A Husband for Springtime

by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace), seraphim_grace

Summary

After Stiles' stepmother insists that Stiles marry Adrian Harris, Lord Carstairs, who assaulted Stiles at a party Stiles comes up with a plan to marry the alpha he wants, Jordan Parrish, but he doesn't count on becoming involved with the demon duke who offers him a choice that is not a choice - serve as parent for Derek's children and give up any hope of children of his own. This means never consummating the marriage but with all the advantages of being Derek's duchenne - but there is passion between them and there are ways around the agreement after all.

Please pay attention to the tags and rating - this is E for a reason

Notes

The porny one

This fic was heavily inspired by "Accidentally compromising the duke by Stacy Reid" because I got a lot of requests for a porny one and so I had to find a situation where porn was okay but the drama was enough to make people go yep sounds legit because these people don't talk or something similar. The broad strokes here will be similar but that's it.

for people new to this verse - all omega are addressed as vidama [girl] vidame [boy] unless they get a better title through marriage
alpha and omega have pointed ears as a secondary sex characteristic - it's considered polite to keep them covered
	his story has heat but it just means stiles is tetchy and giving off more pheromones than usual, all sexual acts are entirely consensual, so if they have heat sex it's because they felt like it, not an overwhelming biological imperative - think more PMS than yowling cat

if you have a world building question not included in the story ask - i can add it to the notes

Special thanks go to Ravewulf who is putting up with my indecision over ridiculous things and making me actually make decisions as well as acting as my porn whisperer
Chapter 1

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Nearing three of the clock, as the party below was winding to a close, Stiles put his candle holder with it's stub of candle down on the hallway table where it was mostly hidden by an empty vase and then smoothed out the creases on his night shift and his hair before taking a deep breath to calm his nerves.

The plan was flawless. He knew exactly what he was about but it was still a huge thing to do.

He was going to take advantage of his own destiny.

After tonight his step mother, Natalie, would have to agree his engagement to Mr Jordan Parrish, a sensible man with a future as a barrister, and forget about her plan to see him married to Adrian Harris, Lord of Carstairs, and a man who had tried to force himself upon Stiles and when he had run to his stepmother with a blacked eye and split lip and Harris' promise to train Stiles to behave and instead of protecting Stiles from him she had been starry eyed over his title and agreed to his proposal to restore Stiles' honour. Natalie had married Stiles' father when Stiles was twelve, barely three years after the prolonged death of Stiles' mother, providing him with a respite from his grief and providing Stiles with two sisters, Lydia who was of an age with him, and Felicity who was two years younger, and then three years ago an alpha brother, Aleksander. With his father, Sir Noah Stilinski, abroad on the continent Natalie made the decisions regarding the seasons of the two eligible omega -Felicity was too young- and had quickly become almost drunk on the parade of luxury at the balls they attended with her in place as supposed chaperone, though she was most often found at the card tables. It was this laxity that saw Lord Carstairs able to force Stiles into an alcove and try to force his attentions upon him at a society ball.

It would not do.

Stiles would not marry the man.

Desperation had made him seek out his childhood friend and perhaps the only person who would countenance such a plan, Scott McCall, who had agreed it was the best option of a truly awful sequence of options, which put it a hairsbreadth better than shrieking and running into the night to be collected in the morning for delivery to an asylum for he had surely lost his wits, and stoked by several fortifying mouthfuls of Lady Argent's decanted ratafia Stiles stood outside a gentleman's door with the plan to be spoiled and forced into marriage with the alpha he wanted to marry, and not the titled asshole who wanted him.

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With the close of his first season Stiles had been delighted to be included with his sisters, his infant brother left with the nurse in Hampstead, to visit with Vidama Allison Argent, for he had not expected it as Allison was Lydia's dear friend and he was not sure that in the years of their acquaintance that they had shared ten words. Male omega were a rarity and as such were treated in the same manner that one would an odd duck, he was afforded all of the titles and deference given to an omega but with the expectation he would not be interested in things like fashion, which was a fair assumption for he was not, or novels or giggling in corners about alphas, especially alpha poets.

This was not entirely true for he had had his head turned by a fine pair of calves on an alpha, and
was often found with his nose stuck in one novel or another and given the opportunity many of his trips to the city were not for shopping, as it was with his sisters, but to the lending library or the museums.

So it had been surprise when Lady Argent had included him by name in her invitation and how she hoped to see him there in particular. Stiles had shared few words with Vidama Argent and fewer still with her mother but the inclusion had upended the entire household for Stiles, unlike his sisters, had nothing appropriate for such a house party. He only had one riding habit suitable for company, which was quite distinct from the clothes that he actually wore for riding - he was ill at ease on a horse and the idea that he ride sidesaddle which meant he could not grip with his legs made him feel even more insecure. He did not have enough caps, and could not just add a riband to one of his sister's bonnets and Natalie had written to his father on the continent to explain the extra expense, and Natalie considered it worth it for she had arranged for Lord Carstairs to meet him there with the hope that they could announce their engagement, not that she had told Stiles that.

Stiles had learned that he had been invited to make sure there were enough people to attend the dance which was scheduled for the last night of the party when many of the luminaries of Bath would be invited. Stiles was not offended in learning this, he knew that he was an odd duck even for omega, he was too tall, too thin, his hair was a flat dark brown and his eyes, which many considered to be his best feature, had a habit of seeing more than they ought. He was a flitterwit who forgot about propriety and dressed shabbily and that Mr Parrish had tried to offer for him had been a surprise to most. Mr Parrish was an alpha who had a fine future ahead of him as a barrister and although he would offer Stiles only a life in the lower echelons of society it would be a stable and happy one, for Mr Parrish was a stable gentleman who was reliable and sensible and as such desirable. He did not even query Stiles' small dowry of five hundred pounds and lack of good society contacts.

The only time that Stiles had seen Mr Parrish impassioned was when he had professed his love for Stiles.

Stiles could be content with Mr Parrish with a small house in London that would be his own and children and he could ask for nothing more. Lydia might want glittering balls and people to dote on her, and Felicity fantasised about travel to foreign places on maps she kept hidden in her pockets from her mother, but Stiles could be happy as Mr Parrish's mari and when he returned from the continent his papa would agree to the marriage and they would be content.

Then Lord Carstairs had ruined it all by pushing Stiles into an alcove and trying to open his shirt whilst he mashed their faces together. Stiles had tried to pull away and Lord Carstairs had cuffed him hard about the face, blacking his eye and splitting his lip, telling him not to struggle, it would just make him more excited, he had never had a male omega before. He had been rescued by Scott and had gone to Natalie to ask her to protect him but she had been more worried about the scandal than her step son, and now Lord Carstairs was attending the party hoping to use the next night's celebration to announce their engagement. It had turned a pleasant opportunity into a dread that lurked in his belly like a millstone.

He was even desperate enough to listen to Scott and his desperate plan.

He would do his best to duck Lord Carstairs until it was time to retire, knowing that Natalie would be at the card tables until dawn. It was a plan, even if it was not necessarily a good one.

He was stood at the refreshment table, Lady Argent had not put on a sit down dinner or hired a band to play but enough people had availed themselves of her hospitality that she had opened up the recieving rooms that any who travelled to the estate might at least collect a glass of lemonade,
doing his best to avoid Lord Carstairs despite Natalie's insistence that Stiles spent at least some time with him, when the furore started.

Stiles didn't turn from the table to see what it was. Unless Lord Carstairs had taken a terrible spill on the marble steps and was now dead he did not care.

"It is the demon duke," one lady said with a turned up nose. "He has a cheek showing up here, you know what he did," she told her companion. Stiles did not know but got the impression if he lingered by the lemonade he would learn in short order. It was that sort of gossip.

"Why, it is the talk of London," the woman's companion, a portly gentleman who kept wiping at his forehead with a silk napkin like he was under a perpetual drip, "that he murdered his sister for the title."

"I do not know why anyone does anything about it," a third said interjecting themselves into the genial disgust.

"He is a duke," the first said, "one would find it easier to speak out against Prinny." They laughed amongst themselves as if it was the very best joke, "but you would think he would keep himself out of society."

"I heard," the portly gentleman with the napkin said, "that he is on the hunt for a new bride, and after what happened to the last one."

"I heard that he had been married," the third said, flicking the drooping feather from her turban out of the way of her face, "of course he will have no trouble catching some new dupe with that title, strangle her and bury her in the family chapel like the last one."

"I heard," the first woman said, "that he fought in duels," it was at that point Stiles stopped crediting their gossip. Lady Argent had invited the demon duke, and it was not like a duke could be cut in polite circles, even if he had strangled his wife and murdered his sister, Stiles did not care, he had his own things to worry about.
Chapter 2
Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

in which Derek has a plan - it's not a good plan but it is a plan

"It's the demon duke," Derek did not react to the hissed whisper as he entered the room. He never did. He did not care for the gossip that was said about him, sure that the vast majority of it was untrue but with his desire to remain aloof from society it seemed that instead of quietening it just became more ludicrous. He knew the truth of it. He had agents who would do their best to quell the rumours but it hurt to hear them blame him for his sister's death and now, because the two ladies gossiping had no concept of tact and could probably be heard with their stage whispers as far away as London, they had brought Paige into it.

Roderick St John Reginald Gordon Hale had been the third alpha child of Natalia Euphemia Georgiana Hale, Duke of Albemarle had been allowed the freedoms that only the third heir could have, being neither the heir or the spare. With no expectation that he would inherit Derek was given the indulgence to choose his own path in life, even after his parents died and his eldest brother, Edward inherited Albemarle. Even then he was little given to society and Edward had allowed the eighteen year old alpha the luxury of a love match with a local squire's daughter, for although he was not the baby, that was Cordelia, or an omega, none of the siblings were, he was spoiled by people who had money but lacked time for what was clearly heart felt affection. So Derek, eighteen years old and full of life and love and ushering away the shadow of his parent's death with ebullience and joy had married Paige in a quiet ceremony because he loved her.

They had been married less than a year when Paige had died in childbirth, cursing him and every part of the Hale name, with the babe following its mother into the grave less than a day later he had retreated into his duties and swore never to marry again. Then Edward and Laura had been lost at sea on their way to the continent and Derek had, just this summer past, found himself in the terrible role of being Duke with both the duties and the responsibilities that it entailed. Worse still he had inherited Laura's two children, children that Laura had inherited when her friend Deucalion Beecham had died with his beta wife in the same accident that killed Derek's two siblings. Derek felt surrounded by death and he had two babies who needed much more than he had left in him to give, and although Evangeline-Rose was four and old enough to know to ask for what she needed Thomas was barely steady on his feet and already he had replaced two governesses and he was at his wit's end. So he had come to the Argent household after two months of negotiation to complete the deal that he had arranged.

He gave a quick look around the festivities in the hope that he might be able to speak to Lord and Lady Argent without the need to actually deal with the haute ton but the only thing that even caught his eye was a male omega standing at the refreshment table sipping ratafia and looking as bored with the whole affair as Derek himself was. It was likely that the entire family of the omega had been invited just for the novelty of having an unmarried male omega at their gathering. He was pretty enough, high cheekbones and a snub nose with dark hair gathered neatly at the nape of his neck with a white silk riband.
It was possible Derek only noticed him because he no more wanted to be there than Derek himself, and he certainly ignored the frisson of desire that he felt looking at him. It had been a long time since he had allowed himself a lover.

He walked over to Lord Argent who expressed thanks that Derek had attended without the usual obsequiousness that usually accompanied his title. It was one of the main reasons that Derek had chosen the Argents for this particular task. He accompanied Lord Argent to his office, a room closed off to the party, and offered him a brandy whilst they waited for Lady Argent to join them. Lord Argent's office was a shrine to the art of taxidermy with many stuffed animal heads adorning the wall like a macabre Greek chorus. His rooms in the London house where Derek had done most of his business with the man was not similarly arranged.

He had, over the past two months, been negotiating with the couple over the agreement to marry their only child, an omega girl called Allison.

Allison was exactly what a duke would want in a mari. She was beautiful, accomplished and she brought with her a social circle that Derek himself lacked. He also had absolutely no desire for her which suited him perfectly. He had an heir in Cordelia, and he needed a duchess who could do the things that he could not including managing the two children. He wanted all the world for them. He wanted them to be happy and to have every advantage that he could give them. He just didn't know how and the overwhelming terror he had felt when Thomas had taken ill one night, which had been nothing more than teething and gripes, had left him gasping for breath.

Lady Argent had the talent for social easing that her husband lacked. When she saw Derek she swept over and welcomed him both to her home and the gathering with the sort of flattery that she probably had not realised was anything other than normal. Over the past two months they had reached an easy congeniality but it would not be a friendship and Lord Argent's desire to spend more time hunting than socialising was one of the reasons that Derek had chosen her. "We are so glad that you could attend, it means we could announce the engagement at tomorrow's ball."

"Is your daughter aware that I am here?" He pressed them.

"She does not," Lord Argent said putting down his brandy.

"i must ask," Derek continued, "that she does know why I am here," he asked them.

Lady Argent made a little moue with her mouth, "Allison is young and does not necessarily know what is best for her."

Or what is best for you, Derek thought to himself, his title had clearly greased the negotiations. Had Laura become Duchess of Albemarle they probably would not have even considered Derek's offer. Yet his offer would see her, and by extension her family, catapulted to the highest levels of the ton and materially she would want for nothing.

He had loved once and he had no desire to lose again.

"I have made it clear at every stage that she be aware of this, we have been in negotiation for two months." He could not believe that they had not told her, after all she would live her life based on these decisions.

"I shall fetch her," Lord Argent said and escaped as if he was one of the prey animals that were decorating his walls.

"Allison is a dear girl, but she is young and we made the decision that she might enjoy her season,
after all a girl only gets her first season once, and if she knew that we had made such an advantageous match she might not have made those friendships that she has. The *blancs* of the season that she has spent her time with will marry well and such friendships would be good going forward."

Derek let out a breath through his nose with a flaring of the nostrils. There was some merit to her argument but it felt like she was using her daughter as if she was livestock. Victoria Argent would benefit from the marriage of her daughter so it did not matter how her daughter felt about it. Victoria Argent was a beautiful woman with absolutely no softness about her. Even the flounces and trims of her gown did not in any way ease the hardness about her.

In contrast Allison Argent was soft with a head of dark curls and dimples that lit up a room when she smiled. She wore a dove grey robe a la polonaise that showed her pretty ankles and a starched lace cap. She was pretty and she ducked her eyes when she saw him, trying to tuck a lock of air - neatly restrained under her cap - behind her softly pointed omega ears from which a pair of cameo earrings hung. Swift and cursory introductions were made before Lady Argent politely excused herself for ludicrous reasons leaving the door open a polite crack. Seeing it Allison paled.

Uncomfortable Derek sucked in a breath that he let out slowly through his nose with his lips pursed. Had Lady Argent done her duty by her daughter this entire situation would have been curtailed and this meeting would have been much easier. "Your grace," she started and then found the rest of the sentence absent and fell quiet.

"Vidama," he began, then paused, "I am certain that by now you have realised the point of this introduction," he paused as she slowly nodded, "these past two months I have been in talks with your parents and I made it clear that I wanted you to know, the decision not to tell has no bearing upon my offer." He wanted to make it clear that his intentions had included her opinion even if her parents had not. "I have asked your father for your hand in marriage and he has accepted."

"Your grace," she started, "you wish to marry me?" it seemed that she still harboured some romantic ideals over the matter. Derek could understand that, for he had once too.

"Yes," he cut her off.

"But why? We have never spoken."

"Because I find myself in need of a mari and you are desirous of a good match." He told her. This was a business arrangement, he needed to make that clear to her from the start. He needed a duchess not a bride, and certainly not another love match. "Your father has demanded a princely sum for the agreement and I have promised to match it." He felt it imperative that he make clear how much he valued the agreement. Her father was not quite hard pressed but the money eased the agreement. Judging by her expression she knew more about her parent's finances than they thought that she did.

"And if my affections are otherwise engaged, your grace?" she asked.

"You are free to refuse, I am not your parents to slavishly demand obedience, if you do not wish to marry me I shall not force the issue, however," he paused, "I am required to return to Rosings Park," Rosings was not his ancestral estate but it was the one where he chose to live, "this Friday. If by that time you have chosen to marry me you must make it known and we can announce the engagement."

"But it's Wednesday night now," she was almost pouting.
"I am a busy man, vidama, I have, or so I thought, given you two months to make the decision, I had thought this was merely a formality, yet I do understand that this is a big decision. I can allow you no more time, if by Friday you have not given me an affirmative answer I shall treat it as a no and find another to offer for," he thought that he was being most kind but it just seemed to upset her more. "I shall take my leave and let you consider my offer," he said, standing up and going to the door. "It is an honour to finally meet you, Vidama, and I shall wait your response."
Chapter 3

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

in which Scott has a cunning plan

Allison left her father's office with her head held high, which Scott noticed as he did with most things about her. He was building up the confidence to offer for her, and the first stage of that was gaining permission from the vidama herself. She was everything that was beautiful and perfect in the world. She had a habit of ducking her chin into her neck when she smiled which made him feel like the king of England and he loved her completely.

She was not without admirers, for although she was not a diamond of the ton - which Scott could not understand for she was all that was good and perfect in the world - many were desirous of her beauty and each had different things to offer her from wealth to travel where all he had to offer was his unerring love and devotion he was sure that if he asked her she would agree and with such assurances her father would surely give him permission to marry her and make him the happiest alpha in all of London.

Stiles was talking to him but the only word Scott made out was "Argent," and that snapped his attention back to his friend.

Their friendship was unusual for alphas were usually kept sequestered from omega to keep omega unsullied from those beastly alpha urges which young alphas had not yet learned to control but he and Scott had grown up together and when Stiles' mother had died and he had moved to London, Scott remaining in the family estate of High Noons in Surrey, they had been allowed to continue their correspondence and Stiles' step mother had encouraged the friendship as it meant that Lady McCall would visit when they were in London raising her social capital.

Stiles, who spent his life around girls, with his father barely there due to his military duties and the war, clung to Scott's friendship in a way of defending his manhood and if the two of them went tramping through the woods in Surrey looking for pollywogs to slide into Lydia's pockets so that she might scream. Felicity did not care when she found one, she would simply lift out the amphibian and complain it was the same as last time. Lydia at least pretended to be scared.

"I," Scott began.

"Wasn't listening, I noticed. Allison walked past, the world could end and you wouldn't be distracted from your appreciation of her curls." Stiles said this as a matter of fact thing, much as one might notice that the ground was underfoot.

"She is the one I am going to marry," Scott said firmly and to his credit Stiles did not contradict him as some might.

"And that is all well and good for the future, my friend, but unless we come up with a plan then I am going to be married to Lord Carstairs and frankly I would rather be dead, so we have until tomorrow morning to come up with a plan that does not involve me drinking lye for I would really
rather not." Stiles' did feel that his problem was immediate but Scott couldn't help but notice that as Allison spoke Lydia took both of her hands in her own and leaned in.

Stiles noticed Scott's inattention and felt that it was unwarranted. "Scott, don't you understand the situation that we find ourselves in? if we do not think of a solution I am going to be married to a man who assaulted me and we both know that I shall not be allowed to socialise so that no one sees the bruises. After tonight I shall not be allowed to continue your friendship." He tried to explain it but Scott was not paying attention. Allison looked distraught and kept looking across to the demon duke who had followed her out of her father's office. He had taken a glass of lemonade and now stood at the doors to the patio scowling like it was the lemonade itself which had offended him.

"I am sure we shall think of something," Scott said noticing how that Allison and Lydia looked across to the scowling duke. He was handsome enough, even an alpha like Scott could appreciate the attractiveness of such a person, who stood tall and proud with a fine head of black hair and a clean shaven jaw. His cheekbones alone looked like they might be used to shave and his shoulders were as square as any wardrobe, combined with a narrow waist and fine thighs he looked like the sort of alpha drawn in salacious pamphlets, combined with wealth and influence. It was said he only went to London to attend parliament so Scott did not know why he was in Bath, but he did not like the way that Allison looked at him with such sorrow.

It was said that the duke was an honourable man who had lost his first wife in childbed and although he was in his mid thirties he had taken no other, and managed no mistress. He was even working with Fitzwilliam in Parliament for the betterment of those who worked in factories in the north and was a famous abolitionist. There were terrible rumours about him but Scott knew them to be mostly false and caused by jealous mavens who could not secure him for their darlings or courtesans who were rebuffed by him.

But why was Allison looking so sad?

"What are you looking at?" Stiles said looking across at the windows where the duke stood, "will you please pay attention."

Scott told him that he would. The duke had inherited the duchy from his sister, and mostly stayed at Rosings which was only a few hours outside London, but it was the journey of a day or more to Bath and he would not come on a whim. He must be courting, Scott thought and came to a terrible realisation.

He had come to offer for Allison.

Scott knew what would happen, Lord Argent would agree for the duke was a duke, second only in rank to the king. He would have to be a fool not to accept such a proposal. In comparison Scott's offer was negligible but it did not seem that Allison wanted to be married to the demon duke. If he went to her now and proposed that they leave tonight they could, if they changed their horses at every post stop be in Scotland by tomorrow night and be married before they could be caught. But Scott was unsure if she would say yes.

Stiles was still talking.

Scott forced himself to listen even though his mind was whirling. He did not want to lose Allison. He loved her, and he was sure that she loved him too.

"Can't you convince Mr Parrish to just run away with you?" Scott asked distractedly for if Mr Parrish knew of the engagement to Lord Carstairs surely he should act on the passion Stiles said that he had shown when they were out of the public eye with just Felicity as a chaperone. "If he
truly cares for you as he claims to then surely he will act to save you."

"I have tried," Stiles said, "but he does not wish to endanger my relationship with my father for he
knows how important it is to me, and Natalie knows that I have written to my father on the
peninsula and so hopes to have the marriage secured before he can respond. He has left her in
charge of us so unless he is here to act she can marry us as she chooses. Marrying me to Carstairs
ensures a better match for her girls so she will not hear otherwise and says that I am merely being
melodramatic when I threaten to drink lye."

"You might be better adding lye to his drink," Scott said.

"When shall I do that, Scott? because he is never alone and certainly doesn't drink in company, so
I'd have to wait until we were married and he has his way with me, like he has not already tried."
Only this evening he had sidled up to Stiles and squeezed his bottom where it was out of sight of
the chaperones telling him how he could not wait for them to be engaged so that they would not be
so closely chaperoned. Stiles suspected that after he had taken advantage of the engagement's
looser chaperoning he would call off the engagement. Carstairs did not truly want to marry him as
much as bed him after all.

"You should let me call him out," Scott said. He had offered once and he would, but Stiles'
arguments why not were compelling.

"He'd kill you then I'd still be married to him and you'd be dead," Scott's thoughts were full of
Allison and the terrible fear of her marrying the demon duke and so he did not really put any
weight behind Stiles' claims for Scott was a fair shot with a pistol and Carstairs wore glasses, his
sight must be poor but if it was discovered then any chance that Scott had in offering for Allison
would be ruined which Stiles had also impressed on him.

"I have tried everything to urge Mr Parrish, he claims that he loves me but I fear he is more scared
of my father than convinced of his affections," Stiles continued. "I do not know what I am to do, is
this not the part where the faithful alpha risks censure to defend their love?"

"Stiles, this is not one of Lydia's novels," Scott said, "we must be serious and think of a solution.

"Desdemona Greenberg did not have this trouble when she was caught in a recieving room by your
mother," it was a revelation that by rights should have ruined her but hardly anyone knew.

"That is because my mother is discreet," Scott said. "She is the last person to spread gossip, of
course it is hardly Vidama Greenberg's fault it is well known that Kenneth Shores has a roving
hand and his mother is even more discreet than my own. He was found by his mother in the
bedchamber of a married woman and we only know of it because he complained of it in the club
when he was deep in his cups."

"I am at my wit's end, Scott," Stiles said. "And Natalie knows it, she has left me here whilst she
plays cards despite that I told her I would be drinking ratafia." He had had a single glass because he
had quickly learned that he did not care for it, but the defiance was there - he had been drinking
liquor hoping to make a scene and she had not obliged him.

An idea started to form in Scott's mind, a confluence of disparate thoughts and their conversation.
"I have an idea," he said, "but you are going to need more ratafia," Stiles raised an eyebrow as
Scott excused himself for a moment to fetch two glasses of the fortified wine.
Chapter 4

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

in which Derek gets a midnight caller,

Stiles stood outside the door in his best chemise, made of cotton organdie and just thick enough to hint at being sheer. He had brushed out his hair so that it hung loose around his neck and lamented again the series of circumstances that had made this necessary.

The plan was simple. It could not go wrong. Stiles couldn't afford for it to.

He would go into Mr Parrish's room and wait for Lady McCall to interrupt them, thus preserving Stiles' modesty and with her discretion ensuring that there would be no scandal. Natalie then would be forced to call off the engagement to Lord Carstairs and accede to the marriage to Mr Parrish. The terrible thing was that Stiles was not sure that he wanted to marry Mr Parrish; he just didn't want to marry Lord Carstairs.

With a deep breath and the satisfying warmth of a whole glass of Lady Argent's fortifying ratafia in his stomach he opened the door and stepped inside, closing it over but not latching it as he had been told to by Scott. This meant that Lady McCall, who would walk past the room, was more likely to open the door to check that all was well and thus discover them. Stiles only had a few minutes before she would interrupt them so he had to make it look like he was in the process of being ruined.

The room was much larger than the one that Stiles shared with his sisters with a canopied bed, although the curtains had not been drawn around the bed, and the shutters left open to the spring night. It was not chill but Stiles had felt the cold keenly enough to tug a wool banyan over his night shift but had not closed it. He sloughed it off at the door.

The room was half lit from the moonlight, which was an incandescent gibbous, showing the figure asleep in the bed. He was facing out to the room, shirtless, with his arm over the blanket but for all the light there were deep shadows, so Stiles could make out the shape of him but nothing more. He had never been this alone with an alpha that wasn't his father and he felt emboldened by the ratafia and exhausted by the situation he decided he would steal a kiss. It would not matter, he decided, no one would know; this was for him, and he would marry this alpha.

He sat on the edge of the bed, against the surging heat of him, and if he was this warm no matter if he slept only in a pair of braies, and trailed the very tips of his fingers along his jaw, feeling the skin under there where it had been freshly shaved so there was a mild rasp to it as he let his fingers find the alpha's lips. Stiles did not notice the way that the alpha stirred under his exploration and so leaned in to press his mouth against the alpha's.

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Derek woke up sluggishly still half dreaming. He was not surprised that he might dream of the handsome young omega who had stood by the refreshment table because it had been a long time since he had been touched and the boy was as ripe as a peach. He was shy in his kiss but so bold to
kiss him and his fingers were exploring but so light and when Derek urged him he opened his mouth, softly with a sigh. He was inexperienced but quick to learn, and he didn't pull away. His mouth was as soft and pillowy as it had looked when Derek saw him, and the little frisson he had experienced when the omega licked his lips was rewarded in kind when the boy tremulously opened his mouth for Derek's tongue, tasting of salt and sage and the syrupy heat of ratafia.

At that, and with a breathy groan, the omega pressed himself into Derek, virginal and clumsy but no less eager as Derek slid his hands up the boy's arms, trailing wet, open-mouthed kisses along the boy's jaw down to his neck, pushing up the muslin sleeves to touch skin, holding him in place for the predations of Derek's mouth, teeth and tongue, sucking welts into the skin as the boy tilted his neck to tilt more of his throat into Derek's mouth. He spread out his hand to balance himself, perched as he was on the edge of the bed, on Derek's bare chest, "you're so hard," the boy said splaying his fingers out, "I didn't think you'd be so hard."

He was kneeling on the bed now, trying to press more of his throat into Derek's wicked mouth.

Derek chuckled against the throat as his hand took the opportunity to skim up the outside of the boy's thigh, catching the fabric and tugging it up as he had the sleeve, and letting his fingertips find the meat of his thigh, skin against skin but still an innocent touch, but one heavy with intent. He half expected, even in his dream, that the touch would make the boy bolt but he didn't, he just spread the other hand on Derek's arm to steady himself.

It was the work of a moment to tug the boy so he fell, his ass pressed against Derek's plumping erection through the blanket.

That was the moment the boy's fear overwhelmed his desire and he tried to jump away and got tangled, reaching out to grab anything he could to prevent him falling but only managing to catch the blanket which he tugged with him as he slid down and barely managed to catch himself. It was then that Derek realised it was not a dream and he followed the boy, stark naked for he slept so and any modesty he had had was dragged away by the boy's fall, terrified that he would dash his brains open on the small table beside the bed where he displayed his pocket watch.

This startled the boy more as he exclaimed, scuttling backwards towards the door on hand and feet. "You are not Mr Parrish, oh god, oh god," he said, "I," he picked up a bundle of fabric and covered his face with it to hide himself from Derek's crotch and eager erection, "oh God, I am ruined. I have the wrong room."

There were many things that Derek expected him to say but that was not one of them. Over the years since Paige's death, many hopefuls, and their mamas, had tried to catch Derek in a compromising position hoping that his honour would not see them ruined and instead elevated to one of the primary households of England, but this omega had not intended to compromise Derek and now was muttering he had to get out of here.

Pulling on a banyan and belting it around the waist so that he was mostly decent he asked, "so, pray tell, whose room was it you wanted to intrude upon at this time of night?"

The boy managed to scramble into his dressing gown, a tattered wool thing that would have had Derek offer his own in its place had the circumstances not been as they were, which involved thrusted arms, curses and flashes of bare thigh. The omega seemed about as in control of his own limbs as a newborn foal. That managed by some feat, for it had gotten twisted at least once, he managed to get to his feet and scrubbed his face with his hands before the string of his night shift found its way into his mouth. "I," he started, "Mr Jordan Parrish," he lowered his eyes to look only at Derek's feet. "I had to, otherwise," he scrubbed at his hair again scraping his palms hard enough over his scalp that it must have hurt. "I'm so sorry, she was going to make me marry him, and he
hurt me, and I'm so stupid, I can't even get the right room."

It looked like whatever else he was about to say was cut short by the door being flung open and Lady Argent exclaiming "what is going on here?" with an inflection that suggested that she knew exactly what was. She was dressed more for the continuing festivities on the first floor than for bed, holding aloft an oil lamp, and she was accompanied by Derek's valet, Boyd, who spread his hands like he had no explanation for this and he had done his best to prevent the interruption but Lady Argent had hit her stride. Her daughter and another that Derek did not recognise joined her in crowding into his room.

She closed her hand like a crab claw over the boy's shoulder, "you little slut," she barked out, "after I invited you into my house." Lady Argent was fearsome, there were those who joked that if she was on the front lines then Napoleon would never have escaped exile for fear of facing her a second time. At that moment she looked terrifying even Derek wanted to back away from her and she had the omega by the shoulder and was shaking him hard, whilst he sobbed, unable to form syllables let alone words against the onslaught. "Allison," the girl was behind her in a bell-shaped orange banyan that even the poor light from the lamp did not make attractive answered her with a chirp. "Go and fetch the harlot's mother, she is at the gaming table."

There was none to defend the boy so Derek stepped forward. "I shall not have you speak to him in that manner." He was surprised at how firm his voice was.

Victoria Argent, for just a moment, wavered, stammering, "your Grace," then she steadied herself so quickly that it might have been Derek's mistake that he saw it. "This little," she paused biting off the expletive before it escaped her mouth, "has clearly thrown himself upon you in the hope of bettering his chances, when we...."

The omega was shaking his head and trying to explain but all that was coming out was "it's not like that," but in the light from the lamp his neck looked like it had been mauled. He couldn't even deny that anything had happened because his skin which marked so beautifully proved that that would be a lie.

Lady Argent marched the boy to the chair as if to an execution whilst Boyd forced his way into the room, past Lady Argent and her retinue, for there must have been four maids in various states of undress now, making it clear that she had roused the household, if not the house, in her injury. Someone had told her what was happening - that much was clear.

Whoever had told the omega that this was the right room was clearly also the one who had informed Lady Argent. This started to feel like it was vindictive. More and more Derek started to feel pity for him.

Lady Argent clearly wanted to say something to the boy but she kept her lips buttoned tight, and the boy was sobbing and tugging the strings of his night rail and his face was as red as his neck.

Derek was also certain that if he had not spoken out that Lady Argent would have struck the boy across the face.

They had left the door wide open and people wandered past gossiping, and Derek also knew that was exactly what Lady Argent wanted.

"Get out," he said and at first his voice was tremulous, "all of you, out," he pointed at the door. He stepped bodily between the boy and Lady Argent and his dressing gown falling open to reveal his nakedness underneath it, "get out," he repeated.
"Your grace?!" she actually sounded like a victim as she said it.

"Lady Argent," he said firmly, "it is near four of the clock," he was exaggerating a little, it was almost half past three, "and I am tired, and I am not in the mood for your determination to punish this boy masquerading as righteous indignation. This shall be sorted but I am at a loss at what this has to do with you?"

Lady Argent's mouth moved silently, making her look something like a carp, "tomorrow, I shall meet with this omega's parents and the matter will be sorted. Boyd," he looked to his valet knowing that at least Boyd would listen to reason, "escort the omega to his bedchamber and then return with a cup of mint tea for me, for this has drama has made me dyspeptic."

"Your grace," she managed, "I must object."

"To what?" Derek asked, with his dressing gown open wide to everyone gathered there except the boy who was behind him, "I find myself at a loss, and perhaps it is the hour, but I do not see how this matters to you." He knew why, if he continued with the plan to marry her daughter then it was at the ruin of this omega - a feat that she had managed in making it so public - and if he married the boy she would lose the hard-won negotiations that the marriage would have brought them. Either way her place in society was altered, she had let an omega be ruined under her roof and let the culprit remain unpunished and rewarded him with the hand of her own omega daughter for a princely sum, thus meaning her morals were questionable and the rumour that she would do anything for money would circulate, or she would lose both the money and connections that the marriage would bring and although not hard pressed the Argents were known to be short of blunt, something Derek had counted on when he had made the original offer for their daughter.

Boyd helped the boy up, arranging his dressing gown to better cover him and offering him a kerchief to wipe his face and leading him from the room with his hand on the small of his back to help guide him for he could barely walk for sobs.

Derek was not sure entirely what was happening but someone had used the boy's obvious need, for no omega without such necessity would have acted so when caught, it was not pride that he had compromised a duke, but horror that it was the wrong man. So he had intended to compromise someone because the mysterious she, probably his mother, would force him to marry a separate him, and rather than that he had tried to get himself ruined. It was likely the man he had intended to kiss, and Derek was sure it was only that because of how he had reacted, when still half asleep and convinced he was dreaming and unwilling to see it as anything other than a dream. The boy's need had been exploited and considering it was Derek's room he was sent to, and that Lady Argent had caught them, then it must have been a consequence of Allison learning of the engagement but he would have accepted a refusal. He realised then that her parents would not.

His stomach roiled at the thought of treating Evie with the same care that these omega were treated - as little more than social currency in a constant struggle for upward movement and the pursuit of yet more wealth.

He would talk alone with the boy tomorrow, and if the original subject of his plan would have him Derek would match the dowry that his mother would surely refuse him. If not, then Derek would marry him himself. It did not bother Derek, he needed a mari, he didn't care if it was a duchess or a duchenne. Either way, he had provided Evie and Thomas with a parent who would be able to give them the care that Derek himself could not.
Chapter 5

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

in which stiles has to make a choice

Stiles didn't sleep well until the grey half light of predawn started to stain the white walls around the shutters and Felicity turned over from her place in the middle of the bed and pinned him into place with an arm and a leg with the sleepy grumble that he was moving too much. Once he was securely weighted he slept dreamlessly until she decided that it was too late for any more sleep and got him out of bed by pricking him on his bare leg with a hair pin. Where Lydia had large eyes and a soft jawline which gave her a sort of doll like beauty Felicity's eyes were narrow and her jaw was a harder line, but both had a large soft mouth. Felicity favoured darker colours where Lydia preferred floral patterns and someone unobservant might think that Felicity was the sister who had a touch of cruelty to her, but Lydia was the despot of the three of them. Felicity just knew that Stiles would stay abed unless he had a legitimate reason to get out of bed, like making her stop pricking him with her hair pin.

He was sluggish and washed his mouth out with cold black tea as he cleaned his face and applied a little rice powder to even out his complexion, and neatly combed out his hair. Felicity rested her chin on his crown, "you went for a walk last night," she said saying that she had noticed his absence.

"I had to talk to Scott about something," he said, "he was still up so," he tried to lie to her.

"Lydia and Allison went for a walk this morning," she said, "they went into the woods, I think they were looking for mushrooms." She lifted the slim black ribbon that was used to tie back his hair in a styled curl and stretched it between her hands like a garotte, "not that Allison could tell the difference between fly agaric and psylocibe," she tied his hair back neatly, "I think Allison had a rough night too, she was up and about last night too." Although the Stilinski omega had all been put into the nursery with Allison she had the daybed to herself whilst they were crammed into the nurse's bed.

If Allison had gone out with Lydia then Lydia new all of what had happened the night before - or at least Allison's view of it. Stiles had ruined her potential marriage and he hadn't meant to - and he didn't know if it was something she wanted. He had thought that he had followed Scott's instructions to the letter but he had gone into the wrong room and now he was ruined and Lydia and Felicity would be known as the sisters of the dumb omega who compromised the demon duke - and hadn't even intended to.

"Tonight is the last day," she said, "and then we can go back to Hampstead and see Alek, you'll be better once you've slept in your own bed and complained about the hole in the shutters that always wakes you up too early." she dropped a kiss on his head, "everything will be better when we get home." She didn't mention the numerous kiss marks on his neck, and how the skin was reddened even after some hours sleep.

He hadn't the heart to contradict her.
He dressed quickly in a sombre grey that Lydia had always complained looked too much like mourning lavender but it felt appropriate as he pulled the unembellished corduroy coat over it, feeling like a condemned man.

The duke's man, Boyd, a huge black man with soft eyes and imposing shoulders was outside the room. He looked like he had been waiting for some time. "His grace would like me to request that you share breakfast with him this morning." He sounded rehearsed like he had repeated it over and over to kill time until Stiles appeared.

Felicity thrust her arm under Stiles' "we'd be delighted," she said with a grin sharp enough to cut glass.

"Just the vidame," Boyd said. When Felicity went to complain Stiles cut her off, telling her to tell Natalie where he was if she asked, that it was well. She did not look appeased by the information and flung her curl over her shoulder and frowned at Boyd as if he was the villain in the story. "He will be properly chaperoned," Boyd told her. "You do not have to worry for his honour."

Stiles wanted to tell her that the horse had already bolted from that stall and so there was no point in latching the door but the words turned ash in his mouth.

"You're going to miss it," she said and she sounded sad.

"You can tell me all about it later, Flick," he kissed her on both cheeks as if he was saying goodbye, and skimmed his hands down her arms before offering her a wan smile, turning to follow Boyd down the corridor.

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The Duke of Albemarle looked like he had slept as poorly as Stiles himself. His skin seemed unusually pale and almost grey and in the late morning light Stiles could truly look at him. He had dark hair cut short to his head and although clean shaved a dark shadow of potential already covered his chin. His most defining feature was a perfectly clear forehead and straight strong nose. This was continued with a sharp pair of cheekbones and a strong square jaw. He was a very handsome alpha. His eyebrows were unshaped which Stiles was unused to and found to be pleasing, his ears were perhaps too long and he had a figure that suggested exercise. Stiles blushed red to the low points of his ears at the thought that he had had his hands over the alpha's firm chest and coarse chest hair the previous night.

"I do not think we have been properly introduced," the alpha said standing up and giving him a bow of the head, "Derek Hale, at your service."

"Stiles," Stiles stammered, "I mean Mieczyslaw Stilinski, your grace," Stiles couldn't meet his eyes, he had the edge of his thumb in his mouth and started worrying the skin at the edge of his nail. It was a nervous habit and one that Natalie hated for she believed an omega should have immaculate hands.

The duke gestured to a tea set and some bread rolls laid out on a table with cheese and ham, "I don't really eat in the mornings," he said taking his seat.

The whole gesture was as awkward as their conversation and when the duke half stood again to pour the tea for Stiles was clearly frozen the rattle of a spoon on the plate had Stiles, who had been barely holding himself together start to apologise. "I am so sorry, I," he cut himself off. "You've been so nice and I've made a mess of everything and this wasn't supposed to happen."
Behind him Stiles heard Boyd give a long suffering sigh, but the duke pressed a cup of tea into his hands. The movement urged Stiles into a chair. "The point of this breakfast," the duke said, "is to come to an accommodation, just you and just me, we can move on from there. You can start by telling me everything."

And as if a dam had been burst Stiles let everything that he had been holding in out, about what had happened that night with Lord Carstairs and how he had gone to Natalie who had shown him how to cover up the contusions and then came back from Lord Carstairs house with a promise to offer for Stiles and how they were supposed to announce it tonight at Lady Argent's festival. He said that he had been being courted by Mr Parrish who was good and fair and although he had offered for Stiles Natalie had turned him down, and that he knew that Natalie wanted everything sorted before his father returned from the front because his father worked with Wellington as an aide de camp. Stiles knew that his father would have agreed to Mr Parrish's offer and probably would have shot Lord Carstairs dead for laying hands on Stiles.

Terrified of Lord Carstairs and feeling desperate he came up with the plan to compromise Mr Parrish knowing that if Stiles was caught in his bedroom, although he had intended not to actually touch him but he had been curious and he had drunk ratafia to strengthen his nerve and he hadn't thought it would matter, if he was to marry Mr Parrish, and it was supposed be Lady McCall who caught them for she was known for her discretion, so that his step mother would be forced to call off the marriage with Lord Carstairs and approve of the one to Mr Parrish.

Throughout it all the duke listened intently, nodding when Stiles said something that he considered important. Stiles did not mention his accomplice. Then the duke asked, "Do you still wish to marry your Mr Parrish?"

It caught Stiles so unaware he nearly dropped his tea.

He was silent a moment and answered, "yes, your grace." Life with Mr Parrish offered stability, if the duke was willing to quash the rumour then Lydia and Felicity could be saved.

"Then we are in accord, if your Mr Parrish agrees I shall see you married this week by special licence and to prevent argument by your stepmother I shall match your dowry." The cup was rattling in Stiles' hand, "the alternative is that we wed and you become my duchenne, that same marriage licence can see us married and on our way to Rosings by Friday at the latest."

"Your grace," Stiles stammered, "pardon my presumption, but,"

The duke cut him off. "I need a marri," he said, "I had negotiated for Vidama Argent but her parents did not even inform her of the planned marriage." He curled his lip up in disgust, "and after last night's display I do not think she is suitable. Between her mother and herself I am certain that if Boyd had not accompanied you despite my request you would have been turned from the house. I can offer you wealth and status, but it will be a loveless marriage. I made a love match in marriage once and I will not repeat my mistake. If you would rather Mr Parrish you may do so with my blessing Either way, Lord Carstairs shall not be allowed to continue his pursuit of you."

Stiles thanked his grace and excused himself to find Mr Parrish.

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The entire house was in disarray when Stiles left the small parlour where he had had tea with the duke. Almost all of the ladies of the ton looked at him and then fell into whispers behind fans, and one gentleman mocked a full belly after looking at him. This was matched by several footmen running around almost pell mell through the corridors, not with serving ware as might be expected
but looking behind curtains and standing furniture. He was certain he heard one shout, "I've found his coat," but he paid it no mind. Perhaps one of the visiting families had brought a small child who had wandered off into the house, and if they were anything like Alek, his brother, they were probably naked and pissing in a pot plant somewhere enjoying the game of being lost and allowed to be naughty without adult supervision. There were plenty enough people looking for them so Stiles went to the patio where Mr Parrish liked to take his breakfast in the morning air.

There were a few others there but when they saw Stiles they made excuses so quickly he felt he should shout out leper unclean to justify their haste.

Mr Parrish went to leave with them.

"Might we talk?" Stiles asked.

"I have heard of what you did," Mr Parrish said, putting his napkin on the table, "I do not see what there is left to talk about."

"The duke has," Stiles started and then he started to chew on his thumb, Mr Parrish had once said it was one of his more endearing peccadilloes, and realising that he was doing it Stiles stopped. "Do you still wish to marry me?" he asked. "It can be done straight away, the duke has a licence, we can be married and in London by Saturday, if you still wish me to be yours."

In this light Mr Parrish suddenly didn't seem as handsome as he had the day before, his hair was no longer as dark and his features were more plain. He was still handsome but he was nothing more than that, and Stiles had never noticed how the cuffs of his jackets were frayed with wear,

"You are ruined, vidame," Mr Parrish sqid in a cold voice, "a seducer, a wanton and a harlot," with each word Stiles flinched like he had been struck, "you went into the room of an alpha and,"

"it was supposed to be your room." Stiles barked back, "and nothing happened," that was a slight lie but he wasn't ruined.

"If I was fool enough to marry you the firm that I work for would let go my employment. I would no longer be marrying the son of Wellington's aide de camp, I would have married a slut, I would throw my future away and I am not prepared to do that." Mr Parrish possibly even thought that he was being reasonable.

"If I had not done what I did you wouldn't have married me, Natalie was right, you are not good enough for me, she was to marry me to Lord Carstairs," Stiles kept his voice even and firm, "you would not have brought your employers my father's good will either way, and now you do not only reject that but that of the Duke of Albemarle who was prepared to sponsor our marriage. God be with you, Mr Parrish, for I shall not wish you well on your way."

Stiles was too angry to cry and when he saw Boyd hovering behind him he took a deep breath and said, "take me to the duke, I have his answer."
Chapter 6

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

Lydia removes an irritation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lydia watched Lord Carstairs eat the mushroom omelette she had gathered the ingredients for with a certain smugness. It was too late now to change the things that she had put into place but now she wondered if she should have saved some of the mushrooms for someone else.

Lord Carstairs was handsome in a narrow kind of way, well complected, dark hair, with narrow eyes that were squinting through eyeglasses. A member of the royal academy of sciences he was intelligent and had he kept his hands to himself he might have had a bright future, but his intelligence was dwarfed by alpha arrogance. He had seen something that he wanted in Stiles and Lydia was certain that if he had bedded him it would have been quickly dealt with but Stiles had not wanted the attention and Carstairs pressed it anyway. Lydia could not allow that so with soft smiles and flourishes of her pink sprigged muslin skirts, the fabric making her seem soft and innocent when paired with a sage green Caraco jacket trimmed in rose coloured ribands. She looked every inch the innocent doe of society as she had carried the omelette to him, to ostensibly welcome him to the family she told him and made sure he could ogle the tops of her breasts as she poured him the tea.

Like most alphas he had no idea that she might be dangerous, he thanked her with a lascivious compliment and ate the omelette with gusto.

As she sipped her chocolate she ruminated over what Allison had told her.

Stiles had acted.

She had expected another tantrum but it seemed Stiles had aimed himself at the best target in Bath, if not all of England, and the man who had offered for Allison, the demon duke himself, Derek Hale.

Hale was handsome enough, in a rough-hewn kind of way. He struck Lydia as always in need of a better shave which some omega clearly liked. He was rich and said to be intelligent. He was certainly active in politics but he had kept himself aloof from society since the death of his wife nearly ten years before, and had only inherited the dukedom within the past year.

Allison had told Lydia that Hale had come to Bath having negotiated with her parents for her hand but he had been kind, and, unlike her parents, offered her the opportunity to refuse. He had told Allison that he wanted a Duchesse and not a lover and would not offer her any romantic promises. Whilst she was considering his considerable offer Stiles, who was fastidious in his presentation to society convinced they judged him more harshly than the other debutantes by virtue of his gender and rarity - a thing which might have been true - acted by going into the duke's room and,
according to Allison, having clearly been debauched. Apparently, his neck was raw and red with kiss marks and he had his dressing gown on inside out when Allison’s mother burst in

Stiles had set out to seduce a duke and be caught in the act by the mother of the woman that the duke had offered for.

Lydia knew many omegas who would act so, she could not even remove herself from that number, but for Stiles, it was so out of character that it was ridiculous but others had repeated the story, Lady Argent had roused half the household, according to Allison. Lady Argent could be histrionic in her injury. Why would Stiles act so out of character, not only risking the ire of the duke, a duke that society whispered had murdered his wife and siblings, but the woman in whose house he was staying?

She kicked her legs back and forth as she thought it over, her chocolate held just below her lips as she watched Carstairs eat the omelette when she had been so careful to pick exactly the right mushrooms and add them to the omelette when the cook, who might have recognised them, could not see. She should start to see the effects soon.

Why would Stiles, who had been adamant that he didn't want to marry Carstairs and was content to accept the rather lacklustre proposal of Mr Parrish suddenly set his cap so high? It made more sense that he might want to be caught compromised by Mr Parrish, although Lydia did agree with her mother that Parrish had not enough prospects for marriage into their family. He was attractive, a fine young Corinthian with a future in the house of commons but he was so bland and boring that unless someone fought for those things on his behalf he might remain happily a solicitor with no change to his prospects.

She ran her tongue over her teeth watching as Carstairs began to look intently at his tea, the mushrooms were beginning their work. Unfortunately, Stiles had rendered the omelette moot, Natalie couldn't maintain the announcement if Stiles was known to be ruined by all of Bath, which with the way that gossip spread would be cemented by the morrow.

Why would Stiles who was so awkward in society do such a thing? Escaping the engagement with Carstairs was the obvious answer but why the demon duke? Lydia was missing parts of the puzzle - and she did not like puzzles that she could not solve.

Felicity came over to sit next to her, pouring herself a cup of the chocolate. "Stiles is awake," she said. Felicity was two years younger than Lydia, and one year younger than Stiles. "His neck looks like he's been mauled, Allison was right about that, did I miss it?"

"It's just starting now," Lydia said, "so where is he?" She wanted to ask him what was happening.

"The duke's man requested that he join him for breakfast," Felicity said, "he is a delicious looking alpha, with arms like tree trunks and a neck you just want to bite."

"The Duke?" Lydia asked her sister for the duke did not look quite so fine in her opinion.

"No, his man, a prime example of a black man, polite and neatly turned out whilst being built like a brick shithouse, maybe two or three inches taller than Stiles and it must be ten around the chest."

"Felicity," Lydia chided her sister, "we have other games afoot."

Lord Carstairs stood up, wide-eyed and unsteady on his feet, "what do you think he's seeing?" Felicity asked.

"No more than he deserves, now ideally he will make a complete tit of himself before he comes
"down," she flicked her curl over her shoulder, "and Mother will have nothing to do with him, so even if Stiles had stayed in bed last night that marriage was off." Lydia had been so careful to find the right type of mushrooms, nothing lethal just hallucinogenic and now Carstairs was seeing things and with no preparation of what might happen he would certainly panic and make himself look so ridiculous he might have to go to the continent. Lydia was an omega but she had no intention of letting some arrogant alpha join her family just because he thought he deserved to be.

Now she had to worry about the duke.

How would she remove a duke? She certainly could not repeat the trick with the mushrooms, because a pattern would lead to investigation and that would prevent future action.

"I do not like this," Lydia said, "do you think?"

"Scott McCall," Felicity answered, "he saw Allison after the duke offered for her," Lydia might have been the more active of the two sisters but Felicity was the more observant. Lydia considered it. "I know he's Stiles' friend but he is an alpha," she made a gesture with her head that filled in the things that she did not say. Alphas always put themselves first and didn't consider the damage. She would wait and see and if Stiles had been hurt by Scott, even without intent, she would do more than simply feed him a dose of powerful hallucinogens like she had with Carstairs. She would destroy him utterly and completely.

No one hurt her family.

She needed to talk to Stiles, then talk to her mother but she got the idea that she and Felicity were being cut out. Carstairs had started yelling, waving his hands above his head like swiping at airborne attackers and was now being chased by footmen hoping to calm him down.

She no sooner removed one problem than another took its place.

Chapter End Notes

this was going to be part of the previous chapter but I cut it, and then no one realised about lydia and tge omelette so i put it back in
Chapter 7

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

in which Derek tries to lie to himself - without much success

Derek was unaware of the chaos that was taking place outside the small room he had taken over for his business and now, apart from Boyd standing at the door, he was alone in it with the omega who had compromised him. This was made more complicated because with even as bereft as the omega looked, constantly tucking his hair behind his perfect little pointed ears, Derek desired him. He knew he should ruin the boy, throw him out and let his family deal with it. He had come to marry Vidama Argent simply because she was everything he did not desire and after Paige's death, he had sworn never to be the cause of another's death and keeping such an oath when married to one such as Vidama Argent was easy. She was affable and exactly what people expected of him and she would thrive in society, and it did not matter to Derek that she would never give him an heir for he had a sister who could follow him into the ducal seat.

Vidame Stilinski was, however, a peach just begging to be plucked and tasted and Derek wanted to be the one to taste him.

It was a desire made worse because Derek had already had his hands upon him and heard the noises he made under Derek's mouth, and even now as he fussed and fidgeted, staring at the carpet like it held answers, Derek could see the flash of a bruise blooming on his throat, a bruise left by Derek's mouth.

And Derek wanted nothing more than to stand up, to take the few steps across the Aubusson carpet and crush the omega in his arms in a kiss, to peel back the frock and waistcoat that he wore to bare the throat under the jabot to see what he had done, to see if any of the skin was unmarked and to correct that oversight.

Derek had not touched another person sexually since before Paige had died. Her pregnancy left her feeling nauseated almost all of the time and the doctors had recommended bed rest since she was prone to swooning. Then she had died in childbirth cursing his name, his line and even his god, and her babe had followed mere hours later and Derek was left aching with the loss. Any desire that he had was sublimated by his grief, and when it returned it was nothing that could not be taken in hand. Where his fellows in parliament had mari and mistresses kept in plush London apartments Derek returned to his chamber alone, his reputation as much a protection on his virtue as a locked door.

Then this boy had gone into the wrong room and chosen to steal a kiss unaware that Derek would consider it a dream at first, and the noises that he had made and the spicy sweet of his perfume, clove and violet and vanilla and the warmth of his skin under Derek's hands. Oh, the noises he had made, and he had been as lusty, if unaware of his own desire and how to express it, as Derek himself. Had they not been interrupted then Derek could easily have talked him back into the bed. He might not have known what he was about but he knew to enjoy what he experienced.

And Derek knew that when they were married he could do all that. He could share every pleasure.
of the flesh with a willing young sybarite that only needed to be shown what they liked to demand it.

He tamped the thought down. He had sworn. If he lay with the omega if he buried his knot inside him as he so wanted to the threat of pregnancy loomed and Derek would not be responsible for another death. He wasn't sure that he could survive another loss.

He needed a Duchenne but he did not need another lover.

The boy wasn't shy - he was mortified and chewing on his lips, making them angry and swollen and Derek was again reminded how easy it would be to kiss him again. They were engaged now, it would not even strain the limits of society's impositions on omegas.

No, he repeated to himself as if he could exorcise the memory of the omega's smell from his memory.

"I feel that it is best that we are frank with each other, vidame," Derek said, trying to ignore the flash of red at the omega's throat when he lifted his head and squinted at Derek. Most omega had been schooled into a saccharine blandness, but the omega's every thought was telegraphed on his face and person. He would be beautifully responsive under Derek's hands in his bed.

"your grace?"

"Derek," suddenly Derek wanted the omega to say his name, "we are to be married after all," this was said with a lick of his own lips as the omega knitted his brow with confusion, "Mieczyslaw," he attempted to say his name and his pronunciation was awful and he knew it.

"Stiles," the omega corrected, "everyone calls me Stiles, it's easier, and," he frowned, "it doesn't matter right now, but everyone calls me Stiles, Stiles Stilinski," he gave an exaggerated bow with a swirl of his hand, "Derek."

Derek had been right about how he would react to his name in the omega's mouth. It shivered down his spine deliciously. "I intend to be honest with you, Stiles," he tried the shape of the name in his mouth, "I cannot offer you a romantic entanglement with this marriage," he was determined that he be clear about this. Stiles' delicious mouth fell open, and his pink tongue flickered out to wet his plush lips. It was all Derek could do not to groan at the display and rearrange himself in his pants. "You must understand, I married for love once and I shall not repeat the same error." The omega clearly did not understand, he had not, it seemed, heard the gossip that followed Derek like a foul smell. "I expect of you only those duties necessary for a Duchenne, you shall manage my household and my social expectations, although those will be slight until the demi season in the autumn."

"Don't you want an heir?" the omega blurted it out, "I thought, you're a duke and you, I mean, babies are the point of marriage aren't they? Surely you'd want me to pop out a dozen or so."

In that moment Derek both despaired of whoever was responsible for this omega's education and given a momentary flash of the omega swollen with child, and then cold and dead on a bed of blood like Paige had been. His ardour went cold as if ice had been dropped in his lap.

"I have an heir," he said it more stiffly than he had intended perhaps, "my sister, Cora, will inherit after me, but I do need help with the children."

"Children, your grace?" Stiles said archly, "you just said that your sister was your heir."

"And she is, my other sister, Laura," he paused, "my sister was named guardian of the children of
her friend, one who died in the same shipwreck which took her, as Laura's heir I inherited them, two of them, Evangeline and Thomas, they shall have to satisfy any yearning that you have for children. Their care will be part of your duties."

"It sounds like you don't want a mari, you want a housekeeper," Stiles snapped, and his eyes seemed to flash golden as he raised his head in anger.

"You will have access to my name and my wealth, do you not consider that ample restitution for any inconvenience?" Instead of backing down to the force of an alpha the omega seemed empowered, in fact, the more Derek pushed the more that Stiles pushed back.

"You say you do not want me like that," he said, "you sure wanted me last night," he stood up and took a step towards Derek.

"You are the one who came into my room," Derek could not help the way that he stared at Stiles' mouth and the wicked little tongue that flickered out to wet those sinful pink lips.

"And yet," Stiles reached out with a curious hand to cup his hand around Derek's jaw. They were almost of a height, Derek noticed, and his hands were strong and firm, there were callouses on his fingertips and attempts to soften them, up close the clove and violet and vanilla scent of him was burning its way through the pathways of Derek's brain, "something tells me if I came to you, and I offered you comfort."

Derek took a step back. "You tempt me, sir, but I do not think that you know what it is you try to stir in me."

Stiles laughed a little and it was a broken sound, "I'm already ruined," he said. "So what does it matter if I want to kiss you?"

What did it matter indeed?

Derek took a step back so that his head would clear from the perfume so that he could breathe without the omega fogging his senses. He wanted to grab the boy, to crush him to his chest and kiss him, to tear away his jabot and collar and expose that glorious neck, to peel back his jacket and waistcoat to find the skin underneath, to pull down those infuriatingly tight pants and bury himself in that hot sweet flesh to hear the noises that he would make.

It would be easier in Rosings, he decided. In Rosings it would be easier to avoid him, he could exhaust himself riding and with other sports. Rosings was big enough that two people could happily share it without seeing the other.

"I said that I would not be responsible for the death of someone else, go see your sisters, Stiles, have them arrange your marriage outfit, I understand these things are important to omegas, perhaps write to your father, he will be proud to hear you marry so well."

Stiles' temper flared like a struck match, "you don't talk about my father," he said leaning back into Derek's space with his fists clenched at his sides, and like that he was so unlike Paige who was soft and quiet and flinched when he raised his voice too loud so he made a point never to. Stiles was quixotic, mercurial and wore all of his emotions brazenly like he had never been told to be anything else.

"I apologise," Derek said quickly, "I meant no offence, I thought he would be proud to see his son marry so well," that was honest, he hadn't considered that Stiles would immediately consider his spoiling to be something that he would mention in his letter. "When he returns to London I would
be honoured to meet him."

"Are you only interested in his position like everyone else?" Again Stiles was prickly and angry.

"All I know about your father is that he is in France," Derek told him, "I said that I would be frank, and I am trying to be, I chose you because you came into my room but I wanted a mari, because of the nature of what I require it does not matter who I marry, your father could be Napoleon himself and it would not matter to me."

"Then you don't desire me," Stiles was determined to provoke and push.

"No," Derek lied. "I do not."

"And there will be no spousal duties required?" he scratched at his jabot revealing more of the marks that Derek had left on his skin.

Derek swallowed through the lump in his throat. "None." He agreed.

"I shall go see my sisters," Stiles said with a hint of a smile, "after all, I am getting married in the morning."
Chapter 8

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

Stiles stands up for himself, a little,

Mieczyslaw Stilinski was married with an amazing lack of circumstance considering the particulars. He married Derek Hale, Duke of Albemarle in a ceremony officiated by the Bishop of Bath and Wells and attended by his mother and sisters as witnesses. He had no new finery and so wore his new riding habit with his face scrubbed clean of cosmetics, and his hair still wet from the washing. Were it not for the low points of his omega ears, displayed brazenly without being neatly covered by his hair, he could have been mistaken for a beta on his way to work. His wedding breakfast was just him and his sisters as his stepmother and his new husband worked out the details for his new life.

Lydia especially seemed closer to him than usual, patting where his pockets normally were and smoothing out the lines of his brown velvet Spencer, "of the three of us, you were the last one any would pick to be Duchenne, so it will not be easy for you, not like it might be for Felicity and I," she took his hands in hers, both of them were wearing gloves but he could feel the heat of her hands in his, "so I shall tell you what I would do," her smile was soft and fond, and Stiles knew that it would be good advice for Lydia treated society like a war. "Don't let them walk all over you, say things like you expect them to happen, do not give orders and do not ask for things, state them and move on, act like you have always been a queen and they shall treat you like one." She kissed him on the forehead, "that goes for the duke too, pretend you know what you're doing until you do, and here," from the pocket of her morning dress she passed him a small leather-bound book, "Flick and I are there for you if you need us."

Taking the book he thanked her. He had a suspicion that he knew what it was, and was somewhat scandalised that Lydia would have one because she had not been to Bath so the book was hers, but lacked the heart to tell her it was unnecessary. The duke had sworn to celibacy and he offered Stiles no more than a business arrangement.

The duke watched it all with a sort of angry face, Stiles did not know him well enough that he could judge for sure. He looked stern and generally angry at life. He was handsome, with a blunt sort of beauty all straight lines and contrasting colours, and certainly cut a fine figure in a moss green superfine and white buckskins, and he was younger than Stiles had thought him, answering that he was thirty-two when Stiles asked him. They had had a brief conversation over dinner when it was announced that they were engaged and the rumour mill did its best to exaggerate the scandal. Felicity informed Stiles in the nursery after, over candied fruits wrapped in her handkerchief and stuffed into her pockets, that Stiles and the duke had been meeting in dark corners and now the marriage was rushed not because they had been caught, although that certainly wasn't being overlooked, and depending on who was asked altered the details of how they were found, but that Stiles was now pregnant and starting to show.

That at least made Stiles laugh because it said so much of society that he wasn't being judged as much for his licentiousness as his waistline.
Some of the rumours were particularly juicy including that Stiles had been knotted when Lady Argent discovered them in an alcove in the library and that the duke had scolded her whilst holding Stiles up against the wall. That also amused the pair of them until Lydia, who was lying back on the bed with a hot compress over her forehead to try and shrink a pimple that she felt forming, pointed out that the duke did look capable of holding someone up against a wall but wasn't sure if anyone could manage it long enough for a knotting which could take up to an hour. "Imagine," she drawled, "holding up another person for a whole hour, I get tired holding my mending basket for more than five minutes, it would take the fun out of the whole endeavour."

"But that's why there are shelves, dear one," Felicity said patting her sister's hand, "to help take the weight."

In public, the Martin sisters were the perfect appearance of society maidens, quiet, docile and utterly naive. It was a very carefully contrived act however and Stiles was grateful he was on their side because they tended to be terrifying. People underestimated the Martin sisters at their own peril.

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In a private sitting room Stiles and Derek shared a private breakfast before they were due to leave for Rosings, a place Stiles had never been. It was a large spread, with Lady Argent still doing her best to curry favour with the duke even though the marriage to her daughter was now impossible. Pouring the tea Stiles tried to spark a conversation with his new husband asking about the children, because he thought, mistakenly it turned out, that he might loosen up around such a topic.

Derek told him, cutting into the roast beef before him with a scrape against the plate, that there were two children, Evangeline Rose who was four and Thomas who was only eighteen months, that both were omega and that they had a nurse called Maudlin, Stiles frowned at the name, who made sure that they were well taken care of. Other than that he went quiet, turning back to his meal.

"I have a little brother," Stiles told him, already sure that he would have to take the slack in the conversation and just talk until either Derek answered him or he was told to be quiet. "Aleksander, but we call him Alek, he's just turned three, I wanted to stay behind with him in Hampstead but Lady Argent invited me personally, I think she just wanted to round out the numbers, with so many military alphas she needed extra people to dance or Allison would have worn her feet down to the ankle. Alek is really funny though, he looks just like my father, and he has the same angry face so when he gets told off he has this little angry face and he must look exactly like Father did at that age and he gets angry at the strangest things. He had a screaming tantrum because the cat was asleep in front of the fire and then got up and left the room. How can you explain to a three-year-old that cats won't do what you tell them because they're cats and he hadn't even told it to stay, he was playing with his little horse and the cat was just there and then it got up and left and he screamed the house down."

Derek made a noise of acknowledgement.

"I expect Evangeline Rose is the same," Stiles left it open for Derek.

"Evie," Derek corrected him. "We call her Evie." Then he fell quiet again leaving Stiles wondering if he had more to say before he returned to his breakfast plate which he had not even lifted his gaze from. He had filled the plate with slices of roast beef, two boiled eggs, watercress and three slices of freshly baked bread spread thickly with butter and a marrow chutney. Marriage had not dimmed his appetite.
Stiles made the decision that he would not let him hinder him and continued to talk. "I'm sure Evie and Alek will get on like a pair of puppies if we ever let them meet, Alek is an alpha so he's quite used to getting his own way."

"Just not with that cat," Derek qualified and was unprepared for the way that Stiles beamed at him, it was like a fire had been set under his skin making his unusual eyes sparkle and gleam in the morning light.

"You listened," Stiles said through his great grin.

"Why would I not?" Derek seemed perplexed at that.

"I talk," Stiles started, "a lot and I'm used to people not paying attention when I start talking like that because I can go on and on and I say most things that come into my head because I'm a flitter-wit and things fall out of my head just as quickly."

"How rude," Derek muttered.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realise," Stiles began but Derek cut him off.

"Not you," he said. "Them, it costs nothing to listen even if one is not actively paying as much attention."

"You might change your mind about that, I really do talk a lot about everything." Stiles was unaware of how lovely he was like that, beaming with delight, and flushed with it, with a few hairs falling loose from the tie at the nape of his neck in a silly little tail that Derek wanted to tug on to pull that luscious mouth back for a kiss and bare that gorgeous throat.

"I am perfectly capable of telling you to be quiet," Derek answered crisply, "now eat your breakfast, we have a long journey ahead of us and I'll not have you grumbling that you're hungry." Derek also knew that food had been put in a basket for them to eat in the carriage.

Still grinning like a loon and utterly unaware of his beauty the new Duchenne ate a mouthful of eggs smiling all the while.

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The night before Lady Argent had continued her festivities as if nothing had happened. She elected to ignore the fact that her intended paramour for her daughter had been caught in a compromising situation with one of her visiting omegas, and that another guest had stripped his clothes off and ran into the woods yelling about spirits trying to consume him. She decided that the scandal would have been worse if she had given it time and so she made the firm decision to continue as if nothing had happened.

Natalie had insisted that Stiles attend even though all he wanted to do was curl up in the nursery and try to convince himself that if he ignored the whole affair long enough that it would go away. He walked down the marble staircase flanked by his sisters trying so hard to be as strong as they looked. Stiles did not know how two girls who barely stood five foot tall could exude such menace whilst appearing to be as sweet as sugar and as innocent as freshly fallen snow. They would catalogue everyone who spoke out against him and there would be action, just not necessarily immediately. Stiles knew that but he still heard every word that they said, how they laughed behind their fans and called him a soiled little dove, and how there were bets over whether the duke would cut him.
Stiles knew that the duke had promised to marry him, to prevent the scandal but there were still long moments where his dance card hung uselessly at his wrist whilst Lydia and Felicity wrote in the names of those alphas who they would dance with.

When he saw Allison he went over to her, "I'm so sorry," he started.

"None of that," she said looking over his shoulder, "I am not ready to talk to you, Stiles, please," and with that, she pushed past him and Lydia flashed her a quick glare. She looked lovely in an almost teal white. "If you don't mind, I have a dance," and walked across to Mr Parrish and Stiles bit back the hurt.

"Stiles," Scott said coming over.

Stiles did not do him the dignity of even looking at him, walking past him as if he was not there, towards the chairs laid against the wall for the omega to sit between dances.

He sat down and rested his head in his hands. He was ruined, not even Carstairs would have him, but the duke had promised. He had promised. An older omega that Stiles didn't know laughed and offered a farthing for the duke cutting him, and he hated Natalie for making him attend.

"I believe this dance is mine," the man said and when Stiles looked up it was the duke, he had been so deep in his upset that he had not noticed him enter or how the people whispered and openly gawked. He offered his hand to Stiles. "I hope the next dance is a waltz," he said helping Stiles to his feet. He walked him into the centre of the dance floor, with one hand on his waist and the other holding his hand tight to his own. He looked like he would much rather be anywhere but there but it was not that he did not want to be with Stiles, he just hated all of this and Stiles knew that. The duke had told him as much. There, in the duke's arms, stepping in time to the music Stiles felt something he had been without so long he had not even felt it's lack - he felt safe. With the duke's gaze on him, with those strange kaleidoscopic eyes of his, Stiles felt safe, he felt that that he could, given time, come to love his husband.
Chapter 9

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

Ducal coach is the only way to travel

After their wedding breakfast Derek led Stiles to his carriage so that they might leave Rosings. The weather had already proved to be that particular type of changeable unique to April in England where it could veer from bright hot summer's day through a brief but torrential rain storm into a wicked chill and back again in the course of an hour. Although Derek preferred to ride he had his roan stallion lashed to the carriage, which had four piebald mares to pull it - he had intended to impress the Argents - sure that Boyd would scold him for a soaking as if Boyd were the peer. Derek had sent his other man, Theo, on to arrange lodgings in his favoured inn for himself and his duchenne so if anyone was to be drenched by the changing weather it would be him.

Stiles, still gnawing on a scone, came out, putting down his treat to kiss both his sisters and speak stiffly to his mother, before lavishing praise and attention on each of the horses, even pulling peppermints from his pockets for them. It seemed he was as intent on having even the working animals of the Rosings estate adore him. He had told Derek at breakfast that he had decided to make the best of the outcome and face the world with a smile.

His smile was bright and brought joy to everyone around him. If this was a facsimile, Derek thought, pasted on to hide his fear and his hurt, both of which Derek knew that he felt, then when he truly smiled Derek wasn't sure he could bear it. He passed a small cloth wrapped bundle to Boyd and was about to climb into the carriage, it alone had escaped his effusive praise, when the dark haired lady approached him, "Stiles," she called out and then remembered herself. She had been rushing but not quite running. She was attractive, Derek thought, for a matron of the ton, with a head of tight black curls that would be the envy of any blanc, an olive complexion and shining black eyes. She wore a pale dress in a printed robins egg blue with black leather shoes with matching ribands. She had attempted to catch those spiral curls into a pretty lace cap but it seemed that the gesture had been somewhat futile as many of them had escaped to frame her face.

"Lady McCall," Stiles said and turned away from the carriage. "I did not expect to see you now."

She looked a little flustered. "I had to come, Stiles," she looked across to Derek, "I have been looking all morning for you, Scott is beside himself, he is distraught, he claims that you cut him at the ball last night and now I hear that your mother is sending you home, that you have been ruined, I do not know what to think."

Stiles had said that Lady McCall was discreet, he had described her as efficient and not fond of him, but was dearly devoted to her son. All that Derek knew was that in the scheme to compromise Mr Parrish, which Stiles had been open about in some angles, even if he had not mentioned his co-conspirator, that Lady McCall was supposed to be the one who discovered them so that it would not be openly known.

Derek kept one eye on his new bride and the other managing the final tasks of packing Stiles' few belongings on the back of the carriage. Stiles' mood had changed so swiftly he wondered if he had
to give someone a thrashing. Stiles led her to a covered bench situated for people waiting for their carriages to sit, and out of Derek's earshot. Whatever he said it involved large gestures and when Lady McCall left him she gave him a quick embrace and wished him the best but her scowl suggested that she shared Derek's opinion that someone needed a thrashing and, unlike Derek, she knew who to give that thrashing to.

When Stiles came back over to him he had pasted on what looked like the fakest smile yet, "Is all well?" Derek asked. He wasn't sure that he truly wanted Stiles to tell him.

"Oh there is a lot of misinformation swirling, and Lady McCall has known me since I was on leading strings, she wanted to wish me well," He opened the door to the carriage, "didn't you say that we were stopping in an inn tonight, I will be glad to see it, it will allow me to prepared myself before arriving at Roswell," he mis-said the name.

"Rosings," Derek corrected putting his hand on the small of Stiles' back to help him into the carriage which creaked under his weight, lurching to one side on its new springs. "I am surprised you have not heard of it, on the few times I have socialised in society I have heard of its gardens, which apparently are quite fine."

Stiles, seating himself on the blue velvet upholstery and appreciating the comfort and luxury with his hand batting against the cushion. The carriage was the height of fashion with dark blue and heavy walnut panelling inside the carriage, there was a lantern hanging from the ceiling which was currently unlit, and an old rug on the small area of floor. There were pockets on the door and one of the cushions lifted to reveal storage for things necessary for travelling like lap rugs, books which had been abandoned and a silver tea service, complete with a sealed flagon of apple tea which had been refreshed that very morning. The sunlight filtering through the muslin window coverings softened Stiles' beauty and made his skin seem to glow.

With a brown velvet spencer Stiles wore a vest and pantaloons made of a red printed toile de joiy and the clocks on his white stockings were also scarlet. It was surprising and a little scandalous. Male omega were so rare that fashion never quite made sense for them and the fine silk stockings Stiles wore were a strangely androgynous mix. Women, whose socks were hidden by the skirts could wear thick, comfortable stockings and the flash of the clock, the embroidery used to cover the seam, was a mild erotic thrill, a reminder of what was underneath their skirts. Men, on the other hand, had previously displayed their calves to best effect, although fashion had moved on since then, and so wore the finest stockings that they could afford with buttons on their pantaloons holding them taut without garters, but Stiles wore those silk and fine stockings with clocks and perhaps, in the slight folds and billows of his red toile de joiy pantaloons he was wearing garters, and Derek liked that thought. He liked the idea of sinking to the carpet on the carriage floor, pulling off those black leather pumps with their scarlet ribbons, running his hands up those silk covered calves, undoing the bright red button on the outside of his knee and finding an embroidered silk garter.

"Are they fine?" Stiles asked not realising what he was doing as he crossed his legs.

He dismissed the thought and climbed into the carriage, sitting facing Stiles on the opposite cushioned bench. Once he was comfortable he returned to the simple conversation about the gardens at Rosings. "We have some traditional Elizabethan mazes but instead of being planted with laurel they are borders of woody herbs amongst the flowers which produce such colours in the summer. My parents had Robert Adams in to manage the estate but most of it is given to wilderness. There is a small duck pond, such as you could walk around in perhaps an hour, and wide hedges of chrysanthenum and rhododendron trees. By the rear of the east wing are two large lilac trees and and imported magnolia amongst the elderflower. After a summer rain the private
gardens smell much like I expect Heaven must." During his explanation Boyd started the carriage which rocked on the Argent's gravel drive.

"And this part of the spring," Stiles began, "I am not good at being cooped up. I love nothing more than a good rousing walk, if it is so divine in the summer it must still be exquisite in the spring."

"The wilds are almost violet with a carpet of bluebells," Derek continued, "and the paths, those that are cobbled are edged in holly and hawthorn, so they are alive with white blossoms and my siblings and I planted primroses and buttercups in the shadow of the hedges, edged with extra cobbles, my mother loved flowers, she spent most of her time in the time in her hothouse growing everything she could find cuttings of, trees especially. Come late May the blossoms from the cherry and apple trees look like blizzards."

"You love those gardens," it wasn't a question, just a simple statement of fact, "it's the most conversation that I have had since our meeting."

"When you tried to compromise me," Derek offered him a grin.

"Tried? I think we can agree that you were fully compromised," Stiles answered in the same light manner of jocularity.

"I might have been if we had not been disturbed, you might have leapt across the room like a scalded cat but you would have come back, I am hard to resist." Derek's grin was wolfish and he knew it. Yet Stiles did not seem to understand that they were making love and bristled like that scalded cat derek had called him.

"You make me sound like a wanton."

"You did compromise me," Derek answered, "I was asleep."

"I keep telling you, I had the wrong room, it was nearly four of the morning, I should be forgiven for mistaken identity." Stiles did sound genuinely distraught. "Miss Windermere had the gall to actually praise me for aiming so high above my station, she claimed I had made the hunt of the season and bagged myself a fine buck."

"Do you love him?" Derek wasn't sure why he asked the question, he had agreed to a civil partnership not a love match. Love would have no place in their marriage bed.

"Mr Parrish?" Stiles sighed, "I thought I would be content with him, Felicity, my sister, she claimed he was so bland he considered salt as too spicy," Derek snorted a laugh, "I thought him everything that I could want, he was kind and sensible and had a fine future ahead of him, when he told me I dominated his affections I believed him. He asked Natalie three times for my hand but she kept refusing him, patting my hand and telling me that I could do better. I thought that given time I would love him. I would be content, isn't that what I'm supposed to want, a warm hearth and a bushel of children around me?" He sighed so lustily that Derek could not help but notice how almost every one of Stiles' gestures were over-exaggerated, as he waved his hands about he was directing an imaginary orchestra. Derek was surprised go discover that he liked that about him.

"And do you know what the worst of it is? when I went to him after, when I offered him marriage he told me he was really only interested in my father and the connections he could bring, he told me that he couldn't be with me as I was ruined, that I would ruin him by association."

Derek felt relieved that Stiles' affections for Mr Parrish had been so practical but he could not say why and he was overcome with the urge to tell Boyd to turn around the carriage that he could give
him a sound thrashing, and he said so.

"I am glad that I found out his true nature, but Natalie would not let us marry, perhaps she could see through his nature, so why would she betroth me to Lord Carstairs," Stiles might not have been aware of how his hands shook. "He hurt me, and she, and," he stopped, slowing his breathing carefully and clenched and unclenched his hands to ease his temper.

"You never call her mother," Derek said

"She's not my mother," Stiles snapped at him, "she is my stepmother." Then he took another deep breath before he continued, "my father remarried just as I entered that nebulous state between childhood and being old enough to marry and she knows society and I adore my sisters, I do, but Natalie and I have very little in common. Her daughters, Lydia and Felicity, they are the best of omega, but they care how people see them and how to make advantageous matches and to promote my father, although he has turned down more peerages than she is aware of. She is not a villain but she would have had me marry one that she might make better matches for her daughters, and then there is little Alek who I love insanely but she is his mother."

"Then perhaps she also needs a thrashing," Derek said with a forced and rather wan smile but it was enough to make Stiles laugh. Derek suspected that Stiles was not taking him and his threats of violence seriously. "We shall invite them all to Rosings and she can see how you did well for yourself, after all Miss Windermere was right, you bagged the finest buck of the season." Derek liked to watch Stiles laugh and how when he threw his head back it was possible to see the kiss marks on his skin.
Chapter 10

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

euphemisms galore, and stiles takes a bath

Chapter Notes

St George is not a regency euphemism for a dildo, however riding st george is a literal regency euphemism for what we now refer to as the cowgirl position, so i repurposed it a bit, just a teensie bit, but it sounds legit don't it so yes, stiles talks about his sex toys,

The inn that stood slightly less than three-quarters of the way between the Argent house and Rosings was used to ducal visits and so kept a room to the standard that they felt that he expected. This meant that there was a large room with a bed a'la polonaise which due to the fabric hangings matching the wallpaper vanished into the decor despite the size of it. Facing it was a couch so large it might have been a lit a l'anglaise that just wasn't made up with sheets and blankets. Derek had ordered dinner, that a fire was set in the grate and that a bath be brought up for his Duchenne. Despite Stiles' protestations that he was fine to eat in the salon, a room set aside for ladies and omega that was basically a run-down couch with a table nicked and worn with use, Derek insisted he eats in their room.

"I hope you don't think that this is how our marriage is going to be," Stiles told him, with his hands on his slim hips, when they entered the room, before he had noticed the decoration, which although perfectly fashionable was far too much and which he would spend a great part of the evening complaining about, "you barking commands and expecting me to rush to obey."

"Stiles," Derek said with a deep sigh, "you are a Duchenne now, there are behaviours that are expected of you, especially in public. Duchenne do not eat where others can see them."

This struck Stiles as being quite ridiculous, "why ever not?"

"Gossip," Derek answered, peeling off his jacket and stretching a little in just his vest. He felt exhausted from the travel, for despite the luxuries of the carriage it was still not a pleasant experience that left Derek full of unspent energy and aching in strange places. "People will watch for opportunities for you to make a fool of yourself, and most foods are messy, a little gravy left on your lip and it will be all over Mayfair by morning at which point it will be an entire course splattered over your front. Any food that has the opportunity to be messy eat in private when it is possible. I am certain that your manners are exquisite but I would rather not arrive in Rosings behind the word that you travelled from Bath with cream on your cheek."

The corner of Stiles' mouth slipped up into a grin. "Or is it, your grace, that you like to watch me eat?" He cocked his hip slightly towards Derek, "I would have to be blind to overlook how you
stare at my mouth." He was almost purring, his fingers fluttering at the top button of his vest.

"You do nothing but draw attention to it," Derek answered, exasperated, for all through their journey Stiles had fussed with his mouth in one form or another, there was the sucking on his pendant, there was the rolling of his stylus through his fingers before it too ended up in his mouth, then there was the fussy gnawing on the riband that was supposed to hold back his hair but was tied in such a way that it reached his delicious damnable mouth. To add to the temptation every now and again his wicked tongue would flick out to lick his lips which were always swollen and red from the way he, unaware of the effect he would have on any who watched him, dragged it between his teeth as he read.

"What is the problem with you staring at my mouth?" Stiles asked him, "we are married, after all, my mouth is now yours," he dragged his fingertips down his vest as he continued, "all of me now belongs to you."

It was as if he knew exactly what to say to drive Derek to distraction with lust. The images that his mind presented were obscene, with Stiles spread out on the bed behind him like jam on bread and Derek using his hands and his mouth to finally render him speechless. This would have been easier with Miss Argent, for not only had she a sweet and naturally submissive nature as far as he knew, but Derek also did not desire her. Derek had married because he needed a Duchenne; he needed someone capable of managing the social events he could not; he needed someone to help with the children who seemed terrified of him; he did not need a lover because he could not bear to be responsible for another death. He had ended up married to a wanton imp who was alternately lusty and virginal. How was he supposed to resist? It would be much easier at Rosings when they would not be in such close proximity and he could put him out of mind entirely.

He just had to make it to Rosings.

After eating a fine meat pie with a large mug of the local ale, eaten across the table from Stiles who, despite any natural temptations that he offered did not eat suggestively but instead with gusto, and answered Derek's bewildered stare at that with a mouthful of food crammed around the word what, Derek took a walk both to aid his digestion and to clear his head. When he returned the bath had been set up and Stiles lay within it.

"Your grace!" Stiles said when he noticed Derek's arrival. When startled Stiles would refer to Derek by title and not by name. Derek was surprised to find that it, if all things, gave him a frisson of desire. "You shouldn't be in here, I'm naked!"

Derek wanted to not look yet he couldn't help himself; the water was murky with soap, hiding the details of his figure but showing a silhouette in the water. "I'm glad, I can't imagine you'd get very clean if you bathed in full dress."

The bath was a large copper affair covered in linen and filled with the water and a few herbs to sweeten it. It sat in front of the fire to keep its heat and as such, despite the amount of furniture and the overwhelming upholstery, it dominated the room. Stiles was tall enough that he had lifted one shapely leg and was resting his ankle against the rim out of the water. Derek was a little glad that Stiles had made him turn around or he was going to need another walk. Yet every time that Derek thought that he had banished the thought Stiles moved in the water with a soft slosh reminding him of what he was trying to resist.
He stepped out of the bath with the grace of a baby goat learning the use of its legs and wrapped a worn dressing robe around himself. "You can bath now if you want to," Stiles said wrapping a piece of linen around his hair, forming a turban, to wick most of the water from it. "You can shave, you look like you haven't in six months."

"I shaved only this morning," Derek answered turning to see Stiles looking taller with his feet bare and the long elegant column of his throat bare with its kiss marks.

"And already you have bristles like a pig," Stiles seemed to be amusing himself. "I might not let you debauch me if you mark up my face like you have my neck," to highlight that he dragged his fingertips down the tendon in his throat.

Derek huffed out another sigh. He had married temptation made flesh. He was mostly sure if he kissed the boy he would taste like apples, not because he had eaten them, but because the boy was sin incarnate and Derek would not be the death of him. It cooled his ardor as easily as a jug of ice water. He had loved Paige and she had died and he had sworn that would not allow another to die in her bed of blood.

"Are you over your Mr Parrish so quickly?" Stiles sat on the bed with an exhalation not very unlike Derek's bad tempered huffing.

"I am nervous enough about this," Stiles answered, "without you teasing me about other alphas."

"Then you might as well ease your thoughts, nothing is going to happen."

"I don't think that waiting will work, it will just make me more nervous because then I have more time to work out the logistics and make things seem a million times worse and all the instruction I got was that if you were at all considerate it wouldn't be too bad and that you knew what you were doing, but I had to leave my particulars in London." Stiles was prone to babble when he was nervous, Derek was learning about his new bride. He also babbled when given the chance so it was hard to tell which was which; or if he was ever at ease with Derek at all.

Derek had been about to explain, again, that nothing was ever going to happen but he felt that he had missed an important thread of the conversation. "Your particulars?"

"Well, I could hardly take them to Lady Argent's, I mean, I was expected to share a bed and most of my time with my sisters and that meant none of the three of us had any privacy, except, well, in the bath, and when three omega need to bath you need to be quick so your particulars suddenly don't matter and the whole point of them is to make things easier." Derek blinked at him for he had no idea what it was that Stiles was talking about and said so. "My particulars," Stiles stressed to him, "a small pochelette to stretch my poche for your knot and a small St. George," suddenly Derek did not wonder about being the death of Stiles, Stiles would be the death of him, sitting there, naked except for an old silk dressing robe talking about sex toys. The image of Stiles thrown back on this bed with the robe open pleasuring himself with the aforementioned St. George drove all the blood from Derek's brain. Would it be wooden, or bone, or even dark blue porcelain, a slight curve so it would look like the tusk of a walrus, or was it shaped? Would he tease himself with it? What noises would he make, sweet yips or deep groans, would he talk? Would it be a torrent of filth or would he beg for the carved phallus in Derek's hand as he pushed it against the sweet peach ass where he would be wet enough that the device would slip about in Derek's hand.

Derek was hard. He wasn't sure how he was expected not to be.

Lust was like fire in his veins and the only thing preventing him was his fear, but he had loved Paige so dearly and it had not been enough to protect her and he would not condemn another to her
fate. He had lost everyone around him, he could not bear another loss and remain sane, and he certainly could not be the cause of another death.

"You misunderstand," he said in a voice thick with lust. "This marriage will not be consummated," he was saying it as much for his own edification as that of Stiles, "not this night, not in Rosings, not ever."

"But do you not want an heir?" Derek had a momentary image of Stiles swollen with child, and then holding a fat baby with Derek's thick eyebrows but he squashed it down with his desire.

"I have my sister," he said finally. "We have travelled a long way, today," he said tugging at his cravat, "we should go to bed," he could not seem to loosen the knot, so he pulled on it harder, which just tightened the knot. "To sleep," that was an important addendum to clarify to the incubus that was beside him on the bed.

"And if I wish to offer you comfort?" Stiles reached over to take the cravat from his hands and loosen the knot, pulling it away in a manner that was solicitous but not seductive.

"You have your particulars," Derek answered, looking at his bride with the cravat in his hand, "and I have my own."
Stiles was more than happy to accept Derek's assurances that he would not debauch him, even offering such a promise of his own. He, with a grin and his night-rail sliding down to reveal his shoulder and the array of kiss marks that Derek had left there and climbing with his knees up to the head of the bed before laying down supine on the pillows with no idea of how he looked, that he was actually more comfortable sharing a bed as he had done so all of his life and that he couldn't be a worse bedfellow than his old nurse who snored like a pig and farted like an old hound. He then, with a yawn big enough to crack his jaw took the bolster pillow, arranged it lengthwise down the bed, draped himself along it, snuggled in twice, with a roll of his shoulders, and then, with his face buried in the pillow - went to sleep without waiting for his husband to extinguish the lamp and join him.

Derek had imagined that it would be difficult to lie next to him in the bed, to breathe in his smell of vanilla and cloves, and sleep. He was wrong for it found him easily.

He woke with a while left until dawn confused and disorientated for he had the terrible thought that he was being cradled against Paige's breast after another nightmare of the fire, which she had never done. This was made more confusing by a soft voice singing to him, softly and sweetly, and fingers carding through his hair as Paige never had either. Everything was almost, but not quite, as he remembered it. Between dragging himself out of the nightmare and waking enough to realise what was going on he was surprised to find that his new mari had pressed Derek's head against his chest and was dragging his fingers through his hair as he sang a nonsense lullaby in a language that Derek did not recognise.

"wiem, że nigdy nie wejdę w twoje buty
Bez ciebie tańczę w mojej komnacie
Mam nadzieję i modlę się
za miejsce, w którym mogę mieszkać
miejsce, w którym nasza miłość może być prawdziwaz."

When he saw that Derek was awake he ended his song, "you were having a nightmare," he said, "I can never remember if you're supposed to wake someone or not or if that's sleepwalking and you grabbed me, you cried out and you sounded so lonely, so I thought when Alek is upset like that I bundle him onto my lap to sing my mother's lullaby and I did not know what else to do." He was still, although perhaps unknowing, carding his fingers through Derek's hair.

"Did I hurt you?" Derek asked him, not wanting to pull away from the cradle of flesh that Stiles had made of himself.

"I'm sorry," Stiles said as he clearly did not understand what he was being asked.

"You said that I grabbed you, did I hurt you?" Derek wanted to be clear, to make sure that Stiles understood him.

"No," Stiles said softly and then to lift the mood added, "you had already put those marks on my neck, and I bruise like a peach, you might have noticed, you pulled me to you and urged that I run, that's what woke me. I sleep like a dead thing, if you hadn't manhandled me like that you could have gotten up, lit all the lamps, made breakfast and invited in an entire twelve piece orchestra and I wouldn't have woken, well, it depends on the violin solo, I have a specific taste for Paganini, I can
play the violin, I am no virtuoso, but my mother read that the ancient Greeks had female omega
learn wind instruments and that they had their male omega learn string, and when it became really
apparent I find it hard to focus she decided learning music would be good for me because it used
my mind and my hands. I can knit too because a child learning how to play violin sounds like
someone is torturing a cat for hours on end and well, she was already plagued with megrims, so I
learned to knit. My violin is in my luggage, I had to sneak it into my things because Natalie thought
it was rude to bring your own violin because of course the Argents would have them, even if
Allison is a proficient hunter like her father and couldn't hold a beat if you paid her, but a violin is a
personal thing, you learn how it feels and it's like a part of you, you know," Derek did not know but
listening to Stiles chatter on was actually kind of soothing. It sounded like he was just emptying his
head of every thought but there was a pattern there and his conversational patter calmed Derek after
the nightmare. He didn't ask about the nightmare, just talked about music and his sisters and how
he had not thought that they meant to invite him to the Argent house party over the summer but it
might have been suspect if they had left him out.

Throughout it all Derek lay there with his head on Stiles' chest and Stiles softly carding his fingers
through Derek's hair.

Derek had not shared a bed with anyone other than the children since Paige had died and then only
when they were travelling and he had made a barrier to stop Thomas getting out of the bed with his
own body. Even with Paige he could not remember this sort of easy, sexless comfort. Paige was
small and quiet, all curves and dark hair, though like Stiles she had a splatter of natural mouche.
She was lovely and soft and shy and had a smile like the soft uncurling of a fern and moved like
mist through the trees. In contrast Stiles was tall and all sleek hard angles, his hands were long and
thin with hard knuckles unlike Paige's which had been like a pair of birds laid in her skirts.

Derek had loved her with a madness that consumed him. He had been the happiest man in the
world when her parents allowed them to marry although they were young, then he had lost her and
the grief drowned him, despite Laura's best attempts to save him. Since her death, which had been
twelve years before, Derek had lived like a monk. He could have kept a mistress or lover but they
were not her, even when there were flashes of desire it was nothing that could not be solved by his
own hand.

Then Laura had died with Edward and their friends in a shipwreck near Malta and with no other
alphas to claim them Derek inherited a pair of children with no blood relation and no idea what he
was to do.

It had been a long time since he dreamt of the fire.

Now he was married and halfway back to children that were his own only by law with a bride that
he had sworn never to consummate, no matter how he desired him, and who had offered him
comfort his own family never had; a stranger he had married because he had not cared who it was
that would fill the post had pulled him into his arms and sang to him because he was dreaming of
the fire.

A weaker man might have wept

"What time is it?" Derek asked.

"Half past four," Stiles answered, using the hand which had been carding through Derek's hair, "it
looks like it might be dawn soon, do you wish to try and sleep some more?"

"Are you tired?" Derek asked in response. He would feel more at peace if he got up and moved
about, but Boyd would not be about until eight of the morning with the carriage readied for ten,
which was over five hours away.

"I can sleep in the carriage," Stiles told him. "I am all right for now, if you want to talk."

Derek felt like he was still in a dream. Had it really been so long since he had been touched by another person that this boy's sleepy mother comfort now served to undo his mind. "The song," he started, the one that you were singing, could you put it in English?"

"Do you want me to sing to you?" Derek could hear the smile in his voice, and it was apparent that he was beaming. Perhaps Stiles was as lonely as he was, "it's just an old lullaby," he tried to dismiss it. "I do know it in english but I don't think it's as pretty."

Derek made a noise to suggest that he did not mind that and made the mistake of looking up at Stiles from where he lay against his chest, to see the way Stiles bit into his lip, and how disheveled his hair was from sleeping. He looked lovely like this. It lacked the formal beauty of court, or the determined cosmetics that were used in order to lure alphas and provide an omega with everything that they wanted, this was the easy beauty of someone who did not care how he was seen. He knew Stiles well enough to know that Stiles was utterly unaware of his own value, and in fact thought the opposite to be true. For all the things that Derek knew him to be capable of, which due to their short acquaintance was not much, he knew he was kind to offer such comfort, to bed someone down in his own arms, to an almost complete stranger.

"Some of the song sounds silly in English," Stiles said, "and mama changed the tune a little, but it's the same song."

Derek didn't know why he added the clarification.

"No I would never step into your shoes
I'll dance in my chamber without you
I'm looking and I'm praying
for a place I can dwell in
A place where our love can be true," he sang almost tunelessly and soft, his fingers weaving through Derek's hair and Derek would not have considered it, for he never did after a nightmare, but there in Stiles' arms, with Stiles' heartbeat as loud in Derek's ear as the song, Derek returned to sleep.

This time he did not dream of the fire, or of the omega who shared his bed.

He dreamt of nothing at all

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After a hearty breakfast of bacon fried with eggs and served with wholegrain bread fried in the left over grease in the pan and fresh early season tomatoes, served with strong black tea from the caddy Derek carried with him, they once again alighted in the carriage for Rosings which was to be Stiles' new home.

"I sha'n't long stay in Rosings," Derek said distracting Stiles from the book he was reading. "I must return to London to finish out the parliamentary season." It would also be easier to get away from thoughts of his new mari if they were several hours apart by horse. "I will only be gone a few days, a se'nnight at most."

Stiles closed the book using his thumb to mark the page. "I have to ask," he said, "because I'm the son of a career soldier and this marriage has catapulted me into a part of society I had not even
thought to dream of, but what does a Duke actually do? I know what Wellington does, because of my father, but I am very out of what I was raised for."

Derek found that of all the questions Stiles could have asked him about his time in London the one that he asked what was not one he considered.

It was also an easier question. "I have several duties," Derek answered, "I have the estates which are managed in my stead, but need my input, so my secretary brings me the things I do need to pay attention to. Then when I am in London on a Wednesday I am open to petitioners, people who need either my political backing or finance, this might be a charity or an investment. These have been whittled down to viable candidates so I do not spend all day every day listening to every half-baked plan by someone," he smiled and shook his head to himself, "we actually have a pot where a penny is given every time someone new brings us the same plan to trek across British Colombia to reach China," he rolled his eyes, "which when it's full we give to a hospital for the poor in Cheapside as a bonus. We call it the idiot payment." Stiles laughed at that. " But most of my work is in the House of Lords when it is in season, although I know many of my peers leave it to lower ranking members of the noblesse. "I would leave it for the rest of the season but an important law that I have been instrumental in crafting is coming up for the vote."

Stiles nodded, "and what is the purpose of the law?" He sounded interested which surprised Derek.

"English privateers are," Derek paused, looking for the word, "shall we say encouraged to waylay French and Dutch ships headed out to America, those ships are usually full of slaves. England has abolished slavery in its territories and that includes ships at sea, so those slaves are made free men by the capture, but the sailors are recieving extra encouragement from Northern Industrialists in England to bring them to their mills where they can be employed."

"Surely that's a good thing, freeing them from captivity and providing them with employment."

"It's not that simple," Derek said, "the mill owners are using them as cheaper labour than the already massively underpaid workforce they have. They are freed from one kind of slavery to another, and held in place with systems of debt and the threat of prison or being transported which would see them return to slavery in America. The bill that is up for the vote is to have a set wage for all employees, not a piece rate, and to abolish the debt system, which isn't much but it is a start. Lord Peel has promised me his vote if I vote for his metropolitan police force, and many of those alphas and beta men could be employed in those new police forces."

Stiles' smile this time was soft. "You surprise me, sir, I thought dukes rode around on expensive horses, kept mistresses and lost fortunes at the gaming tables, and I find you care for the people who serve you, live like a monk and yet they call you the demon duke."

"I must be a demon," Derek told him with a smile of his own, "for I thwart them at every turn."
Rosings was beautiful. A brick wall with an arched gate led to a gravel lined drive that curled around the frontage of the house where two gabled bays emerged over five floors with high chimneys. The main entrance was brick with mullioned lead paneled windows set in what looked like a sea of purple wisteria blossoms. The household had been notified of their arrival and so they had gathered outside to meet their new duchenne. The house staff wore black with pearl grey buttons and white cuffs, where the garden staff looked outfitted to a similar quality but in much hardier clothes, and Stiles had to be honest after meeting the butler, Cheshunt, the housekeeper, Mrs Porter and what was called his camerera mayor, Halwyn, the names and faces blended into each other. Stiles was quite overwhelmed for although Derek had said Rosings was the more intimate house it was still much larger than he was used to and there must have been thirty people there to be introduced to.

He nodded politely as Derek recognised them all by name and saw how flattered they were by such attentions. Natalie was not so solicitous of those who served them in the Hampstead house.

Mrs Porter and Halwyn, who was a man as tall and broad as Derek, if not quite handsome but he certainly was gorgeous, led Stiles, when Derek abandoned him to their care saying that he must want to freshen up, to his new rooms.

It was a pleasant room, with dark wood panelling and an old Jacobean curtained bed with new fabric and heavy old tapestries covering the walls. Thick rugs covered the floor and there was a screened off area with a bath, a dressing table with looking glass and padded stool. They were lovely rooms, overlooking the road that led to the estate and full of light. Yet for all the niceness of the room something struck Stiles as being off, and it took a moment for him to realise what it was. The adjoining room was a large office with a desk and bookcases, it was clearly a room expected to see work although it was empty at present.

He took the opportunity to remove his coat and waistcoat, then his corded stays, but did not bother with a dressing gown because the house was unseasonably warm.

"Excuse me," he said, mustering up the courage to speak to these people, he remembered Lydia's advice to act as if you expected to be obeyed without question until you were, "do my rooms not adjoin his grace's?"

Mrs Porter and Halwyn looked between themselves before speaking. "His grace," Halwyn answered, stepping forward and allowing the housekeeper to leave, "stays in another wing."

"Why was I not given the rooms adjoining his?" Halwyn for a moment looked like a cornered animal before he smoothed out his features into a civil mask.

"The instructions we were given was to prepare a room for you, not that it was to be the duchess' rooms." Halwyn was very political in how it was worded, he knew someone was in for a scolding at best and Stiles was an unknown, no one knew what would happen or how he would react.

Stiles knew immediately who was to blame and it wasn't the servants. He could have thrown a tantrum but he did not, he merely sucked a breath in through his nose and pressed his lips together in temper. "Take me to the duchess' rooms and do not unpack for me until I return."
The way that the house had been built with a warren of outbuildings around a courtyard behind the main manor there were a rat warren of corridors and doorways, some rooms could only be accessed through other rooms and doors that were expected to open into rooms might be closets or stairwells. Halwyn moved with the certainty of someone who knew exactly where he was going, occasionally looking back to make sure that Stiles was following. The wood panelling continued to the corridors although only to hip height and not shoulder height like it was in the rooms, and the walls above were painted an off white, tables with fresh flowers dotted the corridors and where large expanses of wall were left by the labyrinthine construction were tapestries. Stiles had seen portraits in the rooms on the ground floor and the walls of the carpeted main stairs. Rather than being like the Argent house which was a place to display that they lived in Rosings was a home and it showed in how things were worn. They were not shabby just used, doorknobs had a dark patina from hundreds of hands opening them and were not just bright new brass.

The duchess' room were in a different bay to the room that Stiles had been given. The walls here had been painted a pale yellow and Halwyn had to remove a bunch of keys from his belt, untying the riband that kept them from rattling and turned the key in the door. The architecture here was slightly different with gothic doorways with the pointed arch above the door set with coloured glass and the door was not panelled as it was in the more modern parts of the house. Derek had told him that parts of the house had been a castle that had been converted, this door was clearly a relic that had survived.

It opened with a creak and the first thing Stiles became aware of was the smell. It was cool and musty and it took a moment for Stiles' eyes to accustom themselves to the darkness inside. The room had not been opened in years and the shutters were closed against the glorious late spring day. A coat lay across the couch where it had been left, with the hood hanging over the arm rest. The fireplace was empty but for ashes. The vases which decorated the room held only dried stalks and sat in pools of dried petals. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. The only hint that the room had not been left exactly as she had left it was that there were neither sheets nor mattress on the bed. She had died and Derek had closed the room up in her memory.

Stiles closed the door and locked it again. As he went to leave, Halwyn close behind, thinking over what to do next, feeling very much as if he had peeked at something terribly forbidden and so lost in his thoughts that he did not see his husband until he bodily crashed into him. Derek lurched back and grabbed Stiles by the shoulder, "did you go in?" he asked. At some point since leaving the house Derek had removed his coat and waistcoat, his cravat hanging open around his neck so Stiles could see the smattering of dark hair through the gap of his billowing shirt. It formed a contrast to his tight white buckskin pants and high black hessian boots.

"I opened the door," Stiles answered, "and I asked Halwyn to bring me and open the door, so if you have to blame someone blame me," he took a step backwards which allowed Derek to back him against the wall. Stiles flicked his hand telling Halwyn to leave. "I didn't know, I asked." His tongue flicked out to wet his lips and Derek's eyes followed his tongue. "I'm not afraid of you," Stiles said, curling his hand up around Derek's neck. "I asked him to show me the duchess' rooms," Stiles was aware that his voice was becoming husky as Derek's hands cupped his ass and lifted him up to the table. They were close enough that Stiles was aware of the smell of his husband, sun warm and overpowering this close. There was cologne and horse and grass and it was heady. "I wanted to know why our rooms didn't adjoin," Derek buried the tip of his nose behind Stiles' ear where his omega wax formed and he applied his perfume.

With a deep breath Derek lurched backwards and Stiles was left feeling the sudden rush of cold air. "I said I would not consummate this marriage," and with that he turned and looked like he might leave.
Stiles reached out and took his hand and pulled him back. "We need to talk," Stiles said, aware that his voice was rough with desire. "Just talk." He opened the nearest door and pulled Derek inside. He was gratified to find it was a bedroom and not a cleaning closet or a stairwell, and was just luck that it was not. Still holding Derek's hand he pulled him away from the door.

"I'm sorry," Derek said and he sounded like a small boy, terrified of what he had done, "I," he paused looking at Stiles' tongue flickering out to lick his lips again, "I shouldn't have grabbed you, but when I thought that you'd gone in."

"I understand," Stiles said softly. "When my mother died my father gave away all of her things, he wouldn't have a thing of hers in the house and all I could save of hers was a little porcelain doll," he pulled Derek in with his other hand so that they were kissing close again, "and Alek found it or Natalie or Felicity or Lydia gave it to him, they didn't know what it meant, and he was a baby, so it broke and I was so angry."

"It's been twelve years," Derek mumbled as if that was reasoning enough for anything.

"There is no timeline on grief," Stiles said in a soft voice like he was soothing a wailing child, "it takes as long as it takes," then he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders, "Derek, why won't you fuck me?"

Derek desired him, Stiles knew that, and when pushed to extremity Derek seemed to forget that. Stiles desired Derek, he did not love him; he did not know him, but this alpha was his, his husband and he didn't know why Derek wasn't acting on that. Derek had given him a sort of explanation before but that was before and right now he smelled and looked so good and Stiles was so willing. Stiles had to admit when Derek told him he was so caught up in the folderol going on around them he had not paid too much attention to anything other than his own anxiety over what had happened.

"I can't lose someone else," Derek told him but he was so close that his voice was almost a whisper against the skin of his throat. "I can't, I don't have it in me."

"I'm made of old boot leather and nails," Stiles murmured, "what makes you think you're going to lose me."

"I lose everyone," Derek said and Stiles' put his hands on his shoulders, pulling him in, he was unsure what had caused Derek's near breakdown but Derek had always promised to be honest with him and since he had woken with Stiles singing to him he had lost some of his prideful aloof. "There was the fire, then Paige and then the shipwreck, I can't bear it, I'm not strong enough."

"Well, you're doing a piss poor job of keeping me at arm's length," Stiles told him just to feel him smile against the skin of his throat.

"You're the first person in a long time that has looked at me without disgust or pity," Derek told him, "you don't look at me like I'm a,"

"Demon duke?" Stiles offered, "I heard them gossiping."

"You don't believe I murdered my sister to become my brother's heir?" Derek asked him pulling his face back so he could see Stiles' reflection, "or strangled my wife in her wedding bed."

"You do have a bit of a beard," Stiles said bringing his hand from Derek's waist to cup his jaw, "but it's not blue, I don't know the truth of what happened," he said, "and you'll tell me when you're ready, but I don't know up from down at the moment, Derek, the only thing I know for certain right now is that Mrs Porter said the children were visiting the neighbours and wouldn't be back until
after tea. So answer me, please, why won't you fuck me?"

The word landed on Derek like a lash. The profanity seemed unexpected but he didn't know why. "You'll die," he was so certain when he said it that he was a little insulted by Stiles' amusement.

"Are you diseased, is it the French pox?" Stiles asked, Derek looked offended by the accusation. "Then what?"

"Paige died in childbirth," he managed finally, "and I won't risk anyone else like that. I had thought you understood, I thought I was clear."

Stiles seemed to make a realisation and his face lit up with understanding. "Is that all, oh that's not a problem," and with that he lunged in for a kiss so that Derek had to lurch back to avoid it, looking at his new mari like he was a madman and raising an eyebrow asking for a better explanation than Stiles had offered. "If you just don't want me to be pregnant," he said brightly, "that just means that you can't knot me or finish inside me, but that doesn't mean we can't fuck, I mean, we have hands, mouths, whole bodies, we can use skins, I can visit the midwife for a contraceptive." He sounded so eager that Derek was a little overwhelmed.

"You're a little wanton," Derek laughed mostly to see Stiles' indignation which he found adorable.

"No, I'm not, I'm just," he reached into the pocket of his breeches and pulled out the small leather book that his sister had given him, "I read a lot and I wanna do this," he opened the book to a bookmarked page and it showed a picture of an omega, recognisable by the low points of their ear, kneeling in front of their alpha with a rather engorged member in their mouth, "I think I'd be good at it."

"Where did you get this?" Derek asked snatching the book and flicking through the book to reveal a lot more illustrations like the first.

"My sister," he answered, "so can I?" He asked.

Derek could feel his restraint crumbling, how was he supposed to resist. "I thought omega were supposed to be demure and know nothing about the carnal arts," he was transfixed and horrified by the book.

Stiles laughed and like so many things he did it with his whole body, "then you clearly don't know many omega."

"Tonight," Derek managed to say, still looking at the book, the illustrations were surprisingly clear despite it's small size and cheap printing, and each was accompanied by a short chapter in which the author, an omega courtesan, performed the act upon an unnamed patron. "I'll come to you tonight."

Stiles darted forward for another kiss. "I'll look forward to it, but I'll have to sort out the bedroom thing, you don't mind it if I move you."

"You're not going to have Paige's rooms cleared out?" Derek asked, surprised.

"No," Stiles told him with a faint but more genuine smile, "we'll do that when you're ready, and there's no real rush."
I don't know where the goat came from either

Had Stiles been asked to describe a four year old omega with the name Evangeline Rose he would have spoken of velvet dresses and bouncing curls. He would not have thought up a dark haired whirlwind who appeared to be wearing a pillowcase cinched at her shoulders with a tangle of black hair that looked like a bird's nest running pell mell down the long corridor, which had been designed for indoor exercise which ran the length of the house and had a barrel ceiling and was interspersed with fireplaces, none of which were lit. She was waving a wooden sword and at her heels was a baby goat. Her baby brother was sat on a quilt happily stuffing his face with a scone and some of it was in his mouth, but most smeared around it his face and in his dark hair. He had the bluest eyes that Stiles had ever seen and skin like cream. He would be a beauty when he was older. Thomas was on leading strings but the end was not held by his nurse but instead the largest, meanest dog that Stiles had ever seen. It was pitch black with its ears and tail clipped and a mouth that looked like it could easily lift baby Thomas by the head without trying and its paws were about as large as melons. It must have stood the size of a pony but with the bulk of an make barrel. Baby Thomas was nonplussed by the demon hound sat beside him and occasionally offered it bits of his scone which it took with surprising delicacy.

In a nursing chair beside the quilt was their nurse, a woman who looked to be in her sixties with her grey hair tightly pulled back into a cap and she seemed completely unconcerned at the behaviour, or the threat that the dog posed to her charges. When she saw Stiles approach, walking with Derek for he had insisted that they be introduced so the children did not consider him a stranger who was to be feared the old woman called to the hollering whirlwind who was running the length of the hall. "Schatzi, come and meet your onkel," she spoke with a strong German accent and the sort of authority that expected complete and utter obedience.

"The dread pirate Evie leaves no survivors," the child yelled back and the goat, which had been running alongside her, had the audacity to meh along with her, "she sails alone on the seven seas."

"Does the dread pirate take supplies on board?" Stiles asked, "for there are scones and jam and hot milk with honey and surely they're needed for a long journey," he hadn't realised that he was talking to her like he had known her for years but it was easy to fall into the old behaviours of make believe when Alek had just been old enough to start with those kinds of games.

After a few moments the girl decided that the dread pirate did indeed take on supplies and ran towards them on the blanket just as pell mell as she had been before, still waving her wooden sword and followed by her trusty crew, which happened to be a black and white baby goat. Stiles was so overwhelmed by all of it that he didn't even think to question any of it.

"Your graces," the old woman said struggling to get out of her chair.

"Don't get up, Maudlin," Derek said sitting on the quilt, carefully on the other side of the dog, to preserve, Stiles thought, his coat from the mess that was spreading around the baby like a miasma.
"I wanted to introduce my new mari to the children." Stiles feeling the old woman's gaze turn on him felt the urge to curtsey. "This is Mieczyslaw," he said, "this is Thomas, Evangeline Rose," Evie had taken one of the scones from the tray and was shoving it into the pockets of her simple dress to supply her imaginary pirate ship. "And this is Cerberus," he scratched the dog behind the ear and it's tongue unfurled with delight. As the dog looked large enough to murder Derek and drag off his corpse Stiles was not surprised at it's name.

"No!" Evie said with surprising force from the other side of the blanket that baby Thomas and the dog sat on, with a scone in each hand to shove into pockets and another sacrificed when she gave it to the goat to hold for her, "his name's Berry." This was said with such conviction that even Derek flinched.

"Schatzi," their nurse said, "Berry is a short version of Cerberus." Berry recognised his own name and that the goat was eating more than he was and looked at Stiles and the plate of scones he was being so good about not eating and then Stiles again, then the plate. Stiles didn’t have to be a mind-reader to understand what he was being told. Neither did Thomas who with a gummy smile showing all four of his teeth to the gathered party offered the dog his half eaten and very slobbery egg. Berry took the egg, gulped it down in a single swallow and then licked the hand that had fed it.

Berry might have looked like he might give his namesake pause if crossed in a dark alley, with dark velvety black fur, narrow eyes and a mouth that contained far too many teeth- His paws must have been the size of Stiles’ hands- but it seemed he was as much made of fluff as Baby Thomas’ stuffed piece of sheepskin that was fashioned to almost look like a lamb which had been abandoned behind him for things that he was more interested in like scones and boiled eggs.

"Maudie," he said, and held up his hands for his nurse to wipe clean, “all done.” Then he put his hands in front of him on the blanket and using that leverage, the dog, Stiles and anything else he could leave a sticky handprint on toddled over to her on unsteady legs so she could make an attempt at the food smeared on him. He was clearly for the bath.

"I’m not done," Evie said with a pout. She was not a quiet child and she managed, without shouting, to be the sort of loud that could attract the entire attention of a tea-room currently engaged in a riot.

“That’s because you haven’t eaten anything yet, Schatzi,” the nurse said wiping Thomas’ face and hands with a damp rag that she had brought with her in the basket that had contained scones and had been on the small table beside her chair where the honeyed milk was in small cups for them.

“Nuh, uh,” she said proudly, “because I don’t have to have a bath and go to bed until I eat my tea so I’m not going to then I never have to go to bed.”

Derek might have looked terrified by the children, and not their demon dog, or even the goat, who having finished his scone was trying to eat the hem of Evie’s dress. Stiles couldn’t help but snicker at her logic. “But it doesn’t work that way,” he told her, “it just means you go to bed with an empty belly, isn’t that right, Maudlin.”

“But,” the child protested, “but, but Cynthia said so.”

Stiles didn’t know who Cynthia was but he got the impression she was older and got away with a lot of things that Evie, who was clearly adored and allowed many freedoms - including a goat- would not, like postponing bedtime.

“Maudie,” Thomas said, interrupting and holding his hands out, “milk, please.” He was still
steadying himself on the dog, and the nurse went to lift him, to hold him in place whilst she held
his cup for him, because he wasn’t quite old enough to manage it on his own.

“I can do it,” Stiles said, “if you don’t mind, Thomas, do you want to sit on my knee to drink your
milk?” Stiles was sitting cross legged on the quilt.

Thomas, who was revealing himself to be what was colloquially referred to as an “easy baby” just
walked over to Stiles using the dog as a walking aid and poking it in the eye. The dog looked used
to this behaviour.

"I don’t know you,” Evie said watching what she considered to be a stranger with her baby brother.

“Evie,” Maudlin said, because Derek looked fit to burst out of his skin if it would give him a
chance to escape and certainly did not want to introduce him, “this is your new Onkel, his name
is,” she paused.

“Most everyone calls me Stiles,” he told her as Thomas settled into the space left by his crossed
legs. “You can call me Stiles if you like.”

“Are you going to be my new mother?” Evie had a suspicious face that would have cracked any
military spy in moments. “Tavia said if Onkel married then I’d get a new mother and I don’t want
a new mother.”

“No,” Stiles said softly. “I’m your new Onkel, you can have more than one, you can have lots and
lots, Onkels are the brothers of your parents, and Tantes,” he used the German word, “are the
sister’s, but when an Onkel or tante marry it means you get a free tante or onkel.” Evie chewed
over this with a bite of scone, thinking it over. “I married Onkel Derek so that means I’m your new
onkel, but no one is going to replace your mother.” She still seemed quite suspicious so he
continued, “my mama died too, and so I know how scary it is when you think someone might take
their place.”

“Say-eez,” Thomas tried to say but the t sound and the l sound were not helping. “Milk.”

Stiles took the cup and held it where he could guide it but he had the weight, “I have a little brother
too, and he’s just a little older than you, little man,” Thomas was truly more interested in his milk,
“but he calls me Meemee, would that be easier?”

Thomas just belched, smacked his lips a few times and went back to his milk.

With her pockets successfully filled and the knowledge of who Stiles was, and that he wasn’t a
threat to her pirate empire Evie decided to continue her pillage of the Caribbean, which in this case
was an old linen chest, by running pell mell with her goat towards it. It would not have taken an
oracle to see what happened, barefoot and wild, but laden down with delicious goods that the goat
was interested it was only a matter of time before the entire adventure came down with a crash, a
caprine yell of surprise and a wail.

Stiles immediately stood, with his hands around Thomas, and in what looked like a single
movement deposited the baby into Derek’s lap and went after the girl who was crying more from
shock than hurt. This shock was repeated on his husband’s face as he found himself with a lapful of
baby and a cup of mostly drunk milk as Stiles went to the crying child, “oh no,” he said,
deliberately downplaying the situation to try and prevent her from crying more, “the dread pirate
Evie has foundered on a reef, we must make sure she hasn’t scuppered, but no fear, a passing sloop
has heard of her reputation and has come to her aid.” With the same ease with which he had
deposited Thomas he scooped her up.
“I hurt my chin,” she said against his vest.

“Do you think we’ll have to cut it off?” he asked, making sure she knew that he was being silly.

“No,” she said in the same voice she had used to correct Derek’s misnaming his own dog.

“But we could get you a fake chin, can you be a real pirate if you don’t have a peg leg or a hook hand? You could have a steel chin and then everyone would be even more scared of the dread pirate.” Despite herself and the tears barreling down her face Evie laughed. She might need a little honey plaster on her chin, more for her reassurance than because it was seriously hurt, but she was fine.

“You’re silly,” she said.

“Yep,” he answered, “I’m as silly as can be.” He sat her down next to the dog who took the opportunity to lick her face wiping away the tears and handed her the last complete scone. “I was so silly I gave your Onkel Derek Baby Thomas and look,” he gestured to them, “neither of them knows what to do about it.” And Evie laughed.

Derek might not have known what to do with the child in his lap, Thomas seemed quite content regardless, splitting his food covered face in a mighty yawn, but he knew he was very lucky with Stiles. Would Vidama Argent have sat on the quilt with them? Would she have dashed up to lift a wailing child? Would she play pirates with them in the covered walkway and fairies and monsters in the garden? Derek could not imagine that. He had wanted to give them a parent, someone who knew what to do with them because, lord knew, he did not, but he had not envisioned Stiles. Stiles who even now was making gestures with his chin to make Evie laugh, sniffing up her tears with Berry’s paw on her leg, holding her in place.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Stiles takes some matters in hand

After tea with the children Derek declared he wanted a long walk alone which Stiles was beginning to believe was just his evening habit, possibly to build an appetite for dinner. He told Stiles that he would take a tray in his room meaning he would not have to dress for dinner and that Stiles could wander the house and eat where he chose. With the instruction in place to move the two of them into other, adjoining, bedrooms Stiles took the opportunity to explore the ground floor followed by Halwyn at a discrete distance. It seemed that Stiles' camerera mayor considered chaperone part of his duties.

Climbing the main stair he had seen the footmen trying to remove a large painting of a soft faced dark haired girl from the wall. When he asked he was told that it was his grace's first wife and they were taking it down to move it to the gallery so that the space would be free for Stiles's own portrait. Stiles told them not to bother because his own portrait wasn't a thing yet so all they were doing was leaving a blank space on the wall when there was no need.

When Stiles sat down to his dinner in one of the sitting rooms, one that had toys tidied away in one corner and showed more use than any of the others. It was also the most unlikely to be used by Derek. During his dinner Stiles asked Halwyn what his duties actually were and was surprised to learn that Halwyn would manage his household, which carried the unexpected revelation that Stiles would have a household of staff whose entire purpose was to give him as much free time as possible despite those obligations he would have with his title. So Stiles' head was still reeling and he was overwhelmed by it all when he went to his new bedroom which overlooked a large duck pond, one certainly large enough to fish on.

The room was well appointed if a little worn, the fabric on the wall had clearly been applied in a previous generation when more flamboyant patterns were preferred and the furniture didn't entirely match with some of it painted white and gilded in the Versailles fashion whilst others were oak left to age black. Halwyn did not have to tell him that be could have it redecorated if he preferred and so Stiles cut him off when he tried.

As Derek had told him that he would call upon him that night Stiles asked for a bath and stripped to his skin whilst waiting for it, pulling his threadworn banyan around himself. His bath at the inn the previous night had been perfunctory but this bath was not only accompanied by a maid- a middle aged member of the house staff who would be replaced at the first opportunity - but bottles of scent and lotions, even baking soda to soften the water, so when he left the bath he smelled wonderful and his skin was velvet soft. Wearing a clean shift, the last of the clean ones that he had brought to the Argent house, he dabbed a little of his own perfume on his wrists and in the divots behind his ears. Then because his feet were cold and he had no slippers with him he pulled on clean stockings.

Then came the waiting.
He had no idea how long Derek was going to be. What time did he go to bed? When was he going to come to Stiles? And the more questions that Stiles had the worse it became. Derek had said that he would not knot him, but Stiles' pillow-book had been quite explicit about other things and there were things that he could do on himself to himself and like any student of the natural sciences he had certainly tried but his body was that of an omega and he had no hands on knowledge of an alpha. Everything he knew came from books that Natalie would have had conniptions over if she knew that the three omega in her house were trading amongst themselves.

The author of the book that Lydia had given Stiles on his wedding day, which had only been two days before but felt like a lifetime, had been blunt and detailed about sexual acts but she was a female omega, ruined, who had become a courtesan and although she openly discussed her suitors, her household, she sketched over the things that Stiles had questions about because she assumed, erroneously as it turned out, that everyone knew. She knew what an alpha cock looked, felt and tasted like. Stiles didn't. He could hardly have asked his father to drop his pants so he could answer his son's questions without being ruined by the association.

There were other things, as well. Veronica, the author of the pillow-book that Lydia had given Stiles had a reputation for more exotic sex acts. One of her patrons, named in the text as Zinc - she used the code of metal names for all of her patrons - had enjoyed being whipped with birches. Iron had liked to be struck with a thick leather paddle. Mercury liked to be bound. What if Derek enjoyed that. Stiles had no idea where to begin, and was he expected to bring his own props? Where was he supposed to find a mink glove and a St George carved from ice that Veronica spoke of as being just the thing for her more royal patrons, especially one she called Gold.

What if Derek expected him to find a harness for his St George, which even now was still in Hampstead, to bugger him mightily as Veronica put it. She was quite certain that most alphas craved a strong hand and were, in most cases, scared to ask for it, and almost all of them just needed bringing down to their knees.

Therese, the author of the first pillow-book that Stiles had read had advocated just lying back and letting them do all the work and remind them that they should be grateful that she had bothered and admitted that because she had large breasts that they should be honoured because not all alphas were so lucky. Stiles didn't have big breasts so he had no idea what he was supposed to do, but the longer he waited the more unsettled he became, not because he thought, even for a moment, that Derek would hurt him, he just didn't know what was next and that scared him - even if he did not want to admit it.

He was perfectly aware that he was putting himself into a panic with silly fears but he could not stop. He considered having a drink from the tantalus on the table beside the fireplace, which was clearly for him to use, but Diane, the author of Felicity's pillow-book had a list of rules of consent and when it was and was not given - which she used as a method of screening her patrons - and drunk was a definite no-no and Stiles himself knew that two glasses of port and lemon and he was muddle-headed. Natalie was so good at keeping the three of them from the liquor in the house so he had no real resistance to it.

He didn't know if he was supposed to get in the bed, sit on the couch, drape himself on the chaise in front of the fireplace. Should he sprawl seductively on the bed, or wait with his head bowed. These were important questions and Stiles found he had no answer. He had bathed and washed his hair, he had put on a clean night rail and neatly tied back his hair after rubbing most of the water from it, and he was waiting and it felt like it had been forever but had, according to the clock on the mantle, been barely ten minutes.

He could send for tea, tea with bergamot was said to be good for the nerves. But then he had to
wait for the tea and he didn't have a personal maid yet to see him dressed for bed so he would have
to send for Halwyn and he had no idea how Derek would react to Halwyn, a handsome alpha in his
prime, seeing him in this state of undress.

The worst part of fretting himself into a panic was that he was perfectly aware he was being silly
and fretting over nothing but he couldn't stop.

He made the decision to just amuse himself until Derek came in, he could learn later how Derek
preferred him, because he wasn't capable of sprawling attractively over the covers displaying his
large breasts as Therese, the only pillow-book author who had even mentioned this - suggested.

When his things had been unpacked his violin had been laid out on one of the chairs so he went
over to it, untying the laces which kept the case closed and opening it, making sure that it had
remained in the well packed state in which he had put it, wrapped in calico in the lined box that it
had come with. He corrected his stance unaware that he was even doing it as he lifted the
instrument. It was the most expensive thing that he owned and when it was in his hands it felt like
an extension of his body as he brought it up to his shoulder, tucking it under his chin. The bow
whipped around in his hand as he brought it up. He intended only to play a set of scales but he had
been practising Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" and the music was right there, so it didn't mean
much to run through it a few times, he was just learning after all.

He could lose himself in the music, with the tip of his tongue quirked out of the corner of his
mouth as he concentrated, going through the simple opening and then the more complicated parts
before he botched the note and winced. He went back to the start of the bar and tried again, his
fingers sliding up and down the fingering board but his dressing gown was in the way, so he put the violin down and removed the robe, draping it over the chair before picking up the instrument again in just his nightrail.

He swayed back and forth, his knee keeping time for him. He would have to ask for a metronome
he thought, with his bow sliding back and forth over the strings, rosin dust vibrating in the air
above the instrument. He knew he was almost dancing with the force of the music, something his
instructor had always despaired of because omega were meant to be appreciated for their stillness,
like a portrait, not their abandon but there was no one here to see so it didn't matter if his feet
moved, if he whirled around the room in an almost waltz, enjoying the freedom of playing because
he wanted to play in his night rail and stockings. He could almost laugh with the freedom of it and
so was panting by the time the song came to an end.

When he lowered the violin his skin had a cooled sweat feeling like he was unwell, unaware of the
energy that he had expended in his moment of beatific musical fever and he was panting a little. He
looked around the room to see if anyone had seen him capering about like the pied piper of
Hamelin. The door to the room adjoining his, Derek's room, was open where it had not been
before.

Derek had tried to come in and seen Stiles spinning around like a top and had turned and walked
away.

"Shit," Stiles cursed under his breath, and used both hands to scrub through his hair trying to find a
way to fix this before he decided that he would be best explaining himself, he would go in there
and think of something to explain what he was doing when he really had just been trying to burn
off the nervous energy despite missed notes and botched chords and twisting around like a
weathervane.

Derek had his back to the door when Stiles walked in, he had removed his jacket and vest, but was
still in his boots, doeskin pants and shirt, open at his neck. Derek stood over his commode and
when Stiles went to turn around Derek clearly said his name so Stiles looked closer. He was hunched over, his hand below his waist and it took a moment for Stiles to realise what he was seeing and took the initiative. He walked over behind Derek, his footsteps silenced by the thick carpet, tucked his chin over Derek's shoulder and reached around to put his own hand beside Derek's on his cock as he stroked it. His erection was large, thicker and heavier than Stiles' own, but this Stiles knew how to do. "Is this for me?" He asked breathily into Derek's ear as Derek leaned back into him, their hands twined together as they tugged the foreskin back to bear the head. "Let me," Stiles said, letting Derek turn his head towards him even as his hips thrust forward into Stiles' sure grip. "You saw me dancing," Stiles said, sure of what was happening, "and you liked it."

"God," Derek managed. "You are,"

"Yours, alpha," all three pillow-books had been clear of that detail, alphas enjoyed being allowed the illusion of ownership of the omega that they bedded, Stiles himself was hard and he could feel his slick, damp and unpleasant between his ass cheeks, but he felt powerful, strong and in control. "Let me bring you pleasure, alpha." With a grunt that sounded punched out of him Derek came into the bowl of his commode in long thick ropes, splatters of it on Stiles' hand as he continued his long slow strokes with the wicked twist at the head that he himself enjoyed. When it was becoming clear that Derek was oversensitive Stiles brought up his hand, slick now with Derek's cum, and pressed it against Derek's collarbone, where the skin had turned blotchy and red, preparing to turn him. "Let me, alpha," Stiles said, husky into Derek's ear where it was beside his mouth, "let me."
Chapter 15

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

okay it's short but it should be worth it

Derek turned, his arms wrapping around Stiles' ass and tugging, his fingertips finding wetness there, "wrap your legs around my waist," he growled, his cock was heavy between his legs, knotted but with nothing clenched around it, and all he could fathom was the smell of the creature that had come to him. His senses were full of the smell of violets, vanilla and cloves, and the ghost of old wine on his breath which he found hard to pull into his lungs. He felt chilled and in comparison Stiles was feverishly hot against his skin where it was exposed.

Stiles threw back his head and laughed at what Derek said, but it was not a mocking laugh but an exaltation of joy baring the length of his neck and letting his night rail slip from his shoulder. It exposed all the kiss marks that Derek had left there.. "Sorry," he murmured burying his face in Derek's hair so his mouth was against his ear, "private joke."

He did however wrap his legs around Derek's waist as he was bid.

With a few steps Derek had him on the bed, "one of the rumors about us," Stiles kept talking, "was that we were discovered, knotted, in that exact same position, my sister said you had the arms for it, but if you were going to knot me you would have to use a shelf or a window-ledge."

Derek didn't care what Stiles said and knee walking up the bed silenced him with a kiss.

Stiles was unskilled but eager, and his mouth tasted of the mint and sage with which he had cleaned his teeth. All of him was clean and new and it had been so long since Derek had lain with anyone that he was half out of his mind with desire.

In the lamplight Stiles' night rail was an almost holy white against the dark fabric of his bedspread and his skin was like golden cream. What Derek was surprised to find the most attractive part of him was his laughter. Even now, thrown back across the bed like an old coat he was chuckling to himself, a glorious image of gilded youth. Derek had a momentary vision of Saint Sebastian sprawled on the hill side in a picture by Carlo Saraceni that he had seen when he had visited Europe, the image of the young man with his head flung back as if in passion, with a strip of white fabric covering his manhood where he was draped over the red cloak. Derek had felt desire seeing that then too. One of the ladies who had crowded around him like houseflies had muttered, it looks like he just spilled, doesn't it and it had.

Saint Sebastian had been painted looking like some slim, lithe dark haired omega but Stiles was alive and vital where the portrait of the saint had looked cold and hard- like he was painted marble. Stiles was warm and soft in his hands, his thighs parting under Derek's palms as he pulled himself up on one elbow, "off," he muttered, pulling at Derek's shirt, trying to tug it up over his head.

Stiles kissed messily, with no real skill but plenty of enthusiasm. This was the same untouched but eager boy who had climbed into his bed and had awoken him from sleep and a lack of desire into a
hunger that was almost enough to drive an alpha mad. His hands were balled up in Derek's shirt and his thighs fallen open to reveal his sex in all it's glory, shining wet in the lamplight.

With a grunt Derek tugged his mouth away, Stiles trying to follow him but Derek pushed him back with a hand on his collarbone, parting further the night rail to the very limits of the fabric, dragging the tip of his nose down his breastbone, his thumb running over the peak of his nipple, hard and tight in the night air. With the other hand Derek pushed up the night rail to bare Stiles' sex to him, his knees pushing between Stiles' thighs until they parted enough to give him access, so Derek could fold him in two like a letter ready for franking.

In a moment of impish mischief he dipped the very tip of his tongue into Stiles' navel to make the boy laugh which he did with such abandon that Derek found himself in awe. Stiles wore his emotions proudly and with such scope that Derek, who had felt near nothing for the past years could not even fathom it. He had thought that society omega were pale, bloodless things. Paige had been so shy in bed and Stiles certainly was not.

Whilst Stiles was still rocking with laughter Derek dragged his tongue the length of Stiles' erection. It was smaller than his own, without the heavy weight of a promised knot and as hairless as a babe. The skin of his inner thighs was as soft as a pillow against Derek's mouth, pinking from the texture of Derek's stubble against it as Stiles let his head fall down heavily and groaned like he had been murdered.

It had been so long since Derek had had anyone in his bed, and now this nymph, this fey creature who had known no touch but his own was wantonly crying out for more even if he did not himself realize that was what he was about. It had been twelve years since Derek had known a hand other than his own and this youth, perched on the cusp of twenty, was there and wanting and yearning as much for the knowledge of what it was that Derek could offer as the pleasure he could deliver.

And bent as he was, with the back of his thighs against Derek's shoulder and laughing as he had been he could not help what happened next. Stiles farted. The rich food and the sudden movement and two days in a carriage had made it inevitable, and even then it was not much of one, barely a moment's exhalation but in such close proximity to Derek's face that there was no way that he could have avoided it. And as Stiles curled in on himself further in such shame, because it was not the sort of thing that good omega did, which of course they did do they just denied it was them, Derek brayed out a laugh of his own.

Stiles managed to free himself from the position he had held resting against Derek and rolled over so he was on his hands and knees on the bedspread and was trying to escape muttering about how he would just go when Derek grabbed his thighs and pulled him backwards, with the night rail still rucked up around his waist and with a soft kiss to the nub of his coccyx Derek laved a thick stripe with his tongue and what thoughts Stiles had had of sinking into the bed with shame dropped with his head to the bedspread.

It had been so long since Derek had done this that he was unsure that he remembered what to do, but clearly Stiles' own inexperience was allowing him liberties because as Derek moved his tongue, almost lapping up the slick, which tasted not entirely unlike pork aspic, like he was a starving dog. He parted the cheeks of Stiles' ass to get more of it, making a point of his tongue and stabbing it inside where the muscle was relaxing for him. With his cheek pressed against the bedspread Stiles was muttering exhortations of faith and it made Derek feel virile and powerful, some primal part of him was pleasing his omega and liked it. Stiles desired Derek and Stiles' body enjoyed what pleasures that Derek brought it. It was a loveless act but there was companionship and kindness and marriages had certainly been built on less.
Stiles, possibly mortified by his incoherent mumblings as much as his body, shoved his forearm into his mouth and bit down, arching his back as Derek added two fingers to his hole and pushed them in as far as they could go, rubbing and twisting as his tongue worked him open. Derek was glad that he had finished, spilling across Stiles' fingers and into the commode, because otherwise the urge to mount Stiles, working him open for his knot, and letting the boy sink into float, sprawled beautifully across the bedspread in Derek's new bed.

Yet Derek didn't. There was pleasure enough here like this, with Stiles arching on his fingers, sinking those white teeth into the soft flesh of his forearm to muffled what sounded like the prayers of an ecstatic saint. Later Derek would think to ask Halwyn to have Stiles painted as Saint Sebastian in a picture just for Derek, for he did not want to lose this image, even in the poor lamplight, but he did not want to share it either. He would have it moved to the hunting lodge that he used when he wanted to be alone, an image of beauty without the hard artifice that had dominated Paige's portraiture making her look stiff and stern when she had been soft and yielding. Derek had loved her completely with his whole being, and he would not love again, could not, not with the way that it destroyed him when it was done, but Stiles wasn't Paige and didn't need coaxed or coddled, he demanded and thrust his hips back and whimpered and genuinely enjoyed what was happening to his body without shame, without the accidental flatulence, and when Derek twisted a third finger inside him he let go of his arm to exhale what was possibly the most desirable entreaty yet causing Derek to curl his fingers to form a fake knot and the pressure causing Stiles to tip over into float even as he spilled, the walls of muscle around Derek's fingers contracting in waves as his thin erection juddered but there was no emissions. Between his thighs Derek's cock ached at the image of this lovely fey youth orgasm on Derek's tongue.
Chapter 16

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

In which Berry tries to help, but isn't very good at it, despite his best intentions

Stiles woke in his marriage bed curled around the bolster pillow and pinned by a thick and rather heavy arm draped over his waist. Sometime in the night Derek had moved across to plaster himself against Stiles' back and bury his nose in his hair. This was charming and endearing but the reason Stiles had awoken was that he was sweltering. Between the pillow throwing his own heat back at him and his husband preventing any heat loss from his back he felt like he was going to expire. He had to move away the bolster, letting it fall to the floor before slithering out from under the arm without letting it drop, and then shove the bolster back into the bed to fill his place before he felt comfortable that he was free. Then he gave himself a cursory wash from the water jug, pulled on what remained of his nightgown, because it had a nasty tear at the collar he didn't remember happening, and the first dressing gown he found, which must have been his husband's for it was far finer than his own, which was, he admitted, days away from the rag merchant.

That done he was at a loss, because he didn't want to go back to bed and judging by the thin fingers of pink visible through the shutters and open curtains in his own room - they had slept in Derek's and it was the work of a moment to pass through the adjoining door and close it behind him so as not to wake his husband, it was close enough to morning that it was not worth the effort. The clock on the mantle, which was so ornate and covered in curlicues of gold that it looked to be the value of a small house, told him it was barely five of the clock so it was likely not even the kitchen was awake. He had far too much energy for this time of the day. He kicked on his slippers, ramming his feet into them with such force Lydia had always joked that it was a wonder he did not kick them across the room, and decided he would wander. If he was back in his room by a reasonable time, such as eight, when people were more likely to rise Halwyn wouldn't know he had done so.

Halwyn did not serve as a jailer, just a rather irritating shadow who insisted on doing things for Stiles, like opening doors, and lifting down books and reaffirming to Stiles that he was a duchenne, he did not have to do these things himself. Stiles half thought that given opportunity Halwyn would feed him like he was baby Thomas.

He knew he had to have a long conversation with Halwyn about staffing, because Halwyn thought he should have a personal household of twenty or so, and Stiles was quite happy to manage on his own. It was likely that even if he pared the staff dilemma down he would have another fifteen people trailing him around no matter what he said. Even now before he had even spoken to Stiles about those people Stiles felt trapped.

He had never imagined himself marrying more than well. He had thought he would have a content life with a small house in a reasonably fashionable area with a small household, a cook, a butler, and a maid. Perhaps there would have been a footman if his husband had done well. He had thought he would stay in houses like Rosings when he visited his sisters, for everyone in London knew that the Martin girls would marry well. The expectation with Stiles was that he would marry. Stiles was awkward and funny looking, his limbs were too thin and his head too large for his long
neck and he had heard more than one suitor complain that he had flat ass under those flared coats, which Lydia had scoffed at and lamented that he had skin so beautiful she wished it were her own. Lydia's own beauty, she maintained, was her head of Titian hair and Felicity had the largest breasts of the three of them.

The Martin sisters were elegant and clever, witty and charming, their brother was loud and skinny and a male omega which was not enough of a novelty to cover for his features.

Yet Stiles had climbed into the wrong bed and ended up wedded to a duke.

He pressed one of the bruises that Derek had left on his neck, it was a pleasant reminder that even if Derek maintained that he wanted nothing to do with his mari he desired him. His hands were possessive and his mouth wondrous.

After everything Stiles was a duchenne, and as far as any knew it was consummated, certainly the sheets would testify to that, but Derek had not knotted him, so there was a sense of his position being somewhat precarious. Stiles was even aware that his own sense of self importance was confusing him with what Felicity told him were the devil's lies, but he had never really been able to get past it. His own mother had called him an ugly nothing after all.

He was careful to close the door behind him as silently as he could, padding down the corridors only lit by the faint predawn falling through the windows. The house was Elizabethan at it's heart and had, Halwyn had told him, been built in the popular fashion for such places in the shape of an E. In the two centuries since rooms had been added and there was a whole new servant's block with washroom that separated the house from the stables, but the basic layout was that same simple design of three extensions from the main house. The ducal bedchambers, which had been crown bedrooms apparently when it was fashionable to have such a room just in case a royal ever stayed - they hadn't - had been at what would have been the apex of the E, the two rooms filling a whole side of one branch of the letter looking over the formal Elizabethan herb mazes, and because Stiles had ordered that the two be moved into adjoining rooms that would leave the old Lady Hale's room intact, they had been moved from the top bar to the bottom with his room, being the least important, overlooking the pool, as Derek called it, which looked to Stiles to be a small lake.

He could go swimming, he considered. Then he decided against it because the water would be cold and he had already had two baths in the last forty eight hours and judging by the color of the water he would need a third. He could go to the kitchens and scrounge up something to eat but then someone would ask why he hadn't rung down for something and his answer would be I didn't want to disturb anyone so he wandered. There were paintings along the walls, both watercolors supplied by maiden aunts, the sort just about every society house had a slew of, and expensive giant oil paintings of Hales past, in a variety of styles. For a moment Stiles noticed that the feet on one of the portraits were both left and wondered if they had enough money to hire a very expensive painter to create a portrait that was easily eight foot tall and four foot wide why they couldn't afford a pair of shoes that could fit.

He found himself distracted by a baby crying and thought well at least he knew how to deal with that. He had walked the floor with Alek a fair few times, Alek's nurse always looked one loose strand of hair away from crying like Alek, and it was an easy thing to do to try and distract him from the pain in his mouth because he was teething.

It was not chaos in the nursery, for Maudlin was not the sort of woman who would countenance such, but she did seem to be in a situation where she needed at least one more pair of hands. Evie was stood at the door, crying, and Maudlin had baby Thomas in her arms as she tried to strip the bed and she couldn't put down the baby because he was clinging to her braid and Berry, bless him,
was trying to help but it just meant he was barreling around like a bull in a china shop making things worse. "Do you need a hand?" Stiles asked her and the woman looked for a moment like she might kiss him.

"Thomas' is teething and Evie had an accident and Berry," she said pushing the baby into Stiles' arms, and gesturing with her head to the nursing chair tucked in the corner that Stiles did not sit in.

"Is trying to help without realizing he is like a cannon ball on a rope." Stiles finished and she nodded.

"I couldn't sleep," he told her, cutting off the protestation that she was sorry to have woken him, which she hadn't, "I was just wandering, I can take Thomas down to the gardens, maybe the ducks are out, have Berry follow me," he left it as a suggestion.

"Berry chases the ducks," Evie said taking great big sniffles and tugging up the end of her own night rail to wipe at her nose. She was completely naked underneath it and had no idea that it might not be proper. Then Stiles caught himself, she was barely four years old, there was plenty of time to teach her propriety later.

"Does he?" Stiles asks, "I know he's trying to make the bed."

This made the child giggle, because Berry had taken one length of the loose sheet, which had a large wet stain and that Maudlin was trying to pull free of the mattress and was tugging it meaning she was spending as much time trying to stop him from helping as she was doing the job herself. "If you don't mind me asking, why do you not have help?"

Thomas had decided that Stiles' thick wool dressing gown was a good substitution for Maudlin's braid and had taken huge handfuls of the fabric, from a ribbon tied around his wrist Thomas had his stuffed lamb, which Stiles could feel the child losing grip on as he snuffled and sobbed because his mouth hurt and no one could fix it and he was tired and wanted to sleep but he couldn't because his mouth hurt.

"There have been a few," Maudlin admitted, "but his grace does not like the way that they treat the children."

"I got scolded for getting mud on my dress and losing my shoes." Evie told him in the same matter of fact way that she preferred. "They weren't lost, they were under the chairs in the play room. They were too tight and I didn't like them."

"I know, Schatzi," Maudlin told the child, "every time that they were children the nurse would tell them it wasn't proper for an omega and then the new nurse got fired."

"I used to get mud on my clothes," Stiles confided, "and I lost my shoes when I went trying to catch frogs." He winked at her. "Except they were lost because the stream bank was really muddy and it ate my shoes and one of my stockings."

"Did you get in trouble?" Evie asked, wide eyed.

"I got in so much trouble," Stiles told her, "because I also put one of those frogs in my nurse's bandbox for her to find when she stuck her hand in. It jumped right up on her face."

Evie's hands covered her face as she laughed, so delighted by that image. "Now are you going to be a big girl help Maudlin make the bed again? Then later we can go and play on the grass with Berry." She nodded and accepted the bundle of fabric. Stiles shifted Thomas up on his hip, "now little man," he said falling into the same nickname he had given Alek, "are we going to go
investigate the house?"
Chapter 17

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Derek woke alone in his bed which distressed him more than it ought. However a bolster pillow had been placed under his arm for him to curl up against in his mari's absence. Paige had never done such a thing although she had often left the bed before he did, eager to be about her day. By the time Derek had risen she was fully dressed with her hair styled and had finished her breakfast, a single boiled egg and slice of buttered bread with a cup of strong black tea, before taking her daily exercise, a sedate trot around the park before calling on her mother where she sat with her mending, she took it in for the poor in the village, and attended to her correspondence which was where she would be when Derek found her. She would offer him a faint smile and continue with her letter writing.

He found Stiles in the rose room which had better light, he was sat at a small table with Thomas on his knee as the child ate early season raspberries and cold rice pudding with a spoon which he got most of in his mouth, every now and again Stiles, with a practised hand, would, using another spoon, gather up the largest of the food globs around his mouth and put it in his open mouth. For a moment Thomas looked consternated but then just chewed. Evie was sat on a pair of pillows, put on the chair so she could easily reach, with the ties of her skirt around the bobbin turned spindles so she would not overbalance and fall, waving about a half full cup of milk and talking. Maudlin was nowhere to be seen but Berry was present twining through the table legs in the hope of dropped scraps. Stiles' own breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast was cold and congealed on his plate without a bite taken out of it.

Although both children were dressed for the day, both wearing linen napkins tied around their neck to protect their clothes from spills, Stiles was wearing what looked like Derek's dressing gown and nothing else. For a second Derek had the memory of Stiles' throat, still so beautifully marked, exposed, head thrown back as Stiles' came on Derek's fingers, his own hand in his mouth so he would not yell. He would later confess, bottom lip caught between his teeth, he liked the weight of something on his tongue.

There were children in the room so the thoughts were inappropriate but Stiles noticed and offered him a knowing wink.

With nothing to be done about it Derek ordered breakfast, fried kidneys. When they came he did not taste them, watching Stiles act as mother to the two children, making sure that Thomas ate more of the food than he smeared over his face, although he was adamant he "do it m'self" and Evie chattered through her rice pudding about how wonderful strawberries were, which Stiles quietly corrected were raspberries, and how they were going to spend the day with Cynthia and 'Tavia.

Cynthia and Octavia Cheviot were the two beta daughters of a local gentleman and lived in the nearby hall of Fell Leaf. They were the nearest society children and their mother knew it, so she would often send invitations for the children to play together despite that her daughters, Cynthia at twelve and Octavia at eight, were really too old to be playing with babies like Evie and Thomas. Thomas was quite happy to be anywhere that Evie was, even Derek had seen that he worshipped her, and Evie had a baby goat and Berry to play with, and given the opportunity, which Theo had said only happened when Derek was absent from Rosings, the local children of the village at least two of which were closer to her own age. Nevertheless such interactions were important and Derek
had no idea what he was doing so if Maudlin said it was a good idea, Derek agreed and gave her whatever money she needed to do it.

The idea of sitting so comfortably with the children was completely alien to Derek, but he wondered if his child had lived if he would have been so at ease.

"Oncle Derek," Evie said, "what're you eating?" She was a beautiful child with milk pale skin, dark, dark brown hair and her father's piercing blue eyes that seemed to fix Derek in place like those of an adder. She shared that with her late father.

"Breakfast," he answered. "This is what I always have for breakfast," he continued. He had no idea where this was supposed to go and Stiles just looked like he might burst out laughing.

"What is it?" she continued, at four Evie would be on a steady diet of simple foods, rice pudding, bread, eggs, mild cheese, cold ham, beef and chicken, with boiled vegetables so she would never have had pork kidneys and did not recognise it. "It smells."

"Kidneys," Stiles said, "they're part of a sheep. They are very strong tasting." He was patient as he explained it.

"Can I try?" Evie asked leaning over and fixing Derek with those blue eyes, framing them with thick lashes did not make them feel any less like the points of knives holding Derek in place.

"You won't like them," Stiles told her.

"I might," she countered, "how do you know I won't like them if I don't try them, Maudie says it's fine not to like a food but you have to try it, you can't just say you won't like it, so you can't just say I won't like it because I haven't tried them. I could try them and I might like them, but I won't know if I don't try."

Stiles was chuckling now and Derek wondered if he would be able to keep any face in this situation if he bolted. There was no escaping her logic though. He did recognise the prompt though, and cut a small piece of the kidney, and offered her the fork which she took. She ate the morsel with exaggerated lip smacking and then crinkled up her nose and scraped her teeth over her tongue a few times. "I don't like it," She admitted.

Across the table Stiles was chuckling but he made no noise, he was pressing his lips together to prevent himself laughing loudly, but the whole thing didn't feel vindictive, he was laughing because he found the thing delightful, not because Derek had no idea what to do with a small child. Evie had him wrapped around her finger and she had no idea of it because every time Derek had to interact with her his instinctive reaction was to bolt.

Thomas was an easy baby little given to complaint but he looked like Derek's own son might have, with the dark hair and same huge blue eyes as his sister, but that child had died and that made things worse.

"I will be leaving for London this evening," Derek told Stiles trying to gain some control of the conversation. Stiles nodded. "I will be there by nightfall, I do have some business left to arrange, I sha'n't be more than a sennight." Stiles opened his mouth to say something but Derek cut him off. "I feel I will be able to manage it forthwith without your presence, if you attend you will be expected to attend society outings and that I will display and introduce you, which will prolong the whole affair so for this time it will be best if you do not attend."

"I was not going to ask to accompany you," Stiles told him, "just ask if you could pick up some
things for me, just some shopping that I would have to go to London to select and well, you are my husband, you can certainly have some input."

Derek got the impression that there was another trap here, but he had no idea what it was, so he blundered into it regardless. "What is it you want me to collect?"

"Oh, nothing much, I just need some new particulars," he said as if there were not two children at the table.

Had Derek taken a mouthful of the strong black tea on the table in front of him he would have sprayed it across the room.

"I had thought you would not need more, with the agreement that is in place." He said when he had taken a measure of the situation.

Stiles just beamed at him impossibly fond and slightly patronising like he had missed some giant revelation, "you misunderstand," he said and Derek thought he had it right, "they are not to prepare, they are to be shared."

That time Derek did have a mouthful of tea.

Evie, in the way of the eruption, chirped out a loud "Oncle Derek, we're not supposed to play with our food," as she munched her way through Stiles' left over toast. Stiles could not help the laugh that time, Evie looked so stern as she scolded her uncle and Derek was caught between embarrassment at Stiles' frank talk of sex toys at the table with the babies, spraying Evie with tea, and Evie telling him off, he apologised, which Stiles got the impression he didn't do often. Thomas broke the moment with a loud "all done," and picked up the napkin around his face and smeared the food further. Then with a chuckle he stuck his tongue out at his uncle Derek and blew a watery raspberry. Stiles burst out laughing, "I've spent all morning teaching him that," he admitted, "we're so proud."

It had served the purpose of easing the mood, and Stiles, after washing Thomas' face much more thoroughly than he had himself managed put him on the floor to play with Berry, then he untied Evie so she could climb down. "Oncle Derek," Evie said, determined to befriend her uncle no matter how he was terrified of her, "can you do my dress bow please," she turned around where the two strips of fabric were loose around her waist, she wore a miniature facsimile of omega fashion, although without the cording and boning, but it was unusual to see her dressed more normally and not for the sort of rugged play she preferred. "It has to be pretty or 'Tavia will complain and then she has to get her maid to do it again and it takes for-ever," she dragged the word out. "And Cynthia just sighs and reads her book, but I'm going to be pretty so 'Tavia can't say nothing."

"Can't say anything," Stiles corrected absentmindedly.

"'Tavia makes a bad pirate." Evie continued. Derek, having grown up with three sisters, two of which were now dead, was an expert at quickly tying a bow that would not look out of place in a London ballroom. Once he was done Evie beamed at him and gave him a loud thank you, and surprising everyone, reached up on her tip toes to kiss him on the cheek.

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After Maudlin came to collect the children, making sure that they had things like stockings and shoes and bonnets, a thing that Thomas was not keen to put on, and marched the children to the carriage, with a heartfelt thank you to Stiles for taking care of them, Berry trailing behind with his own leash in his mouth, Derek was left alone with his new husband.
"You are wicked," Derek said and Stiles beamed at him, "mischief made flesh."

"My mother called me that," Stiles agreed, "Mischief."

"I should," Derek thought, "I should put you over my knee for doing that."

"Should you now?" Stiles veritably purred, scratching at his neck in a way that displayed all of the kiss marks that Derek had left there. "I wonder if you wouldn't like going to London leaving me unable to sit down," he raised an eyebrow, "is that what you want, alpha, for me to go over there and raise the hem of your dressing gown and just let you spank me?" Derek suddenly couldn't breathe, "perhaps I shouldn't share my new particulars but I particularly liked the idea of you using them on me. Just think I could sit on your lap, and you could hold my Saint George, moving it and it would be just like you were knotting me, your cock rubbing against my stomach, against my cock as you move the Saint George and the noises I would make, would you like that?"

Under the tablecloth Derek was getting hard fast, and Stiles knew it. He got up from the chair and walked across to Derek, loping like one of the big cats in London zoo, "I told you I wanted to take you in my mouth, do you want me to? Tell me, alpha, do you want me to do that."

Derek fumbled at the ties of his fall, to free his cock which now ached as if it had not spent the evening being pleasured. He wanted to see this, to see Stiles, still rumpled from his bed, wearing Derek's dressing gown, kneeling on his feet in front of the breakfast table with the plates still upon it, suck him off.

It was an act that Paige had refused, said it was dirty and non-Christian, it was the sort of thing French whores did, but Stiles just licked his lips and sank to his knees on the carpet.

With careful hands he undid the laces that Derek had fumbled with and reached inside pulling Derek's erection free, with a muttered word that Derek did not hear he opened his mouth and Derek's world went still.

He could not have described it, he had been pleasured like this before, before he married Paige when girls with questionable reputations could be met in dark alcoves in London society for alphas with enough coin, before the fire, when he had spent as much time in the city as he could, but the image of this young man on his knees willingly and gleefully, learning the shape of Derek's cock as it filled his mouth, how it could be maneuvered to butt against the velvet soft inside of his cheek, the accidental scrape of teeth, the spongy texture at the back of his throat where it was hot and wet and the wicked delight of his tongue. It was never going to last and when Stiles, after his third attempt to slid Derek's erection down his throat pulled back, licking his lips which were now a little swollen and tight at the corners, Derek came, splattering all over his face. It was luck that Stiles had his eyes closed but the resulting mess caught in his eyelashes, and dripped down the side of his nose where Stiles' wicked little tongue caught it like it was a crumb of something delicious.

After a moment where Stiles' hand dropped down between his thighs, he reached up and grabbed one of the napkins, wiping the mess from his face and hands, and said, letting the napkin fall on the table as he came to his feet, a little wobbly now, and picked up his cup of tea, letting it swirl around his mouth before he swallowed loudly, "I'm not sure," he told Derek, "which of us enjoyed that more."

Sprawled on the chair at the table with his cock hanging out of his pants, Derek couldn't really answer. He felt a little like he had been thrown from a horse.

Then Stiles smiled at him, a knowing smile, "you know," he said, "eventually we'll do that and you will be undressed."
Derek arrived at his London estate just before Mrs Lennox was due to serve supper. He had sent Theo ahead to warn them of his arrival so he expected the house to be lit what he did not expect was that his uncle was in the drawing room, sprawled over one of the couches with his shoes off and one leg draped over the back. "It seems," his uncle drawled in a drunken manner, one which Derek knew entirely to be an affectionation for although Peter often carried a wine glass he rarely drank the champagne he insisted it be full of, "that I owe Robert a guinea." Peter liked people to think him a harmless old drunkard, it was the opposite of his nature, for Peter had a wit like a steel trap. He was more likely to gain access to circles of information when they thought him a fool and he did look every art and part of him the dandy he emulated. He was wearing a pale linen suit over a white waistcoat with blue floral details and his cravat was so expertly tied Derek felt that his own looked like he had been strangled with it.

"I thought I left instructions that you were not to be let in," Derek said, removing his hat and passing his gloves to a footman, he had disembarked his carriage with the hope of sitting quietly until supper was ready and possibly having a glass of port for his nerves felt frayed. He had spent the entire journey from Rosings worrying over Stiles like a sore tooth.

"I am the Marquess of Westfall," Peter snorted, "I am part of the inner circle that contains the Prince Regent, you only technically outrank me, nephew, and besides I heard the most divine gossip."

"You know I do not care for gossip, uncle," he used the familial term deliberately as he peeled off his coat. The day had proved uncommon fair for May with a sultry heat that meant trapped in his carriage he felt like he was in a sweat box, and he had had the forethought to put on a great coat and so now his shirt and waistcoat were glued to his back with sweat, but he had looked very proper driving through London. Once he was in the house, and down the great hall into his favoured sitting room, for the house had grounds and was also very proper but far too big, he had intended to collapse into his favourite chair, have some port and wait for the exceptional supper that Mrs Lennox would have made at the last minute. Derek would never admit it but the cold supper that Mrs Lennox whipped up out of nowhere having been surprised that he was attending were some of Derek's favourites. More than once he had sent down that she was just to serve him cold pie and preserves and cook for the staff because Derek might have been the duke but he didn't care for the folderol of it. He was happy with a fire, a book and food to pick at as he read.

Now his uncle was here and he had to be genial and he was tired.

"Oh this gossip is worth the trip from Brighton," Peter told him without raising his head from the couch. Peter, ever the slave of fashion, had let his hair grow out a little and fell in artfully teased curls, that Derek knew for a fact were put in every morning with hot irons and papillotes, and scented with mareschal pomade.

"It is not so far from Brighton to London as it is from Rosings, so I doubt your gossip will be worth the trip I made," Derek answered, wondering how rude it would be if he summoned Isaac in to help him with his boots. His feet felt like they had swollen to the size of Spanish melons.

"I had heard, form a source I could not consider reliable, that you had wed."
Derek’s resulting silence caused Peter to raise his head from the couch, revealing to Derek that he had put down a cloth so that his pomade would not stain the upholstery. It was not like him to be so conscientious.

"It is not nonsense, then," Peter said, "that you are wed? Seems that I owe Robert another guinea, at this rate I shall have to give him a whole bushel of them."

"Then perhaps you should not gamble, if you are so prone to lose."

Peter gave him a mock smile that almost immediately slid from his face again, "Tell me, was it the Argent chit, I can see why you had chosen her with your monkish proclivities, if she were the last hole in London I doubt I could get it up for her," Peter spent his time with perhaps the most fashionable and vile men in London, but he had a point, he had chosen Vidama Argent for exactly that reason. Her association with Gerard Argent was not her fault but it did little to recommend her.

Peter measured his silence, "no, let me see, what were the other rumours, there was a Portuguese dancer, that one was good, there was word that you compromised Mischief Stilinski and his father ran you down at gunpoint to force you to wed, but that can't be true for he is on the continent, there was the thing with Lord Carstairs- he lost his fool mind, stripped off in the heart of Bath and pissed in a public fountain exclaiming he was saving them from the “old gods” or some similar nonsense, you didn't marry his sister or something similar did you?"

"I did not compromise him," Derek muttered under Peter as he continued on.

"You married Mischief Stilinski?" Peter said, and then started laughing, proper belly laughs the likes of which Derek had not thought his uncle capable of. "Oh tell me you were caught in his bedroom naked, that you joined Carstairs in his madness and compromised the boy accidentally, his father is going to..." Peter left it open and was smiling with delight.

"I hear much talk of his father but it is not something that I have much knowledge of, tell me, uncle, who is his father?"

"You do not know?" Peter seemed even more delighted by that. "His father is Noah Stilinski, newly minted Earl of Rocester, the knife in the right hand of Wellington himself, he is the very point of the spear of the English forces against the French, he is," Peter was beaming, "absolutely terrifying and you compromised his omega son."

"I didn't compromise him." Derek insisted that Peter understood that, and then muttered, "he compromised me."

"That's even better," Peter said, "and you being you did the right thing."

"It was a huge misunderstanding, he didn't mean to come into my room," Derek suddenly felt like a child again, explaining what had happened in the hope it would get him out of trouble.

"This is the gift that keeps giving," Peter said, "this is the sort of gossip that would keep me in dinner invitations for a year, not that I will accept them, so, if I am to understand it right, the son of the second most powerful man in his majesty's armed forces came into your room accidentally," Derek agreed, "then why didn't you just usher him out again."

"Because someone," he ground out that word, "had arranged for us to be interrupted, you see he was supposed to be caught by someone else leaving the room of someone else so that he wouldn't have to marry Carstairs because none knew then that he would lose his damn mind the next day."

"Carstairs was due to marry him? the man has hands like eels, they are everywhere that they are
unwanted and unpleasant and slimy," Peter was not one to keep his counsel when it came to things that he openly disliked, and handsy alphas were among the worst in his opinion, giving the rest of the gender a bad name.

"According to Stiles," Derek said, "his stepmother arranged the marriage after Carstairs tried to compromise him."

"Perhaps she hoped to fob him off with a proposal until her husband returned to refuse the marriage," Peter suggested.

"Or she wanted the advancement in society for her daughters."

"The Martin sisters need no advancement," Peter said, "they have their choice of suitors, they are as fierce in the defence of their brother as their stepfather in defence of his country. Perhaps you should worry that you might lose your damn mind and piss in a fountain in the centre of Bath."

"You think they had a hand in that?" Derek asked, "but they are omega."

"Then you have not known many omega," Peter told him.

Derek had to laugh at that, "that is exactly what Stiles said to me," He let out a lusty sigh, "right before he offered to suck me off." Peter barked out another laugh, "he has these books," Derek drew out the word, "I do not know where he got them and I am frightened to ask, one of them shows an alpha on his knees whilst the omega whips him with a birch branch, what if he likes that?"

Peter rolled his eyes and pulled himself unto a seated position without spilling a drop of his affectatious champagne, "he's an omega, they know a lot, but they have never experienced anything. Their experience is entirely with each other."

"Then he is a savant," Derek said, "for he made my eyes roll back in my head, and I am quite sure he intends to do it again."

"Then why are you in London?" Peter seemed genuinely confused by this, "and he is in Rosings?" Then he curled in on himself, "you ran away. THa'll be another guinea that I owe Robert, he is fast becoming a seer with how well he predicts your behaviour."

"I am not running away," Derek was aware that he sounded petulant like a child, "I have business in parliament."

Peter sighed, "I am the closest to a parent that you have and we are not that far apart in age," he held up a hand to cut off any argument, "and I should not be the one to be responsible, but you can't just compromise an eligible omega, marry him, bed him, and run off to London citing parliament as an excuse. You ran because that's what you do, what you have always done, you ran to try and sort out the mess of thoughts that clatter through your head and your beard is not thick enough to catch. You did it when you were on leading strings and your beard is not thick enough to catch. You did it when you were on leading strings and you do it now. You probably showed that boy Rosings and left him to Halwyn." Peter paused and frowned, "tell me that was not your intent, nephew, that you did not intend that Halwyn fill the empty space you intended to leave. For you are determined to remain monkish, what did the boy do to get into the fall of your breeches, did he pin you, did he have to go into your bed at night when you had neglected to tell him what you expected, did he have to climb onto your knot whilst you slept?"

"I didn't knot him," Derek shouted back. Peter had this ability to see through to the very core of him that had always made him feel like a child and he was a duke. "I offered to let him go to his
chosen suitor, but he was rejected, the solicitor called him a wanton and made him feel like nothing so I married him, but I told him, I told him that I needed someone on my arm but not in my bed and he is so good with the children, children I don't know what to do with because it suited Laura to move to Venice with her alpha lover and leave me with the children they paid some beta to bear for them, and then she died and Edward died and I have to do everything and I can't do it alone and I needed help so I married and it is so much and I do not know what I am doing."

Peter got up then, putting his glass of champagne down on the floor, crossed to where Derek sat and embraced him. He got the impression that Derek needed that then.

"I can offer you all of the sympathy in the world," Peter said, "but I cannot fix your mess, even if I wish I could. He is not Paige," Derek made a snort at that, as if it was the most obvious statement in the world, "but I would have you happy. Would it be so bad to try with the boy, I mean before his father comes back from the continent to grind your bones to make bread to feed Napoleon in exile with."

"I don't want him to die," Derek muttered, "I cannot lose another person."

"I need a glass of port," Peter said shaking his head, "I am too sober for this conversation and just this morning I had a conversation with his majesty, about fairies of all things, and we all know he has more bats than belfry at this point and that was not as exhausting as this conversation, tell Mrs Lennox to have a bed made up, I intend to get as drunk as a lord and quite possibly sick in the morning, I think that I have earned it after this day."
Chapter 19

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

Say hello to Cora

It took less than two hours after the children had returned and gone to bed for the boredom to set in. Stiles had the entire house to himself, it felt like, despite the small army of servants that maintained it. If he caught their eye they asked him how they could help, calling him “your grace” and dropping a quick curtsy. He was followed around by Halwyn who couldn’t help but exude menace because of his size. When Stiles asked if he could go riding whilst Halwyn had not said that he could not he did point out that they didn’t really have a suitable horse or clothes and he would ruin what he was wearing.

One girl appeared out of nowhere carrying a lit candelabra as soon as he appeared so he would not have to light one himself as if, by virtue of marriage, he had suddenly been rendered incapable of sitting in the dark.

When he asked if there was a pack of cards three footmen brought him three different embellished caskets containing cards. He didn’t dare ask for a novel for fear they’d bring him a printing press or strong arm an unfortunate passing author.

Stiles was so bored he was even willing to discuss staffing with Halwyn which he had avoided as much as he could. He was relatively sure he could barter the alpha down from twenty five staff to ten, but he didn’t think he needed near that many.

Halwyn was sat at one of the tables in the salon writing into a volume from pieces of paper, possibly doing the accounting and working out how much of Stiles’ allowance he would be able to free for pin money for gambling. Stiles might have been the lord in the relationship but Halwyn was the one with all of the control.

Stiles had never really been on his own before, when he was a child there was his mother and his nurse, and then after his mother had died there were the Martin sisters who shared his life so completely it was as if they were one person, but now there was no one, even his husband had left him for business in London.

So he was sprawled across the couch, playing endless games of solitaire because there was nothing else to do and no one to do it with.

“Halwyn,” Stiles began, causing the alpha to stop scratching away with his pen and wait for the rest of the question, “can I ask you about the late Lady Hale?”

“I do not carry tales, your grace,” Halwyn said bluntly.

“Sorry, I,” Stiles stopped, thinking about what he wanted to say. “My husband clearly loved her very dearly and when I went into her room without knowing I hurt him unwittingly, I was hoping that you might tell me so I could avoid such mistakes in the future.”
Halwyn took a moment before he answered. “She was quiet, she mostly kept to herself, she spent her time with her parents. She was dutiful.” That seemed to be the very opposite of what Stiles was and even what Derek had asked Stiles to do, which was to be his voice in society, to be it’s darling so that Derek did not have to be. Stiles knew that he would be useless in that role but he was determined that he try. His plan of do what Lydia would was so far working.

“My father is on the continent,” Stiles said, “but I did not think to ask permission to invite my sisters here.” He turned the cards.

“You do not need permission to invite them,” Halwyn said, and Stiles could feel the disappointed look he was definitely sporting, “this is your house too.” Stiles had no idea what he was doing, would Lydia have immediately written to him asking him to come visit for the summer because she was bored. No, Lydia would have found a way to amuse herself and her husband would not abandon her to politics within a sen’night of their marriage.

“If I wished to invite the entirety of the players of the Royal Opera House?” Stiles asked.

“They’d have to bunk together in some places but I can’t see why not.” Halwyn was smiling, laughing at him. “You are a Duchenne, you can do what you want as long as your husband is not embarrassed and you are discreet.”

“I have never been discreet in my life,” Stiles said with a sigh.

“Then invite your sisters and not the Royal Opera House,” it was a joke but Stiles didn’t laugh, “it is not what you do that you will be judged for, but what you are caught doing. That is one of the reasons that you must have a staff of your own, people who are loyal and who will protect your reputation better than their own.”

“I am horrendously out of my depth,” Stiles admitted and it felt good to speak it out loud.

“So is his grace,” Halwyn said, “he was not meant to be Duke and the rumors that swirl around him might break a lesser man.”

“He is so lonely,” Stiles said, “and I,” he paused, “I just make it worse because I know nothing and,”

Halwyn got up and poured two tiny glasses of port, one of which he placed in front of his employer. He gestured to him with his eyes that Stiles take the glass, which he did, emptying it in a single swallow that burned like fire all the way down. “None of us know what we’re doing,” Halwyn said, “I worked for His Grace’s brother so I know my duties, but the rest of it,” he shrugged, “life is what happens when you have other plans,” he told him, “a much wiser man than I said that.”

“And port is what happens when those plans go awry,” Stiles muttered. Halwyn just refilled his glass and held it in salute to suggest that they could at least drink to that.

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It was not his own sisters that first arrived at Rosings but instead that of his husband. Cora Hale arrived mid afternoon when Stiles was trying to get the truth of why Evie had attacked Octavia and bitten her. As far as he could tell Thomas had been playing with the Cheviot family cat, this was a
known game between the two where Thomas would lie on the floor and the cat would swat him with its tail which Thomas would try, and fail, to catch. This delight had caused Thomas to squeal like he was being murdered, which was another thing that he was known for. This squeal, in turn, caused Berry to get up from his place in front of the fire and wander over to check that all was well. He did this straight through where Octavia was painting on paper on the floor, walking clear across her masterpiece. Octavia had turned to hopefully just scold the dog and whatever happened in the moment caused Evie to attack her like a demon and bite her on the arm. Octavia reacted badly and slapped Evie which meant both Thomas and Berry started to get involved, Berry trying to separate them and preventing further violence until Maudlin had them all standing in separate corners thinking about what they had done.

Thomas was still upset and Evie was so angry she was in tears and couldn’t stop and then in walked an alpha, handing her bonnet to a footman like she owned the place, which turned Evie’s angry tears into “Tante Cora,” and launching herself at the woman.

Cora Hale was lovely, in the hard way that Alphas often were, where the softness of her features was countered by the steel in her spine. She wore a pretty sprigged muslin under a velvet pelisse that she added to the pile in the footman’s arms. “You must be my new brother,” she said in a voice like broken glass in cream without a single moment of kindness in it. Yet she lifted Evie into her arms and wiped away her tears with her thumb as she said it.

“A pleasure to meet you, my lady, please, take a seat,” Stiles at least knew how to welcome guests, and he wasn’t sure that his plan of pretend to be Lydia would work with this woman. She was perhaps his age, or close enough to not make much difference, but she had been raised in the beau monde and there did not appear to be an inch of softness in her. She was clearly a Hale with the same dark hair and cheekbones but the hard lines in Derek were in her curves. She was clearly already a celebrated beauty.

With Evie balanced on her hip she sat on one of the couches and Thomas worked himself to his feet and walked over, still unsteady and prone to using the furniture to support himself, and held out his hand and said “sugar pig.” Both Stiles and Cora laughed at it. Thomas didn’t have many words but that one he had clearly associated with her. From her bandbox, carried by her manservant, a beta in a fine velvet coat, she pulled a little muslin bag and to each of them presented a small pig shaped candy. “Thank you,” Thomas said proudly and went back across to Stiles to share his new prize with Berry like he did with all of his food.

“Did you bring presents?” Evie asked, because she was not above being forward when she thought she might get something out of it.

“Of course I did, but you’ll have to wait until tomorrow, it’s late now and I imagine you’ll be getting supper and it will be waiting for you when you wake up in the morning.” Evie looked suspicious but agreed, not willing to let Cora put her down.

“Evie, what do you say to Tante Cora?” Stiles asked.

Evie begrudgingly said “thank you.” She was sniffing theatrically. “What present did you bring me?” She asked, “Tavia was really mean to me today, so I deserve a very good present.”

“Evie!” Stiles chided, “Tavia was mean to you because you bit her, and you both had to apologise didn’t you.” Evie mumbled an answer, “so does someone who bites people deserve good presents?” Evie mumbled another answer. “So you can wait until tomorrow to see what Tante Cora brought you both.”

Cora raised Evie’s chin to look her in the eye, “dread pirates don’t bite people,” she said, “because
they don’t know where they’ve been.”

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After the children had been bustled away to bed, helped by Cora’s manservant, a young man called Dickon who she announced would be staying to help with the children, and whom Stiles suspected might be having an affair with his mistress, Cora looked Stiles up and down like he were a horse that she might be purchasing. “When I heard my brother had remarried quickly I had assumed that some bitch had forced his hand, but you are not a bitch, are you?”

“I have my moments,” Stiles answered, “but I did not intend to force his hand. I do not know what stories are circulating about our courtship but I can tell you the truth of it. I compromised him, I did not know who he was and I was misled, I was told that his was the room that contained the man whom I had intended to compromise. My stepmother wished me to marry a man who wanted to hurt me, I felt desperate and so I tried to compromise my suitor. Your brother offered to sponsor my marriage if my suitor would have me, he told me his reputation was more important to him than I was, so to save my reputation your brother married me. He had gone to marry, he had chosen Vidame Argent.”

Cora measured him as if she could tell falsehood from truth, sipping her tea and pondering. “You have more backbone than his last wife,” she said firmly, “and if you plan to hurt or use him I shall break you, I shall do it publicly and I shall do it swiftly, my brothers lacked the steel the women in our family come to naturally, all I have left is my foppish uncle and my brother, do not think your marriage will protect you.”

“I have no intention of hurting him,” Stiles answered calmly, surprised that it was true. “I would like to get to know him, however, so if you could get him to stop running away that would be a start.”

Cora chuckled, “I had thought I would come and run you out, but then I saw you with Evie, even though you told her that she was not to bite it was not because she was an omega, every governess we have hired has tried to turn her into the porcelain doll that society expects of our little dread pirate, but you are happy for her to trail her goat and wear her wooden sword.”

“She is an omega,” Stiles said, “but I do not see how that makes her less of a person.”

Cora smiled to herself. It was a cold gesture. “Perhaps,” she said, “Derek was more lucky than he intended, those children mean the world to me, and forcing her into corded stays and gowns would make me very unhappy.” She emphasized the word very clearly.

“I don’t see the point of putting children as young as she is in corded stays,” Stiles says, “in fact as someone who had to wear them I think they’re cruel, how can she play or run about with those damned things on, I do not care if they are to train her for proper adult stays with whale bone, she climbs trees and does not attend balls.”

“Perhaps, Stiles,” she said his name mockingly, “we shall get along very well indeed.”
After a rather uneventful meeting with Peel, which Derek felt he absolutely could have not attended or even been in London for the same results, he decided that he would visit Rotten Row to arrange several things that were perhaps not as pressing. He was walking with Theo properly ten steps behind, seeing and being seen as was the fashion at the time, and trying his best to resolve the dilemma that saw him in London, the situation of the black men who were being rescued from being sold into slavery in the Americas and instead filtered into very low paid factory work in the English factories, which needed Peel’s support but Peel did not seem interested past the idea of hiring them, at a lower price than native workers, to his municipal police force, so he could be forgiven for almost walking into Gerard Argent.

On another day had he walked into the man he would have been sure to knock him down.

Gerard Argent had been minor French nobility who had come to England as an emigre escaping La Terreur and promptly married a young English noblewoman who had more title than wealth. Although he himself had no title recognised in England, his marriage had made sure that his children did, although they were mere lords, the lowest rank. He had made some wealth with the importation of Canadian fur and he was unpopular in the beau monde with the stink of trade about him.

Derek despised Argent and had done since he had known him, which was far too long for his own liking.

“Albemarle,” Argent addressed him. There were strict guidelines of how people should be addressed in England and Argent was almost, but not quite, inappropriate with him. His peers would address Derek by his title, but Argent was only a peer through marriage. “I heard the most troubling rumour.”

“Then perhaps,” Derek told him, “one should not listen to rumours.”

Argent ignored the comment with a mocking almost smile, “my son informed me you were in negotiations to marry my dear grand-daughter but then I hear you have married another in haste breaking the arrangement.”

It took everything Derek had not to roll his eyes and answer instead of just pushing past him. Unfortunately Derek needed to be seen as approachable to get any sway in parliament. “Then you were misinformed,” he said, and again tried to leave to be held in place by the man.

“I do not think my daughter in law would lie to me,” there was a hint of a threat to his voice when he said it which Derek would not countenance no matter how personable he needed to be right then.

“I did not accuse her of such,” Derek said, “I said that you were misinformed and allow me to correct you. I had entered into marriage negotiations with your daughter in law over your grand daughter, and was prepared to pay off their debts to ease the negotiations,” he said it carefully making sure the man heard every syllable, “on two conditions, one that she was to have no further contact with you,” Argent didn’t flinch as much as almost snarl, “and two that the vidama be involved and agree at every step. She was not informed until we were ready to announce the engagement, and she did not just refuse, she arranged that a friend of hers be found trying to
compromise me by her mother.” Argent’s hard eyes narrowed and his smile became fixed. “I was quite prepared to marry the vidama for a single reason, one I would have paid any amount to arrange, well two reasons,” he looked again at Argent, “the other being that I had no need to take my mари to my bed, I need nor desire no children and so it ensured for me that your horrid bloodline would end at my hand, and that the last scion of your gods-damned family would serve me until she died and even then,” he spat out the words, “it would not be restitution for what you and yours cost me.”

“And yet you married the Stilinski chit?” Argent snarled, “will you ruin him as you intended to ruin my dear grand daughter?”

“As if you care for anything but your reputation,” Derek answered, not caring that they were on the busiest road in London with half of the beau monde about seeing and being seen. “Do you even know the vidama’s name?”

“You hold a grudge like a Corsican,” Argent snarled the words out.

“It is all you and your family have left me,” Derek said, “your determination to see your family raised up saw mine in their graves, what should I hold for you, perhaps the keys to your daughter in Bedlam, it has been twenty years, can you say that what you did for Kate was compassionate, or did you arrange it with Edward to prevent the scandal.” Argent took a step back. “I am not my brother,” he said, “I have married well and did so because the chit, as you call him, is charming and witty and I cannot wait until he is round with my child, your bloodline can die in debtors prison, it is almost as good as watching it die out over time. Of course with what the vidama arranged… if word were to spread, none would marry her anyway. Come now, Theo,” he turned to Theo then, to find him grinning from ear to ear at the spectacle, “I did promise my dear mari some little trinkets whilst he is in Rosings awaiting his introduction to society, there are so many things to arrange before he can return to London, because it does not matter what the rumours say, he’s the Duchenne of Albemarle and your dear grand-daughter is still the vidama heir to a house with no money to pay her dower.”

That said Derek stepped into the first open door making sure his servant closed the door behind him so that none would see him rage at the affront of the man. He had not intended to walk into the jewellers but he had and now found himself looking at the very uncomfortable alpha who ran the store which was not equipped for a duke. It was a jewellers but sold mostly paste and the sort of inexpensive gewgaws that people used to pad out their expensive jewels, the sort that Derek had a glut of, displayed on velvet to make them look more expensive than they were.

Derek was just as confused as he was. Ideally this would have happened without Theo snickering behind him for Derek’s extravagant leaving of the conversation had been deflated as much as it would have had the door been to a wardrobe. Theo was also the sort of person who would not let it go, had it been Boyd no one would have learned of this, but Theo would tell the entire household.

The alpha who ran the shop, a stout middle-aged woman with a lavender overgown on top of her black muslin, looked at Derek and he looked back as if wondering which of the two might bolt for the door first. Derek was the first to break eyecontact when his gaze fell upon a small tray of what at first glance looked like little glass beads, but were slightly smoky and when he lifted one he saw that they were slightly domed, like droplets of liquid. He pulled off his glove to better check the stone against his skin, it was not quite white and it looked like white ink had been dropped into water and gathered into small and pleasant patterns.

That gave the shop-keeper the opportunity to speak, “it’s hecatolite, my lord,” she said. She went for the general honorific for it was clear that Derek was gentry but she was unsure of his title and
thus the correct mode of address, “from Lake Sevan, we call it moonstone for it can look not unlike
the moon in the night sky when polished brightly.”

Derek rolled the bead in his hand, it looked not entirely unlike a spot of cum on his skin, catching
the light almost exactly the same way, and he remembered how his mari had looked, kneeling at
his feet with his face splattered, how it had looked on his mari’s creamy skin. “Can you have this
made into a necklace?” he asked, “the beads spaced slightly apart,” he continued, “on a very fine
chain, one that is almost invisible.”

“Certainly, my lord,” she sounded delighted. Derek was not to know that previously she had been
selling the beads as adornments for gowns and fans, “perhaps you would wish a more extravagant
gem for them to offset, a diamond perhaps.” He would have such things and if a stupendous
necklace with a family diamond was set at her store she would certainly have much more custom
from those who could not afford such stones but would want to emulate it, and then she could sell
variants with paste.

“No, I like the stones as they are, and this one,” he lifted a large cabochon that was perhaps as
large as his thumbnail, “set into a ring, something simple, Theo,” he turned to his servant, “if you
could arrange the details for me.”

Theo’s official job was as Derek’s batman, he arranged things so that they would be to the duke’s
liking, such as hotel rooms, making sure his houses knew of his arrival, and that his secretaries got
the right bills. It was not listed amongst his duties but he also arranged for those things which
might not be so legal - with Theo setting up the account at the store it was much less likely that the
shop keeper would, knowing that Derek had no idea of the cost of things, be able to massively
overcharge.

With his head full of the image of Stiles, on his knees and cum spattered, with it glueing together
his lashes and glossing his lips, she could have charged him for the Star of India and he would
have paid it without thought.

He informed Theo that he would be on the other errand and that when the account was in place he
could find him there.

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Walkers, the shop where Stiles had told him to purchase his particulars, did not on the surface look
to be the sort of shop where one bought particulars. It was a small chocolatiers in a small side street
near Rotten Row where the counters were covered in sweet confections such as sugar pigs and
chocolate ganaches in hard candy shells. There was a female alpha attending a ceramic samovar
from which she poured hot chocolate into tiny glasses before adding delicate swirls of cream and
giving the confection to her customers. When she saw Derek she gave him a beaming and rather
genuine looking smile. “I am here to see Meredith,” he said quite convinced that he had gotten the
details of the store wrong.

“Certainly, my lord,” she said, and gestured that he follow her sweeping skirts to a door almost
hidden behind a curtain, which she opened for him, leading him into a small parlour with a table,
the top of which was inset with pretty stones set in marble and looked much more precarious than
it was. She indicated a couch for him to sit. It was clearly one of several such rooms. “One of our
attendants will be with you shortly, perhaps you would like some chocolate whilst you wait.”

“I had not thought such stores were,” he left it open and the girl’s genuine smile returned as if she
was laughing.
“Not illegal, my lord,” she said, “just frowned upon, and with the rumour mill such as it is there are many who would go without rather than be seen to attend such an establishment. Might I ask, if it is not too forward, do you know Lord Peter Hale? For you have something of him about you.”

“He is my uncle,” Derek said, not in any way surprised that Peter might be known at such a place. He was only surprised that Peter had not made him aware that such stores existed. “But I am here on other business, I have recently married and my dear mari has made a list of things that he requires.” He took the folded piece of paper from the pocket of his vest.

She took it and scanned it quickly before tucking it into her dress under the decorative lacing over her stays. “These shall be no problem, we can bring you several options for you to choose,” judging by his expression she qualified, “the list is quite explicit, it will be decorative details, such as glass or horn, so you can choose which you prefer, I trust the items will be used mutually.” She was so calm about the whole affair that Derek felt that he had swallowed his tongue. He was not used to be people being calm about such things, people did not talk of congress outside of gentleman’s clubs and bawdy houses, and certainly not in fine establishments off Rotten Row. “I am Caitlyn, you can ask for me if you need anything, even if it’s just someone to hold your hand, this is your first visit here?” It wasn’t really a question.

“Is it so obvious?”

“When one knows what to look for.” She said, “I shall get you some chocolate,” then she winked at him, “you’ll be fine.” Then she left him alone with his imagination, which was already picturing Stiles with the listed particulars, wearing nothing but a string of moonstones and a smile.
That Stiles’ family arrived the day after he had sent the letter inviting them suggested to him that they were not responding to his own invitation, but perhaps his mari had invited them in his place. Or that Natalie had presumed that there was an invitation and showed up regardless.

She flounced in wearing a new bergere hat and looked around like she was disappointed, as if the finery of Rosings, which was more intimate than grand, was much less than was her due, like she herself was not married to a career soldier.

Alek, who had been cooped up in a carriage, probably sprawled across his sister’s lap like a cat, didn’t care it was nearly time for bed, being five of the clock, and burst in like a miniature hurricane with his sisters looking exhausted behind him as an army of footmen Stiles did not know that Rosings employed carried in their luggage.

As soon as he saw Stiles coming down the stairs he launched himself at him with a cry of “Mi Mi” meaning Stiles had to catch him or the two of them would end up smashing their heads open on the stairs. Stiles adored his young brother and with practise managed to give him a tight squeezing hug before rolling him around to sit on one hip. He hadn't seen him since they had left for the Argent house party weeks before, and having slept in the carriage he immediately wanted to tell Stiles everything that had happened in his absence. Stiles would have liked to continue the conversation with Alek but Natalie looked across at Halwyn and dipped her head with a “your grace.”

Stiles wished that he could have been surprised that Natalie mistook Halwyn for his husband but he wasn’t, neither was Felicity with the way that she had her glove half off when she pressed her palm to her face. Lydia just rolled her eyes.

“This is not my husband,” Stiles said sweetly, with a smug amusement he didn't care if he was showing, “this is Halwyn, he’s my career major.”

“Camerera mayor, your grace,” Halwyn corrected softly. He didn't usually bother with the title because Stiles didn't care. “I am the last line between the world and his grace, I manage his staff and his affairs.”

Natalie did not want to look offended by the way that the two of them had dealt with her faux pas but she couldn't quite keep it from her face. “Dearest,” she said, she had never called Stiles dearest before but clearly didn't want to use his new title, “will we get the opportunity to spend time with his grace.”

“Oh, Derek is in London,” Stiles said, “he has business in parliament but he should be back any day now.”

“And you are not in London with him?” Natalie asked with an archness to her tone that Stiles had never liked. She used it when she wanted to remind him that she had married his father and that made her clearly higher in rank than he was.

Natalie was not necessarily unkind but she had ambitions that made her cruel when it suited, yet she genuinely loved Stiles’ father so he tended to handwave her worst behaviour.

“His grace is not appropriately provisioned for the beau monde, we have modistes and tailors coming to Rosings to create for him a new wardrobe, and we are interviewing personal staff but his
grace disagrees over how many might be needed.”

“I do not need someone specifically to brush my hair before bed,” Stiles groused. “I don't have that much.”

“As you can see,” Halwyn said, “we disagree over how many.”

Lydia, having removed her cape and handed it to the footmen, smiled, “I have had the same conversation with my brother many times. He has beautiful hair it should be properly styled.”

Stiles made a noise, “you shall all gang up on me and before you know it I will be employing some village simpleton who is paid entirely that when I die he will make certain of my mortality by tapping me on the head with a silver hammer.”

“Do not be so facetious, dearest,” Natalie said with a sniff to show her disdain of the whole affair, “he would not be a village simpleton.”

“I was going to say,” Felicity said behind her mother, “that the cause of death would be extreme damage to his head from the hammer.”

Stiles’ bray of laughter caused Natalie to give him a dark look, “I had expected more of the home of a duke,” she said looking around Rosings.

“That is because this is not the ancestral home,” Halwyn said, “that is Lea Green in Lancashire, however this is closer to London for business, this is more of a pied a terre,” he said it, “there is of course the house in London as well, but who cares to stay in the city all of the time. Now, my lady,” he said it with a pleasantly deferential bow of the head, “vesdames, if you would follow me into the lavender sitting room I shall have tea and repast brought up, you must be exhausted from the day’s travel.”

Had Halwyn not answered Stiles might have said something that he regretted to Natalie, because he liked Rosings and it was clear that Derek loved Rosings. Rosings was smaller and intimate than many houses Stiles had visited, even in London, but that made it feel more like home.

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Evie’s reaction to Alec was immediately preceded by Natalie’s reaction to Berry. Berry shouldered his way into the sitting room, he walked in a particular roll where it looked like his feet might be turned inwards suggesting he was gearing himself up for a brawl. Berry was so large and with his clipped ears and tails he looked like a fighting dog, he was followed by Thomas toddling on unsteady feet and trying to use the dog to prevent himself falling on his napkin. Natalie seeing what looked like a demon dog, and with no knowledge that Berry was as soft as butter and all of his menace was in his appearance, managed to lift herself from the couch, put down her tea and saucer on the table and launch herself across the room to save the baby who was about to get mauled with a cry.

Berry might have been an excellent nursemaid he just didn't look like one. It was not unlike hiring a pit fighter.

Surprised by a fast moving mantua in a rather bright green snatching the baby who had only moments before been using him to stand up Berry looked at Stiles with an expression that was clearly “what the hell?” before noticing a new baby that he could adopt and crossing the floor to where Stiles sat with Alek doing his best to wrangle himself free.

This happened in a moment, causing Felicity to burst out laughing, Thomas to maintain his placid
amusement before shoving his fist back into his mouth, and both Dickon and Maudlin, following behind Berry in case Thomas fell, to brace as if for impact.

“DOGGIE,” Alek, who was old enough to perfectly say dog and was probably taking advantage of his mother’s upset to further agitate her.

Evie, who had never in her life been shy, stepped out from behind Dickon’s leg with a wooden sword shoved through a make shift sash around her waist, with mud up her legs and what looked like a branch stuck in her hair clearly exclaimed. “No, his name’s Berry.”

If Felicity had been delighted by the giant dog, who did closely resemble a bear who had switched it’s fur for velvet, then Lydia was delighted by the imp that challenged her brother. “Who are you?” Evie continued, looking around the room with her hand on the hilt of her wooden sword.

The only person who was willing to let things happen as they would was Thomas, who was wearing a linen napkin around his neck to try and catch some of his overwhelming drool, combined with his bright red cheeks it was clear that Thomas had decided that his sore mouth was a bigger concern, and he settled himself with his hands, his drool covered hands, all over Natalie’s clearly new mantua.

“I had not known that his grace had settled you with his bastards,” Natalie said, but she didn’t move Thomas who had replaced his fist with a cookie that Felicity had slipped him from her own saucer.

“They are his wards,” Stiles said in a tone like ice, “Derek took them into his care when their own father, Lord Deucalion Beecham, died in that tragic shipwreck, Lord Beecham and his sister, who also died that day, were close so he took them as his own. I did include that in my letters.” It was not often that Stiles even complained against Natalie. She had married his father and she had been the closest thing he had had to a mother since his own had died. Sometimes he just didn't like her very much. “Evie,” he turned to the child who looked like she was about to start biting. “This is Natalie, my step mother, and my sisters, Lydia and Felicity, and my brother, Alek.”

Alek took that as cue to slide from Stiles’ lap where he had previously looked as if nothing short of a prybar would get him free, to investigate the dog who had taken advantage of the furor to land by the fire with a thump that made it sound like the legs had been swept from him. “Alek, Lydia, Felicity, this is Vidama Evangeline Rose Beecham, the scourge of the seven seas.”

Alek stood about as tall as Evie, with finely combed short blonde hair and his father’s insightful blue eyes. He wore a fine skeleton suit in striped blue wool and his alpha ears were on display. He was Natalie’s pride and joy, and had the dirtiest chuckle. Evie looked like she had been dragged through several brushes which she had thwacked out of the way with her sword, she had lost her bonnet and shoes again and had a year on Alek, but her low pointed omega ears were showing. She also had a thick smear of dirt across her nose. They sized each other up like possible enemies. "You have a sword," Alek said.

“I have a ship,” Evie said, “Tante Cora brought it from London, it's in the hall, and it swings and,” she paused for a breath, “do you want to see?”

And like that they were the best of friends.

Cora had brought a boat swing from London which they had set up in the long hallway where the children played when the weather was inclement, it was a simple device with a boat shaped bucket that the user could swing by pulling on a rope. Evie had immediately declared it for her use in subjugating the Caribbean. It was large enough that she could fit both Thomas and her baby goat,
who had been stabled for the evening for which Stiles was glad because he didn’t want to have to explain that to Natalie who would declare that the girl was spoiled.

“And who are you?” Lydia asked, tempting Thomas with a biscuit. Maudlin and Dickon had gone to get the children’s tea. “What’s your name?”

Thomas took a whole moment to finish chewing his biscuit, and licked his lips. “Tavia,” he answered proudly, causing all of the adults to laugh.

“Stiles, can I show him my boat?” she was polite and she knew she was in the sitting room for her supper which preceded her bath and then bed.

Stiles nodded, “wait,” he said, “for Dickon to take you, Alek doesn’t know his way around the house, he might get lost and then we’ll have to arrange a search party and those searchers can hardly fail to find the scourge of the seven seas if they’re looking for Alek and he’ll be somewhere way more interesting like the tunnels where they do the laundry.”

Whilst Evie laughed Natalie spoke, “that child should be in stays.”

“No,” Stiles said, “his grace has firm opinions on that, and she will not be introduced to stays until she is twelve, even the wrap around ones, and as someone who was put in stays at her age I thoroughly support that decision. They’re uncomfortable, there is nothing wrong with her posture and she runs around like a monkey, and it’s very hard to climb trees when you can barely lift your arms above her head.”

“It’s not seemly,” Natalie said.

“It’s not your decision, Mama,” Lydia said trying to stop this from turning into a full row. “If his grace has said so then she is not to be fitted for stays. But we have more important concerns,” her smile was sweet and entirely fake, “if Stiles hasn’t had his wardrobe made that means he will have magazines and he can make decisions. Can we trust him to make those decisions without us?”

Stiles got the impression then that the modiste might be coming to see him but it would be his sisters who decided what he would wear.
Chapter 22

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Notes

i has the writers block, so this is getting from point a to point b

The highlight of Stiles’ day was not, as he had expected that it would be, spending time with the children, but instead when he received his mail. Halwyn sorted it with the sort of ruthless efficiency that one expected at the Front lines in France, so invitations, introductions, requests for money, begging letters, letters begging for money or an invitation or introduction all of those were dealt with so Stiles only saw personal correspondence.

Halwyn handed out the letters that morning as they were having breakfast. Evie was pissy because Thomas had been up most of the night crying because his mouth hurt and he was tired and he couldn’t sleep because his mouth hurt, which kept Evie awake and she didn’t want to have a nap because she was too old for naps - she wasn’t but she wanted to be perceived as grown up - and Alek who didn’t like people to make pronouncements that he was not a part of insisted on repeating her demands so that the two of them were running pell mell and just as cranky as Thomas had been because they were tired. Thomas had managed one mouthful of Stiles’ tea and fallen asleep on Stiles and was happily snoring away.

Lydia and Felicity were sitting on another couch, wearing lovely morning gowns and helping themselves to kedgeree which was a dish the cooks were especially proud of. Stiles, not being the biggest fan of haddock, was eating boiled eggs and toasted bread which he had most mornings. His sisters weren’t as fussy and looked to finish the large platter and send for more. They were already on their second pot of coffee.

Stiles had been surprised to discover that his husband was a copious letter writer, and he could, and had, write up to five letters in a day to Stiles. It gave the impression that he was finally glad that he had someone to write to. Stiles had known that he was lonely, but this cemented it in his opinion.

Derek’s letters were a joy, they were witty and charming and some of the things he said about the people that he had to interact with with funny if not necessarily polite. He included little sketches including one of a prominent politician taking snuff that made him sneeze so hard his wig popped off, and the image of the man raised off his feet with the sneeze and his wig clear above his head made Stiles laugh out loud.

Derek told him everything.

He wrote about a Baroness who threw parties which were of the sort that people attended because they wanted business to be done outside of the usual legal channels and so had become the most coveted invitation in London. He had been there trying to negotiate with a mill owner who had been invited because he was having an affair with a noted violinist at the royal opera house and Derek needed his backing to coerce Peel in regards to the bill. Derek knew that the violinist was about to be encouraged to leave and that Paganini was to be invited for the demi season, at Derek’s request because he had remembered that Stiles liked his compositions, but the mill owner didn’t and the mill owner’s wife was a devout monogamist and she was at the same party as the mill
owner and the violinist and blackmail was a powerful lever.

Derek did not even realise that encouraging the opera house to invite Paganini because Stiles liked them might be in any way as charming as it was. When he read that detail aloud to his sisters Lydia, who believed in love much in the same way a child believes in unicorns with a wistfulness that did not need such a thing to exist, had sighed and Felicity, with her hands clasped, about her heart had a soft and somewhat tragic smile to herself.

It was a simple nothing to Derek, he was doing something else and he knew the name because Stiles had mentioned it, nothing more, but Stiles felt it like a blow that knocked him from his feet.

Stiles had always been an oddity, he didn't behave as an omega should sighing at romantic novels, or fantasising about poets. He liked music that was spiky and complicated and had a habit of speaking his mind when he ought have kept quiet. He didn't care for fashion or the latest on dits, or even who was who or who was doing who. So he had always come last when it came to considerations. He was asked his opinion but was almost always over ruled by people who were better than he at playing the social game. Omega had strict rules, especially when they were unmarried, and Stiles was such a flitterwit that the only people willing to listen to him were those who sought either his favour or faked it in order to gain access to his sisters.

Yet Derek who had spent his time with him feigning inattention to the extent of looking out of the window whilst Stiles chattered remembered every word. Derek told him outright that theirs would be a loveless marriage but he offered Stiles more kindnesses thoughtlessly than he had ever truly known.

When he was a child his mother’s illness had dominated their family life. He was told to be quiet as a mouse in case he woke her when she had megrims and then no matter what he did it was not good enough for her and more than once she brought a cane down across his shoulders for no other reason that Stiles could perceive than he was there. As her illness progressed she forgot who he was and thought him some urchin crept into her house. Then she died and the house was about her lack, people came only to show their condolence and none thought to comfort the skinny little boy, as one opportunistic widow called him, in the house. They came thinking that they might marry his father and inherit the fine house in Hampstead Heath.

When his father married Natalie she at least was open with him. She knew the rules of society well and that made her callous and cruel where she often did not intend to be. She wanted Stiles to marry well, understanding he would have freedoms in marriage that he would not otherwise have and a title would buy him protection as well as advantages for his sisters who loved him but were so different from him that they found it difficult to communicate with him. He learned to say what they expected to hear.

He had had one true friend, or so he had thought, but Scott McCall had thrown him over for a pretty omega and that he was lucky in the marriage that Scott had arranged for him was irrelevant, Derek could have been the devil himself for all that Scott cared, Scott had seen an opportunity to protect the object of his affections by removing the powerful man who sought to arrange a marriage with her. He had not even asked her opinion on the matter.

Derek's letters suggested that her family was angry at him for the whole thing and that, duchenne or not, they would not socialise with Stiles if they could avoid it. This was, apparently, no great loss as the Argents were upstarts and Derek had chosen Allison simply because he would never have desire for her.

His desire for Stiles was obvious even if the bruises and fingerprints he left on him were fading.
The midwife, Halwyn was adamant he see a doctor, Stiles insisted it be a midwife and Halwyn made the sound that told Stiles he disapproved greatly, had told him that the only way to truly be sure that he would not conceive was not to have sex but she had given him a contraceptive and several skins in case his alpha lost his reserve and tried to knot him. She believed that it was Stiles that was reticent, tried to reassure him that it was natural and that he didn’t need to be afraid and questioned him about his necessaries and marked on a calendar when he would be most likely to conceive so he could explain to his alpha when was best not to have sex, but really, he was better off being celibate if he was so sure - but babies were adorable and child birth was nothing to fear.

She was so compassionate and kind that his sisters had visited her the following day, although he hoped it was not for contraceptives because that would be hard to explain to their mother.

After her immediate outrage that Stiles had been abandoned by his husband in an estate that was not fit for a duchenne and with children no less Natalie had mellowed some, she liked Thomas more than Evie, because Evie challenged her with questions, the sort of questions that had no answers like why do you not see bees at night? Natalie had looked at Lydia, the one of her daughters which preferred the natural sciences and Lydia had told her the reason you didn't see bees at night was because they became a type of tiny fairy who lived in the woods and sometimes appeared as light above bogs but moved so fast the eye could not see them. This settled Evie who insisted that she would be able to see them, which meant Alek would be able to see them and they then badgered Dickon to take them to the woods to look for fairies so he had had to explain that the fairies only came at night and it was daytime.

The portrait of Derek's first wife did cause an argument between Stiles and Natalie however because Stiles saw no harm in leaving it where it was until he had a portrait to replace it but Natalie thought it was reducing his own imprint upon the household, that they still saw her as the lady of the house and Stiles, who had generally allowed Natalie her own way on things, had had to be firm and repeat that the portrait was to stay.

Natalie had then joined her daughters in checking fashion plates and bolts of fabric, fine silks and wools and corduroys that were the height of fashion in colours so bright they might be seen from a mile away. He had told them that they could choose what they want within the budget that he had been set with the expectation that he needed a complete wardrobe and that they would not play him for a fool.

It was the letters that made him eager for Derek's return and so when Theo had arrived the night before, and was also kept awake by Thomas’ crying, saying that he would return the next day, in the late morning Stiles was actually pleased with the news. Derek's sen’night had been conservative for he was gone nearer to a fortnight and his letters were a poor replacement, even if he did draw witty little cartoons in them.

Derek was returning and Stiles had just about everything he needed for that, and a grumpy baby draped across his lap, drooling unto his pants.
Chapter 23

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Derek was in his copper hipbath, enjoying the luxury of hot water with sandalwood scented oil on his skin and just letting the tension of the past days wash away when the door opened. He had his legs draped over the edges of the bath, but the room was warm, both from almost a full day's sunlight and the fire that was built for him. He had told Isaac, his valet, that he did not want to be disturbed and so didn't bother to take the cloth from his eyes when he told him to “get out”.

“My lord is so charming,” Stiles said, bustling about.

Derek didn’t remove the cloth. It had been soaked in hot water and lavender. His journey had been awful, he had set out before dawn but a fallen tree had added two hours to his travel and there was a storm on the horizon the pressure of which looked to give him a headache, so a hot bath and some hot tea was exactly what he wanted before he had to deal with people.

Stiles clearly didn’t consider himself “people”. He continued to move about the room, testing out bottles because Derek could hear them clink, and possibly stealing a mouthful of his tea, and he put a bit more wood on the fire. There was a rustling sound that Derek did not immediately recognise but made sense when Stiles, naked but for his linen shift, climbed into the bath with him, curling up in the space between his legs and resting his head on his shoulder.

“Am I to guess that you missed me?” Derek asked. He still did not remove the cloth from his eyes.

“Either that, alpha, or that I am hiding from my sisters who have engaged a modiste in their attempts to harangue me.”

Derek chuckled, the water around them rippling. “Such adoration I find,” he muttered into Stiles’ hair and the scent of him, sweet with vanilla and cloves was a balm to his senses, “what need have I for a mistress when I have a mari who uses me to hide from his family and their penchant for fashion.”

“Well, the alternative is introducing you to my brother as the head alpha of my family, and when you came in you looked so worn I made the decision that it would be best to wait until he climbs you like you are a tree from whose branches he can swing.”

“I thought that I was supposed to keep those branches just for you,” Derek said.

Stiles’ bright peal of laughter was as relaxing as the bath, “my lord,” he said, “such euphemisms, don’t you know that I am a pure-minded omega, I am not supposed to be surrounded by such filth.”

“Ah,” Derek said, nosing into the space behind Stiles’ ear where his scent was at its most potent. “It is only performing such acts that are allowed, speaking of them is forbidden.”

“Alpha,” Stiles drawled out the word, “I live only to please,” there was a smug archness to his tone which caused Derek to lift the cloth from one eye to look at him, at the smirk there.

“What happened to your hair?” Derek asked him, taking in his appearance for the first time and
noticing that the small tail of hair he had had when Derek had left him was gone and his hair was in fact cropped close to his head in a style more commonly called “Brutus” but had become so dishevelled it could have passed for a “frightened owl”. Those were alpha styles however and although it suited him it was a little improper for Stiles to wear his hair so short. He would probably cause a sensation in London.

“That’s a long story involving your sister giving Thomas toffee which he got in my hair where Grete tried to remove it.”

“Who’s Grete,” Derek asked wondering if Stiles had given in and gotten the bevvy of maids that Halwyn wanted for him.

“The goat,” Stiles answered. “Evie thought it was hilarious, Dickon, the nursemaid your sister brought tried to brush it out but with the goat chewing on my hair, there was nothing for it but the shears. So I asked Cora not to give Thomas any more toffee until he has more teeth.”

“I had not known my sister would come calling,” Derek said, “had I, I would have prepared you better, and probably spent more time in London.”

“Your sister is delightful,” Stiles said and he seemed to genuinely mean it, “it is my sisters that are horrors that we must crouch in wardrobes to hide from.”

“Is that in the hope that if they see us draped in velvet they might think we are listening to their advice?” Derek asked.

“If they found us,” Stiles said sagely, “they would assume we were at coitus and would ask us questions sure that we could not leave until we acceded to their demands,” he paused then, “and I’m not sure what those would be, they might ask us to,” he took a breath, “perform.”

“Cora bought Evie the goat.”

Stiles was still laughing when Derek used his fingers to bring his mouth up to Derek's for a lingering kiss. Derek kissed Stiles like he hungered for it, as if the fortnight that they had spent apart had been driven entirely by the desire to return and kiss Stiles again. Although the fabric covering his back and ass were wet under Derek’s hands, clutching him just tight enough that he could not escape even if he had wanted to, his hair and face were dry under Derek’s gaze.

Derek suspected that Stiles had no idea just how beautiful he was in truth. His skin had a lovely peach tint and his cheeks were reddened, either from the heat of the bath or the feel of his alpha’s hands upon him, and his lips were the devil’s own gift to Derek, soft and plush and constantly caught between his teeth. His eyes, darkly lashed and heavy-lidded caught in the light the way that they were made them the colour of sherry. He had eyes like chips of sardonyx catching light to throw back a hundred colours from black to mahogany to gold that would have been the envy of a hundred courtesans. His brows were strong but thin and his cheekbones high but without the hard lines of a nordic background, forming a line to his jaw before dipping into a chin that seemed perfect for Derek to lift with his hand to bring his mouth to Derek's own with a happy little groan. His face was slim, matching his body which was slender but defined, despite his protestations Stiles’ body was that of a man, but not the hard ridged shape of an alpha who gave their body to sport, but soft and plush like his lips. There was a little softness in his hips and in his thighs. He looked sylvan and his short hair, changed now from the omega standard, made him look puckish.

Had Derek found him in a forest glade, wearing nothing but a smile and a crown of ivy, to lure him into the kingdoms of the fae Derek would have not been surprised. He would have taken his hand regardless.
“I went to the midwife,” Stiles murmured, “I,”

Derek moved and his hardness swept, with the movement of his hips, against the hot linen and the softness of Stiles’ belly. “We should,” Derek began, cutting off as Stiles rolled against him, “Isaac is supposed to be coming in to take care of my needs,” Stiles rolled against him again, “he doesn’t need to see this.”

“What if I need to see this, alpha?” It was clear that Stiles was using the term, and my lord, because of the reaction it gave Derek. Derek, despite himself and fully unsure that he held any of the power in this marriage, liked the idea of control even the illusion of it.

For a moment he thought of what he had read in the pillowbook that Stiles had given him, the illustration of the young male omega tied to the bedposts at wrists and ankles with what the description said was red silk sashes, and a blindfold over his lovely eyes. He thought of Stiles like that, his wanton, beautiful Stiles, writhing for more, begging with his plush mouth, thighs slick and little cock hard against his stomach. He would be trying to move against the sheets, trying to get any friction against his little peach ass, but not able to, depending on Derek for his pleasure.

“Do you want me to take this,” he curled his fingers around Derek’s erection, hot and heavy and aching with the need to bury himself inside this beautiful boy even though Derek would never let it happen, “into my mouth,” Derek groaned against Stiles’ mouth. Even the illusion of control might never apply to their lovemaking. Just as Stiles had him in hand literally he had Derek utterly in the palm of his hand. “I could ease this with my hand,” there was no question there, “or I can do this.”

Stiles lifted himself up a little arranging Derek’s cock in the crease of his ass, leaning back and supporting his weight with his hands around the lip of the bath he began to thrust, letting the water of the bath and his own slick serve as lubricant as he rode him, the chemise flapping with the motion of it and the blood flushed column of his throat.

Even the threat that Isaac, Derek’s valet, might at any moment interrupt them just made Derek’s fever burn hotter, he put his hands on Stiles’ hips, clutching tight enough that he had to bruise and the love bites that had once decorated Stiles’ collarbone and throat were gone, faded to yellow and covered with powder, powder that even now was catching into clumps as the water splashed around them where they rutted together. Stiles was making little grunts and was clearly as aroused and as close to climax as Derek himself.

Paige had been perfunctory in regards to sex. She saw it as something that she had to get over and done with to please her husband, and Derek had suspected that omega just didn't feel desire the way that beta and alpha did. She had hitched up her night shift, for sex never happened outside their marriage bed, and she had not cared to share his bed if she could have removed him, sending him back to his own bed half dumb from climax.

Once her pregnancy was confirmed she had locked the door that joined their two chambers.

She never would have joined him in his bath, or rolled her hips to grind her sex against Derek's own, and she never would have thrown her head back to gasp, blood flushing across those gorgeous collarbones that Derek needed to bite and mark. He had not wanted to mark Paige’s creamy skin the same way.

Under Stiles’ hips, pressed against his taint and between his thighs and the swell of his ass Derek was knotting and it felt so good to press his knot into that hot, wet tunnel between their flesh. Stiles’ head was cast back, throwing his Adam's apple into harsh relief but he was grunting out his breaths, trying to catch a normal rhythm in the aftermath of their encounter. He finally fell forward, resting his face against Derek's shoulder and his mouth hot against the cords of Derek's neck as he
similarly panted, his entire being dominated by the smell of vanilla and cloves and the heat of his omega and his heartbeat pounding against Derek's chest.

“I like this,” Stiles said, scratching his fingers through the thin dark hair on Derek's chest, “you’re warm.”

“The bath's getting cold,” Derek said, “we could,” he wasn’t even sure what he was suggesting just more of this without the cooling water around his ass and thighs.

With a sleepy sigh, Stiles kissed the underside of Derek's jaw, “we could,” he said, “but we do have to appear to the others eventually. Evie especially wonders what you’ve brought her. You and your sisters have spoiled her terribly, she expects gifts whenever someone leaves and Thomas calls Cora “sugarpig” he’s so used to her giving him candies.” Even like this in the aftermath of their sex, the domesticity felt normal. “You need a shave too,” he added, “I’m going to look like I face-planted into a thorn bush.” Stiles made no urge to move though. He was comfortable draped across Derek like a blanket, his legs curled up in the vacancy left by Derek's knees hanging over the edge of the bath. “But I did go to the midwife,” he repeated, “I have skins if you want to,”

Derek kissed the crown of his head, “we shouldn't,” he said, “just in case.”

With a yawn and a roll of his shoulders, Stiles agreed, “just in case. Besides, we're getting good at this.” His grin was satyric, an invitation from a sylvan creature in the deep dark wood to give away everything he had known for just one night of pleasure.

“We are,” Derek agreed and if Stiles had offered Derek would have taken his hand.

Chapter End Notes

I was trying to find a word for like a faun and damn near invented one to do the work before I found Satyric which incidentally was the word I was inventing, as in like a satyr so it would be satyric before finding on deep dark merriam webster's page on satyrids [butterflies] that it was a word, it was just playing coy. See what we writers go through, and yes, a word can utterly derail an entire chapter.
Chapter 24

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Stiles had returned from business in Bath that had taken the best part of the week before he received a letter from his father.

He had gone to Bath with just Lydia to deliver fabric to the modistes along with the fashion plates that he could have a new wardrobe, to order a new set of dishware for the London house from the Royal Worcester agent there and met with several artists to arrange a pair of full length portraits: an elfin one from Mrs Cosway, which he was more excited by for the stairwell in Rosings, and a standard image from Mr Lawrence for the London house which he had not even seen yet.

After nine days, including four days travel, Stiles was glad to return to Rosings and wondered how Derek could make the day long journey to London as often as he did. Stiles was exhausted and he hadn’t done much at all to warrant the tiredness.

Lydia did not look like she had just spent the same nine days, looking as fresh and fabulous as one of the fashion plates that she had given to the modiste.

Halwyn, who had also joined them on their adventure and had managed to increase Stiles’ staff after visiting an employment agency in Bath and hiring no less than four maids for the young duchenne, who were following by hired carriage, and a secretary, had rested his head against the padded wall of the coach to close his eyes for a few minutes several hours ago. At least he did not snore much.

They were welcomed in by Thomas who was sat in the front foyer on a blanket with his toy sheep and several blocks that he was organising whilst Maudlin sat nearby darning a pair of socks. He beamed at them with a huge gummy smile displaying all four of his teeth. Thomas liked to play in strange places, he would amble in and start playing where he landed on his napkin and he liked the foyer because it was flat and his blocks made the best noise when he bounced them across the ceramic. The other two children were absent as was Berry and Dickon so it was likely that they had been invited to a game in the gardens where they could appreciate the hot weather of mid June.

When Stiles had left he had told them that he was leaving them in the capable hands of their oncle Derek, both Derek and the children had looked distraught at that information but he was pretty sure that Natalie and Felicity had prevented the need for a doctor.

Stiles picked up Thomas with a delighted laugh, Thomas agreed that this was brilliant in his babby baby speak patting Stiles on the cheek and grinning. Evie might have been a little hurricane but Thomas’ easy manner and charm meant Stiles adored him, whether he wanted to or not. With Thomas on his hip he went into the main parlour, knowing Maudlin or Halwyn would pick up his blanket and toys, and asked for a cup of tea because he really wanted one.

As Halwyn sorted his mail Stiles was informed that his grace was out riding and that Miss Natalie and the children were having a scavenger hunt and that they would return for tea.

Stiles took the opportunity of being in his parlour, in his house, to just relax and let the tension of being a Duchenne in Bath slip from his veins to the slobbery pats and delight of a baby.

Most of his mail was nonsense, invitations and requests for invitations, the usual slew of begging letters for his influence or wealth in regards to charities which was something he would eventually
have to make a decision on, and packets from stores including things like fashion plates and
crockery designs.

Among the letters was a small packet that had been redelivered from the Hampstead Heath address
and was marked from the weather and looked a little salt stained. Stiles had been recieving letters
like that all of his life and knew immediately what it was. His father’s mail had finally arrived in
his hands.

He finished his tea before he opened it. Lydia, having seen that he was situated and no longer
needed her being content with Thomas in his arms, had gone up to her room with the intent to have
a short lie down. She might have looked unbothered by the journey but she was as tired as Stiles
was.

Thomas was placated with a biscuit, double baked and firm as brick, for him to gum on when
Stiles finally opened the letter.

Son, that word alone was enough to make Stiles’ eyes water. He loved his father dearly but he had
been absent so much of his life and he had felt that lack that every time he called him son the
power of it overwhelmed him.

By the time he had finished reading the letter he was sobbing, and he refused Maudlin’s offer of
comfort, the old woman treated everyone inside the house with the same affectionate care that she
offered Thomas, they were all her babies and her babies could be pulled unto her knee for
reassurance at any time that they needed, or bent over it for punishment, although to be fair she
preferred to punish children by making them sit on the stairs next to the grandfather clock until a
pre-arranged time to think about what they had done.

Stiles pushed her away and went to find himself a quiet place where he could break down in
privacy.

His father’s letters had always made him feel lonely. His father had an important job, he was the
aide de camp to one of the most powerful men in the British army. His job made it necessary for
them to be apart for long periods of time, Stiles knew that. He also knew that he had been on his
own, apart from his governess and staff, for nearly three months after his mother died. He knew
that his father, unaware of the day to day problems of his mother’s illness had always taken her
side telling Stiles it was her illness attacking him, but never offering him comfort to accompany
the truth of it. When his father had married Natalie he had been in the house for a whole six months
but he had spent those months with Natalie and Stiles had not been an after thought but not as
important. Yet his father tried, he wrote to him often, he included gifts and spoke to him frankly but
Stiles still felt like he was last in his father’s affections, especially after Alek had been born. He
knew, intellectually, that because he was older he was perceived not to need his father as much as
Alek who was still a little wobbly on his feet he was so young, but knowing a thing was not the
same as feeling a thing. His heart was not rational after all.

Derek found him in the orangerie. He was still dressed as he had been when he was riding, with his
shirt pluming around him where it had come loose from his vest. Windswept and a little sweaty he
looked like he was the frontispiece of a salacious novel where a young Bluestocking garnered
marriage to an earl by virtue of her wits whilst serving as a governess to his adopted daughter.
“Maudlin told me you were upset.”

Even his concern added to the sexual imaginings of the dried up elderly betas who wrote those
books.

Stiles didn't care that he was sprawled on the tile floor between the potted bergamot trees that were
the pride and joy of the gardeners, or even that he was drinking from a decanter he had swiped on the way. He suddenly didn't care if Derek saw him as a sloppy drunk, with his eyes red and his face as slobbery as Thomas'. He had ripped away his jabot, draped his frock coat over a carved bust of some judgemental Hale ancestor so it would stop looking at him, lost his shoes in the back corridor and even sloughed off his stockings so he was barefoot, in just his shirts and pantalons, drinking gin from a crystal decanter whilst wiping his nose on the lace jabot.

Still in his riding boots Derek sat on the floor next to him, and took the decanter, taking a large swallow for himself. “What did your father say?” he asked.

“My father is unsure if he is disappointed in my choices,” Stiles answered with a fake smile that came nowhere close to his eyes, “that he wishes me well in my marriage and that if you hurt me he will drive you into the sea, duke or not. Apparently he had told Natalie to accept Carstairs proposal but to hold out on the marriage so that he would leave me alone and then he, my father, would break it, so I compromised you and ruined myself for nothing.” He took the decanter back, taking a large swallow and pulling a face. “So he left me behind again, and nothing I do matters,” he looked across at Derek. “I am so tired of being left behind.” Drunk and angry he continued, “do you know why I agreed to your bullshit reasonings, why I spread my legs like butter for you? So you couldn’t annul the marriage later, so you couldn’t leave me behind. I would have bent myself through the carriage door if it meant that you had to keep me.”

“You’re drunk,” Derek said and tried to take the decanter away.

“Tired,” he said, “I keep a pretty face and smile and agree to everything but I’m tired, Derek, I’m tired of being the one left behind, I’m tired of being the last person anyone thinks about, except Halwyn, he’s fine, he thinks of me second after himself, and he tries so hard and I have to be the duchenne and smile and remember which fork to use and who I’m supposed to speak to and I have to be nice to you and I don’t know what I’m doing and I, I just want to be kept. And I know you have to go to London, I know what you’re doing is important, and I know I have to be perfect for you to do the things you’re doing because they’re important, but I don’t want to be left behind any more.”

Derek did not understand because he pulled Stiles into his chest and murmured nonsense to soothe him. He had heard the words but he did not truly listen. He thought it was upset from the letter exacerbated by the gin for he said so, not that it was the culmination of many little breakdowns that Stiles had prevented himself having.

“He left me behind.” Stiles murmured into Derek's shoulder. “They left me behind.” Then he paused, “they all leave me behind.”

Derek hummed and rocked until Stiles was undone by the gin and exhaustion, carrying him up the stairs to his bed, and was unsurprised when Berry, who had the harried look of a dog who was escaping two energetic small children and wanted somewhere that they would not find him, joined Stiles on the bed, nestling into the curve of his body to watch over him. “You're a good boy,” Derek told the dog but Stiles made a murmur in acknowledgement.
In the two weeks immediately following Stiles return to Rosings there was a steady time of upheaval although it was fair to say that none of it was planned. Natalie received a letter from her sister, Louise, who lived in Littlehampton just outside of Brighton who had said that she was ill. Tante Louise had the constitution of a horse but a tendency to claim illness whenever something did not go her way and take to her couch and refuse to see the Doctor. After receiving three letters from her sister Natalie was forced to admit that she would have to go and spend some time with her. She arranged with Stiles that Alek and his sisters would remain in Rosings, but an invitation to Lydia saw the two sisters with the opportunity to stay with a friend, Vidama Yukimura, in Brighton, which actually invited Stiles as well, if he wanted to come but making it clear they were welcome even if he did not.

This meant that by the third week of June it was clear that the house would be almost empty, even if Alek and Evie were capable of making it sound like the house was full of screaming monkeys by themselves. Stiles didn't question that Alek would be left with him, he had a larger nursery, and Maudlin was as harried with three small children as two, and as Alek was napkin trained and mostly beyond the age of accidents it was mostly making sure that he was fed and in bed before dark. Dickon was the one who chased them down so if he was happy she was happy and Natalie could go to see her sister even if she would rather have her head shaved. Not even Alek wanted to go see Tante Louise and he wasn't sure who she was other than that no one liked her.

After they left Stiles seemed to recieve a parcel every day, his wardrobe arriving in dribs and drabs from the modistes, and there were those arriving at the London house that Halwyn, who had hired a London staff member whose job it was to let Halwyn know what was happening in London, had to make sure were properly placed and that people knew that he had ordered new ceramics, or paintings, or had a room that he had not seen, which was his new office, redecorated so that people knew he was taking his new duties seriously. Halwyn was adamant that it was important that the rumour mill was active and Stiles, who had never really understood the rules of the bon ton, even when he had barely been part of it, and so was happy for someone else to manage it.

Derek managed his own correspondence, although his secretary did object, and spent his summer mostly taking the opportunity to ride and time with Stiles.

Derek was charming and witty although he admitted, a little shyly, ducking his head into his neck where they sat on a blanket watching Berry wear Alek and Evie out playing chase-me where it was unclear if they were chasing him or he was chasing them but both parties clearly enjoyed it, as unsure in society as Stiles himself. He hated the artifice of it, he was a simple person who only wanted simple things in life, but he had the ability to do more and so he knew that he should.

Stiles never really forgot that he and Derek had made a deal, he was Derek’s duchenne because he needed one, both to look after the children he had inherited from Laura - who he absolutely did not know how to interact with, and society where he had the capacity to make lasting change for people. He would have been much happier in himself with a fire, a comfortable chair, and a new book. A glass of wine was a pleasant optional extra.

One of the parcels that Stiles had recieved was a confection of scraps of gold silk satin with lace
insertions and insertion lace that formed a pair of combinations, a new item of foundation wear where a button front bodice was joined, by a lace waist pulled tight with silk ribbon, to a pair of braies with a modesty panel forming an open gusset that was designed as a pleasant surprise for Derek. It was utterly wasteful as there was no real way to wash it without ruining the fabric and after he had worn it once it would probably be cannibalised for all the mis-matched lace and ribbon. It was designed to be worn under his stays and was an experiment although most of the combinations designed for male omega, with the idea that they would work better under the tight omega fashions than the chemise and braies that were currently worn, would be made from utilitarian linen and Stiles had ordered an entire bolt of fabric’s worth in fine Belfast linen, so new that it was picked up from the Bristol docks to go to the modiste in question, a company called Symington who were also making the stays that it would go under.

Even though they were made of scraps the satin combinations were a frivolous waste of money and yet Stiles liked the idea of Derek seeing him in them. He knew the soft, whispery and draping fabric would make his skin rosy and he liked that Derek desired him. He didn’t love him, they barely knew each other even after all this time, but he desired him. He had rules about what they could do, he refused to knot him after all, or even penetrate him, but the desire was there.

Stiles felt safe when he was in Derek’s arms which was a surprise to him. He did not like to sleep alone and Derek didn't just tolerate the way that he burrowed into his warmth but pinned him in place with a heavy arm and a calf between Stiles’ own.

There could be love between them, but it would take time. They would need to learn the shapes of the other and make changes to slot them better together. It would be a mutual shaving off of edges to form a seamless whole.

Most society married couples did not bother. Marriage was a business arrangement. The mari would be kept and bear children and the alpha would work to keep them. There were monetary and property exchanges, promises and arrangements, both families would be promoted by the marriage, after that it was academic. As long as someone was discreet it did not matter what they did, and society could hold its tongue very well. There were many open secrets that would destroy someone if it stopped being a secret. Derek had said, more than once, that there were people whose entire stock in society was in secrets. Stiles felt glad that the only secret he had was that Derek didn't want to knot him, it would not ruin him, nor could Derek anull the marriage now, so his secrets were irrelevant.

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Stiles went into the parlour, the one that the family preferred to use with the lavender silk on the walls and paintings of lush European landscapes, and a wall intersected with French doors. There was always a fire in the grate, albeit a small one at this point in the summer. The day had dawned overcast and a little chill but had quickly cleared and promised to be beaming hot. He found Cora on one of the couches with Thomas on her knee squealing in delight as she mocked eating him with exaggerated nom nom nom noises and promises to eat his bare belly when she blew noises on it. Thomas, who adored Cora at the best of times, thought that this was the absolute best game and was laughing so hard he couldn’t help squealing which just made her do it more.

“Cora, when did you arrive?” he asked for he had not been expecting her.

“Late last night, after everyone had gone to bed,” she said, before threatening to eat Thomas’ cheeks which she bussed loud smacking kisses on and he squealed again, “I don't like to leave my little Peaseblossom too long,” she said, tickling his sides with clever fingers, “he grows up so quickly and Derek never thinks to mention the important things in his letters.” Cora, unlike her
brother, was not terrified that the children might shatter if he got too close, she had been known to heft Evie on her shoulders for races through the garden, holding onto to Evie’s calves as Evie whooped and hollered and asked her to go faster and faster still. Derek got uncomfortable and left the room if the children were inside. He was unaware that Thomas called him “the man” in an ominous fashion. “I felt bad that I had gotten the swing for Evie and nothing for my peaseblossom, it is strange how guilt tears at one, so I found a delightful little cabinet maker and had him make a bath chair for a small child, I thought we could take him for a long walk, talk apart from the ghosts of this house.” Stiles agreed although he was aware that the house only had one ghost and her name was Paige.

The perambulator as it was called was a miniature rattan and wicker chair, designed for a youngchild or a very, very small adult, and had been affixed to four small wheels, possibly designed for an industrial trolley, with a pair of handles, like a bathchair. A leather loop came from under the seat through which a small bamboo rod was inserted to hold the child in place whilst giving them something to hold onto. There was plenty of room for Thomas, a blanket and his lamb and Cora used another strap to fix a parasol in place to offer him shade. The whole thing looked like it had been constructed entirely to Cora’s desire that Thomas be taken for walks and with some practise, for this model was clearly engineered and tied on mostly with leather straps and glue, it would be a useful device for nurses exercising older children whilst able to keep a younger child with them.

Thomas, despite his early misgivings, decided he loved it, as they walked along the manicured paths of the estate. Derek had been right all those weeks before when he said that the gardens of Rosings were a treasure. They were an endless delight of colour and scent and sound, whether that was birds cooing in the trees or the babbling of a stream over carefully placed rocks. Cora mentioned that the Devonshires, she said it in the same manner which one would talk of a close neighbour and not the owners of Chatsworth, had a cascade waterfall put in place where water fell along terraces but that Derek had dismissed the idea as wasteful and instead they had landscaped a small brook from the ponds that created the same noise.

If the Devonshires had hired Capability Brown to do their gardens then it was made clear that the Albemarles would not hire him, but instead, his competitor although Cora was quick to admit, she wasn’t sure she would know the Devonshires to pick them out of a crowd.

They walked through a dirt path covered entirely by cypress trees, twisted together to form a tunnel where Thomas crowed at seeing a squirrel, and then down the gravel path, which the push-chair struggled with a little, to a wall covered in different types of aromatic rosebushes where a covered bench faced them. He talked to Cora about a lot of things, about how her brother was terrified of the children, and Cora reassured him that when Stiles’ own came along it would be different and Stiles did not contradict her. He wanted to know about Paige and this far from the house, listening to the bubbling stream and surrounded by the heady scent of roses, as Thomas strained forward in his seat to catch ambling butterflies he asked her.

Cora spoke frankly and calmly. She had never cared for Paige and she said so, rocking the push-chair back and forth.

“It was all a matter of timing,” Cora said, “the very worst of it. After Edward, I mean,” she sighed, “after the fire, I should start before that,” she said. There was a pause where Stiles did not interrupt her.
“Our parents were,” again she paused, “Maman was,” she licked her lips, “there was the Duchess and there was Maman, and Maman was always there for us, she loved us completely but the Duchess, our alpha parent, was more distant. She was very active in politics, and she was instrumental in getting slavery abolished in the English provinces and colonies, it was not that we came second to her political ambitions, but that they kept her busy and she knew Maman would fill the gap. Edward was the oldest of us,” she brushed a stray lock of hair under her bonnet watching the bees lazily bumble into the heady rose blooms. “Edward was old enough he could have been my father and the Duchess spent the most time with him, training her to take his place. Then there was Laura, her spare. This gave Derek, Stephen and I more freedoms to be who we were, and there was uncle Peter, clever and manipulative and so completely uninterested in politics as he saw it as a game too easily won. He and the Duchess disagreed often and loudly about everything. Have you met Uncle Peter yet,” she asked. Stiles told her that he had not.

“Edward rebelled against the Duchess, an alpha who thought that he knew best, as all of us are,” she smiled, “and he arranged a marriage with a young omega called Katherine Argent.”

“Allison’s aunt?” Stiles interjected.

“Yes,” Cora said, “that was why we were all so surprised when Derek announced he planned to marry the vidama, he hates her family, we all do, because of what happened, because of what they did.”

“Vidama Argent was beautiful and rich and intelligent and seemed every thing a ducal heir could want in a wife but the Duchess hated her on sight, claimed she was an instrument of her hateful father, that this was a plan to destroy her. Edward and she argued over it for months, until the duchess agreed to meet the girl. This was in the big house, Lea Green, up in Derbyshire.

“Uncle Peter declared the whole thing an alpha pissing contest and wanted nothing to do with it taking Derek, Laura and I to Brighton, Stephen was unwell so it was decided he could join us later. He was the only omega in our family.” She paused again.

“The Duchess decided that Edward could marry Katherine over her dead body, Edward went out for a late night ride to clear his head and Katherine burned the house down with everyone inside. Edward came back to see her gloating, claiming that they could marry now.”

Stiles was shocked speechless and took Cora’s hand, both were wearing gloves but the gesture still shocked her for she looked him in the face. “Edward had her taken to the local magistrate where she was claiming that she had done it for him, that he was the Duke now, and they could marry. She was taken to Bedlam by order of the law, she’s still there, I think; if it didn’t kill her.” There was another pause.

“We were devastated, as you can imagine, Laura stayed with her friend, Lord Beecham, Thomas’ father, Edward moved to London permanently and kept me with him, and Derek, angry and lashing out and young moved here, to Rosings, alone.”

“Maman had always let Paige use the music room, she knew her through her charity work in the village, Paige’s father was the local vicar, and he was a,” she paused, “he is gone, I can call him a rat bastard and not worry that I will offend delicate sensibilities.”

“You could call him a rat fucker and I wouldn't be offended,” Stiles told her with a smile.

“But then Thomas might run around shouting it and we all know that I would be blamed, wouldn't I, Peaseblossom?” She rocked the chair again. Thomas was still reaching out with pudgy arms for the passing butterflies.
“It would certainly liven up dinner time,” Stiles told her, trying to cheer her up, “and we both know it would be Evie that saves it up for best effect.”

She laughed. “Paige’s father was a manipulator, he seemed all that was good and best but he was cruel and he had this way of making people do what he wanted. Uncle Peter is,” she paused, “an amateur compared to this man, he convinced them he was a good Christian, got an excellent living and managed to push his only child into the household where one of those grown alphas might spot her and the one who did was Derek.”

She scratched at her nose, at some pollen that landed there, “he was eighteen, newly stripped of family and home, and refusing any kind of solace or comfort. He was rattling around this big empty house where he had always been part of a loud and bustling household and then there she was, playing the cello in the music room. She must have seemed like a gift.”

“He proposed marriage quickly and Edward, terrified that he would drive us away, gave into everything that we asked. So he married her because her father wanted it.” She looked at the sky, “we should go back,” she said, “it looks like the weather is turning.”

Chapter End Notes

I've started adding emdash spacing between scene breaks where normally you'd just add extra spaces because if you download the fics to kindle or aldiko or the apple equivalent it eats the spaces which make it hard to see where they are. So I, wonderful as I am, am making it so you can see. It's one of those really annoying things that need to be addressed.
If anyone knows how to get cool spacers = I can add those instead.
Chapter 26

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

I know, I know, it took forever but sometimes that happens

Lord Peter Hale arrived at Rosings about ten minutes after the end of a heavy summer storm. He had decided earlier in the day to eschew his carriage and ride the last thirty or so miles upon his fine horse and as such when he arrived in Rosings he was soaked to the bone and scowling. When the door was opened to him he was faced with both a solicitous member of staff fawning over him and a small blonde child sitting on the stair watching the clock. As he peeled off his soaked greatcoat, which had done nothing to protect him from the rain and only made him sweaty, he looked at the child and answered, “you’re new.” At about the same time the child, noticing his interest countered, “I don’t know you.”

It was not the best start to a relationship between them.

Alek Stilinski was being punished. On being served supper which included a small egg custard tart for each of the three children he declared that Thomas didn’t need an egg custard because he was an omega and that he and Evie should share his because they were alphas and alphas were supposed to get all the best things.

The only person not offended by this was Thomas who was still doing his best to smear rice pudding over his mouth in the hope that some of it would end up inside.

Alek was put on the stair after a long explanation about how omega absolutely should get egg custards too, and that alphas were no better than omega, and that both Stiles and Evie were omega which Alek was keen to disagree with. Told to sit there and think about what he had done until the long hand had moved three notches he was sat there when Peter came in.

Peter had spent his fair share of time sat on that stair watching that same clock when he was about that child’s age. It was likely that he was actually sitting in the butt groove that Peter’s own bad behaviour had left.

Evie, never one to miss out on anything happening where she might acquire sweetmeats, came barreling out into the hall with a screech of Onka-pi so loudly that it was a wonder the windows did not shatter. Thomas, chewing his way through his egg custard and allowing, graciously, Stiles to spoon more of into his mouth, asked “onkapi?” with the wonder that his favourite person in the world was excited about it so he was too, just as soon as he finished his egg custard.

Peter didn’t get to answer before Evie had wrapped herself around his legs, and then looked up and went “you’re wet.”

“And you’re shooting up like a weed,” He swept her up on his hip, “soon I’ll have to get the gardeners to cut your hair, now are you going to tell me all that I missed since I saw you last?”

In the furore of Peter arriving the gathered nurses of Rosings might have been overlooked for
leaving Alek on the stairs for nearer fifteen minutes than the three he had been told to sit there for, meaning he was sulkier even if they were allowed to stay up a little longer to see Uncle Peter who had the good grace to allow them this time whilst sitting in damp clothes.

Thomas also took the opportunity to showcase his new word, throwing something to the floor, where it was often gobbled up by a waiting Berry, and exclaiming "sumvabich" causing all of his caretakers to wince. Seeing their reaction Thomas immediately did it again laughing.

Peter, being the person he was, just kept giving Thomas things to throw to the dog so he could say it.

They were trying to negotiate this when both Derek and Cora came in, deep in conversation and raised their head at the presence of their uncle, who still had Evie on his lap and was passing bits of crust and smashed up boiled egg for Thomas to feed to Berry whilst laughing and saying "sumvabich".

There might have been a time when Derek expected that his household would be quiet and well maintained; that Stiles' presence would ease the emptiness in Rosings and fill a place that was obvious to others. Yet it wasn't quiet he brought- it was the children happy enough to laugh and play and share their joy.

Derek wasn't ready for this, he had to admit it, so he went to excuse himself but Stiles noticed it, and stood up to follow him into his office. Derek used his office as a place to hide, he knew that he knew that when he was behind his desk with his ledgers in front of him or his correspondence that no one would disturb him except for his secretary. Stiles opened the door and followed him. "Are you well?" he asked and Derek was suddenly angry and bulled Stiles up against the wall with his shoulders.

To Derek's surprise, despite the way that Derek's bulk seemed to dwarf Stiles despite them being of a height, Stiles was not intimidated. He grinned and there was a hint of mockery in his smile. He knew that Derek desired him, and with his shirt open at the collar Derek could see the collar of lovebites that he had left of his omega's skin and licked his lips. "I see how it is," Stiles said in that deep growl he got when he was aroused, "you're afraid of me."

And there was a truth to that. Derek was scared. He was scared that he might become attached, - this was a lie he told himself for he was attached whether he liked it or not - and lose Stiles. He was afraid that Stiles might leave him with the emptiness and two children to look after. He was scared of the desire that he felt with Stiles and how different it was to what he had known. He wasn't scared of Stiles as a person, but instead as a concept, as a solution to a problem that he had not realised was so vast and overwhelming.

"I think," Stiles put his hand on Derek's shoulder and pushed him, "that you're scared that I'll figure out just how much power I have over you," he said and walked forward so that Derek had to stumble back, clumsy and overwhelmed, until he walked into the desk. "I think," Stiles said, running his finger down the length of Derek's vest, "that you're scared that I might break this aloof facade you have," his fingers went to the buttons of the double fly on his pants. He was wearing linen today and not buckskin and Stiles had to be aware of how hard that Derek was right now. "And I think you're scared that I might not drop to my knees on this thick Turkish carpet, open your flies and take you in my mouth."

There was a fear there too. Stiles was so wanton, so wanting. He enjoyed sex and was eager to learn. He actually liked sucking Derek off which was something Derek had always believed was a thing that people did because the receiver enjoyed it, but Stiles would eagerly go to his knees. Just the previous night Stiles had taken him in his mouth, with the same impish grin he had now, and
with the rose salve, the same one that he used on his lips, on his fingers rubbed the pucker of Derek's ass. The sensation was so new and so overwhelming that he damn near knotted Stiles' mouth.

That had aroused Stiles even more, kneeling on the floor wearing nothing but the moonstones that Derek had bought him, as Derek sprayed him with his release so it glistened on his skin and his own hand worked his small cock between his legs. They might not have penetrative sex but none could say that their bedroom sport was blander for it.

That was when Stiles did as he had promised, sinking to his knees on that plush rug and reaching into the open fall of Derek's pants to bring his erection to his lips. All Derek could do was lean back against the desk and let him.

Stiles controlled him utterly, and he didn't even have to use his cock to do it.

And then there was the filth. When they were alone the words that escaped Stiles' mouth were those that might make a bawd blush, and when he said he would do those things he did. He let Derek use his body as he would and groaned and moaned and enjoyed every second of it. He was an incubus sent from Hell to drive Derek to madness and Derek could not resist him.

The concept of him being gone terrified him even more than the idea that Stiles might turn him from his bed, for Derek's naivete would mean Stiles would almost certainly take lovers to satiate his voracious appetite and Derek couldn't help the growl he felt in his throat at that. His alpha nature was possessive and Stiles was his - his omega; his mari, but he had only promised him security and surely such a creature would look for love elsewhere. If only Derek had it left in him to love him.

Yet only the night before Stiles had gotten from his own bed, before their liaison, and went swimming naked in the pool behind the house, darting through the water as confident as a fish and as glorious as a white whale. When he found Derek had laid out a blanket, with a sheet for him to dry himself, he had smiled and sat there, on the lawn in the deep summer night and looked at the stars. "I know their names," he said, "but I've never been able to identify them in the sky."

Derek had taken his hand and pointed them out, Orion, Capella, Aldebaran, Cassiopeia, Pegasus, Ursa Minor and Stiles wonder was as wondrous as his touch. Derek felt that he had to explain, "my Maman was fascinated by astronomy," he wasn't sure why he was confiding that but the look on Stiles' face, illuminated by moonlight, made it worth it. "She had a telescope in Lea Green and would spend hours charting the stars, she made sure we all shared her knowledge. She would travel to Birr Castle in Ireland at least once a year to see their charts." The Earls of Rosse were notorious for their fascination with the night sky.

"I have Messiers catalogue," Stiles admitted, "but I couldn't translate it."

"My Maman would have loved you just for that," Derek admitted, pulling Stiles into his arms to keep him warm, he was naked but for the damp sheet that he had wrapped around himself and the string of moonstones that he always seemed to wear. The lovebites around his throat formed a dark collar like lace and the stones shimmered in the silvery light. "None of us really loved the stars as she did."

"I would have liked to have met her," Stiles said and it seemed genuine, "sometimes I don't really remember my mother so I wonder what mothers are meant to be like, are they like Natalie where they are desperate to improve their daughter's station, or are they like yours, hunched over a telescope and sharing all that they learn."
Derek had tilted his face up and kissed him.
Stiles, feeling under the weather and a little worn out had decided to go to bed straight after supper. He was just tired, he had been more active lately than usual and with the travel that was expected for shopping, for all of Halwyn's determination that the vendors would come to him he had to go places for them to do that first - with running around with the children and his explorations with his husband he was worn thin and was sure that it was nothing that a hot posset and a long sleep would put to rights.

The posset had met an unfortunate end when Evie had been fascinated by the cup, which had a spout that rose from the bottom and looked like an elephant with its twin handles and he had gotten up to sort something and in the interim Evie had dropped the cup. Stiles had been more worried about her cutting herself on the glass than that she had broken it. Accidents happened but he told them not to bother making him another posset, that he would be fine, and Evie was apologetic and crying and it was just an accident where no one was hurt. So the children were cleaned up, put to bed and Stiles settled himself in front of the fire and felt miserable until supper.

It was just that kind of illness.

Flora, whose job in his household was helping him in his bath- which he didn't want- and attending to his complexion, checked him for a fever and offered to fetch him another posset. The last one she had made for him was more brandy than custard. He waved her off and let her twin, Fiorna - whose job was to help him with his hair, help him into thick wool socks and a bed jacket because he was feeling the cold despite the warm summer day. He would sleep it off.

Even Derek had noticed he looked a little unwell and was a little quiet during supper, whilst Peter had regaled the table with witty stories from Brighton and Derek had leaned over, put his hand on Stiles and asked, "are you well?" Stiles reassured him that he was just a little run down and would be fine after a good night's sleep. Derek informed him he would not call on him then but if he had trouble sleeping, Stiles had previously told him that he did not sleep well alone, that he was just to join him in Derek's bed.

The kindness warmed Stiles heart even if the rest of him couldn't quite get warm despite the fire in the grate and the formal clothes he was wearing determined to make a good impression on Derek's family - although neither Cora or Peter, it had turned out, had made a similar effort.

He had picked at his supper, well for him, which meant he ate what was probably a normal-sized portion for everyone else, and excused himself for a hot bath with lavender oil and his bed.

He was just having his hair combed through where it was wet, so it would be easier to style in the morning, although the shorter style was much quicker than the braid he had worn before to bed, when Dickon knocked and popped his head around the door, "sorry to disturb you, your grace," he said with eyes lowered although Stiles was covered from cuff to ankle in a wool bed coat and had been wearing less at supper. "Evie is unwell and she's asking for you."

Stiles knew that the children had two full-time caretakers. He knew that any and all of the staff would mother them in a heartbeat, even Boyd who kept telling Evie he was going to eat her so
she'd shriek and run whilst he chased her. He also knew if he trusted them to take care of it, which they absolutely could have, he wouldn't sleep he'd just lie in bed feeling wretched so he accompanied Dickon back to the nursery.

Evie was sick, sat on the bed next to Maudlin who was holding a basin, Thomas was stood at Maudlin's feet wailing because Evie was sick and Alek slept on regardless. Alek could have slept through an entire cannonade. Seeing Stiles Thomas toddled over to him, wiping his face on the hem of his nightshirt - he even had a little cap on - so Stiles could lift him up. Evie just vomited into the basin and let Maudlin wipe her face.

"Sorry to disturb you, your grace," Maudlin said, stroking Evie's dark hair. Evie looked wrung out and her face was wet with tears and snot and she kept wiping at her mouth with the sleeve of her nightshirt.

"It's nothing," Stiles said waving it off, "Thomas," he turned to the baby, "do you want to sleep in my bed tonight?" Thomas didn't answer, he just continued wailing. "With Evie unwell he and Alek will get more rest if they sleep with me." Stiles was sure that Dickon could pick up Alek, redress him, carry him across Rosings, possibly dunk him in the duck pond and put him in Stiles' bed without waking him. Once Alek's head hit the pillow nothing other than being ready to wake would wake him. Apparently Stiles had been the same at his age, as had his father.

"Your grace," Maudlin asked, "did you have any brandy earlier?"

It was a strange question and Stiles said so but also confirmed that he had not. He had intended to have a posset but Evie had dropped the cup when she was examining it and he hadn't had another made.

Maudlin sighed, "Evie," she asked the girl who was leaning into her warmth, "did you drink his grace's posset?" Evie managed to look both wretched and guilty.

"The cup looked like an elephant," she maintained. Maudlin had already chided her for breaking the cup, reminding her with what sounded like infinity patience that she looked with her eyes and not with her hands.

"But did you drink it?" Maudlin said and Evie nodded looking at the ground.

"Well, at least now we know where she got the brandy she's throwing up," Maudlin said. Evie had drunk the posset made for Stiles because the cup looked like an elephant with its twin handles and drinking spout, and she had drunk enough of it that she was now suffering the consequences. It was reassuring in it's way because it meant she wasn't very ill and would most likely be fine by morning. Thomas was sobbing in Stiles' arms and he couldn't be as easily soothed by barley water and ginger candies.

When he returned to his room Alek had managed, in the brief moments he had had access, dominated the bed. For a small skinny child he could spread himself over vast distances when he was asleep. And he kicked. Stiles, humming tunelessly to Thomas, took the chair by the fire instead. He would ease the baby to sleep and then climb into Derek's bed.

He remembered how on his wedding night Derek had had a nightmare and unsure what else to do Stiles soothed him as he remembered being soothed, even though his mother had died when he was still young, so he crooned to the crying baby in his arms, "come into these arms again, and lay your body down," he was rocking in the chair, tired and bone-weary, on the cusp of what might be a summer cold, wanting nothing more than to crawl into his own bed and sleep it off but caught by responsibility to a crying baby, "the rhythm of this trembling heart, is beating like a drum."
He ran his hand over the back of Thomas' head, almost pushing the baby into the crook of his neck where he would be warm and safe, "it beats for you, it bleeds for you, it knows not how it sounds."

He looked up to see Derek in the doorway that adjoined their two rooms watching him with a strange expression. He had shirked off his coat and vest and his shirt was open at the neck. He had taken off his Hessians and stockings and stood barefoot in breeches, leaning against the door frame in a picture of alpha virility except for the strange expression on his face. Stiles continued to croon, "for it is the drum of drums, it is the song of songs."

He expected Derek to turn and walk away but he didn't, he just stood there and watched Stiles sing to the baby in his arms, in his nightshirt by the poor lamplight and Stiles could not read the expression on his face. He had never seen it before. "Once I had the rarest rose that ever deigned to bloom," Thomas' crying had turned to tired whimpers, it would only be a moment before he was asleep. "Cruel winter chilled the blood and stole my flow'r too soon."

Stiles had learned this song to sing in the salons of society, soft and sweet and high as a chirping bird, soaring and sad but it had been a song that he had not really understood for it was a story of love lost, and the sort of song people sang so that the society mamas and Blancs could politely clap and Felicity could play the harpsichord next to him.

Stiles had sung a lullaby to Derek on his wedding night when he had woken from a nightmare and now he sang it to soothe the baby in his arms but it was possible he was also singing it to Derek now, "let me be the only one to keep you from the cold," his gaze held Derek firm, "now the floor of heav'n's laid with stars of brightest gold." Derek did not turn away, he watched so intently, "they shine for you, they shine for you, they burn for all to see, come into these arms again and set this spirit free." Stiles wanted those words to be true.

In another situation perhaps Derek would have crossed the room, perhaps he would have swept Stiles into his arms, he would have picked him up and carried him into his bed where he would have made him feel cherished and loved and used one of his particulars until they saw those shining stars in the floor of heaven together.

Derek just stood there and watched.

Chapter End Notes

Stiles is singing love song for a vampire by Annie Lennox

yeah it's a bit shorter than usual but this was such a brilliant place to leave the scene
Stiles had been unsure when he had agreed to the blindfold. After supper, Peter and Cora had decided to allow the newlyweds some alone time and Peter had said this with a leer that saw his niece bat him about the head and roll her eyes so excessively it was a wonder that Stiles could not hear them. Derek was feeling amorous and was keen to see them go and with a belly full of food and rain pattering against the windows outside Stiles was feeling compliant, if not amorous yet then easily led into feeling so.

After adding more wood to the fire Stiles had curled back into the couch next to Derek and let himself be pulled into his embrace and rest his head against his husband's thigh so he was lying across the sofa. "You look so peaceful," Derek murmured, carding his fingers through his hair, "it almost makes me feel guilty for the wicked thoughts I had about you this evening, by firelight, your skin looks as lush as a fresh grown peach and I wished very much to bite."

Stiles was glad for the poor light as it hid his blush but he was curious and so he asked, "what thoughts, alpha?" he made a point only to call Derek Alpha in the bedroom that he might associate the word with sex.

"Such wicked thoughts," Derek continued, "the acts that I wish to do to you are enough to make a sybarite blush." Stiles knew Derek's uncle Peter well enough that he was certain the man had long since lost the ability to feel anything other than mild disdain or amusement.

"Wicked acts, alpha?"

Derek murmured in agreement. "I wish to do such terrible things to you, to bind you to the four posts of my bed and to just look at you, naked and lovely, watching me, waiting to see where I might touch you, shall I touch you with an ostrich feather?" Stiles shivered for an ostrich feather was soft and would feel like a taunting breeze against his skin, almost like a shiver. "Perhaps I shall fetch ice from the cellars, taken from the cooks so they cannot make those mousse you enjoys so much, I could drag it across the creases of your skin where it is hottest, where the skin is thinnest, the inside of wrist, the back of your knee, the crease of your thigh." Stiles gasped a little, imagining it.  "A beeswax candle held above you could be eased into dropping on your skin, across your soft little breasts, your flat stomach, leaving spots of heat that I could harden with the ice, pulling the skin tight for me to pick it off with my nail."

"Or I could bind your hands behind your back, have you kneel on the rug in our room," Stiles heard that word, our, even if he was perhaps a little too aroused to truly register that Derek had said it, "in front of the fire so I can see your gorgeous skin by firelight, wrap silk about your eyes as you hold your mouth open wide for me to use as I wish, as roughly as I wish." As he said this he rubbed the pad of his thumb over Stiles' lips allowing Stiles to suck the digit inside his mouth and curl his tongue around it.

"We could do that," Stiles said around the thumb in his mouth, "I don't know that I would want to be tied up," he continued, "well, not that time, because it means if I lose my balance I have no way to stop myself falling, I could certainly hold my hands behind my back but if you want to use my mouth like that it would be better if I could put my hands on your thighs so I can brace myself, but
you can certainly blindfold me."

Derek looked like he had been poleaxed. This sort of conversation had, in itself, a sort of illicit feel, for one did not discuss wicked things with society ingenues, even ones that you were married to. These were not even the provinces of mistresses, even the sort of mistress which lived south of the river Thames with broad accents and dirty petticoats. This was the sort of act one discussed with a bawd and then again with a prostitute of the lowest sort and even then under the expectation that they might baulk at such things. One's mari certainly did not offer practical solutions that such filth be enacted in the marriage bed.

It was as if no one had told Stiles that these things were not acceptable so he just rolled with the punches and expected these things instead. The pillowbooks from which he had received his sexual education might have been to blame. Those books had introduced Derek to wants he had not known it was possible to want and some that made his blood run cold in his veins. He was confused about whether he wanted to spank Stiles but he knew for sure that he did not want to use a switch upon him - Stiles blushed so prettily the idea of controlling that blush certainly appealed to him.

And so Stiles found himself kneeling on the rug in front of the fire with his hands on his husband's thighs to steady him for he was blindfolded, and his mouth open with his husband's cock resting upon his lower lip like a promise. Every time he stretched out the tip of his tongue that he could taste it or curl his tongue around it, Derek pulled back and tapped him on the nose with an "uh-uh" noise."

Stiles' lips were slick and glossy with precome and without his expressive eyes to convey what he was feeling he was making the most delicious noises and Derek felt that he was losing his mind as Stiles scratched at his thighs with his manicured nails.

Derek could never have had this with Paige. She had no eagerness towards sex, she had seemed resentful of the act and Derek had not known that omega could even feel desire until he married the satyr currently kneeling at his feet. Derek pushed his cock forward, against the velvety warmth of the side of Stiles' cheek, Stiles cleverly making a cushion of his tongue over his lower teeth that he could not catch them, and then when Derek pulled back he gave a wicked and lusty suck so that when Derek left the warmth of his mouth it was with a loud pop. Derek couldn't help but laugh. It was the same move that Stiles would do with Thomas who was fascinated and would try to stick his own fingers into Stiles' mouth to recreate the sound.

He had probably done it so that the next time he played that game with Thomas it would result in Derek hardening in his pants.

He was impish enough it was probably deliberate.

Yet how could Derek hold him accountable when he had his cock in Stiles' mouth and Stiles seemed too eager to let him just hold it there, pressed in as far as Stiles could take it, with him taking loud breaths through his nose and slowly pressing and releasing his tongue against the underside.

If it was the price Derek had to pay for such things then Derek was content to pay it, several times over.

Distracted as he was, by both the overwhelming sensation of his cock surrounded by warm wet and willing heat he did not notice how one of Stiles' hands had left his thigh and had reached up, he had had both hands curled around those thighs to give him purchase but now he stretched out those long fingers and began to rub the pucker of Derek's ass. He had done this before and Derek admitted he found it pleasurable and began to rock his cock in and out of the spread lips around
him. He was grunting and close to completion when Stiles took the initiative and pushed his finger, his middle finger, through the pucker of Derek's ass and inside him and Derek might have reacted in surprise if he had not come so hard he thought he might see stars and used both hands to clutchof Stiles' head to stop himself falling which had the unfortunate consequence of pushing his cock further into Stiles' throat than he was comfortable with so Derek had to lurch back to allow Stiles to breathe, which he did coughing and retching a little and pulling off the blindfold.

Both of them immediately started to apologise and then when Derek realised Stiles was fine and still apologising he pulled him up for a kiss. "I didn't mean to try and choke you," he said against Stiles' mouth, "I'm sorry for that."

"I should have asked before doing that," Stiles answered, "did you like it?" There was another question imbedded in that - Stiles was asking if he could do it again.

That question was what led to Derek on his side in the bed with his legs spread and both on the coverlet before him as Stiles worked him open with a small glass St George, one of the smallest he had, and Derek was tense at first but Stiles worked so slowly and with such praise it was no time before he was rocking back against his mari's hands and demanding more, with a voice as coarse as Stiles' own and Stiles felt in control. There was something about having an Alpha in his bed grinding against the linen sheets with pleasure whilst he tried to force more of the glass St George inside himself.

Stiles had an impish thought, one he should not ask certainly whilst Derek was fuck-drunk but the idea was there and he himself was too aroused by the entire situation to think as clearly as he might otherwise. Yet if he had asked Derek when he was not so close to ejaculation as he currently was, when he was not writhing and moaning and begging, he would almost certainly say no, but like this, like this - he might say yes.

Stiles could later say that he was driven on by a devil, that some wickedness came in through the open window, he was overwhelmed and as such could not be held accountable, especially if Derek said yes.

Leaning in to whisper in his ear Stiles asked him, "Alpha, I have no larger St George prepared," he slowed the movement of his hand to almost a crawl, so that Derek would be aware of the fullness within him but without the friction that he would need for completion, "the only thing I have right now is my cock, would you like that, Alpha," he was so careful in his words, a breath in Derek's ear, the reassurance of his virility by using the word Alpha which he knew that Derek liked. Perhaps Derek was right and he was an imp, a wicked incubus given flesh, but if Derek agreed there would be no sin. They were married, what happened in their bed was considered sacred by the church, did it matter if the omega was the one penetrating the alpha? "I could give you my cock, alpha? Do you want it? I could push it inside you, it is just a little larger than this St George but it's not cold, Alpha, do you want it?"

And Derek said yes.
Chapter 29

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Notes

sorry it took so long so I put this as one long chapter instead of two although I could have broken it.
Yes, Derek is a dick in this chapter, and understanding why he was a dick doesn't mean he wasn't a dick and doesn't need to apologise. He totally needs to apologise, don't think he's going to get away with it.

July rolled into August with a slow, creeping and syrupy heat where even the insects felt sluggish. Derek quit London entire complaining of the stink of the city and Peter and Cora went to Brighton for some social occasion. The lack of adult guests meant that Stiles and Derek were more openly affectionate and shared conversations but there was a distance between them. It was not just physical, but it felt as real to Stiles as the bolster pillow Stiles liked to sleep curled around.

Stiles spent most of his days either tending to the tasks that Halwyn considered necessary or playing with the children whilst Derek maintained his correspondence and rode. Peter had told Stiles about a hunting lodge on the edges of the property where Derek had always run when he was upset and informed him that if Derek did not return in a timely manner from his exercise that that was where he would be. Stiles just put Thomas into the carriage that Cora had had made for him and walked the gardens.

It started to seem more and more to Stiles that the only place that Derek was truly himself, and not the Duke or the expectation of who the Duke was supposed to be, was in their bedplay. Outside of it, Derek felt like a stranger.

Stiles had found himself sitting on the stairs, sipping port and lemon, and talking to the portrait of Paige when he thought no one was listening although, with their staff, someone certainly was.

Had Derek been so distant with her? He had loved her and he didn't love Stiles. He liked him, and he desired him, but Stiles knew that there was no love between them. There was a kindness and practicality but there was no love.

Had she married him because of the difference in rank? Because she could not say no? Had she loved him back because he was a good man and he deserved to be loved? Stiles did not know him well enough and Derek was so wounded he closed himself off and how could Stiles love a man he did not know but then Derek would do something and Stiles' heart would ache in a new way because Derek deserved love and he hoped Paige had given him it because Derek would not let Stiles love him as he deserved to be loved.

Stiles was terrified he would be left behind by someone else, that if he offered his heart and his affection, which he knew to be his entire being, would be scorned again and Derek was terrified that he might be responsible for the death of another loved one. Lydia might shake her head and call them stupid men but fear was not so easily overcome. Their fear kept them apart and there was nothing Stiles could do about it. If he allowed himself to love Derek it would just tear them further apart, damaging them both further in the process.
So instead there was sex.

There were other things to be joyful about, Stiles found, he had a husband who was distant but he had two children who adored him and a brother who would burn down the world for him if he was allowed near the fire. He had his sisters who had proven what real friends were, and he had his father, as much as he ever had.

It was hard to be morose and introspective, he found, when Thomas was waving a new toy from his uncle Peter which had several small bells on it and an ivory ring for him to chew on, and was his favourite thing, a cat which happened to be wearing a skeleton suit like his own and served as bludgeon, companion and relief all in one.

He was sat in his high chair, a delightful transforming contraption supplied by Cora which had a small safety bar and allowed him to reach the table on his own, waving the toy back and forth shouting Onkadi when Derek entered the parlour. Evie and Alek were lying on the floor playing with a paper theatre, supplied like most frivolous toys were by Peter, with Berry lying between them and the couch keeping a watchful eye on everything. Maudlin had a nursing chair by the window where she could monitor their behaviour as she worked on their mending. The entire scene was rather idyllic as Stiles sat at the table working through his correspondence.

Lydia had written him a letter assuring him that she would be in London for the demi-season to make sure that he was not alone for his social debut but that she expected at least one gown to make sure that if he had made a fool of himself it would be considered charming.

Felicity had just asked for ribbons and an introduction to a certain modiste.

They both knew that they would be spoiled regardless of their help unless they were as cruel and spoiled as they wished others to believe them to be, perhaps then he might not have opened his allowance to them.

Thomas was so delighted to see his uncle that Stiles grinned to see him waving his little silver kitten so that the bells rang discordantly and shouting Onkadi, if Oncle Peter was Onkapi because Thomas could not quite manage Oncle, then Oncle Derek was Onkadi. His entire face lit up and he squirmed and wriggled and swung his kitten and yelled.

Something complicated crossed Derek's features, something that if Stiles had not spent as long as he had watched his husband he might have missed before Derek descended into what was rage. "Will you be quiet." He shouted at the baby.

The next sequence of events happened so fast that Stiles would later have to think over them for them to truly make sense. Thomas wailed and Stiles turned to calm him, as Evie got up from the mat and, wearing her new shoes which she had spent all morning complaining about, kicked her uncle hard in the shins saying something about shouting at her brother, but Stiles couldn't make out what she was saying because he was shouting at Derek about how Thomas was only a baby and that baby was screaming in his ear. With all the kerfuffle Alek curled in on himself and Berry got up as Maudlin was sending Evie to the bottom stair until the big hand was on six barked at his owner in a very threatening way.

This was enough for Derek to turn on his heel complaining that he knew where he was not wanting and leaving. Stiles let him go and he was followed by Evie, and Berry, who had to go sit on the bottom stair, Evie was crying, Alek, who it turned out didn't like it when adults shouted at each other, was crying, Thomas was wailing and Maudlin couldn't quite get out of her chair quick enough to calm everything down.
So when Cora came into what was chaos she looked to turn around and try again later. "What happened here?" she asked, offering to take Thomas who was snuffling and Alek told her scrubbing at his face in Maudlin's skirts and Cora managed to calm them down only with the application of sugar pigs that she kept in her reticule. Stiles was left, without a candy, with no idea what had happened, only that it had.

Derek did not return that day.

By teatime, Thomas had returned to his usual good cheer and was helping his rattle and his piece of sheepskin to eat stoned cherries which stained everything he touched dark red and was happily offering them to Peter who pretended to eat them, hand and all, just to make Thomas laugh. "Cora told me there was some sort of brouhaha here this morning."

Stiles with a sigh told him about how Derek had shouted at the baby and everyone shouted at him and Evie kicked him and even Berry had barked at him.

Peter stirred his tea in a slow deliberate motion. "That is not like him," he said finally, "and he has not returned?" he asked, "it is not unlike him to ride when he is angry and it has been several hours now," he tapped his spoon on his teacup again, and then, uncharacteristically for it seemed to be the day for it, he swore. "It is the fourteenth of August," he added.

"And?" Stiles asked for he knew many things but not why the date mattered.

"It is the anniversary, and I forgot," Peter said, "and knowing my nephew he walked in on this idyllic domesticity and for a moment he forgot and then he blamed himself with every mote of his being because that's what he does, he feels guilt and then he uses that guilt to destroy himself even when he is nowhere near the one to blame."

"She died in childbed, it was not his fault," Stiles said.

"Is that what he told you?" Peter asked, "it is probably what he believes. It certainly portions the blame towards him. He probably blames himself for the fire for he was the one to introduce Vidama Argent to his brother," he took a sip of his tea, "I love my nephew dearly but he is an idiot who loathes himself to the point of insanity."

"I had noticed," Stiles answered around his own teacup.

Peter chuckled. "Paige was," he stopped, "a child, I suppose, with an overbearing parent who had visions of fathering a legacy and saw her nothing more than a vessel for his ambitions, and I do believe that if Derek had just despoiled her his desire would have faded, she had no choice in the marriage, she had no real choice in most things, so she took what choice she could."

Stiles didn't understand and he said so.

"She didn't eat," Peter said, "perhaps some bone broth, and it is hard to bring a child to term under good circumstances but she did not care, by then I do not think she could eat," he put down his teacup, "she locked herself in her room and refused entry to everyone until the doctor had Theo pick the lock, she didn't die because she gave birth, Stiles, she died because she had made sure that she had nothing left to be taken from her and the babe was too small, too new, to thrive. Derek is no more responsible for Paige's death than he is for the sun rising, but I am sure that he blames himself for it."

Stiles agreed with him for it sounded true but he could not imagine what might move a person to do that.
"Go to him," Peter told him, "Someone needs to make sure he does not drink his weight in brandy and fall into a hole and die or something equally ridiculous. If he stood in a rabbit hole and broke his ankle he would blame himself for ruining the rabbit's house."

"I do not know where he went," Stiles said, and he thought he said it firmly because he had no intention of going after him, it looked like it might storm and it was on Derek's head if he got himself soaked.

"He has a bolt hole on the west of the property," Peter said, "a little folly he has converted with the idea of using it as a shooting lodge, he's never used it for that. It is where he goes when he is particularly self-loathing to drink and feel sorry for himself."

"I had not thought he needed a new building to do that," Stiles said.

"That's why I like you, Stiles," he said, "you are less willing to put up with Derek's moodiness than I am."

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Derek's folly was an attempt someone had made to create a sort of medieval fairy cottage that had never existed and covered it in ivy like it would not ruin the building within a generation or two, nevertheless, it was very pretty and the storm had caught Stiles halfway between Rosings and the folly which was perhaps an hours ride from the house if not more. So when he tied his horse into the stable he was soaked to the skin, despite the oil cloak he had put on.

He had vacillated about going to the folly. He had had a bath and let Flora oil his hair and he had stood for a while looking at his chemises deciding which he would wear for the evening and which pair of comfortable pants but the gold combinations with the lace inserts had also been laid out and there was something wicked about them. They were like a dirty secret because no one needed to know he was wearing satin against his skin instead of linen, and they would be hard to launder certainly but he had enough wealth he need only wear them once.

Derek did not deserve the gold combinations so we almost put on a linen shift and then decided he would wear the combinations regardless. Over them, he pulled a riding habit of dark green wool with black piping. He didn't bother with jewellery. He did pull on a hat and an oil cloak because it did look like rain nevertheless he was soaked by the time he arrived at the folly.

He did not bother knocking, just opened the door and hung his oil cloak on the hook on the wall before he bothered to look at his husband.

Peter had been right that Derek was drunk, at least one bottle lay empty at his feet and he sprawled in a chair in front of the fire with another hanging from his fingers. Where Stiles most closely resembled a drowned rat Derek had a sort of easy virility about him that should not have turned Stiles' head because he was angry with him, but he knew how good those hands felt upon him. He was a little desirous following his horse ride because it had always gotten his blood up.

It seemed as Stiles peeled off his soaked riding jacket that Derek's blood was up too. "Hmm," he purred from his chair, "my beautiful bride."

Derek was drunk and Stiles was angry and there was so much between them and Stiles understood why Derek had shouted but that did not mean he forgave him for his behaviour but he was sprawled there like the cautionary vision of lustful alphas those good mothers used to scare their babies and Stiles had just had a bath.
There was a bed in the cottage, the furniture was simple, rude things, better suited to a farmhand than a duke but the bed was freshly made, and the room was pleasantly warm, the fire roaring to drive out the damp of a house left to the elements without someone to live in it. The folly felt like Stiles’ combinations, wasteful and expensive but perhaps a necessary flash of luxury found from something else. This was a place where Derek didn't need to be the duke, where he could be himself.

Stiles’ hand was cold in Derek's when he took it, using himself to replace the bottle he had held. He did not know how much Derek had drunk but he knew what came next. If Derek did not stop he would be sick and with no one else about and Derek incapable Stiles would have to clean it. It was not something he wished to do so the alternative was to get him into that clean new bed and hope he would sleep. If he had drunk as much as Stiles suspected he would sleep easily.

"My lovely omega," Derek purred again as he pulled Stiles down to his lap, "you're all wet," he said and Stiles hoped he was talking about the fact that he had been soaked by the rain. Derek cupped his free hand around Stiles' neck and pulled him down for a kiss, sloppy and stinking of brandy Derek kissed him like he was eager to see him- like he wanted to kiss him, that it was not desire but hope. In that kiss there was something other than two bodies finding pleasure in each other, there was something like affection and Stiles hungered for it and in doing so was overwhelmed a little. Stiles had always been the one to be left behind and in that kiss it felt that, drunk or not, Derek wanted to keep him.

Stiles told himself that was why he kissed back - because just once he wanted to know how it felt to be kept.

Derek was drunk and it made him looser than he might otherwise have been but a kiss couldn't hurt. There was wickedness in it, being clothed but soaked and sat on Derek's knee when all Derek wore was pants and shirt, even his feet were bare, as his husband kissed him with lips and tongue and hands trying to pull at his shirt to pull it free and find skin underneath. Instead, he found satin.

"Is this a gift for me?" Derek asked against his mouth.

"Later," Stiles said, they were close enough that they were sharing breath, hot and heady with the fire cracking and popping in the grate and the rain lashing down on the thatch above them. There was a privacy and wickedness to being here, away from everyone, where it did not matter who they were or what they did; Where even them being married was irrelevant because this was about wanting.

Part of Stiles broke at the idea that the only time Derek truly wanted him was with a bellyful of brandy but he still wanted it so desperately he would take it in any way that he could. "I should get you into bed,"

Derek hummed in approval, his hands on Stiles' ass through the wet wool, lifting and squeezing the cheeks, pulling them up and apart and letting them bounce back as if he could feel the skin underneath and the way it made Stiles' hole flex and yearn for his fingers.

"Sleep first," Stiles said as Derek's mouth found his neck, sucking dark marks on the skin as if his neck wasn't already ringed with such marks, "we get into bed and we sleep and then," he bit down on the lobe of Derek's ear, "then I am yours to do with as you will."

He could feel Derek's erection, hot and insistent against his thigh, it would be the work of a moment to untie his flies, to reach into the fall of his pants and bring it out, he could bring Derek to completion easily with his hand, using them both to squeeze the knot the way that Derek liked. He would be easier to coerce into bed because Derek liked to sleep after he knotted like it took a lot
out of him. Once he slept he wouldn't be as drunk and Stiles would be more sure of his ability to consent to sex.

Derek would never force him, but he could be persuasive. And he was being persuasive now, but Stiles could be adult and he could bundle Derek into bed to sleep off the brandy. 'I have a surprise for you,' Stiles purred into Derek's ear, his hands were around Derek's head, holding it against his throat where his mouth felt so wicked and divine.

"I like surprises," Derek splayed out his hand on the satin on Stiles' back, sure that the surprise would be something to do with the fabric. He was drunk but he was not stupid.

"But you have to get into bed," Stiles said, "get into bed, alpha, and I'll give you your surprise." He had not put on the satin combinations with the intent of showing them to Derek but if it got him into the bed then it would be worth it.

Derek damn near fell over himself to get out of the chair, nearly sending Stiles sprawling across the floor, take off his pants, leaving them in a puddle on the floor and climb into the bed where he remembered to take his shirt off. He did not pull the cover over himself and instead draped along the white sheet like a carving by Michaelangelo, looking every inch a muscled and virile seduction and he was Stiles'. Stiles' mouth went dry looking at him but Derek was also drunk. He was stroking his cock and looking at Stiles with such desire but he was drunk and Stiles was trying so hard to be good. He had clearly committed some terrible sin and now was being punished because more than anything he wanted to go to his alpha, to let his alpha do as he will, but Derek was drunk and Derek had been angry and that would be the worst of betrayals.

He felt desired and loved and wanted and powerful. He had to sit to take off his boots, pulling his stockings with them so he was barefoot and bare below the knee before he opened the fall of his pants and let them fall to the floor, puddling like Derek's had done. Then he tugged his shirt up over his head so he stood in front of the bed, lined by firelight, in the gold satin and lace and he felt surprisingly self-conscious.

Derek looked at him like Derek were a starving man and Stiles were supper - and Derek very much wanted to lick the plate.

"for me," he purred reaching his arm up above his head to show the dark hair of his armpit and the delightful ridges of his ribs, a sight that he knew Stiles appreciated even if he was too far to see how wet Stiles was, and not because of the rain, "how delightful, it shimmers with your skin."

Stiles crawled into the bed, rolling Derek unto his back as he straddled him, "all for you." He said leaning down to kiss his husband as Derek's fingers found their way between the modesty panels of his combinations, "once you've slept."

Derek, smug as a cat that got the canary, licked his lips and pushed his blunt fingers against where Stiles was wet and wanting and said: "I can sleep after."

Stiles laughed, Derek was usually so surly and angry and scared that seeing him like this was delightful but it was also like trying to wrangle a toddler into bed, sleep was what was best and sleep was what the body wanted but sleep wasn't what Derek wanted. "I want to knot you." He said it so clearly that Stiles blinked in surprise.

"No you don't," Stiles said, "you're drunk and when you're sober we can have this conversation again."

"I think about knotting you all the time," Derek continued, "at my desk, I fantasise about you,
naked, draped over my paperwork and stuffed full of my knot, lying there in float your body mine
to play with, naked but for firelight and I can't focus on my ledgers." Stiles licked his lips because
he couldn't not. "I think about knotting you when I'm riding, I think I could bend him over that
branch, or push his back against that wall with his legs around my waist. I think about knotting you
when I'm in my bath, so you can rest your head against my shoulder and I can run my hands down
your back as you float. I think about," Stiles silenced him with a kiss because he couldn't hear it
any more. His self-assuredness was a thin veneer and if Derek pressed him it would snap and he
would unravel and Derek was drunk and someone needed to be sensible.

Derek didn't want to knot him, but as Derek kissed him, eagerly, joyfully, hungrily, he pushed his
fingers, blunt and thick and long up inside Stiles and thinking became so difficult Stiles wasn't sure
he could do it. When Derek twisted his hand Stiles' back arched despite himself and he cried out
and he couldn't not. "Let me," Derek was crooning to him, one hand pressing inside Stiles and the
other skimming down his thigh, "let me,"

"No," Stiles managed to say, "when we've talked."

"We are talking," Derek grinned up at him, rapacious and wicked and Stiles wanted to kiss that
smile from his lips.

"You're drunk, we can," another deep groan escaped him.

"Just the tip," Derek breathed it into his ear, "just the tip and I'll pull out, but love, if I don't get
inside you, I'll die." It was the word that undid Stiles' resolve, love, and Derek sounded like he
meant it, and it would not be so dangerous, just the tip after all, and Derek was as good as his word,
he wouldn't knot him.

"Just the tip," Stiles agreed because it sounded so good he might expire from pleasure if he took
more.

Had Stiles been more aware of the wiles of alphas, as opposed to how to manipulate their pleasure
he might have seen the slippery slope, how with every small roll of his hips Derek pressed the head
of his cock in further, until Stiles' ass was against his balls with every thrust and smacking
obscenely, and it felt so good that he had to rest his weight on his hands on Derek's shoulders, with
the straps of his combinations around his wrists so the lace was gathered around his waist and he
might lose his damn mind at how good it felt to be filled like this, filled properly with his
husband's cock and not just his fingers or a Saint George. It could reach further, deeper, it was
broader and blunter and hot and Stiles wanted so much more. He wanted it never to end. He
wanted the burn of the slapping skin on his thighs, the way he felt stretched out and his stomach
almost hurt from it. His cock was rubbing against the satin and was poking from the modesty panel
and the tip of it was leaving a sticky trail in the hair on Derek's lower belly.

Derek was muttering, his knees bent to give him purchase to thrust up, and his words were slurring
proclamations of Stiles' beauty, how good he felt, how Derek needed him, most of which were
influenced by the way that flesh met flesh.

"Derek," Stiles cried out, feeling the way that Derek was swelling, he was beginning to knot,
"Derek," he tried to pull up and off but Derek's hands on his waist held him firm and smacked his
hips up and started to grind and it was like Stiles was a puppet and his strings had been cut because
as the knot swelled he fell into float and face first unto Derek's chest even as Derek continued
muttering promises and proclamations and rolled them onto their sides, stroking Stiles' back and
then smacking his lips a few times before falling asleep.
Chapter 30

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Stiles woke pinned in place by his husband and felt self-satisfied in the way he often did when he woke up in his husband's bed. As he rolled his shoulders and stretched out his legs, coming more and more awake with each movement he became aware of a few aches, some in places he could not quite remember causing, and a coolness between his ass cheeks and a sort of cavernous emptiness. He felt sloppy and it wasn't comfortable and it took a few moments for him to realise what it was.

He managed to get out from under Derek's arm, for Derek often pinned him in his sleep, pulling Stiles' back against his chest, and used the jug of water to wash himself, taking especial care of his genitals, the cloth coming away almost covered in cold semen. Alphas came a lot when they knotted and most of it was doing its best to slither out of his ass.

He had no idea what was going to happen next but when he had gotten himself as clean as he could he dressed, pulled on his boots and left the cottage. Instead of using his horse to return to Rosings he went to the village and banged on the door of the midwife. She was not pleased to be woken and every utterance of your grace was said with a hint of scorn. Stiles didn't blame her. His watch told him it was barely six of the clock for all that it was bright daylight.

When he told her what had happened she dared to laugh but she did help him, using a device to clean him inside, forcing him into an ice-cold salt bath and giving him three preparations of tea to drink through the day with the assurance she would send his bill, which would be excessive, through to Rosings to be paid, and that she had done all that she could and it was in god's hands now.

He still managed to return to Rosings before Derek. He had another bath because the salt had made his skin feel dry and somewhat itchy, allowing Flora to use the expensive oils she preferred for his skin and hair and he felt much more like himself for it. He pulled on the more comfortable options that were laid out and let himself be coddled and ordered a large plate of kedgeree for breakfast which he normally could not stomach first thing, but between the unpleasantness at the midwife, the unpalatable tea and the ride he had built up an appetite and the strongly flavoured dish would help rid his mouth of the bad taste he was sure was entirely in his head.

It was past lunch when Derek returned, barrelling into the house like a storm, demanding this and that and he stopped in his tracks when he saw Stiles with Thomas in his lap and Stiles thought he might be confronted. He wanted desperately to confess to someone, to tell someone, so someone, anyone might understand but there was no one to tell. Derek looked at Thomas who was delighted to see his uncle, all unpleasantness forgotten because Thomas was such an easy-going and happy baby, and bowed his head, "I shouted at you yesterday," he said to the child, ignoring the omega who held him on his lap, "and I apologise I was wrong. It's important that we apologise when we're wrong, we can't expect you to learn to say sorry if we don't. Tell me what I can do to make reparations and it will be yours."

Stiles' heart broke a little because Derek had it in him to be a good father.

Thomas grinned and held his arms out, still holding his kitten rattle and his bedraggled piece of sheepskin to be lifted. His beaming smile showed all four of his teeth and the piece of linen around his neck to catch the drool. Derek looked like he would much rather wrestle lions but he did lift the baby and rested him on his hip. Thomas took the opportunity to point out and introduce his uncle to all of his toys, Stiles, Berry, Maudlin, his sister and Alek who were playing on the floor, and point
out the fire which he called Bad.

Derek nodded patiently but every part of him looked uncomfortable and pained. Stiles wanted to immortalise this image because Derek was going to send him away. "Stiles, I also owe you an apology," he said, "I was rude to you and I didn't explain why and that was unfair to you. You are my Duchenne and as such you should be treated better than I have treated you."

Then he turned back to the baby on his hip. "Thomas," he said with a certain amount of reverence. "Would you like to go see the horses with me?"

This caught Evie's attention, "Oncle Derek," she said, twisting around to face him. "Oncle Peter bought us donkeys so we could ride, he bought six of them."

"Rescued a herd," Stiles told him, "someone in Brighton was offering rides on them along the beach and your uncle was drunk enough to have a conscience that day." Derek nodded, "so he decided that these two weren't spoiled enough and clearly needed donkeys to learn to ride on."

"Can Alek and I come too? we can go riding." Derek looked terrified and knew that if he said to ask Maudlin she would tell them that it was his decision. Their idea of riding was being allowed to sit on the saddle with an adult behind them as a groom led them around the back courtyard making sure they were neither leading their mount or allowed to fall. There was no way he could say no and he knew it.

When he returned passing a sleepy Thomas off to a waiting Dickon for a bath and a nap Derek made no comment of Stiles visiting him in the cottage. He did not mention it at tea, which he shared with the children for once, and he did not mention it at supper. When Stiles stated that he did not want Derek to join him, Derek did not mention it but nor did he complain, just kissed Stiles on the forehead and wished him feeling better in the morning.

Lying in the dark in his expensive bed Stiles was forced to admit a terrible truth. Derek remembered shouting at the children but he didn't remember Stiles coming to him in the cottage. Stiles knew he should tell him, how he was persuaded and that he was weak but he had been to the midwife and he had done everything she asked from him, even lay there as she used her terrible device to wash him inside with saltwater.

He was overwhelmed and didn't think he'd find any rest with the way his mind was turning over and over but he slept deeply.

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Stiles fretted over what had happened in the cottage for a few days, waiting for Derek to say something, deciding if he should say something before Derek announced with the demi-season due to start and his work in parliament weighing on him he wanted to return to London and to have Stiles come out to society as his Duchenne.

The resulting furore of packing, of logistics, making sure the coaches were ready, making sure the wagons for luggage were ready, that the horses for drawing them were ready, then there were the servants who would accompany them, the wailing of Evie who wanted to go too even though Alek told her London was boring and she couldn't go riding there and she didn't want to go, then Thomas wailing because Evie was wailing and in all that confusion Stiles forgot.

He just gave in to the noise and the tantrums and the packing and the unable to find anything and Halwyn trying to sneak more members of staff into his household when he absolutely didn't need them that a simple thing like checking for his menses was overlooked. He had too many other
things to do. So he did them instead.

He was in London before it occurred to him that he was a Duchenne and he would be expected to manage Derek's house which was Hobart House, although calling it a house was much like calling the sea a puddle because although both were made of water there was a vast difference of scale. The house with it's central London gardens was nearly 70 acres and had an entire wing given over to the servants, and one for the duke. The Duchenne's bedroom adjoined the duke's and was large enough that it could have housed ten of his huge bed, with a pretty sitting area, a fire he could roast a cow in, and a private bathing room with indoor plumbing and a flush toilet. He had his private sitting room, a public sitting room, and an office. These did not interfere with Derek's private sitting room and office. The centre of the house was an octagonal room with four doorways leading into a ballroom, the dining room, the library and the main steps. It had four floors that Stiles knew of and worst of all it had fifteen footmen, twenty-five maids, three butlers and a housekeeper who expected him to manage them.

Had Derek not put his hand on his shoulder and reassured him that this was home he would have run back to Rosings as fast as his feet would carry him. Rosings was intimate and as unaristocratic as it was possible to be, like La Petit Trianon for Queen Marie-Antoinette of France, a place to be away from people doing their best to anticipate your needs so you couldn't even drop a fork without three people trying to pick it up. Hobart did not offer the same anonymity.

Stiles suddenly felt underdressed.

Derek didn't say anything he just walked up the stairs to the main doors as if it wasn't worth mentioning. Derek had grown up in houses like this, his mother was a Duchess so perhaps to Derek it wasn't worth mentioning but not even Natalie could complain about the house not looking ducal enough.

As the butler, Finch, walked him around the house she didn't say anything to Halwyn who followed Stiles around taking notes for him. He would eventually be asked about the Hales on the walls or the Romans on plinths that decorated the Octagon.

The house Stiles had grown up in Hampstead was about an hour from the centre of London and had a sitting room, a dining room, an office and a kitchen on the ground floor, three bedrooms on the second floor and four small rooms for the staff, one maid, one cook and a butler, in the attic. The gardens could be crossed in one hundred steps and there were fields and farms outside. He had always considered it a large country house for a career soldier. When his mother had died he had stayed with the Mc Calls in their house which was a little bigger but certainly within the fiscal realm of a minor lord like Lord Rafael who served in the admiralty, it was on the river but although smaller than Rosings it was not overwhelming, perhaps the size of Fell Leaf.

Hobart house was overwhelming.

It was possible that they could put the entire floorplan of the Hampstead Heath house in his bedroom with room to walk around the outside.

Finch explained that they had spent the summer redecorating the Duchenne's rooms for him but if he did not care for anything he was to say and they would fix it. The walls of his bedroom were covered in dark green silk and polished cherry wood panelling. The rugs were thick enough that if they had gotten up and baaed at Stiles he would not have been surprised. There were four couches around five small tables, in the bedroom, which were clearly for the multiple candelabra that were around the room, despite the lamps that sat beside them. Each table was covered in white linen and the couches were in the Elizabethan style with rug upholstery but were deep enough to curl up into.
Every care had been taken for his comfort but it was just as overwhelming as everything else.

Then Flora, delighted with the new bathroom fixtures, ran him a hot bath and poured him a large glass of wine and he agreed. Some things just needed a hot bath and a large glass of wine in a gorgeous tub with the afternoon sunlight tinting the room with its beautiful blue Portuguese tiles a lovely gold and a fire in the grate. It might have been more extravagant than he had thought possible, but it was a really comfortable bath, and being able to moderate the temperature by just opening a spigot was delightful.
Chapter 31

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Notes

London at the turn of the Nineteenth century was not a nice place but it was very rich and very determined to create fun for the rich [that they might spend money and gamble etc] and Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens are a famous example, and yes, they did have animals there.
I want to repeat that this is fiction and no animals were hurt or hunted for fur in the making of this fic = if someone at the time didn't wear fur it's because they couldn't stand the feel of it - not because of animal rights.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The size of Hobart House meant that Stiles wouldn't actually see his husband unless he sought him out during the day. Servants would almost melt into the background as he passed them by, his new shoes, that he was trying to break in before wearing them for an entire ball, clacking on the marble tiles in their black and white geometric pattern. He was kept busy until supper time and then if Derek did not want to play cards or share conversation he was left with nothing to do but go to bed, where Derek mostly joined him.

He insisted that Derek join him when he went shopping for fabric and attending the modistes that Lydia had insisted he visit, for Derek needed at least one new greatcoat for the one he had was torn on the lining and he would put things into his pocket and pull them out of the hem - so he needed a new coat.

It was a balmy September day and the park was busy but it was the wrong time of day for people attending the park in order to be seen so it was mostly nurses with children and people using it to cut across town. Stiles turned to Derek and with a smile said "do not be obvious."

Derek turned to him at the same time Stiles, without leaning forward moved his hand over and cupped Derek's cock in his pants.

"Stiles!" Derek hissed.

"Do you want me to stop?" Stiles asked whilst looking out of the window of the carriage. Derek did not answer so Stiles continued to move his hand, rubbing Derek's swelling cock with the heel of his hand through the doeskin of Derek's breeches. "Just think," he whispered, "If we saw someone we know and they came up to the window, they'd see."

Stiles was not to know that this would be the moment where Derek discovered he liked the idea of being caught.

Derek's cock jumped against Stiles' hand, and Stiles turned a little so he could see what he was doing and undid the fall of Derek's pants pulling his cock free so it was hot and heavy in his hand.
In the time since his marriage, Stiles had come to know the heft of Derek's cock in his hand and how Derek liked to be touched. He knew to twist his hand but it was his non-dominant hand and he was wearing gloves as he pulled on it, the foreskin slipping up and down the length whilst Derek
tried to school his face not to reveal that he was being jerked off in a carriage in the middle of Regent's Park in the middle of the day.

Two days later Derek got his revenge. Omega pantalons were designed to expand with three lacing panels, one at the point of each hip to allow for pregnancy and one at the back to allow for the weight gained in pregnancy to spread to the ass.

Stiles was in a box at the opera, sharing a bench with his husband, and they were alone listening to the violinist that Stiles was such a fan of, Paganini, when Derek untied the lacing at the back of Stiles' pantalons and used the extra room to slide his hand down the back, tug his shirt out of the way and push his fingers against the opening of Stiles' ass. When Stiles jerked, for Derek's fingers were cold, Derek took the opportunity to push two fingers up inside him and started to thrust as much as he was able whilst Stiles buried his face into the curve of Derek's neck to hide as much as he was able.

He sucked Derek off in the carriage in the way home.

This continued.

They found dark corners to get each other off with linen kerchiefs to clean up the mess. Derek fucked between Stiles' thighs in a receiving room in hired assembly rooms whilst London society milled outside. Stiles took both of their cocks in his hand in a hotel linen closet. Derek ate Stiles out behind a bush with Stiles hands against a tree. Stiles fucked his cock into Derek's ass in the bath with water slopping over the side.

They couldn't keep their hands off each other and so Stiles was disappointed when Derek had to cry off on an engagement although he was tired and he could join Derek in bed later although it would be several hours past midnight when he got back in. They could have sex in the morning. As the autumn slipped into winter he got more and more hunger but Derek seemed content to try and keep him satisfied.

His appetite came and went but he ascribed it to the change in location and the pressures of being a Duchenne in his letters to his sisters who were in Brighton spreading rumours - each more ridiculous than the last - about Stiles' scandalously quick marriage so that the truth was buried in the nonsense.

It was odd how quickly time passed in a whirl of callers, shopping and balls where Stiles was not quite welcomed but too highly ranked to be sent away, and he made sure to be in to callers on the same day that Derek heard petitioners so that the house looked far more busy than it was and reminded them that his husband was a good person even if he, himself, was not. He was yet to decide on a charity to patronise and it was starting to make him uncomfortable. He listened to every conversation about politics they thought him, as an omega, too dumb to understand and had conversations with Derek about politics, about the ways that politics interacted and then went to balls where he pretended to be Lydia and steered the conversation so that he could learn more - knowing he could only be an observer because no one would take him seriously because he was an omega.

Six weeks after he had left Rosings and the day before Lydia and Felicity were due to return to London - Natalie had said that they were not to stay in Hobart House but instead in Hampstead - Derek suggested that the two of them visit Vauxhall Gardens on what was the last night of the season.

Stiles was surprised and made sure to tell Merryweather that he needed to dress for an evening outside in October that looked to be clear if a little windy. She chose for him a black-green wool
redingote and matching pants, which were a pleasant change from the satin he was usually expected to wear which were uncomfortable no matter how well they were fitted, and riding boots and were a variation of the uniform his own father wore in the Peninsula. It was not late enough in the demi-season to wear anything other than a half cape, even if the day had been chilly, but the half cape was quilted silk and trimmed in fox fur. He had a small hat fitted with quail feathers pinned into his hair.

Derek had chosen to wear his new wool redingote in a dove grey that he paired with a new beaver hat and suede gloves. Derek often didn't look like a duke as much as a labourer poured into much finer clothes than were expected but his valet had made him look very much the part with his burgundy superfine and tan doeskin pants. When he offered Stiles his arm as they left the ferry Stiles took it.

Vauxhall Gardens were the place where London took its pleasures. It had been forbidden to Stiles as a blanc and so he wasn't sure what to expect. He had heard stories, certainly, of young omega dragged into bushes in darkened corners and how whores wandered around freely touting their wares. He had also heard that there was a balloon with a basket one could step inside and be lifted to the heavens; that there was a walk amongst the gardens lit by a hundred glass lanterns; that there were acrobats and performing animals and palanquins where one could eat and hold court. He had heard that there were fountains lit by huge braziers and paths that ladies would promenade to show their gowns. People tended not to wear their real jewellery there for there were pickpockets and other thieves and it was a loss of social currency to admit that you had been robbed - or that the lightskirt you had paid helped themselves to your wallet.

There was blaring music from groups of musicians placed at various intervals around the garden playing joyous reels where drunks danced. Pot-bellied stoves were giving out heat where hawkers sold bags of roasted chestnuts for people to eat as they wandered past. Another sold bags of hot almonds dusted with sugar and cinnamon. Amused at Stiles' wonder Derek purchased him a bag, Stiles took off his gloves, passing them to Derek that they might go in his pockets and not get lost for they were scented with vanilla oil and he was very fond of them.

He was chatting happily with Derek about a cage of small monkeys that were wearing little waistcoats and shrieking at passersby for the candies that they were eating as the animal's owner asked if he would like to handle one of the monkeys when Scott McCall came up to them. "Stiles," he said making Stiles turn to face him.

Derek politely told the man that they were not interested as he passed him a guinea and faced Scott having seen the expression on Stiles' face, "your grace," he said firmly. "You address him as your grace."

Scott was either unaware of, or chose to ignore, the two alphas that followed them at a discreet distance.

"Stiles," he continued. "I wrote to you and you didn't respond and Mother said,"

"Your grace," Derek repeated more firmly this time. "You will address him only by invitation as YOUR GRACE."

"Husband," Stiles had become adept at stepping into his impersonation of Lydia since his marriage and he did so now, "this is Mr McCall, the son of Lord Raphael McCall and his lady, Melissa," it was almost but not quite a proper introduction, "he was my childhood friend." He flicked his eyes at the word was in a way that Derek recognised as an inflection.

"Stiles, I don't know why you're being like this," Scott continued putting his hand on Stiles' arm
which proved to be a mistake as the two alphas who had been following at a discrete distance stepped forward and both Halwyn and Boyd were imposing figures and with their shoulders rolled forward looked more suggestive of violence than even Derek who had leaned back on his left foot as if waiting for the cue to spring forward and knock Scott on his ass.

Stiles put his hand on Derek's chest to tell him he had this. "You ruined me," Stiles said in a low voice, careful of onlookers in the packed gardens on their last night of the year, and the man who managed the monkeys who was just behind them, there would be gossip of this all over London tomorrow, "and you expect me to just accept that and go back to what we were."

"You're making it a huge thing and it's not," Scott protested, "you did well out of it, and I had to, he was going to marry Allison."

Derek might have lacked most of the information of what happened, Stiles had been coy about what happened the night he had crept into Derek's room and why he had chosen that room by mistake. Derek had thought that perhaps Allison had had a hand in it but now he saw that he had been incorrect. "No I wasn't," Derek said in an even tone. "I had entered into conversation with her parents in regards to marriage but when I asked her she said no." Stiles made a noise, not unlike a whimper. "And how is that working out for you Mr McCall, are you and the Vidama now courting?"

"Her parents took her to Virginia to counter the scandal," Scott answered, he looked so young and earnest that Stiles wondered how much he had overlooked because Scott was his friend and how much he had grown since his marriage. Scott's youth was written all over his face with his naivete. Scott had not thought that what he had done was wrong, he genuinely believed that sacrificing Stiles to the demon duke, although that was a misnomer for Derek was nowhere as vicious as a demon even if that was his reputation, to save Allison was a virtuous act. He considered his future with Allison, imagined as it turned out, to be worth more than Stiles' own life. Stiles wondered how he had missed such selfishness, he was aware of the flaws in his sisters but he had never seen Scott's until he had betrayed him.

"Do you have the wealth to attract the Argents?" Derek countered, "they were expecting a bride price of ten thousand pounds, do you have that, perhaps as pin money, of course, Gerard Argent would need a large amount to even introduce you, and with the vidama linked with a duke before you interfered the price has probably gone up, I suspect they are trying to find an American industrialist, a mill owner perhaps with pretentions, did you think she might elope with you?" Derek laughed. "You would have had to slip laudanum into her wine and take her to Gretna against her will, which, considering how you have treated your childhood friend I do not think that you would not. Now if you do not mind, I was enjoying this night with my mari."

"Stiles," Scott continued, seemingly still unaware that he was in the wrong and was acting like a victim.

"No," Stiles said firmly, "you don't get to ignore what you did, you ruined me, I was lucky that the duke was kind, but I could easily have been murdered, what if the duke had refused to offer marriage? which he easily could have? Even Carstairs would not have had me because I was ruined. You have no idea what I went through, none at all, do you know what Parrish told people, and you did that. I almost certainly would have had to go to the continent. I was so lucky and you did not care because a vidama you had never spoken to smiled at you once and you decided that she was to be your wife as if she would have had you. I asked you for your help and instead of having me visit Parrish, to learn that he had spent the night with one of the maids in the servants quarters whilst Carstairs lost his damn mind, I was found by Victoria Argent in the room of my husband and she was determined that I be cast out and that all of England learned my shame.
"I was so lucky and all because you let your knot think for you. I have buttoned my lip and not told anyone who helped me that night, because I thought, for a moment, that perhaps you meant well, that perhaps you had given me the wrong room, but you didn't tell your mother as we had agreed, for her discretion is well known, but you arranged to have me ruined so a marriage that was not going ahead would not happen because Vidama Argent looked in your direction once in passing. I should have told everyone what you did because, Mr McCall," he used the honorific instead of his name to put distance between them, "you are a selfish spoiled brat of an alpha, unworthy of a knot and certainly unworthy of my friendship.

"You RUINED me," he repeated it over, "and you don't even care because that's how much I mean to you, that's how much omega mean to you, we're just pretty vessels for you to fantasise over and own. I should have Halwyn take you from the gardens and give you a beating but I won't, but I will tell my sisters and I will tell my father and I shall make it known that I will cut you in the street when we pass, I will not have you in either Rosings or Hobart House and nor will they have you in Hampstead Heath. I shall block you from receiving vouchers for Almacks and have your name struck from the invitation list of every ball in London."

"Stiles, don't be like that, you know it wasn't..."

Stiles left him talking as he turned and walked away, grateful for the arm that Derek wrapped around him as they walked into the garden. Scott did not hear him say "I need a drink," or how Halwyn was sent ahead to hire them a tent that he might sit, for he might have looked like he was made of fire but his legs were made of aspic and he could barely stand.

Chapter End Notes

For those keeping track Stiles is about two months pregnant here.
Chapter 32

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Notes

For those who don't follow me on Tumblr I apologise for the delay here but February was not good for me
first I pinched a nerve in my back so badly I ended up in the hospital [yay] and I've been on big painkillers and a walker since, I can sit or stand but the inbetween is out and that's because I have a medical pillow = I gave myself a mild case of cauda equina for those who wanna google it
and in the middle of that my dog died, he was 15 so yes, February SUCKED hard
This chapter is me trying to work but yeah, I'm getting there, I was itching to write but couldn't sit to do it
Enjoy

Derek was going over his ledgers and accounting when Theo knocked and entered. Theo was Derek's batman which meant that when Derek made an order Theo made sure he had everything in place for it to happen, by whatever means necessary but Theo rarely came to him with concerns so for Theo to do so was enough to distract Derek from his work. Most people of rank had solicitors and secretaries for such tasks but Derek liked to sit with the numbers, they were quiet, did what they were supposed to and meant people, for the most part, left him alone.

Lately, he had been troubled more than ever. Since their journey to London, he had done his best to be sociable, which was not much because he did despise people, but he had taken Stiles to the opera, twice, and attended three dinners and one rout and was exhausted. Stiles who went calling most afternoons and at least three times a week didn't seem to show any kind of fatigue which Derek put down to the difference in their ages.

Stiles was so young that sometimes Derek got tangled on the threads of the very idea. He found himself stopping in the middle of walking through the house because of the curve of Stiles' neck where it fell into the collar of his chemise and the mouche there. The contrast of his skin against linen left Derek's mouth dry. The weight of him against his chest and his soft slow breaths in float. Derek had never seen Stiles in float, so it must be a dream, but it was a dream that kept returning to him, a dream of gold satin and the poacher's cottage, which Stiles had never been to, so Derek stamped it down. He did not want to become enamoured of his mari, after all, this was a business arrangement between them - a contract and desire was not a part of that.

Yet he could not keep away.

He would find himself reading and imagine the sigh Stiles would make when he was knotted, when all his muscles eased and he would rest on Derek's chest, a golden satin camisetta loose around his waist.

Stiles could not own such a thing. It would be so wasteful, almost impossible to launder, it could not exist, but in his daydreams, it was always there, this froth of whisper-soft gold satin and cream lace, and salve on his lips so they tasted of roses when they were kissed.
He could return to his ledgers, where he did not see the strength of Stiles’ wrist or the curve of his hip or the sleek plain of the outside of his thigh in those waves of gold satin and cream coloured lace.

Theo bowed respectfully, or perhaps one hair short of what was respectful before he placed the Prattler on Derek’s blotter. “Your Grace,” he said quietly, “we might have a problem.”

The Prattler was a scandal rag, designed to spread false gossip - for the most part false - that was scandalous ensuring people read it. Unlike The Times it rarely had actual news and Derek was surprised that he was even subscribed to receive the thing.

“Demon Duke Despoils Darling” the headline read and the article gave very little more information except it suggested that the altercation in Vauxhall Gardens with Mr McCall had come to blows, Mr McCall, it seemed, although not named by the paper, was telling everyone who had a pair of ears, that Derek had compromised Stiles into marriage, that the advantageous match was beneficial to Derek’s political aspirations and that with his new found allegiance to the German Ambassador he was aiming to sway parliament into some new draconian, and that was the word they used, law, possibly the return of slavery in the colonies.

According to the article McCall had tried to prevent the marriage and had received a beating for his trouble, not that he had arranged it and was now angered that the new Duchenne was cutting him in the street so it had to be Derek’s fault and Derek was now trying to become some sort of evil warlord or something.

The Prattler always had been given to hyperbole but this was extreme - even for them.

It continued that because Stiles had been stepping out so often apart from his husband that Derek had compromised him only for the political advantages and was now pimping him out to any alpha who would have him.

Although The Prattler gave Mr McCall as the source of the story it felt very much like it had been written by Gerard Argent.

Derek’s actual response was “but I don’t have any association with the German Ambassador.”

Theo inclined his head, "the new German Ambassador, your grace," he said, "the one that is due to come to London sometime this month; The Count of Gratz." Theo was sure Derek must have read it in the Times for he himself had.

"Not Das Deutsche Dumpling?" The Prince Regent had coined the unfortunate moniker and it had lingered.

"No, the new one, his countess was the playmate of his grace's mother in their childhood. They are his godparents."

Derek sighed, "for a low born omega from Hampstead he has the ability to gather more connections than the crown princess herself." When he had married Stiles several months before his father had been a career soldier with prospects and was now the Earl of Rocester, or would be when he returned to England, and now he was associated with half the luminaries in London - and - the Prattler was saying that Derek had married him for those associations and was using him as a bribe for those who were not related to him.

Derek schooled himself- only one problem at a time.

"Has his Grace seen this?" he asked Theo who admitted that he didn't know but that the Misses
Martin almost certainly would have and knowing that the language was couched in words like allegedly and "we have heard" that there would be no legal recourse. "Arrange a meeting with Lord and Lady McCall, such behaviour from their son does not well reflect upon them," he held up a hand, "and I know that it is Argent behind this nonsense but I can't exactly offer his parents to buy him a commission in India when the alternative is Halwyn taking care of it for his Grace."

Derek was being merciful for the Misses Martin would destroy him in society, and Halwyn would give him the sort of beating that destroyed a man physically. It was one of the reasons that Derek employed Halwyn in the role of Camerera Mayor for his Duchenne. No one crossed Halwyn twice - if they had they certainly hadn't survived it.

Theo occupied the same position for Derek, he was the one who made sure Derek had the people he needed to get what Derek wanted doing, by any means he decided necessary. "Find out who owns the Prattler, if I can't prevent them printing this slander about my Duchenne," Derek did not mind being called the Demon Duke, he had certainly been called worse, "we can certainly prevent future attacks. Also, spread a rumour about Argent, I don't care about what, goats or something, something that is just plausible enough to create doubt." He scrubbed his hand over his face. "I am going to have to attend whatever is happening tonight, aren't I?"

"It's a rout," Theo said, "and it's expected to be something of a crush, you might be best keeping his grace upon your arm for the whole evening."

Derek's quiet evening of completing his ledgers in time for the next day's open house to those who sought the Duke was vanishing in a whirl of gold satin and a perfume that smelled like vanilla and cloves.

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It had not taken long upon returning from the rout for Derek to be lying exhausted in Stiles' bed with an ivory St George lying on the bed beside him waiting to be cleaned. He was sheened with sweat and covered in the evidence of their joint passion.

Derek was chuckling even as Stiles struggled to catch his breath. Someone had thoughtfully decanted some wine and water on the bedside cabinet, and poured two glasses, obviously expecting this outcome.

Both were naked and it was only the presence of quilts that Stiles had tugged up over their feet, there must have been four of them, and the fire that was neatly banked for the night made their nudity bearable in the late October chill. "You broke me," Stiles lamented, "with your chest hair and your," he gestured with his hand.

"Sparkling alpha personality," Derek offered.

"Youness, I am broken and it's your fault." Stiles swung his legs out of the bed to get up, still naked, and take a glass of the wine, offering the other to Derek who hadn't intended to sit up and instead rolled over unto his side propped up on one elbow against the pillow. "And you're unrepentant, lying there all," he paused looking for the word, "you."

In the firelight Stiles was beautiful, his skin looked golden and warm with dark shadows and the glint of the crystal in his hand. His hair was slicked back with sweat, and it gave his skin a warm sheen. He emptied his wine glass in a single swallow putting the glass down and licking the last of it from his lips. "You distract me," he said airily crawling back onto the bed, "this," he dragged the very tip of his fingernail around the hair circling Derek's nipple, "drives me to distraction, and this," he took the now empty glass from Derek and threw it to the side, careless of where it lay,
pushing Derek to his back in a single motion and in doing so buried his face in the dip of his armpit to which he gave a lusty lick.

Derek could not help from laughing out. "I am fascinated by your hair," Stiles continued, "you have it all over, I could take your pelt and lay it front of the fire telling people that it was from a great American bear. He scraped his fingernails, polished and shaped, up Derek's thigh but they were too spent for it to go anywhere really but Derek flipped them, turning Stiles on his back and draping his own weight in place to hold him there.

Stiles liked to lie like this, with Derek's weight pinning him in place - he supposed it was the omega in him, but it made him feel like he wasn't flying apart - he had told Derek that, but Derek had a flash of him, his head turned and his neck covered in kiss marks in another bed with that gleam of gold satín. It was almost enough to make Derek jerk back but the bed was warm and the room was cold and he loved the feel of Stiles under him. He reached back and pulled the quilts up over him as Stiles grin cracked with a great yawn. Checking the pocket watch in its stand beside the bed suggested it was nearly five of the clock. "We should sleep," Derek told him curling his head into the arch of Stiles' neck, so his nose was against that gland where the omega wax formed, where Stiles smelled most sweetly of vanilla and cloves. Stiles just hummed his agreement into Derek's shoulder, not sleepy but almost floating in the secure headspace of being pressed into the mattress by an adoring alpha. It made Derek wonder what he was like in float, would he be like the fantasy version of him in gold satin? would he just flop, like a marionette with his strings cut or would he murmur endearments as he did in the fantasy, in the dream of him in the poacher's cottage in the gold satin?

"Did you read the Prattler today?" Derek asked him softly.

"Oh that nonsense about you being the Demon Duke," Stiles said in a slow almost sleepy drawl. "I pay it no mind, they've been calling me the Hampstead Harlot since August."

Derek growled. There was no other word for the noise that came from the base of his throat. It was an ancient primal noise, one of possession, one that threatened the omega that he had pinned. "I'm yours," Stiles said threading the fingers of both hands into Derek's hair to reassure him, "alpha." He was almost petting Derek even though to an observer it would look as if Derek was in control - he never was with Stiles. "I'm your harlot," he said and licked at Derek's shoulder, "just yours, just yours, alpha." That last was sleepy. "Frever."
Stiles had just left his morning bath when Derek came in, he had tugged a linen wrap around himself, belted at the waist to go into his dressing room. He was still new to all the pomp and luxury but he was getting used to it. The felt slippers that Fiorna laid out for him after laying them by the fire might have been the best part.

Derek was not yet fully dressed, wearing only stockings, shift and quickly pulled on and badly buttoned pants, which meant Isaac had not had a hand in dressing his lord.

In his hands, Derek had a small paper-wrapped parcel, "I have brought you a gift," he said and he had a shy almost impish smile, "might I?"

Stiles waved off his maids, sending them away for now leading Derek into his exquisite sitting room in which he had entertained no visitors. One couch was heaped high with blankets with a marble-topped table covered in finished novels and half-eaten boxes of bonbons. "Gifts, for me?" Stiles said, sitting on the couch, "Any particular reason?"

"Can a husband not see a thing and wish to share it with his mari?" Derek asked, he started to scrub at the back of his heck with his hand, into the collar of his shirt where he kept his hair short which let Stiles know he was bashful, whatever the gift was it was more intimate than jewellery for even when Derek had presented him with the moonstones, which he had intended Stiles to wear during sex, he had not been so shy. It made Stiles feel powerful.

Moving over to the couch Derek dropped to his knees upon the thick Aubusson rug, lifted Stiles left foot up and removed the slipper. With the package laid on his thigh, he opened it with his left hand to reveal a folded pair of red silk stockings with what looked like elaborate white clocks. Derek lifted the first one, rolled it up at the toe and with such delicate fingers slid it over Stiles' foot.

Stiles did not have small, elegant feet. Omega were said to have dainty, pretty feet, Stiles had what Lydia had called great big alpha feet, his hands were the same given more to motion and use than the still prettiness his sister's had but the feel of Derek pushing the silk up his leg, in the same motion his maids used, made Stiles feel like he had small pretty feet.

The stockings were longer than most, ending at mid-thigh so that a pair of omega pantalons could neatly be buttoned under the knee with perhaps two inches longer than most of his pairs so that the hem was where the skin was starting towards its silkiest which Derek skimmed with his fingers, before laying a kiss.

He then repeated this with the other leg, his big rough hands skimming up the silk to make sure it was straight, thumbs rubbing over the bone of his ankles and in the packet was a pair of buckled garters, scarlet like the stockings and embroidered with silver thread in the Hale coat of arms and Derek's hands were so gentle as he pulled each around the top of Stiles' knee, buckling it and then pressing his finger underneath to prove it wasn't so tight.

Each garter was accompanied by another kiss on the soft, silky skin of Stiles' inner thighs. He was undone, wearing his linen wrap and these beautiful stockings with his husband between his ankles, kneeling on the floor.
Stiles had things to do today and he was not sure how he was expected to do them after this.

He felt like all of his muscles were aspic and Derek hadn't even touched him really. The whole scene was so hopelessly erotic, which surprised Stiles, for he had thought that taking off Stiles would have been sexier than putting them on but Derek's hands were reverent and kind which surprised him for he had expected that the hands of an alpha would be rough and take - he had not believed that they might give.

His thighs, half-covered in fine red satin, fell open - giving Derek full access to his sex. Exposed in his linen wrap on his silk-covered couch in his exquisitely decorated sitting room and spread open for his husband to plunder in a pair of scarlet silk stockings.

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After his meeting with Maria Cosway for the final sitting of his portrait, Stiles met with his sisters for a lunch of oysters and then some shopping in Rotten Row where he had a fitting with a well-recommended modiste who often had a six-month waiting list - but had made accommodations for the new Duchenne of Albemarle, which Halwyn had described as obsequious to the point of being enough to cost her their custom. Stiles appreciated the petty vindictiveness of going to a terrible store simply because his sisters couldn't. It was why he brought them.

It was nearing the start of the best time to eat oysters but Felicity suggested it and they were in London anyway and the shop had access to a hothouse full of lemon trees so the juice was fresh and the smoked paprika sauce from Spain that had become so rare during the war on the peninsula but Stiles was appreciating the allowances given to a Duchenne. He and his sisters talked about Hobart house and fashion and their father and how the violinist that Derek had invited to London had had some kind of mental break and had taken to the country to recover so it was lucky that Stiles had seen him when he did. The conversation was both entirely vacuous and deep and meaningful, skimming over delicate topics and laughing at those they were not supposed to know existed.

He was, all in all, having a jolly good day which was of course when Scott McCall came along to spoil it.

At first, Stiles did not see him, but Scott called out to him and then stopped him in the street, blocking the entire thoroughfare so that none could pass, even if they intended to cut him. Stiles was feeling indulgent so although Lydia went to move him past and Halwyn made the Derek sounding noise of exhaling loudly through his nose in displeasure Stiles let Scott talk. "It is so lucky I met you like this," Scott said, "without your husband, we can talk freely, I know that you held your tongue before because he was there." Stiles blinked in astonishment, "but can we talk privately?"

"No," Stiles told him, pulling on his greatcoat in displeasure. He had been having a lovely day, and although the sun was shining it was bitter cold and he and his sisters were feeling it but he didn't want to give Scott the satisfaction of not being humiliated in public. Stiles knew if he gave the word either of his sisters would shred him vocally and that Halwyn would give him a beating there in the street. Scott might have attended Gentleman Jacksons but he was not a fighter. "You can say what you want to me here and now because I do have appointments I do not want to break." The appointment was with a bootmaker and would happily wait on his grace, which Scott did not need to know.

"I just want it to go back to the way it was," Scott started. Felicity went to cut him off but Stiles silenced her with his hand on her arm, "I know it can't be like that when the duke's around but I
thought if he didn't know."

"No," Stiles shut that line of thought down now. "I shall explain it, I will even use small words because it appears that nothing else gets through to you. You. Ruined. Me. and you ruined me publically. I've been called the Hampstead Harlot for months now because of you."

"THat's not true," Scott said, "the Prattler never said who it was."

Stiles raised an eyebrow as Lydia sighed in dismay. She never did have a tolerance for fools.

"I have had time, Scott," Stiles said, "to chew over what you did and I kept my mouth shut, I didn't tell anyone who helped me, which I know now was unfair because Allison took the brunt of it, her mother blamed her, because of what you did." Stiles made sure to explain how Scott had been responsible for what happened in a way that Scott might understand to be bad - in a way that affected Scott. "Had I told my husband at the time you would have gotten away with a beating but you still mistake him for the villain when he has been nothing but kind."

"It was supposed to make your mother agree to marry Parrish."

"He wouldn't have me." Stiles barked back, "all those lovely connections he had been trying to acquire and they weren't enough for him to get past the scandal. The duke offered to sponsor my marriage if Parrish would have me and he turned me out and called me a whore, Scott, when he himself was fornicating with one of the housemaids. He only wanted me for my father and that wasn't good enough when he was offered it." Scott looked like he was going to complain but Stiles continued. "All my life I had one constant which was you. When my mother died and I spent those months on my own with my nurse in that house it was you that rescued me. When I heard your parents bickering over having to give me houseroom it didn't matter because I had you. When my father came back and married Natalie like he had forgotten my mother just so I had a parent it didn't matter because I had you. When i had my courses and was terrified it I calmed myself because I knew that I had you. All those times I was scared that I was alone I could calm myself because I knew that I had you. But I never had you, did I, Scott?"

He paused for breath, "because the instant you saw something you wanted you threw me away without a single care- like I was a broken toy."

"Stiles," Scott protested.

"No," Stiles continued, "you need to hear this, you are a selfish, spoiled, manipulative brat, and I am glad Allison is not here to marry you because the person who does will be so unhappy, because when you give someone your attention it is like you are the only person in the world, but the instant you want something else then you are nothing and that is a cruelty I wish on no one. If you approach me again, Mr McCall, I shall be forced to take action."

"Stiles, it wasn't like that."

"All those years thinking I was letting you down when I had to cancel appointments, tearing myself to pieces over it - and they were wasted. The plan to be compromised was mine, a quick foray with a discreet matron and a hasty marriage with none the wiser, and had I gone to Parrish's room I would have found it empty and gone back to my bed, but you valued Allison over me and I became the Hampstead Harlot and married to a man who is distant but kind. I needed a friend that night, Scott, instead, I got you."

That said he pushed past him and opened the door to the bootmakers, getting as far as the couch used for fitting when he damn near swooned and it was Halwyn who caught him. "You've been off
for days, your grace," he said as he guided him to the leather seat.

"I imagine," Stiles said as Lydia started to fuss over him, "it's just all of the to do."

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At dinner, shared with husband and sisters with no intent to go out, Stiles seemed back to his usual self, the colour had returned to his face and although he thought it was unnecessary he told Derek about his meeting with Scott and how he had again, put him in his place.

The meal was progressing marvellously with conversation free-flowing and even Derek maintaining his part as they talked and laughed and Stiles made the joke that instead of sending Scott to India, as Derek had planned, to send him to the West Indies where there wasn't as much chance to make a fortune. He was hurt over Scott's betrayal more than angry and he felt childish, and said so, for wanting Scott to hurt too. Derek just passed him the mustard and told him he understood and there were worse postings than the West Indies and Derek, being a duke, had a lot of sway in where the colours to be bought were available from.

Being Friday they had eschewed the usual meat course for a more substantial fish dish which in this case was a stargazy pie, made because the kitchen had been able to purchase some fine fresh mackerel and the pie showed them off to best advantage. The pie seemed well done, with a golden buttery crust over the fish, egg and potato filling, rich with garlic and parsley, and the fish heads appreciating the mural painted on the ceiling from where they were baked into the crust - the reason for the pie's peculiar name. It was usually one of Stiles' favourites but the instant Derek cut into the pie he was overcome with a wave of powerful nausea and stumbled out of his chair as he felt his gorge begin to rise. He managed to make it into the hallway before he was overcome and cast his accounts into a ceramic jardiniere holding a manicured bay tree.

"What the?" Derek managed to ask before Lydia said, "we had oysters for lunch," Felicity poured Stiles a wine glass of water from the jug on the table and brought it to him with a napkin that he might wash out his mouth, "it must have been that." She didn't mention the swoon but Stiles was sure that Halwyn would.
Chapter 34

Chapter by DarkAthena (seraphim_grace)

Chapter Summary

it's very hard to put a cat back in the bag

It wasn't until Stiles actually fainted that he consented to see a doctor, for he did not believe that he needed one, he had a hundred excuses for why he might swoon: his stays were too tight, he hadn't eaten enough, he had slept poorly, but eventually even he had to concede that something was wrong. Derek did not understand at first, but when Felicity explained that Stiles had been present at his mother's sickbed and had seen doctors hurt her and then she had died, giving him a fear of them that had never really faded nor truly made sense he allowed Stiles another opportunity to improve before he insisted.

Stiles had admitted, to Lydia, that there were other symptoms that scared him more. He had a mild headache that he could not rid himself of or explain and the strangest indigestion, feeling like bubbles in his stomach were popping but without the corresponding flatulence.

The doctor was a man with wild hair and bulging eyes called Finstock. He checked Stiles' urine in a glass flask, pressed his cold fingers against Stiles' pulse, looked in his throat using a small lamp and then asked, politely, if Stiles would consent to him checking his bare stomach for he had an inkling what it was, and Stiles, convinced it was some kind of digestive disorder, agreed.

The doctor removed from his bag a small metal cone which he placed to Stiles' stomach and listened, nodding, before he told Stiles that he could get dressed and he would wait for him in the sitting room. "Is that it?" Stiles asked, "you're not going to bleed me?"

"Don't need to," the doctor said, "unless you want me to, young omega these days, think they know all about modern medicine, think too much and you'll upset your humours, and you'll have yellow bile coming out of your nose."

"That's not a thing," Stiles said dismissively.

"As I said," the doctor said with a knowing wink, "think they know all about modern medicine," and the entire craziness of the situation made Stiles laugh which might have been the doctor's intention or he might just have been that crazy. "I need some tea," he grumbled and Flora rushed to add the water to the prepared pot.

Finstock had insisted that he tell Stiles first so that he had time to process whatever his diagnosis was before Derek barged in with his big alpha feet, that was a direct quote, making everything complicated and about him when he wasn't the patient, and that sort of nonsense made things worse, so Stiles had requested that a tray of tea and cake be provided for him.

Stiles pulled his shirt back on and then pulled a banyan over his shirt and pantalons, the doctor had not requested that he remove his pants only unbutton them to the hips - the ones Stiles had been wearing had fastened at the side - and met him in the parlour where Flora had bitched the pot for the doctor. When she saw Stiles she gave a quick curtsey - something she did entirely for the
doctor's benefit - and poured him a cup of tea, something his nerves desperately needed at that moment.

The doctor had eschewed courtesy titles the moment he had come through the door. Knowing that he was being paid for his work gave him a sense of superiority and he had no interest in calming his patient. In fact, when Stiles had confessed his fears that perhaps the doctors who had tended to his mother had hastened her death Doctor Finstock had shrugged and said probably. He didn't apologise for his colleagues and said he was up to date on the modern techniques but truly medicine was a crapshoot and a good deal of what he did was reassuring people that they were nowhere as sick as they thought themselves in the hope that convalescence, beef broth and time would cure them. He could ease pain but there was not much he could do for the root cause of the sickness. He could pull a tooth or arrange for a surgeon for gangrene but he had useful knowledge, but a lot of doctors, himself included, were quacks when they were out of their depths.

Sitting in Stiles' exquisite sitting room drinking tea he looked entirely out of his element and he had confessed that he was more interested in lawn tennis and was putting together a league.

"Am I dying?" Stiles asked, the cup shaking in his hands so that it rattled on its saucer.

"No," Finstock answered, "unless, well some consider it social death, I mean, you're probably going to miss the season if that's something you care about and then when you come back it will be "oh, was he dead?" I imagine you'll have to go to the country and won't be back in the ton till," he thought about it, "September maybe." This did nothing to calm Stiles' nerves and he said so. So Finstock calmly gave his diagnosis. "You're pregnant."

Cold gorge rose in Stiles' throat, "I can't be," he protested, "I CAN'T be."

"You definitely are," Finstock said, "vomiting, fainting, headache, and your baby has a heartbeat, strong and clear."

Stiles' hand found its way to his midsection all on its own, "you don't understand," Stiles began but he was finding it hard to catch his breath, "my husband doesn't want children."

"Then you shouldn't have taken a lover."

"I didn't," Stiles protested, "I did everything I was meant to."

"Let me guess, you blew your nose and did five jumping stars after lying with him."

"No," Stiles protested, "I took queen Anne's lace daily and I went to the midwife and she washed me out inside the one time it happened and gave me teas, I did everything I was supposed, he doesn't know."

Finstock put his tea down and guided Stiles' head down between his knees, "long deep breaths, in two three four," and it took long minutes before Stiles could catch his breath again.

"I won't lie to him," Finstock said, "cutwifes are so dangerous, you would be literally taking your life in your hands, and any treatment I could give you would be as bad, as a doctor I couldn't countenance such a risk. I have to tell him, but it's not as scary as all that, lots of people have babies every day, it isn't a whole to-do."

"I know that," Stiles snapped, "it's him that thinks its a death sentence, my stepmother had a baby not three years ago, I was in the room when she gave birth because the midwife thought it would be a learning experience. His last wife died in childbirth, he is terrified of it happening again, I don't know what he'll do. He doesn't remember it happening, and." The breath escaped him, again
and again, Finstock talked him through it, calm and quiet.

"You're a good doctor," Stiles managed at last.

"Damn right I am," Finstock agreed.

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Derek had not wanted to admit that he was worried about Stiles' meeting with the doctor so he had not, as he had wanted, burst into the room to witness the examination instead he decided to practise his billiards which proved to be a stupid decision as the last time he had used the table had been a game with Stiles where they each lost a piece of clothing for each ball the other successfully potted.

He was all over the place mentally and playing billiards and drinking wine in the early afternoon was clearly a symptom of that.

Stiles had confessed, with his head pillowed on Derek's stomach - which he had complained was as hard as a rock - that his mother had died of a slow and terrible illness - but he had been scant on the actual details. A cold knot was in Derek's belly - where Stiles had pillowed his lovely head - that the doctor would tell him that Stiles was dying and that there was nothing that Derek could do about it. He wanted to go riding, to do what Peter said that he always did and run, but if he ran then he might miss the doctor and the doctor might say he was fine.

Stiles was only a little unwell, his appetite was gone but he was making the effort to drink ginger and lemon tea, sweetened with honey, and beef tea when he wanted nothing more substantial. He still blamed it on the oysters, and a bad oyster could make you sick for days Derek knew from past experience. Then there was the swooning and Derek accepted the things that Stiles said, that it was anxiety over McCall haranguing him, that he had bound his stays too tight, although he wore light summer stays that instead of lacing had tabs from the back which were pulled tight around the front to give him the fashionable cone shape that was popular for omega, combined with padding for his hips when he went out in society to make his waist even smaller.

Stiles was young and strong he could weather any illness, Derek told himself but he didn't really believe it. Paige had been young and strong and she had died.

It felt like there were a hundred snakes beneath Derek's skin, wriggling and writhing trying to get free of him and he had no idea how he should deal with it because he had never felt this before.

He was terrified and he wasn't sure why. He had done his best to resist Stiles and his charms, but he was not doing well in that regard, but he was sure his affection for his mari was based on proximity and openness. Stiles was not clinging in his affections, he was self-sufficient but enjoyed Derek's company which Derek was glad of. Stiles was witty and funny and sometimes as clumsy as a newborn foal but he laughed at such things even as he found himself with skinned knees.

In the bed-chamber he was just as clumsy but eager and accepting, he was not only open to hearing those fantasies Derek had previously kept to himself but shared his own. Derek had let Stiles inside him and enjoyed it but he had only a passing fondness for him. He enjoyed Stiles’ company and had no desire to see him unwell, or injured, or worst of all, dead.

When the doctor entered the room with Stiles a quiet shadow behind him Derek was so discombobulated that he struck the cue ball hard enough that it jumped from the table. The doctor looked at Stiles who took a deep swallow and told him the diagnosis.
"I'm pregnant." The doctor took one look at Derek and made his excuses, that he would wait in the hall, that he would arrange for his bill to be sent, that he wanted to be anywhere in London but that room right now even if he had to walk and not wait for his carriage to be brought around, he could get a hackney. It said so much about the air in the room that he blathered so.

"How?" Derek was surprised he could speak.

"The usual way," Stiles offered him a wry grin. Then he realised this was not a time to be facetious. Derek's face had closed off so he resembled nothing more than a slab of granite and Stiles started to fuss with the braid trim on the cuffs of his banyan. "It was August 14th," Stiles said and licked his lips. "You shouted at Baby Thomas and then rode off and I let you go." He paused again, "it was past tea when Peter suggested that you might have drunk yourself into a ditch," he wouldn't raise his eyes to look at Derek, "so I went after you, I found you in the folly and," he took another deep slow sigh of a breath, "you were drunk."

Derek said nothing.

"I said no, I did,"

"I forced you?" Derek asked.

"No! No!" Stiles was shaking his head with his vociferous passion, "you were drunk and I was lonely and you were so persuasive and I was not as firm as I should have been. Drunk you made me feel so wanted and you told me it would just be the tip and like a fool, I believed you, I convinced myself you'd withdraw, that you'd resist, you were so insistent, I tried to get you in bed so you would sleep off all of the brandy that you drank and...." he sighed.

"The gold satin," Derek said it in a low voice.

"You didn't remember and I went to the midwife, I did everything she asked of me, I did, and with the whole going to London I forgot, I wanted to tell you but I forgot and..."

Derek had only one answer with which he cut Stiles off. "Get out."

Stiles lowered his eyes, his eyelashes glued together with tears and did.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

dun dun DUN

Stiles left Hobart and had the carriage drive him straight to his father's house in Hampstead without bothering to get dressed. His face was set and he said nothing to Halwyn, to anyone other than the driver, and frowned when he noticed that he was still wearing a pair of Turkish slippers instead of actual shoes.

Natalie was in the main parlour. She was sat on the floor, wearing a simple wool day dress, playing at soldiers with Alek who was wearing the sort of linen dress more commonly seen on Evie and had a small battalion fighting a much larger wooden horse. It was unlikely that he was restaging the fall of Troy, even if it did look like it.

"Stiles?" Natalie asked looking up from their game, "we weren't expecting you. The girls are at the lending library."

Something, something he could not have defined or predicted, in her concern broke the entire wall that he had built around his emotions and he fell to his knees with a wail. Alek, who was not one for other people being upset, threw himself at his brother so that Stiles had to catch him or be thrown to the floor. "Don't cry, MiMi," He said. He tried to wipe at Stiles' tears but all he did was smear the dirt on his hands over Stiles' face.

Natalie pulled the two of them down so that their heads were on her lap, and she started to card her fingers through her hair, "you can tell me all about it when you're ready," she said in a soft murmur.

"I'm lying on a horse," Stiles said which made Alek laugh against his chest.

Natalie just sat there with them, heads pillowed on her lap, one hand on each of them.

Stiles had been on the cusp of puberty when his father married the widow Martin and he had resented her for taking more of his father's limited time. He had remained distant except when necessary and she had been so different and so obsessed with his marriage, and that of his sisters, that he had never really bonded with her, even when Alek had been born Natalie had been something other that shared his house. Yet right now when he needed mother comfort she had offered it without question. It just made him cry more.

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Stiles woke up in the nursery with Alek lying beside him moving his horse across Stiles' abdomen. Stiles was so used to this behaviour it hadn't woken him. He supposed he had fallen asleep on the parlour floor and someone, probably Halwyn, had carried him up the stairs. "Mama says I'm not to bother you," Alek said in a self-important voice. "But I know I'm not a bother."
Stiles couldn't help the laugh that escaped him.

"Are you sick? Flissty," he had taken to saying his sister's name the same way that Thomas did, "said you were sick, that you kept swooooning." He dragged the word out not knowing what it meant.

"I'm not sick," Stiles told him, "I'm having a baby."

"Like Baby Thomas?" Alek asked.

"Not quite, you know how Evie is a year older than you, and you are a year older than Thomas, and Evie is bigger than you and you are bigger than Thomas," Alek nodded, "when babies are new they're little and they can't do much yet, they're kind of like," he paused looking for an analogy Alek would understand, "a plucked chicken."

"Really?" Alek asked.

"Yes, everyone was a baby and they all looked like a plucked chicken, even you."

"Even papa?" Stiles nodded. "And Mama?" Stiles nodded again, "and even Mr Boyd."

Stiles had to be more careful, "well Mr Boyd was probably more like a plucked pheasant."

Alek nodded sagely, "he is very big," he said, "he would be a bigger bird." He screwed up his face in thought, "there is an oss-tritch at the zoo, it is very big like Mr Boyd, it might be as big as Mr Boyd, would he be like a plucked oss-tritch?"

"I don't know, I've not seen the ostrich."

"Have you not been to the zoo?" Alek was outraged, "you have to get Mr Derek to take you, the zoo is brill-ee-ant, it has lions and tigers and piggies and lotsa birds and," he made a sort of lunge so he could sit on Stiles' stomach and maintain his stance that Stiles needed to visit the zoo, which Stiles thought might include bringing Alek with him to see the zoo. Stiles settled him across his hips.

"You have to be careful right now," Stiles said, "you can't sit on my tummy, there's a baby in there."

Alek looked sceptical, "there's not a whole chicken in there."

"Not yet, but just as babies get bigger and become as big as you, before they're ready to be born they're very small and get bigger, right now the baby is about as big as a smudge." He dragged his thumb across Alek's nose. Alek looked like he had received an epiphany.

"You have a baby in your belly and it's as small as a smudge?" This seemed more than he could easily accept but he knew that Stiles didn't lie to him.

"I do."

Alek still looked incredulous. "Does that mean I was a smudge in Mama's belly?" Stiles nodded. "And Lydia and Flissty too?" Stiles nodded. "Were you a smudge in Mama's belly?"

"No, I had a different Mama, her name was Claudia and I was a smudge in her belly."

Alek turned to get to his feet on the bed by shoving his ass in Stiles' face, hearing footsteps outside the nursery door, "Mama," he shouted, "Stiles has a smudge in his belly and it's going to grow into
a plucked chicken."

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Over supper, after Alek was tucked up asleep, Stiles told Natalie, Lydia and Felicity about his pregnancy and how Derek had reacted. Lydia clutched her silver knife a little tighter and Felicity eased her sister with a hand on her wrist.

"He's just scared," Felicity said, "he'll come around," there was something of a threat in the way she said it. "Peter said if he can't run from something he'll drive it away."

Stiles didn't notice how Felicity referred to Peter so casually or wonder when it was that Peter had had such a conversation with his sisters.

Stiles cut into his pie to avoid talking.

"It is normal to be scared of a pregnancy," Natalie said softly, "it means so much change, both physically and to your life, and with him so active in politics he is probably hiding from the idea of it and reacted badly. You'll return tomorrow and it will be well."

Stiles was sure he heard Lydia mutter, "or else."

"When I found out I was pregnant with Alek, Stiles, your father was on his way to Russia. I had never had to be pregnant alone but you and your sisters were there for me and we will be there for you."

"Felicity has her first season," Stiles said, "you should be concentrating on that."

Lydia clanged her knife down on her plate. "Felicity's first season can wait, no one will question us postponing it because you are increasing."

"Lydia," Stiles said, "I know you turned down several suitors until you saw me married and I know you'll do it for Felicity and its not fair to ask you to wait, even though I understand it's your choice, and you will do what you want regardless, I can't ask you to do that. We have gathered her wardrobe and invitations and."

"Stop it right there," Felicity said, "if you are in Rosings you're not so far away that we can't be there in a few hours even if I do have my season."

It was always Felicity who was the voice of reason, "you shall go and see the duke tomorrow, he will apologise and all will be well, and come summer there will be a ducal heir and we shall all gather in Rosings and you shall never get near your own babe."

Stiles chewed on his pie mechanically and hoped that they were right.

---

Stiles returned to Hobart the next morning and was immediately escorted to his husband in his office by a rather sombre looking Boyd who left him at the door.

"I thought I told you to get out," Derek said and his entire demeanour was icy. He had closed himself off utterly and completely. He looked haggard like he hadn't slept.

"I just came to get my things," Stiles said although it was utterly untrue. He didn't even consider how his hand was resting on his flat stomach as if to protect the baby within from his father's rage.
Derek noticed the gesture and stiffened. "I know you don't want me here."

"Don't play the victim," Derek said and his voice was a rasp, "you told me this was what you wanted, I can't ever get rid of you now."

Stiles knew Derek was afraid. He knew that Derek was lashing out to drive Stiles away because he was afraid. He knew all of that intellectually but it still hurt and Stiles could feel a cold well of anger bubbling up within him and he knew if he stayed he would say something that he would not be able to take back. He knew if this continued he would say something that would not just hurt Derek but cripple him. He knew he had to keep quiet so he said nothing.

It didn't matter if Derek cast Stiles aside but Stiles had to keep silent for the smudge in his belly. He would not deny that smudge his father.

Stiles' father had been absent. His work had kept him away, often not even on the same continent. Stiles' mother had died after a terrible disease leaving Stiles utterly alone until Tara found him and then when it looked like he would starve despite her help the McCall's took him in. The years between his mother's death and his father marrying Natalie had been terrible and Stiles had told that to Derek, he had revealed everything. Now Derek was using that knowledge against him.

Stiles bit his lip until it bled.

"I don't know you," Derek said, "I thought," he stopped, "I hoped," there was another pause, "but you're just another omega trying to secure social capital for their family."

Stiles took a long deep breath. Derek was saying these things to hurt him, he repeated to himself because Derek was afraid. He kept repeating that to himself. Derek was afraid. Paige had hurt him in ways he could not process or understand. Paige's hate and it had to have been hate, had crippled Derek, and then she had died and he had blamed himself for making her so unhappy without understanding that she was unhappy, and then to truly grind the pain into him the baby she had carried had died too.

Derek was terrified that the same would happen to Stiles. He had said so when they planned their marriage. He had meant to remain aloof but Stiles had chipped away at it. Stiles knew that Derek desired him and he was happy to use that desire so that Derek could be something that Stiles needed without wondering if it was something that Derek wanted.

Maybe Derek had wanted to be alone and he would have been happier with a mistress as barren as a jam jar.

Derek had intended to marry Allison Argent because his loathing for her family meant that he would never desire her, but he had desired Stiles. He had desired Stiles so fiercely that the instant he had let down his barriers and fear he had knotted him despite promising that he never would.

Stiles had barged into Derek's life with his demands that he love Stiles, that he be all the things in Stiles' life who had left him behind. He had been the one to be there when Scott had let him down, when Parrish had cut out the heart of him and he had been so wrong about Natalie, it had been Derek to be the pillar who could support him.

He had done Derek wrong and he knew it but Derek was being cruel now because he was afraid.

In the middle of Derek's diatribe which Stiles wasn't really listening to he heard the word whore and paid attention as Derek continued, making loud deep breaths through his nose, "all omega are whores, why should I have expected you to be any different?"
There were times that Stiles had felt himself close in on himself like a fan snapping shut, at that moment he felt that closure like a portcullis dropping down hard, propelled by its weight, closing him off from Derek with an irrevocable finality.

"I must thank you, Derek," Stiles said and he couldn't have stopped the words if he had wanted to, he was going to do it even if he didn't want to - he was going to say something final. "for you gave me a family," his hand found his stomach again from where it had clutched the handle to the door behind him, "what a pity you never included yourself in it."
After casting Stiles out Derek allowed himself the comfort of his cellar. For several days he drank until he couldn't think and nothing in the house reminded him of what he was done, and when the alcohol no longer worked - many bottles of wine later when his sweat felt like vinegar and his eyes were bleary - he found if he let slip of his rage then the fear would return as sharp-toothed as any predator.

He was afraid and he had repressed that fear with rage and in doing so had lashed out and had gone too far. He was not sure that he could make this right.

It was better - he lied to himself - better that Stiles was gone, where Derek's foul luck couldn't kill him too.

How was he supposed to stay angry when every little thing in this house reminded him of Stiles. He would go to Rosings, he decided and then wondered if that was where Stiles had decamped.

He called for Theo but it was Peter who came to his call. If Derek was a wreck then Peter was a paragon of fashion in a dove grey waistcoat and perfectly arranged cravatte. "Have you decided to crawl out of your bottle?" he asked. Peter had a rare talent for making himself sound disappointed no matter what he said. There had been a time when Derek had coveted that approval, trailing after Peter the way that Baby Thomas had followed Berry. "I've ordered a bath for you, and you will get into it and you will shave, you look like I found you in the wilds of deepest darkest Africa, and maybe when you look like a civilised person instead of a dishevelled hedgehog we can have a conversation about what has happened."

Derek had to admit he felt more like a real person once he had bathed and pulled on freshly laundered clothes. Isaac neatly trimmed his beard and hair, and after cleaning his teeth he was given mint candies to sweeten his breath, which was sour with the fumes of old wine. They cleaned his bed-chamber, which he had ruined in his binge, and it was only then that Peter agreed to meet him in the parlour.

Derek couldn't face his office just yet.

Instead of his usual pot of coffee a pot of ginger and lemon tea, in deference to his uneasy stomach, had been put out. Peter did not look comfortable in Hobart house and Derek could not remember a time when he had been there. He had his own house in London but spent most of his time in Brighton.

"I do not know what it is about this family," Peter said, "that we are the swine that have pearls cast before." He took a sip of his tea and then went to the honey dipper to sweeten it with a little moue of distaste. "Perhaps the fault is mine."

After that, he said nothing but raised a disapproving eyebrow every time that Derek went to take a sup of anything other than tea, even at supper Peter disapproved of him drinking wine.
After two days of Peter's overt disapproval with no lecture or comfort to accompany it, Derek decided that he would ride out to Rosings to arrange for the staff to ready the house for the upcoming festive period. The ride did a lot to help clear his sour mood for the day was fine and clear and briskly cold, beginning with a deep frost under his horse's hooves and puddles cracking like gunshots along the road.

At the last mile, he gave the horse the lead and moved him into a gallop that stirred the blood in Derek's veins as he crossed the fields towards the stables of the place he most often called home. The bricks were warm against a grey sky and even the ivy looked welcoming.

He stabled the horse and walked across the courtyard pulling off his hat and gloves as he did so, but did not remove his greatcoat until he had reached the main foyer.

He half expected Stiles to be waiting for him and in one way he was, the portrait of Paige which had taken pride of place over the stairs had been removed and a charming but rather unimaginative portrait of Stiles had taken its place.

In the portrait, Stiles wore a white satin spencer with short sleeves baring the forearms he leant on, so one hand was curled under his chin which was turned towards the painter, and the line of his spine was highlighted, with a dark desk piled high with books it made his skin look luminous and the yellow diamond stud in his visible ear brought out the unusual colour of his eyes.

He was an excellent painting but it lacked the spark that made Stiles so very beautiful.

On seeing it Derek pinched his lips and let out a long snort of displeasure through his nose. He was not yet ready to face his feelings about Stiles and what had happened between them.

Yet he could tear his eyes away, in the painting Stiles' eyes were fixed on a random point of the vaulted ceiling, the fashion being to have eyes that stared into the middle distance but with where the portrait hung it looked like he was staring winsomely at a place where they had not been so diligent in dusting or looking for a part of the timbers and plaster that had discoloured.

It would have amused him.

"Your grace," the housekeeper said stepping forward to take his coat and gloves. "We were not expecting you, I shall have the cook make something more suited for your supper." She fell into step just behind him informing him of the changes that she would perform to make his stay more comfortable.

"I shall see the children," he told her brusquely, he wanted to make sure that he had not damaged them in his determination. He had made the decision to remain aloof from them so that he could not cause them further harm than that which they had already endured.

"Your grace," the woman said lowering her eyes, "his grace arrived a week since and took the children with him, he informed us that he was increasing and was spending the time with a friend in the country for his health and that he would take the children with them that they might enjoy spring much further into the country than this. He informed us that you knew."

Derek supposed that he did know.

After he had cast Stiles out Stiles had written him several letters, possibly informing him of his intentions, but Derek had not read them.

"Of course," Derek told the housekeeper, brushing off his mistake. "The news has left me at sixes and sevens."
"Certainly, your grace," she had more decorum to mention that it might be strange that he did not know that his mari had taken his wards, and certainly didn't press that he had no idea where it was that he had taken them. He did know that if Stiles had taken them, possibly to the Hampstead house, that he had taken their nurse, Maudlin, and their caretaker, that they would be well cared for. It appeared he had even taken the dog.

"I only came to make sure the house was prepared for the festive season," he brushed off the conversation, "I will be spending the season in London but I wanted to make sure that you were honoured for your attentive source by having the prepared for you and the staff to enjoy."

"Thank you, your grace," she accepted it as a nice gesture even if it had meant more work, for she doubted that enjoying the lush parlours decorated for the season would be accepted easily. However, knowing he would not be present they could decorate the servant's parts of the house with the detail they would normally give the public parts.

"I shall be leaving again in the morning, I mostly took the ride for the exercise," he lied, "if you would notify the staff. Thank you."

He had not brought his usual staff with him so he could not rely on Isaac drawing him a bath exactly how he liked it so when he sank into the water it was just too hot, but the herbs soothed his tight muscles. The Duchenne's quarters in Hobart had a plumbed bath where a pump drew hot water from a tank over a stove but the bath had been Stiles' so he had made do with the copper tub that was in his own suite. The bath here in Rosings was a wider and more comfortable hip bath and it was a delight in itself. He supposed that he should order one for Hobart but the one there did its job well enough and he didn't see the point just for more comfort for the ten minutes it took to bath him.

He finished and pulled a robe about him before going into the bedroom to dress for supper. He didn't need to dress well but he did object to having a tray brought to him when he was wearing just a linen robe still damp from his bath. He had arranged that his supper be brought up.

He pulled on his breeches first, leaving his feet bare, and then tugged his shirt over his head and as he turned he saw the second painting. Mrs Cosway's triumph and what had been intended as a gift for him from his mari.

It was not a portrait as such. Mrs Cosway was known for taking her sitters and recreating them as creatures of myth and magic, gods and nymphs and her style had a wispy suggestion to it that flattered the sitter. As her portrait had a real to life attention to detail so did this.

In the painting, Stiles sat in a darkened room on a couch draped with rugs and fine sheer fabrics. He wore a veil made of golden tubes and coins that fell around his face and his expression was challenging. He wore sheer cotton showing the tan point of his nipple and he was draped along the couch on the folded rug with his bare feet on the ground amongst the flowers. The details of the rug were so fine that Derek could feel the wool under his fingertips. Stiles sat hips cocked, his violin sat at his feet in a shower of spiked plants with large star-like blooms and where one hand supported his head the other was tucked suggestively into the pages of a book. A golden plate was on the couch next to his legs, with a half-eaten pomegranate showing dark red against the greyish greens and peaches of the painting, so that the golds and the red drew the eye.

His earrings draped over his shoulders, and a gold necklace that must have been an inch wide made of plaques of gold and tube beads of precious stones with his dark hair barely showing. Thick bands of gold encircled each wrist and ankle draped in heavy peach-green satin.

The portrait in the hall over the stairs was exquisitely perfunctory, detailed to life but flat,
portraying a young Duchenne as beautiful but without the spark that made him glow - showcasing his skin and fine eyes.

This painting was in the pose of an odalisque, the stylised courtesans of the far east, the forbidden promise of sexuality kept in harems, a fantasy, but it was not an odalisque that Stiles had been painted as, but instead Persephone, the young omega stolen away by Hades to be his bride.

Derek had once fantasised having Stiles painted as Saint Sebastian but Stiles instead had seen himself as Persephone, the tragic bride of the god of hell - which meant that he had seen Derek as Hades, the god holding him against his will in a marriage that he resented.

It was best that Stiles had gone - he would be happier without Derek.

Chapter End Notes

The two paintings are based on real paintings [and yes Mrs Cosway, who is best known for her threeway relationship with Thomas Jefferson and Angelica Schuyler, did paint people as mythic figures]

the portrait
https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02854/Emma-Hamilton

the surprise gift
It was two days after his return from Rosings that Derek was visited by the Martin sisters. If he had been honest to himself he would have expected their visit earlier. He would have also admitted the angry well of anxiety that welled up in him when he was told that the Stilinski family carriage had just pulled up and that he had guests.

He pretended that he was busy at his ledgers and was interrupted although he had found it harder than usual to concentrate on such banalities these past two weeks.

He had been wrong and he knew it but was now in the terrible state between fear and shame where he couldn't act for fear, the very idea made his gorge rise, and the longer he didn't act the more shame he felt which made the fear worse. The last thing he needed right now was two pint-sized miscreants parading as society debutantes invading his space.

Stiles had said that his sisters were dangerous. The timing of Lord Carstairs mental break was certainly fortuitous but it was not something that two girls could manage. They were vidama, polished dolls educated to be prizes for an alpha - beyond destroying his reputation with a few well placed on dits what could they do. His reputation was already in tatters for Argent had long since maintained that he had murdered Paige and implicated him in the death of his brother and sister that he might take the duchy. It was all nonsense but in a society where reputation was everything even nonsense stuck.

Felicity Martin was the only one to come in. Walking into Hobart like she owned the house. She wore a mustard yellow silk cape caught on the jewels in her hair, enamelled hot pink asters caught in her dark red chignon. Her face had been paled with lilac powder and he caught a hint of a fuschia coloured dress that was certainly not suitable for a girl not yet out in society and he wondered if there was a masquerade to which he had not been invited. Her heels clicked on the floor with an executioners pace.

"I can't stay," he said, pulling off her gloves and almost falling into the couch, "so, no, Theo, I do not want a drink, but you can leave me alone with his grace, after all, I do not need a chaperone with my brother."

Of the two sisters, Stiles had said that Felicity was the observant one but Lydia was the one most likely to act. Theo looked to Derek, who nodded, before he left, leaving the door slightly ajar behind him. Even if Derek did not fear the girl before him his staff remained wary.

perhaps they knew something that Derek did not.

"Do not worry," Felicity said, quite aware of the effect that she had. "Stiles made us promise not to hurt you," she said that with some disdain to the very idea, "some of our ideas were quite delicious but we did promise, he cares about you still, I do not know why." Her scorn was dripping from her voice which did not sound vicious enough for such emotion. Both of the MArtin sisters had voices with a touch of grit, a growl or roughness that meant it was always possible to distinguish their voices in a crowd.

"You are wondering, of course, what could I, a mere slip of a girl do to you, after all, you are a duke," she smiled, a small private smile at a joke she did not care to share. "I shall make it clear, have you seen today's "Prattler," he admitted that he had not. "When I am gone get one of your
people to bring it to you, my sister and I did not care for the slander it subjected my brother to, the
Hampstead Harlot indeed." She smoothed out the fabric of her skirts and cape making it clear to
him that she was utterly in control, this sixteen-year-old tiny little vidama exuding more power
than the prince regent.

With a wicked little smile, she continued, "I have come to add a few codicils to the contract my
brother extorted from my sister and I, nothing painful I assure you, but know if our demands are
not met then we shall destroy you. You do not care for your reputation, certainly," again she smiled
like a viper, "but you do care for the work that you do with the Northern mill workers and that we
can utterly destroy and we shall do it in your name so that everyone in England knows of the Duke
who sought to undermine those hardworking mill owners for his own gain."

At that Derek started, "such a campaign would be easy enough, and then there is the question of
Stiles' delicious new associations in court, things that are now considered felicitous but a man such
as yourself certainly wouldn't compromise a sweet vidame away just for the power he brings to the
marriage bed, an earl, the Duke of Wellington, the German Ambassador, none of which have your
hand in them but certainly bring you enough power, don't they, to make people question. I know
that Stiles compromised you, but who would believe that? After all, isn't it well known that omega
are sexless dolls who marry where they're told."

Her smile took on a mocking twist it had not had before, "society believes what it wants to believe,
if you were shown to be a power-hungry despot, one who only used Stiles long enough to get him
with child and then sent him away when you had your hooks well and truly into him, what change
do you think you could make?" She bounced her head from side to side as if she had not laid out a
plan to utterly destroy him. "And all it would take is a word in the right ear.

"But Stiles did make us promise," she continued with a moue of distaste on her perfect mouth, "so
here are our conditions, now that you know the stakes. You will tell anyone who asks that Stiles
has gone into the country for his confinement, you will not tell anyone you have cast him out and if
any of your servants tattle they will be removed no matter how loyal their previous service," she
raised a single finger to show this was only the first point.

"You will pay any of his bills, well, any you can be sure are his, I am sure some mountebank will
try to take advantage. You will maintain his allowance as you agreed on it at the start of his
marriage but that anything he buys for the baby, including dressing the nursery, you will pay for
without taking it from his allowance." She raised a second finger. "These, of course, go without
saying," his hands were fists on his desk at the very gall of this tiny girl who was forcing him to do
what he had fully intended to do regardless.

"This one might be more complicated before he left London Stiles paid a visit to Sir Robert Peel in
regards to your bill about the mill workers," her tone was more patronising than that of any of his
college tutors who were convinced their students attended only to make friends and drink. "He
made a small amendment to your plan, one that will benefit everyone in the long run, he claimed it
was yours, you shall go along with that fiction. You shall swallow your pride and agree to the
amendment as if you had created it, because my brother, foolishly, cares for you and would not see
you destroyed. He knew that you would not listen in regards to his amendment so he presented it as
if you had devised it yourself. It will be a pity if we have to disappoint him and destroy you.

"I shall not return to Hobart unless I must, for I am utterly disgusted by you, for I had hoped that
you might care for my brother in turn, I was wrong. I do not care to be wrong." She stood up,
arranging her skirts, "I have a theatre appointment with my Aunt Dolly," she said it calmly as if the
woman she spoke of was not the Countess Dollingen of Gratz, the new German Ambassador's wife,
a woman who had been a close friend to Stiles' mother. Derek had looked up the woman after
being accused of getting her husband the position. She was built like an alpha who moved trees, roots and all, for a living and he had been more scared of offending her than the diminutive Martin sisters.

"Just to ease your mind," Felicity said at the door, "Lydia would have just stabbed you in the kidneys," she smiled, then curtseyed politely, "your grace."

Stiles had told Derek that his sisters had the capacity to be terrifying. Derek had not believed him. He knew now that he was wrong. He had intended to pay Stiles’ allowance and to say that he was in the country for his pregnancy so those threats had fallen on deaf ears, but now he was curious about what it was that Stiles had amended to his campaign to help the black mill workers of the North.

"Theo!" he called, "tell Isaac I am going out this evening and need to dress appropriately, get Boyd to bring around the carriage."

"Boyd is with his grace," Theo said, obviously trying to mollify his employer. "He is yet to return with the carriage, but I can certainly have the barouche brought around, or the cabriolet." Derek snorted his anger through his nose and made a comment under his breath about being the last to know what has happened in his own household. He did not mention how he had not noticed Boyd's absence for nearly a month.

He had had many other things on his mind.

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Sir Robert Peel was a consummate politician. He was a fine-looking man with dark hair swept back from his fine clear forehead and a prominent hooked nose. He was slim and tall and despite only being a lower member of the aristocracy drew the attention of everyone inside.

Derek found him at a card party where he was talking to a member of the house of commons that Derek himself did not know. "Your grace," Sir Robert said, "I was hoping that I might run across you, you have been so quiet of late that I was beginning to think I might have to come calling when you are open to the public." This was said with a smile that should have been, but wasn't, mocking. When Sir Robert spoke he had the rare ability to make the person that he was talking to feel like the only person in the world, combined with a detailed memory he made those people feel valued and cherished. "Come," he said gesturing to the closed French doors at the end of the room, "we can talk in private, I know that you dislike crowds."

"You remain observant, Sir Robert," Derek admitted, "and attendant to the whims of those who catch your attention."

"Pah, nonsense," Sir Robert said as if such things were the sort of thing that everyone did, even if they were, perhaps, something they should and did not. Sir Robert listened attentively, he remembered details of what was said, he would repeat them back to make sure that he had heard them right, he would state them in different ways to make sure that he had the right of it before he introduced his own opinion and allowed it to be overturned. "Flattery is not for men like we," he said, "although I must flatter on the subject of your new mari, he is," Sir Robert paused, looking for the word and Derek expected an extolling of Stiles' beauty "quite devoted."

"I am doubly blessed that he is with child," Derek said the words, which were rote but still felt like they should catch in his teeth.

"Yes, he said, when he called on me." Sir Robert reached into his pocket and pulled out a pipe and
used one of the flaming torches that dotted the gravel path at the rear of the house to light it, taking a few healthy sucks before he continued, "I was most surprised but he quickly put me at ease, I had not considered that he might call to put paid to your notorious unease in society." Derek nodded, hoping Sir Robert could not see the fists he made at his side, "remarkable young man, a true credit to his gender."

Sir Robert was an excellent listener but he still made the terrible mistake of underestimating omega - Derek had been the same, but Felicity had made it clear that he was wrong to do so. "When he presented the changes you had made, I was stunned, he even understood why you could not make themself without appearing to backtrack on your policies. It was quite simply brilliant, we alphas tend to overlook such things, wot?" Derek gave him a smile that might have been agreement.

"Your suggestion that the army recruits those freed slaves for the West Indies Regiment was a revelation, Albemarle, not only does it prevent the mill owners cutting labour costs it allows the army to fill a regiment that it simply could not able bodies for with the war. I presented this solution and if you were not already a duke I would think you would be given a peerage for it, and by presenting it without a name attached it was much easier to pass it through the commons. Truly remarkable, I had not thought you a truly capable politician but outmanoeuvring yourself to present a solution to a problem to both your own situation and one you had never before mentioned, why I am simply agog."

"It was a once in a lifetime moment of brilliance," Derek said, brushing off the compliment.

It was because the moment of brilliance wasn't his, it was Stiles' and Stiles had never even mentioned it but if the mill owners couldn't indenture the freed slaves they couldn't cut the wages and it provided them with manumission, for the British army did not employ slaves and a living. It would even employ the women and education for the children because a soldier whose family was taken care of was loyal and the army needed its soldiers fed and housed and that required workers.

Sir Robert was right, it was brilliant and by cutting off the cheaper black workers the white workers abused in the mills could more easily rally and the argument that he, in persisting in forcing the mill owners to pay a living wage to their staff, was fixed in his determination to be considered an abolitionist had crumbled. And having it introduced by Sir Robert Argent couldn't rally his people who hated Derek on principal to deny it.

Stiles had outwitted him, and he had done it entirely for Derek.

Again the gorge rose in Derek's mouth. He thanked Sir Robert and looked for the refreshment table. He needed a drink.
Derek spent his Christmas in Brighton with his uncle and sister although he did give a token resistance to the idea. He returned to London as soon as he could for the opening of parliament, with the instruction to Theo that he go to Rosings to collect the picture of Stiles as Persephone. He was necessary for several important laws that were currently being discussed and could not leave the city. It had the terrible consequence of causing time to pass much more quickly than he would like and by the time the laws were ready to be signed into action it was the middle of March and he was exhausted.

He had not considered himself so busy before and was surprised that politics took up so much of his time because if he was not in the House of Lords he was having to socialise to maintain his relationships that he could guarantee that these people would vote the way that they promised. He wanted to stop long enough that he could process what was happening with Stiles, who had, before Christmas, stopped writing to him - for which Derek did not blame him.

The long period between him accusing Stiles, and he was unsure what it was that he had said, and where he found himself searching through his correspondence several times for the letters that Stiles had sent him but he could not find them - to the extent that he asked Theo if he had actually received them.

He attempted several letters but none of those were cohesive and all ended up in the fire.

Towards the end of the month, as the gardens tried to burst into life around him, he received a new letter.

He took it to his bedroom to read it so that he was overlooked by the portrait of Stiles as Persephone. He could not have it anywhere else, the gaze was challenging and the image overwhelming. Without even being present he felt terrible guilt over what he had done.

It took over an hour for him to even open it.

Dearest D,

I have written more letters that end up in the fire than I have that I could send. It is not easy. I have used perhaps an entire bottle of ink. I have argued with myself over and over, part of me does not even want to write to you but Peter assures me that you are working hard for the betterment of Britain and that guilt stays your hand. Cora thinks you need to be shaken until you come to your own mind.

I am kept busy by the children and my pregnancy continues well, I am blooming and Maudlin
assures me that I have no worries about how it is progressing although my maid, Fiorna, is worried about the texture of my skin once the child is born. She is offended that I am actually increasing and has devised creams to prevent my skin from stretching.

But you do not wish to hear about my maids.

Evie seems to be shooting up like a weed, Thomas has most of his teeth and Alek has a graze on his forehead where he fell over the fireguard into the fireplace and banged his head on the flue. I was just glad that the fire was not lit at the time for I would not have cared to explain to my father that his infant alpha son threw himself into the fire like a Carthaginian sacrifice with something to prove.

Evie has him wrapped around her finger and often suggests mischief that he acts on so that he gets scolded and she does not.

Yet I am not writing about the children, I am sure that your uncle and sister have kept you apprised.

I am writing to apologise."

Derek paused in his reading for he had no idea what it was that Stiles had to be apologising for.

"What happened between us was not all my fault, but nor was it all yours. If blame is to be portioned then we should each take half. I was afraid and fear is irrational, and I understand that we were both afraid. You were hurt and I was afraid and I wish that I could have understood that better at the time.

The absence of my father and the betrayal of my friend cracked me open and I needed you to fill the void that was left in me and you were not ready. I could not understand that you needed time so I cleaved myself to you as if you were the panacea I needed and it was unfair. It put more pressure on you than you deserved.

Given time we would have come together and knew how to fill in the gaps in each other, for I do believe that we would have been good for each other but we crashed into each other. I needed someone that could not leave me because I was convinced that everyone would, but here I have been given time to be what I have never been before - alone.

The first weeks were hard but I have learned to like myself, to find those parts of myself that I do not like and work to excise them. Given time for reflection I realised that one person that I could not be left behind by was myself and so I took the time to get to know myself, for my smudge."

Derek supposed that "smudge" was how he referred to his pregnancy.

"I am learning, I refused to let my sisters accompany me for Felicity's first season was prearranged and it would have cost my father as much to cancel it, they write to me daily but I knew no one here, I had to make my own way and without the expectation that I would have to woo someone into marriage, I am available to actually be myself.

"I am sociable for my own sake, and not for my sisters or your political advantage and I am enjoying it. I have a suitor who I think might be more interested in my wealth than me and I have no interest in him, but it is flattering.

I thought that marriage to Parrish would give me what I wanted, a safe quiet life with a small house to manage. He might have let me continue my violin practise that I might perform to his associates. There would have been a bushel of mistresses and actresses that he patronised that I might not have
known about but it would have been so pedestrian that I knew he would not hurt me, for I had no real affection for him. He would have kept me because I was both too good for him, which I knew, but his slavish devotion to his position meant that my own would have been secure.

I did not want him because of him, I wanted him because of that security.

Carstairs wanted me because I was a novelty and he would have destroyed me and divorced me, or locked me in bedlam. The terror that overwhelmed me that I might be given to him pushed me to extremes and I never truly overcame that. I took that out on you and for that, I apologise.

After the death of my mother and my father's quick remarriage to Natalie, I was left wounded and I did not see the wealth of things that I had gained. I was convinced that my sisters were using me I could not see how loved I was. Even Natalie did care but I did not wish to see it.

I was wrong and for that, I apologise.

This does not absolve you of blame in what happened. You reacted with fear just as much as I did and you acted as irrationally as I did and you lashed out with that fear and you hurt me and for that, I fully expect that you apologise for that. You do not get kissed on the head and told it is okay like Evie gets when she tells Maudlin that they are not friends anymore so that she can hurt her.

I pushed you and hurt you and for that I am sorry.

You pushed back and hurt me and you should be sorry.

I want to be a good parent to Smudge and that means so do you. I cannot force you to apologise and become a part of my life any more, although I would like that, but you do not get to wave away your responsibilities to Smudge. We can be afraid independently but Smudge is another matter. They will grow with Alek and Evie and Thomas and fly kites in the park and learn to ride on donkeys that Peter rescued from the beach in Brighton and they will do it with two parents.

Derek lost his grip on the letter and it fell to the floor at the edge of the bed.

"Theo!"

Derek heard Theo clattering up the stairs where he was normally mostly silent. He threw himself through the doorway and having to take a moment to compose himself so he looked like he worked for a duke. "You called," he said even as he tried to catch his breath.

"Where is my mari? Where is he?"

Derek could not answer this letter by post. He had to see him. He had to explain. He had to apologise.

Derek knew that Theo would have kept track of Stiles, that he would know where he was, he was the one signing off on Stiles' bills as well. Stiles was almost certainly in contact with Theo as the primary access to the estate that Stiles was entitled to as Duchenne. Derek had suspected that Stiles had gone to Lea Green, the family estate in Lancashire but he wasn't sure and he had several other properties that were normally rented out.

"He went to Buxton, my lord."

Derek's heart stopped in his chest.

Buxton was a spa town, much in the same way as Bath was, but Buxton had two main draws for
people, the nearby mountain range - the heights of Abraham which were popular holiday destinations for people who liked to climb mountains and marvel at cliff faces and caves, the other was a large Sanitorium where people went to die. People from all over Europe went to the hospital for the water cure in the hope it might help their tuberculosis and it did not.

Derek couldn't breathe even as Theo guided his head down between his knees.

Stiles' letter assured him that the pregnancy was proceeding well but he had gone to Buxton, a spa town in the mountains of Derbyshire with no real claim to fame except a hospice. Every terrible fear about pregnancy reared itself back up like a hydra. Stiles had written the letter because he was dying. He wanted there to be peace between them so that Smudge could be raised with a loving alpha parent when he himself was gone.

There was no recourse. As soon as he could he told Theo to prepare the carriage, any of the carriages, he had had to amend because Stiles still hadn't returned the big one, that they rush to Buxton at once. Derek had to see Stiles one more time before he died. He had to.

Chapter End Notes

Stiles is not dying, Buxton has a fine opera house as well
It took Derek four days to get to Buxton. He had intended to ride but no sooner had he planned to leave the next day the heavens decided that all of April's rain should fall as soon as possible and he agreed to take the carriage although it would be slower. The road was washed out about five miles outside London and he ended up overnighting in a nearby posthouse because continuing would have broken the horses' legs. The next day was still wet but nowhere near as bad and the locals had put down wooden branches to support the road which allowed him to travel onwards. He did not believe that Theo not had facilitated this with the application of a little silver.

The roads were bad which meant the carriage was slow which made Derek antsy and irritable, but every time he decided that he would ride and the carriage could catch up the Heavens graced him with another downpour. He found himself unable to read or answer correspondence and that made him irritable so when they arrived in the inn the second night, just after the Post, and discovered that they had no rooms left, not even for a Duke, because of the weather, and he was going to have to sleep in the carriage or the stable like Theo was fine to, he just started walking in what he hoped was the right direction. He didn't know the roads outside London towards Derbyshire very well.

Theo talked him back once he had negotiated that Derek might have a bed in the innkeeper's own private rooms, again suggesting an application of silver. He was sure that word of his terrible temper would return to London before he did.

The third night he was a guest of a friend who lived in Derby town where he was expected to socialise and leave early the next morning that he might reach Buxton before it got too late. The friend, Lord Curzon of Kedleston Hall, was adamant that Derek stay a few days more and by that point, Derek's mood was so fragile that Theo cut him off to prevent him offending Lord Curzon, and explaining to the Butler where Lord Curzon couldn't help but overhear that his grace was eager to return to his Mari now that his responsibilities in London were at an end for the season, with his mari increasing he was perhaps more irritable than normal.

By the time that they finally arrived in Buxton, it was so late that they could not even call on the house where Stiles was without appearing like burglars so Buxton didn't see the town until the next morning having been forced to stay in the local hotel which had been the finest he had stayed in since leaving London.

He supposed it was fitting with so many wealthy patients coming here to treat their consumption that rich family would come to visit and need somewhere to stay. It had been such a terrible journey that as soon as he had found himself in Buxton and in a comfortable bed he fell into a deep sleep and did not wake until early afternoon. There had been attempts to wake him, Derek saw, which included clean clothes being laid out by Isaac, his valet, and two trays of tea both of which were cold. He must have been incredibly sour tempered if neither of his servants had actually physically attempted to wake him instead of loudly clattering around the room.

He ordered a hot bath and had Isaac neaten his beard with clippers and a razor before he dressed, surprised a little at the finery that they had laid out for him. When Derek had married Stiles he had seen the way that Stiles had babied the horses drawing their carriage, little sweetmeats and slices of dried apple taken from his pockets and he had been the same with Maudlin and his own staff, Derek had not realised that it was the same for Derek's staff. Derek had not questioned Halwyn's loyalty. Halwyn had been employed to look after the Duchenne, to be butler and confidante and bodyguard all in one, which was in part the purpose of a camerera mayor, but at some point, Stiles
had made the taciturn alpha his friend.

There had been another purpose when Derek had hired Halwyn. Despite his reputation, Derek was not cruel, and his intent had not been to marry Stiles, but to marry Vidama Argent and give her a cold and loveless marriage that was a business arrangement between Derek and her parents, and Halwyn had been the sop to her comfort that Derek provided. Handsome, educated and virile Halwyn had been the way that Derek could make sure that Vidama Argent would not be desperately unhappy with the expectation that Derek would look the other way to any indiscretion with no one questioning the position of such a man in her household. He had given her a potential lover with no repercussions in society because as much as he wanted to punish her family for what they had done to his - he had had no intention to be cruel to her personally. He needed a wife; her parents needed money, she had just been the commodity that was sold.

Stiles had never looked at Halwyn that way. Stiles had never made Derek question his fidelity. Stiles had never been a commodity. He had never been the porcelain doll of an omega Vidama Argent had been, the first time that Derek had seen him he was drinking Arrack punch that he wasn't supposed to have and at that moment when the omega had noticed him staring and poured himself another glass. At that moment Derek was doomed. It had just taken him nearly a year to realise it.

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The house that Stiles had purchased, according to Theo, was in the prestigious Buxton Crescent which was a series of four-story houses built in the same style, and possibly the same architect, like the more famous Bath crescent. They were tall slim houses with white stone fronts and sprawling gardens to the rear. Halwyn had taken over as Butler of the house and with a bow of the head told Derek that his grace was in the garden with some guests if he would like to be walked through the house. This was said with the corollary that most guests were welcomed through the gate at the side of the house that led to the gardens.

The gardens to the house were not large but they were expertly kept with herbs and aromatic flowers. A large wisteria, not quite in season, covered an entire brick wall under which was a stone bench. Through the aromatic garden, under a trellis of growing rose bushes was a small lawned area upon which several tables had been placed for a Venetian breakfast. It was late afternoon and almost all of the guests had left, except for one young alpha gentleman who sat opposite Stiles and was currently engaged in conversation with him.

When Halwyn opened the gate to the lawned area with a loud creak Stiles turned his head and for the first time Derek saw Stiles' "Lydia face", the one he wore when he was being polite and charming and the perfect model of a Duchenne which he achieved, he said, by pretending to be Lydia. Whoever this young alpha was, and to be honest Derek did not truly care, the Stiles he saw was fake and it surprised Derek that he could tell the difference so easily because Stiles had never shown him that face - not once. It caused him to worry the piece of fabric in his pocket. He had brought it from London although perhaps it would have been better thrown in the fire, but he had brought it and now rubbed his fingers against it as all the words that he wanted to say fell out of his head like dead moths.

Stiles had said in his letter that he was blooming but the word was an understatement. He seemed to glow. His hair was cut short into the frightened owl style that he had adopted all those months ago and there was perhaps a little rose petal salve on his lips but no powder could achieve his radiance or the way his eyes shone through those dark lashes in the early spring sunlight. He wore a red jacket with a pleated vest, common for pregnant or older omega gentlemen as it could hide an expanding belly and was the same dove colour as Derek's own. Most of him was hidden by the
table but still, Derek's breath caught. He had not seen Stiles in nearly five months and he had come running thinking Stiles was dying of consumption and Stiles looked healthier than he had ever seen him.

Derek rubbed the fabric in his fingers again, before shoving it down making his pocket bulge around it. "Mr Daehler," Stiles said in that charming patronising way he used for members of society, "you are yet to meet my husband, his grace, the duke of Albemarle."

Stiles' suitor was a young man, perhaps no older than Stiles himself, with the bluest eyes Derek had ever seen, the colour of which was obvious even from some paces away. They were narrow and framed by thick brows and plump cheekbones. He had a pedestrian handsomeness, the sort of alpha who caught a gaze but did not necessarily hold it, his mouth was slim and his smile looked entirely forced. He was well dressed and leaning a little too far against the table for Derek to be entirely comfortable with him, even as the colour ran from his face towards his hessian boots.

"A pleasure, Mister," Derek made a show of forgetting the man's name as he stepped over to Stiles and in a show that was entirely for the alpha's benefit, too his hand and kissed it, "it has been too long my love," he said with a smile that was not as fake as it should have been. There was more truth in that statement than he expected.

"I was not expecting you until tomorrow," Stiles said letting Derek keep his hand, "Halwyn, bring his grace a chair," he waved him over, "and some tea, you must tell me all about your journey." Stiles was trying to dissuade the suitor and was perhaps kinder to Derek than he might have been-had they not had an audience. He completely ignored Derek addressing the young man and had he tried to answer Stiles would have talked over him.

He then continued the conversation on with grace, remembering at times to include the young man, who apparently owned a silk mill in Derby, or his parents did, until even he took the hint that he had been replaced and was not wanted nor needed in the conversation.

When he had gone Stiles leaned back in the chair, "God, he's exhausting." He let out a grand sigh and his hands wrapped around his belly as if he needed to support it, although Derek suspected that both his pants and his pregnancy corset were helping him in that regard, "I don't know if he's interested in my money or he just has a thing for pregnant people."

Paige's pregnancy had involved her taking to her bed for the last five months. She had looked almost transparent and had been so tired, her hair lank about her face and her lips cracked no matter how much salve Derek applied. In contrast, Stiles had never looked so healthy, his hair was thick and his skin radiant with health. It would have been the envy of London. He looked plumper than he had, and under the table, he had no shoes or stockings even though it was still a little cold, and someone, probably, Halwyn had put a thick rug there to protect his feet.

"You're beautiful," the words fell out of Derek as if he had no control over them. Stiles had been beautiful before but he was glowing with health and fecundity and charm and Derek regretted again every single word that he had said to hurt him and he couldn't even remember what most of them were. "I am so sorry." That too came out unbidden and reaching into his pocket he handed over the scrap of fabric. "Here."

It was knit, but the yarn had been ripped out and put back in so many times it had almost felted together and was perhaps the size of a dishcloth. The tension was confused and parts of it were tightly knit and in others, the stitches were loose enough that Stiles could push his fingers through. "Thank you," he said warily trying to work out what it was and why Derek had given him it.

"I regretted what I said as soon as I stopped to consider what I had done, which was about two
minutes after you left, and then I was afraid and ashamed and I went to Rosings to apologise and you weren't there and I got angry again. I Christmassed with Peter and Cora and both were keen to tell me what I had done wrong and I could not disagree with them, I was wrong, and knowing I was stuck in London I tried to make a grand gesture, something I could give you and it would make everything better and I made that." He gestured to the piece of fabric in Stiles' hands. "I tried to at any rate. It turns out knitting is hard." Stiles smiled at him and it wasn't the fake smile he had given Daehler it was amused and bemused and comforting. "It was meant to be a comforter for the baby. I was trying to wait until I finished it so you'd understand, but then Theo told me you were here."

Stiles smiled again, "I want the baby, I want you, I just."

"You were afraid." Stiles said and Derek agreed, "and you were ashamed," Derek had no choice but to agree, "and the longer it went the more ashamed and afraid you got and you knew there were no shortcuts."

"And they say omega aren't mindreaders." Derek finished his tea.

"We're not," Stiles told him, "we're just observant."

"I am so sorry and I know words can't make up for what I said and," he reached into the other pocket and handed Stiles the folded papers. "I had nurseries built in every house I own, I thought you were going to die, why else would people come to Buxton, I damn near ran here."

Stiles laughed.

"I don't know why else someone would come here."

Stiles was still laughing when he answered, "I live across from the opera house where my favourite violinist has played three shows a week for months. I didn't come to Buxton to take the waters, although I do, I'm here after all, and I have baths in it which is possibly why I'm glowing, I came here to listen to him play."

"I've been such a fool," Derek admitted.

"You have." Stiles agreed, "come help me up, I'm getting a little cold and Halwyn seems to have given us some privacy."

Derek damn near knocked his chair over in his rush to help Stiles to his feet by getting around the table and giving him his arm to lean on. He had not even noticed that they were alone once Mr Daehler had finally left. "I don't care who hears it," Derek told him, "I love you, and I was the biggest fool to let you go for a moment, I love you so much and I was awful without you and I was awful for hurting you and I don't ever want to do it again."

Stiles patted his cheek even as he hefted himself from the chair and took a moment to balance himself before he rammed his feet into a pair of cloth mules to walk back to the house. "You are staying for tea," Stiles told him, "and we'll discuss what comes next after you've seen the children. It's Thomas' turn to choose what we are having and he wants Spagussnegs."

Derek had no idea what that was but right now if it would make Stiles think better of him he would have eaten anything.

He was relieved when, with Thomas sitting on his knee because the child just accepted everything with a calm equanimity even if Evie had spent five minutes sitting on the bottom step for kicking her uncle in the shin, that spagussnegs was asparagus and eggs, where the baby was happy to dunk
his asparagus spears and toast points in the runny boiled eggs and chatter to him, making him feel, possibly for the first time since the children had come into his care, like family.
The children treated Derek with the casual disdain and mistrust that he expected from children who hadn't seen an alpha relative in six months or so; with the assurance that Derek was evil and was possibly going to eat them, or more likely, their primary caregivers. The only exception to this was Thomas who patted Derek on the face with hands covered in egg and butter and then sat down with Berry and his toys on the mat before the unlit fire to wait for the others to be finished.

Evie snapped her teeth with every bite in a way that would most likely give her a headache as she scowled at her uncle in a manner that would have made an onlooker swear that she was a Hale. Alek had crowded on his brother's lap and draped himself over him and was munching on Stiles' cheese on toast. That Alek had taken Stiles' tea for himself was not missed by the staff who brought him a second plate of it.

"Mimi!" Alek said finally loosening his death grip on his brother, "Smudge keeps kicking me."

"That's because you're his favourite," Stiles said with a smile and a look of bemused patience, "you know he kicks you the most."

Evie chuckled, "because you sit on Stiles' knee the most, you know that always gets you kicked."
Alek continued to grumble around his cheese on toast, taking it in hand before he climbed down.

Derek wanted to ask if he could feel it but didn't feel that he had the right and it was possible that Stiles could read it on his face. Stiles had always been able to see straight through him. "Here," he said standing up and taking Derek's hand from the table, holding it against his swollen belly. "I'm wearing too many layers for you to really feel it but they're kicking," Derek could feel it, like fingers pressing softly against his palm and he was overwhelmed. A lump that felt like solid acid formed in his throat that he couldn't swallow past and he could feel his eyes well with tears.

"Come along, schatzi," Maudlin said, herding the children and Berry, "it is time for bed," Derek didn't know if it was because she saw his reaction or because it was time for them to finally go to bed.

Once Smudge had stopped kicking, which didn't take long, Stiles excused himself to change, complaining about his pregnancy corset needing adjusting again and that Merryweather was finally going to have to put in breast gussets because, and this was said with a hand pressed to his chest, his tits hurt, and urged Derek to move into the private sitting room which was better suited for intimate conversation because it wasn't covered in toys.

When Stiles came back he was wearing looser pants, his shift and a wool banyan that was belted over his belly. He was still barefoot and sat on the couch next to Derek with a sort of oof noise. "Thank you for waiting for me."

There was a lot Derek wanted to say to Stiles, apologies and protestations, denials that he would never do it again but no words came out. They just sat side by side silent for a while before Stiles reached out and took Derek's hand, "here, Smudge is kicking again."

Without the pleated vest or the shirtwaist, or the layers of the pregnancy corset with its buckles and belts, with just a wisp of cotton lawn, Derek could not only feel but see the baby kick, sticking its foot against the outer reaches of its world. Where the first time had brought him to tears this time
there was laughter to accompany it. "I'm kind of done with the novelty," Stiles said, "but I'm not quite counting the rest of this off on my calendar. It might be our wedding anniversary," he said with a smile, "and if that's not hilarious."

"Lydia threatened to stab me in the kidneys." Derek blurted it out, not sure how his brain had gone there.

"Father will be proud," Stiles admitted, "he always said to go for there if we were attacked. Vulnerable spot." Stiles was resting against the pillows on the back of the couch with his belly sticking out, with Derek's hand against it. "Did you see what they did to Argent? He won't call anyone a harlot again, that's for certain."

Derek admitted he had not.

"You don't read the Prattler," it was a statement of fact not a question, "they found that Argent was associated with a group that was found legally responsible for several girls from a known bawdy house disappearing and being found in the river. He tried to pretend it hadn't happened but Uncle John," that was a known euphemism for the Honorable East India Company, "decided he might be of more use in India, at least until the rumours subside. I heard from others that he couldn't be seen in public without people accusing him of being a whoremonger and a murderer, and the Prattler, having been found to be taking information from him changed ownership." He said this in a very matter of fact way as if it wouldn't reshape London society. "I dread to think what they would have done if he had insulted Felicity, we all tend to be more protective of her, she was the baby."

"Felicity is terrifying," Derek said remembering how she had threatened him all those months before.

"She's my sister." Stiles shrugged it off, "can you imagine how she's going to be about Smudge."

Derek paled, he couldn't help it, it was like he had seen into the heart of a terrible abyss and the abyss didn't just gaze back, but winked and blew him a kiss. With his hand on Stiles' belly, he started to apologise again but Stiles silenced him with a finger on his lips. "You were wrong and I was wrong and now we know and we start again, for Smudge and ourselves and each other." He grinned and it was the quicksilver grin that Derek had loved and had not wanted to admit that he had loved. "I might have read this book of philosophy about self-searching and admitting who you are before you are ready to be loved and it might have made an impression on me."

"I think I might need to read that book."

Stiles wriggled in his seat and then threw his legs over Derek's, trying to make himself comfortable. "I missed you," he said. "When I first arrived in Buxton it was cold and I went to the pump rooms and my first thought was I should tell Derek about this, and the water was warm and it's nasty and I go every day and drink it but my first thought on drinking it was to tell you how bad it was. I wanted you to commiserate with me. People come from all over Europe to drink the water and it's foul." He leaned into Derek's body and Derek admitted to himself how much he had missed the easy comfort of their bodies, not sex but this sort of ease and proximity. Derek didn't even notice how Stiles' hand had reached up to scratch at the short hairs at the back of his head. "I climbed the Heights of Abraham," Derek glared at him, "it's barely a brisk walk, but yes, I climbed the mountains, I mean we're mostly at the top anyway, and I wanted to share the view with you. I was angry for a while and then I got sad, and then I got a bit stupid then I got over my grief and I thought about it and that's when I sent you that letter."

"I would have put it off," Derek admitted, "I was ashamed and I couldn't act and the longer I didn't act the more ashamed I got, and then I got the letter and Theo said you were here and I thought you
had lied to me and you were dying and I had the barouche bring me here as fast as it could."

Stiles laughed, that bright wild laugh that knocked the ground from under Derek's feet. "Would that we could stay like this," Derek murmured into Stiles' neck, "and nothing would change, just like this, forever."

Stiles laughed again. "I'd love to," he said, "but I really need to pee again."

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With the mischievousness typical of her parent Dido Anabel Natalia Euphemia Hale was born on the anniversary of her parent's wedding. A bouncing alpha heir of eight pounds and a shock of dark hair and her omega parent's snub nose she did not wait long to announce her emergence to the world with a thin and thready wail. Greyish blue and covered in fluids, with her face screwed up with bruising and discontent she was the most beautiful thing that Derek had ever seen.

Outside the room, Alek insisted on alpha prerogative that he be first to see and Derek could hear Dickon tell him not right now that they had to be cleaned up first because Stiles was tired and having babies was mucky. Derek heard Thomas agree in that quite placid way of his before Stiles reached up at him with both arms leaving him unsure if he wanted the baby or him.

Stiles was crying, more from exhaustion and being so emotionally overwrought than distress and when Derek laid Dido, wrapped in a silk edged blanket, on his chest he smiled. He wasn't done, but in the quiet before the process of birth continued he smiled at his daughter and began to sob because he had no other way to express all of the emotions within him. "She's a fine lass," the midwife said, using a napkin to wipe some of the vermix from her face, even as the baby rooted around for a nipple where she had been laid on the skin bared where Stiles' shift had come untied and fallen loose about his shoulders.

"Dido," Stiles said with a great sniff, and every part of him sounded exhausted as Derek sat on the birthing bed next to him, his fingers running down the baby's fat arms. She was as plump as a partridge and her scowl was his. She was disgusted with the very world and was rooting around for a nipple with no idea what it was she wanted because she hadn't encountered it yet. "Her name is Dido."

It surprised Derek that he had not thought to ask Stiles what he wanted to call Smudge and that if Stiles had suggested a name that was utterly ridiculous he still would have agreed to it because she was there and she was perfect and Stiles had made her real.

When Stiles had left he had accused Derek of giving Stiles a family that he was not part of, in the month since he had come to Buxton Derek had been made part of that family, whether that was sailing boats in the river with Evie, or flying kites with Alek- even when it wasn't windy - or running pell-mell down the lawn with Thomas on his shoulders and Berry gambolling along with them, threatening to trip them, he had done everything he could to be part of the group, and now there was Dido, too tiny for games but so very perfect that Derek was overwhelmed.

And there was no way he would rather be.
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