

Mockingbird

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Category:	M/M
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Characters:	Stiles Stilinski , Peter Hale , Gerard Argent , Chris Argent , David Whittemore , Talía Hale , Laura Hale , Victoria Argent , Allison Argent , Jackson Whittemore's Mother , Kali (Teen Wolf) , Ethan (Teen Wolf) , Aiden (Teen Wolf) , Ennis (Teen Wolf) , Deucalion (Teen Wolf)
Additional Tags:	Dark Stiles Stilinski , Villain Stiles Stilinski , Villain Peter Hale , Creature Stiles Stilinski , (sort of) , Hive Mind Stiles , For Lack Of A Better Term , Murder , all the murder , so much murder , seriously loads of murder , Murder Husbands , Blood and Gore , human death , supernatural being death , Animal Death , Torture , (only of sapient beings) , Body snatching , Mental Health Issues , that are semi-successfully ignored , partial main character death , Consensual Underage Sex , Kissing , handjobs , Frottage , other sexual acts discussed and referred to , unhealthy relationship , Demisexual Stiles Stilinski , well I guess this is what it is , Alternate Universe - No Hale Fire (Teen Wolf) , Wrong Number AU , mentions of parental neglect , mentions of parental abuse , because ill Claudia , Swearing , lack of respect towards anything at all , Stiles to Peter POV , ratio is about 75 to 25 , Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence , (not between Peter and Stiles) , Public Humiliation
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Mockingbird

by [MarInk](#)

Summary

Stiles works tirelessly to keep the roof over his heads and longs for a proper challenge for his brains. Peter chafes under his sister's authority and nurses big, bloody dreams. One day, the two are connected by a mistaken text message.

One never knows who is on the other end of a wrong number. Sometimes it's somebody one will come to cherish and adore. Sometimes it's a ruthless, unapologetic monster.

Sometimes it's both.

Notes

Hi there, hello, I just want to say a few things before we start.

1) Please, please heed the tags. I really can't stress this enough. If you think anything listed there might upset you by itself or when the main character does it and you still proceed, please keep in mind that you have been explicitly and comprehensively warned. This is a story about villains, full stop, not villains with a moral code and redeeming qualities.

2) The amazing and kind Marce_129 consulted me on the bits of Spanish that will appear in this fic. Marce_129's detailed and patient explanations have been tremendously helpful, and any remaining mistakes are all mine. Thank you for your help so, so much <3

All Spanish is translated in the end notes if it's not explained directly in the story.

3) I put together a playlist for this fic that I listened to throughout writing. You can find it [here](#).

Chapter 1: No One Here But Him

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Stiles opens all of his eyes at the same time. It's a rare moment of perfect synchronicity for him, and he enjoys the rush brought on by the sharp contrast between the dark, peaceful unity of sleep and the bright multitude of wakefulness.

After that, things start to diverge. Some bodies want to stretch luxuriously, and some bodies need pins and needles gently massaged out of limbs that were in an awkward position. Some eyes need dried gunk rubbed out of them, and some lips need sleep drool to be wiped off. Three pairs of glasses need to be donned to bring the world into full focus, and one pair of horns needs disentangling from bunched up sheets.

There aren't enough bathrooms to accommodate all of Stiles at the same time, and he directs the first shift there while the second shift is off to the kitchen, to start pulling eggs, bacon, milk and OJ out of the fridge, grinding coffee beans, filling pots with water for oatmeal, and putting the kettles on. Prime always goes with the first shift, the earlier to relieve his bladder and brush the taste of sleep out of his mouth. That makes him Stiles' favorite, but, Stiles supposes, it's justified. After all, Prime is the only body that never belonged to anybody else; the original Stiles, the source Stiles, at one point in time the single Stiles in existence.

As he works the toothpaste into lather in twenty-one mouths, he looks at Prime's face in the mirror. It's nothing much, a boy-next-door teenage face, if one discounts the eyes. Weird to think that it used to be enough to contain Stiles. It's framed by uneven hair, and Stiles sighs with Prime's lips, carding Prime's fingers through the strands. A hairdresser he is not, but cutting it himself is his only option. He can walk Prime out in sunglasses; however, hairdressers always ask people to take glasses off, which is not unreasonable but makes a trip like that an unnecessary risk.

The first shift makes their way into the backyard while the second shift takes the bathrooms. George-Stiles connects his phone to a speaker and puts on a bouncy workout playlist, and Stiles is off coordinating his morning exercise. Personally, he dislikes doing this and, as far as pastimes go, would've preferred to watch a movie or something, but he learned the hard way that only Prime, the youngest among his bodies, can go without a workout of some kind and still feel limber and well. So he makes sure each body does stretches, and then there are push-ups, jumping jacks, laps around the backyard and so on. Older, frailer bodies do less, and younger, stronger bodies do more.

Soon, it's time for the shifts to swap places: the first one is taking showers, washing off their newly earned sweat, and the second one starts the stretches. Freshly washed, the first shift descends on the kitchen and picks up breakfast preparation where the second one left off.

Cooking is fun. Stiles moves in concert with himself, always aware where every body is and what they've got in their hands. It's a quick, efficient dance where he is own partner. The

only body that does nothing to help is Luke-Stiles. He's a raven, so Stiles makes his contribution to be hopping around on the windowsill and croaking in an encouraging manner.

Forty-two stomachs full, Stiles does the dishes and cleans up the kitchen with forty bodies while Luke-Stiles preens his glossy dark feathers and Prime makes his way into the backyard again with a big extra mug of coffee.

The grogginess of sleep is long gone by now, and Stiles directs the busy buzz of the bodies that need to change, put on jackets and outdoor shoes, and head out to work. The ones who work remotely are already starting, laptops booting up. Prime is relaxed, slumped in his chair in front of the small desk that stands flush with the fence, bare feet planted on the cool soil, hands wrapped around the warm mug. Every body is feeling great, energetic and ready for the daily tasks, and Stiles whistles a happy little tune with forty-one pairs of lips.

Sometimes he regrets the fact that he knows nothing about singing. He could harmonize with himself perfectly and become a YouTube sensation.

On the other hand, any sort of fame could bring suspicious hunters down on him. Better not to attract attention.

It's nice out in the backyard. The solitude provides a pleasant background to the input from those bodies who are driving, watching for their stops in buses, and weaving their bicycles in and out of the traffic. The only thing that's disturbing the peace is the cheery playlist that's still on. Prime sets his half-finished coffee on the desk and reaches for the phone—which, incidentally, Stiles only now realizes he forgot to have George-Stiles pick up before heading to work. Keeping track of these things can be hard. Oh well, it's not like Stiles can't answer any calls or messages from here the exact same way he would at the coffee shop where George-Stiles works.

As he scrolls through his playlists, looking for something more mellow, a new message slides in with a chime that seems way too loud through the speaker.

Unknown Number

Last night was fun. Hook up again tonight?

Oh, this is funny. Stiles is one hundred per cent certain he didn't hook up with anyone in any body last night—or, indeed, ever. He's been rather busy with other things.

He could ignore this, of course. But as he looks at the self-assured, brisk message from a stranger, a slow mischievous smile touches all of his lips. Luke-Stiles gives a loud mocking croak.

Me

nah dude theres not gonna be any hooking up

seeing as your one night stand was disappointed enough to give you a wrong number id rather pass

There's a whole subculture of texting. Stiles knows as much from the media. Teenagers seem to have a language of their own to use, with rules and conventions that are learned by osmosis. None of Stiles' bodies, excluding Prime, are young enough to be high school students, so he has no idea how he's supposed to write messages to suit his actual age. He usually just does perfect grammar, spelling and punctuation when texting on behalf of his bodies. Right now he doesn't have to pretend to be anyone, though; he's an anonymous entity on the other end of a wrong number. So he just lets his texts pour out in a stream of consciousness kind of way, mind working faster than even Prime's nimble fingers.

Now, how will Unknown Number respond to that?

Instead of a new incoming message, the phone starts ringing. The number displayed is the same one the text came from.

Stiles snorts, keeping it to only Prime's lips (no need to give the bodies that are in public right now a crazy reputation; that is, a crazier one than they already have), and declines the call.

Me

WHOA boundaries presumptuous much

Unknown Number

Why not answer the phone if you are not Charlie playing a stupid prank on me and pretending it's not his number?

Me

big brain move lol were i charlie the disappointed hookup i could just give the phone to someone else heck get a stranger in the street give them a sob story about needing to convince a nutso ex i changed my number

Unknown Number

Then how do you propose we resolve this dilemma?

Stiles giggles through Prime and puts Prime's feet up on the desk. This is genuinely so much fun. He hasn't had this much fun without having to play a role in forever.

Me

we dont resolve shit haha i dont owe you anything

youre on your own buddy

whys this bugging you that much anyway??cant take the idea that someone didnt like your dick enough to give you their own number?

Unknown Number

See here now, if you are just a random person, how do you happen to know the shape of my genitals?

Me

i guessed genius

in this culture being so pushy and arrogant is a penis thing

Unknown Number

Alright, I concede to you. You are not Charlie.

Me

oh really what gave me away lol was it my insistence im not charlie or was it my insistence im not charlie hmmmm tough choice

Unknown Number

Charlie is not what you'd call an intellectual type. He wouldn't cite the patterns of masculinity and patriarchy in the modern culture in his defense.

Me

oooh look at them all big words

i bet you actually did study in college instead of having sex all over the campus must be why now your hookups dont leave you their own numbers

Unknown Number

Is that what you did in college? Have sex instead of brushing up on your punctuation and spelling?

Me

nah im not college material

i only flew by

Technically, some of Stiles' bodies have been to colleges. It doesn't do him any good, though, since those consciousnesses and all of their knowledge and experience are long dead. This is why Amelia-Stiles, Ginny-Stiles and Rita-Stiles are lunch ladies at the BHHS, Leo-Stiles is a dog walker, Carl-Stiles washes windows, Mark-Stiles is a janitor at the Sheriff's station, George-Stiles is a barista, Troy-Stiles is a clerk slash glorified printer fixing boy in a local law firm, Xiuying-Stiles washes cars at the local car wash, Amy-Stiles is a supermarket cashier, Eugene-Stiles is a waiter at a restaurant, Logan-Stiles puts his muscled bulk to good use chopping meat at the local farm, Jonathan-Stiles is a writer of quizzes, horoscopes and assorted bullshit for an online entertainment behemoth, and so on. He's gotten good enough at programming that Emmett-Stiles and Mildred-Stiles are doing some freelance coding, but he just doesn't have the education for anything more interesting. He's doing all of his jobs right now, as he texts with Prime's fingers, and he longs for a better challenge. It's a bit of a sore spot, and he's saving up money to send someone to at least the local community college. It doesn't feel like his own efforts made via Leia-Stiles, Darth-Stiles and Han-Stiles are enough; getting through medical textbooks on his own is really tough.

Unknown Number

Flew by? What, in a plane?

Well, not in a plane. Stiles had just taken over Luke-Stiles then and was testing his range by making Luke-Stiles fly as far as he could, including over the Beacon Hills Community College campus.

Raven wings got tired long before his connection to Luke-Stiles started to waver, and Stiles turned him around for some food, water and rest. He kept testing, limited by flesh wings but loath to spend money on a plane ticket just for the sake of experimentation, and never found any limits to his control. Maybe there aren't any.

Me

how else do people fly

Stiles is good at saying things that are technically true and letting people assume what they like. It's another form of fun that he can have quite freely.

Unknown Number

What's your name?

Stiles raises all of his eyebrows, surprised. It serves to make George-Stiles' morning a little difficult because it happens in the middle of taking a complicated order from a bitchy customer.

Me

not charlie ha

but what why

Unknown Number

You're interesting. You think fast, and you're not afraid to say what you think.

Me

and you sound really creepy

Unknown Number

I have been called overly intense before. Does that scare you?

Intrigued, Stiles has Emmett-Stiles, who is already sitting in front of a laptop, go through some free online databases, looking for the owner of the unknown number. Nothing pops up. Looks like the guy is the cautious, privacy-conscious type. Disgruntled at the idea of possibly having to get a subscription to one of the paid ones to find out who Unknown Number is, Stiles has all of his bodies (besides Luke-Stiles, of course) go through their phones and other readily available sources for a last-ditch effort to sleuth the name out for free.

He doesn't really expect it to turn up anything, but he strikes gold with Troy-Stiles' law firm databases. Troy-Stiles has access to them all because he's the one whose job it is to update them with tons of rather boring data. The number is right there, labeled "Peter Hale, senior partner".

Oh, this is precious! Stiles laughs with Prime's mouth while Troy-Stiles closes the phone list and continues his mind-numbing database filling. Peter is his boss; well, one of them, considering how many jobs Stiles has. And he's also the left hand of the local werewolf pack. The enforcer, the spymaster, the paranoid and lethal one. Talia Hale, the alpha, is not at all like her left hand. Stiles has seen her around town a few times, even though they don't exactly share any social circles; a few of his bodies were hired to wait on guests at this or that gala. She is as milquetoast as they come, in his opinion, a spoiled silly woman playing at being a benevolent queen.

Peter, on the other hand, is the real deal. Stiles has heard the rumors and read the file on him he found here in the basement way back when. In fact, Stiles would be willing to bet a body or two that Peter has already looked George-Stiles' number up, in all of the databases that money could possibly buy.

Not that Stiles himself is mentioned anywhere prying eyes can see, of course. He turns off the GPS on the phone, just to make sure it can no longer be traced that way. Peter might have a lot of unscrupulous sources at his disposal.

Now, Peter's asking his name, the name he undoubtedly already knows or at least thinks he knows. Playing a little game, are we?

Me

no

but how bout you gimme your name 1st

Unknown Number

If Charlie altered only a digit or two, there's a large chance we are in the same city. I'm fairly well-known in certain circles, so I'd prefer to get to know you a little more before disclosing who I am.

Me

oh i see how it is

hedging

fine keep your secrets

ill call you Vine then

Unknown Number

Why Vine?

Me

cause youre a creeper

Vine

A charming choice. In this case, you shall be Mockingbird. You do seem to like mocking me.

Me

*uhm and you want to keep talking to me anyway do you like being mocked or something
is that it was charlie not sarcastic enough for ya*

Vine

You're quite refreshing, my Mockingbird. No one has talked to me the way you do in a long time. You don't seem to care about leaving a good impression at all.

Me

*im an anonymous mockingbird why should i care about your impression of me
so you wanna keep talking huh what do you want to talk about then*

Vine

Why don't you pick a topic? I started our first conversation, now it can be your turn.

Me

kay sure

Stiles closes the messages app and goes back to choosing a playlist. He makes circles around the backyard on Luke-Stiles' wings, croaking loudly as Prime's mouth chortles. He's got things to do today besides entertaining Peter Hale. Yes, it's fun talking to him. But it'll be even more fun if Stiles suddenly disappears for a while and then texts again whenever, because Peter's ego is a very big reason why Stiles already likes him.

Troy-Stiles keeps a discreet eye on the door adorned with the plaque "Peter Hale" as he works dutifully. In about fifteen minutes, Stiles is rewarded with the view of Peter's displeased face as the man in question leaves his office, looking down at his phone, and proceeds towards one of the conference rooms. His ass in that expensive-looking suit is exquisite, Stiles notes. Well, he's a werewolf. It'd be strange if his body wasn't to die for.

Hmm. Coming from Stiles, this last remark probably doesn't sound too good.

Satisfied, Stiles washes his emptied coffee mug and continues with the task that he normally only assigns to Prime. It's not something he does very often, maybe once a week, since he's always occupied with earning enough money to feed and clothe all of his bodies and keep the lights on in this behemoth of a building and also with going through the high school program so he can take his GED with the few bodies that never got around to it when they belonged to other people. But today is Wednesday, his day to indulge himself a little, so he walks Prime down to the basement, past Darth-Stiles, Leia-Stiles and Han-Stiles buried in their reading (neuroscience is no joke, he sighs with their three mouths as he looks at the dense text with their ten eyes), pries away the cardboard plastered over with cement that imitates a dead end, and opens the hidden door that requires a code only he knows. Darth-Stiles replaces the cardboard when Prime is inside. Stiles is not expecting any outsiders in the house, but it never hurts to be thorough and paranoid.

It's all very Scooby-Doo, honestly, but Stiles likes it. The setup fits the content of this secret part of the corridor: every wall between the cells and inside them is covered with paper, one

long continuous white river, and about two thirds of it have been written on. Tight, economical lines in Prime's chicken scratch handwriting, ceiling to floor, interspersed with printouts, photos, diagrams. It's divided into sections for each major English-speaking country in the world, their political structure, their economy, the hold various corporations have on their governments, the investigative and peacekeeping organizations.

These are Stiles' plans for world domination.

He's not *seriously* going to do it. Well, he is. At the very least, he will try, but not right now. So far he's got his hands full with this place, really. But it seemed like the thing to do at the time when he started, a goal he could work towards, and by now he has forgotten what it was like to want anything else for his future. Much as Stiles is lacking genuine fun these days, in the beginning everything was much worse, a ten-year-old mucking about in dozens of new bodies, lost, and confused, and all-encompassingly alone. It made him scream often then. All of his bodies would start wailing, hitting the walls with their fists in impotent rage at the unfairness and utter incomprehensibility of it all; he would shamle around on his new feet, getting used to being more than before, and clumsily figure out how to do all the things there wasn't anyone else to do anymore. It's a good thing he's far enough away from the town proper that no one ever heard him scream back then. When he realized what he was, thinking about world domination came naturally, the logical progression of every cartoon he's ever seen, every comic he's ever read. It was both an unreal fantasy and a very tangible reality, and the duality of it was interesting enough to help Stiles cheer up. Not that he even knew the word "duality" back then.

What else is a lonely little hive mind to do except spread himself around the world, after all?

Stiles occupies Prime's hands with writing as the speaker he took with him to the basement starts a new song. Stiles mouths along with the lyrics through all the bodies that are in the house:

"Peter Panic, as light as a feather, and he says it's okay when you blow him away..." Stiles grins with every pair of lips he's got, not minding that it looks like a strange thing to do for some of them. "He'll be back for you some other day!"

* * *

George-Stiles' feet ache. Out of all his jobs, the ones that deal with serving food are always the hardest on Stiles' feet, always standing, walking, never sitting down except during short scheduled breaks. George-Stiles is doing a double shift today, too; a co-worker had some sort of family emergency or something, and Stiles jumped at the chance of a bit of extra money.

He feels like he's earning every cent of it, too. He's exhausted by taking orders, making drinks, smiling and being polite all the time, especially when so many people seem to think the guy making their coffee is a handy human-shaped sink into which to pour all of their frustrations. God forbid their fancy something-ato or something-ino of the day tastes like it has hazelnut milk in it instead of almond milk, never mind that they demanded enough syrup that they can't possibly taste anything but cloying sugar. It's too hot, or it's too cold, there's too much ice or not enough, blah-blah-blah. George-Stiles looks like the type to take abuse without rebelling, too. He's tall, perpetually stooping, and thin in a way that looks like he got

dried out in the sun; he's got rather flyaway dark curly hair, big watery blue eyes and a long face that always reminds Stiles of a horse, and its natural expression is disarming and guileless. Stiles is always careful not to let his real emotions show on his bodies' faces. He'd be fired from most places then, and how would he feed himself in that case?

Tonight, though, there's a lovely surprise waiting for George at the end of the evening rush queue. Peter Hale, expensive suit and all, is waiting his turn to get coffee.

Stiles is delighted enough to do a little dance down in the basement with Prime. He knows for a fact Peter has never shown his face in this coffee shop before for as long as George-Stiles has worked here. Stiles would remember that face, having met him as Troy-Stiles. Besides, the shop's on the other end of town from the law firm office, and any lawyer desperate for an overpriced cup of joe can find half a dozen places to get it within easy walking distance. Oh, Peter's thinking he's being all secret agent or something, tracking down his silent Mockingbird.

"Little did the cunning wolf know," Stiles narrates to himself through the mouths of everyone in the house, "that the bird tracked him right back..."

George-Stiles goes on taking orders and being his guileless self. Finally, it's Peter's turn, and George-Stiles aims a polite, sweet smile at him:

"What will you have, sir? Would you like to hear about our seasonal offers?"

Stiles has never been this close to Peter Hale before, with only the narrow counter between them. Frankly, the man is stunning. Stiles can appreciate anyone's beauty, and he's also unable *not* to connect Peter to sex after how their correspondence started, and he takes in Peter's cold blue eyes, the artful bit of stubble highlighting the lines of his chiseled, handsome face, his broad shoulders and the tantalizing glimpse of the base of his throat just peeking from behind the loosened tie.

Peter's eyes flicker down to George-Stiles' name tag. If Stiles' weren't watching for it, he wouldn't notice a flicker of apprehension in Peter's face. Does he not like George-Stiles? It's entirely possible. Stiles doesn't have any experience in attraction but from what he does know about it, George-Stiles is not in Peter's league. Then again, Stiles doesn't think he's got any bodies who are. It's not like he took over a modeling agency or something.

"No, thank you," Peter says. He's got a nice voice, deep and smooth. "Just a medium latte, please."

"What kind of milk would you like, sir?" George-Stiles is anxious to know. He's a fussy, kindly man, or at least that is how Stiles presents him to his co-workers and customers. It's an image he cultivates across most of his bodies; it works in his favor in multiple ways. "We've got soy, almond, coconut..."

"The ordinary cow milk," Peter interrupts. He doesn't seem like the kind of man who has much patience for fussy, kindly people. Explains why he treats Troy-Stiles like the latter is invisible.

"And your name is...?" George-Stiles beams at Peter who is starting to look visibly frustrated. Prime's peals of giggling echo across the basement as he continues to fill in the Australia section.

"Peter." The name is said with so much displeasure, one could think the man was naming a bitter enemy.

Peter pays for his drink and goes to stand by the bit of the counter where the prepared drinks are brought. George-Stiles swaps places with the other barista on duty, Lucy, and starts making drinks, humming the tune to *Peter Panic* under his breath.

The phone in Prime's pocket starts ringing. Stiles smirks with Prime's lips.

As it rings, George-Stiles crouches down to take a few packets of assorted milk out of the cupboard under the coffee machine. While he's there, out of the customers' line of sight, Stiles declines the call.

George-Stiles straightens up and calls:

"Lucy, we're almost out of almond milk. I'll go grab more, lickety-split!"

"Sure, hon," she says, distracted.

George-Stiles slips through the employees-only door and grabs more almond milk from the industrial refrigerator. While he's at it, Prime types out a message.

Me

aww Vine are you missing me already

When George-Stiles returns, a pack of almond milk in each hand, Peter looks very calm and proper but one of his eyelids has acquired a nervous tick.

Stiles takes pity on the man. He doesn't want Peter to spontaneously combust, after all.

"Oh, Lucy, by the way," George-Stiles says while deftly frothing a cappuccino, "I don't remember if you've got my phone number or not, but just in case, if you get any messages from it, please disregard them?"

"Why, did your phone get stolen?"

"That, or I lost it?" George-Stiles shrugs and gives Lucy an apologetic smile. "I honestly couldn't say what happened to it. I'll get a new one soon, though."

"Oh, you're allowed?" She wonders.

"Cappuccino for Lydia!" George-Stiles calls out. A beautiful girl with a haughty face comes to collect her beverage.

"Why wouldn't I be?" He glances at Lucy.

"Uhm, I dunno, hon, I thought maybe your head honcho would mind." She makes a vague gesture with her hand. "You know, earthly pleasures and all that. Oh, don't mind me, I obviously don't know what I'm talking about. I wasn't offensive, was I?"

"Oh, no, no," George-Stiles hastens to reassure her. His hands are preparing another drink, quick and sure with long habit. "You weren't offensive at all, it's quite alright. And it's not like that with Father Emmett. I'll have a new number in no time!"

He caps the drink and sets it on the outgoing counter.

"Latte for Peter!" He says, looking around the shop as if he doesn't remember which customer was Peter.

Peter collects his latte and departs without a second look at George-Stiles.

Stiles directs the bodies currently at home to the kitchen to start making a simple dinner. He smiles throughout.

* * *

After dinner Stiles cleans up and walks Prime to the backyard again. He likes it here, even if now, after dark, the spring evening is rapidly growing chilly.

Prime sits down in the chair and tosses George-Stiles phone up to catch it unerringly when it falls down. Toss. Catch. Toss. Catch. Luke-Stiles perches in Prime's lap, and Stiles pets his own soft feathers with his own fingers, a double comfort. The thickening darkness of the night shines like an otherworldly landscape through Luke-Stiles' eyes that can see the UV light where Prime's eyes only see the dull black.

He walks Jonathan-Stiles over to the room, the one room in the house where Stiles is yet to set a foot again, any foot, and stands at the threshold like a vampire without an invitation.

It's stupid. It's just a room. He can walk in, and no one will hurt him, he knows that. There's no one here but him.

He remembers that bit vividly, even if a lot of memories from before and after it are blurry and disjointed. They took him to the room with harsh hands, even though he only resisted weakly. He was crying and asking for his dad, and his mind was on fire more than ever before because this was a bad place. He knew it the moment he walked in, it was such a bad place, the absolute worst, because it didn't have monsters under beds, it was a monster. All the people were the monster, all the walls, and chairs, and floors, and beds too, the whole building. They threw him on the bed—that one, on the left—and they strapped him to it with thick leather belt things, and then they injected him with drugs. They knew Stiles was not just a boy, that he was a monster himself, just like mom said, and they probably thought the drugs would make him quiet and docile.

They were wrong.

Later, Stiles had to unstrap himself, with new hands that were shaking and unwieldy. He made Prime (that didn't have this name yet) throw himself off the bed and crawl and lurch out of the room, and he never came back.

He got over the rest of it, even though he didn't much like any of it. He had to walk on the floor tiles, and sit on the chairs, and sleep on the beds, and look at the walls. It's all fine now. It's only the room that keeps giving him trouble.

Stiles catches the phone again, unlocks it and types a message to Peter.

Me

what do you think about power

A reply comes immediately.

Vine

You're going to have to narrow it down, sweet Mockingbird. Power in what sense?

Me

are you a powerful man Vine do you look at yourself in the mirror and think youve got enough feel secure in it or do you feel like you never ever have enough you need more more more

Vine

I have a lot of power, and I have none.

Me

cryptic

Vine

My power is of the leashed kind. I answer to someone else, and my power runs their course, not mine. It may be apt to compare me to an AK-47. It's a powerful weapon, yet all that it has ever done was done by those pointing it and pulling the trigger.

Me

that sounds sad

Me

it also sounds like you might one day soon turn around and shoot your owner and go on your merry way

Vine

Give me a little credit, cariño. I hope I'm a bit more subtle than that.

Vine

What brought this particular topic on? Are you a powerful person yourself, Mockingbird?

Me

i dont know

Me

theres a room in the house i never go to Vine a room where i was unmade made anew

Me

i did things some things that only a powerful person could i think i hope but the room makes me weak makes me small makes me scared

Vine

Where are the people who unmade you in that room now?

Me

dead

Vine

Good.

Vine

A room may defeat you for now. I have a feeling you will defeat it soon.

Me

so much faith in me Vine i wonder what ive done to merit it

Vine

I can't prove anything, but I suspect there's a lot more to you than meets the eye.

Me

your eye has never met me

Vine

It doesn't need to. It's the way you speak, mostly.

Me

oh how do i speak do tell

Vine

Ruthlessly. Freely.

Me

careful Vine youre gonna make me blush

Vine

Is that supposed to be a deterrent, bombón?

Stiles laughs with Prime's lips. The cloud of funk that the room put him in has dissipated, torn apart by Peter's words like by strong winds.

Me

by all means continue i like how smooth slick you are with your words

Me

not that i know what you want to get out of this pouring those words on me well i can make some guesses but whoever you think i might possibly be thats not me

Vine

I know exactly what you are, my Mockingbird. You're a challenge. One with a tongue always firmly in your cheek and with all the insolent charm of a street urchin who smiles at me as he tries to pick my pockets, wrapped in a maddening enigma.

Vine

I like a challenge.

Me

is that supposed to be a threat

Vine

Does it make you feel threatened?

Me

what you waxing poetic about me lol

Me

you dont even know if ive already picked your pockets and i might have metaphorically or actually and you may never know when i have my eyes on you my smile at your back my hands ghosting just past yours

Me

youre fun Vine not scary and i havent had such fun in a long long long time

Me

tell me does this make you feel threatened

Vine

I feel excited.

Vine

Is that the answer you were hoping for, my sweet Mockingbird?

Stiles is completely, irrevocably charmed. He's self-aware enough to know that most people would have run screaming from his messages a long time ago. Unless Peter is a consummate liar, he's not most people at all.

Me

yes

Vine

What will you do if one day your hand ghosts past mine and I catch it?

Me

depends on what youd catch it for

Me

whether or not youd intend for it to hurt

Vine

I don't want to hurt you. Why do you make it sound like I inevitably will?

The question makes Stiles feel agitated and frustrated. He doesn't really know how to answer it; or, rather, he doesn't want to think about the answer.

The answer, he knows, makes him weak. He likes Peter, but it doesn't mean he's about to fall on his back and show Peter his vulnerable belly.

Me

its all hypothetical anyway youll never catch me Vine you cant catch a bird in the sky

Vine

What about a bird that willingly flies down to me?

Me

hahahaha you gotta earn that one Vine

Vine

Mm, and how does one go about earning a privilege like that?

Me

no clue no one ever has

Me

youre gonna have to figure it out yourself Vine

Vine

I will, my darling Mockingbird.

* * *

First thing in the morning, before anything else, Stiles has Amy-Stiles feed Luke-Stiles his breakfast of assorted fruit, grain, and strips of meat and takes off on raven wings towards the Hale house in the Preserve. Granted, Peter might have his own apartment in town, but if Talia Hale has any brains at all, she stores her AK-47 where she can keep an eye on him.

Alpha Hale proves to have some brains after all about half an hour later when Peter exits the house, looking like a dream in another expensive suit but scowling so fiercely, Stiles doesn't even know where Peter finds the energy for that so early in the morning. Peter types on his phone as he walks, and a few seconds later the phone in Prime's pocket chimes with a message.

Vine

Good morning, Mockingbird.

Luke-Stiles croaks an answering greeting from where he's hiding in the branches of a nearby tree. Not that Peter recognizes it as such, of course.

Me

moooooorning Vine

Vine

Was there a sale on o's? Buy one, get six for free?

Me

you really counted them and all lol

Me

you seem a bit snippy today are you not an early bird or did something happen

Luke-Stiles flies down, successfully impersonating a simple bird, just birding around in a totally innocent way, and watches Peter start the car with one hand as he types a reply. Stiles frowns with all of his eyebrows. He sure hopes Peter isn't planning to text and drive.

Vine

I had a fight with my sister.

A personal detail, huh. Stiles can only theorize that by sharing that he has a sister Peter is hoping to induce Stiles to share something personal back. Stiles might or he might not; and if he does decide to share, he has a wealth of files on his bodies with all sorts of personal information. He can share those till kingdom come, all wildly contradictory things and all true.

Of course, Peter might simply not think this tidbit worth much since Stiles kind of hinted yesterday he already knows who Peter is. Stiles doesn't know what's going on in Peter's head, but he wants to.

Me

what about

Peter rolls down his window, sticks his head out and yells towards the house:

"Derek, Laura, Cora, if you're not here within five seconds, I'm leaving without you!"

Then he slumps into the driver's seat, looking annoyed and tired, and Stiles is sorely tempted to perch in his lap. Petting a bird is a good way to calm down and cheer up. No, no, he can't do that, he's well aware. Still, he'd prefer to see Peter smirk in a smug, self-important way like he does at work when celebrating a big win in court, not frowning like this.

Vine

An old friend who is now a threat was spotted in San Francisco. I tried to convince her that he is indeed a threat and I need to go check it out. She wouldn't listen. She doesn't trust my judgment.

Vine

Admittedly, I made a big mistake once, about seven years ago. But it's been long enough that it's really high time to stop beating that dead horse.

Me

thats one tight leash shes got on you so what you gonna listen and stay here

Me

arent you an adult who can travel wherever

Vine

I have to.

Stiles waits for more but nothing is forthcoming. Perhaps it's because three people spill out of the house, notably past the five-second deadline, and head towards Peter's car.

Stiles knows them. Derek Hale, moody brooder extraordinaire, is the newest deputy at the Sheriff's station, and Cora Hale gets her lunch cooked and served by Stiles at the BHHS on daily basis. The third one he only remembers vaguely from those galas where he ran around in pinching shiny shoes and with champagne flutes on dainty trays, subject to the mayor's delusional attempts to recreate the chic of a red carpet premiere or maybe a British royal wedding. Laura Hale didn't say or do much then, completely overshadowed by her mother swanning around the room like a dowager duchess.

Me

do you?

Peter doesn't reply because he, evidently, doesn't text and drive after all. The car glides forward along the forest road, and Stiles soars high into the sky, catching a gust of cool April wind to carry him forward.

After Prime, Luke-Stiles is his favorite body. It lets him really, actually fly on his own wings, its tetrachromatic eyes see the world in a wonderful, trippy, and alien way, it's got these pretty glossy feathers, Stiles can list the pros to Luke-Stiles for hours. But flying is the main thing. It's a sensation of unadulterated, inhuman freedom. The before-Stiles, the singular Stiles who only ever flew in his dreams at night, would have probably pissed himself from happiness if he knew that one day he'd be up there, powerful wings stretching over three feet tip to tip—and then he'd have pissed himself again after learning the price of true flight. Really, it would have been very unhygienic all around.

Keeping an eye on Peter's car is easy. Everything reflects UV light in different amounts, and after all the practice Stiles has had looking at the world through a raven's eyes, he can follow pretty much anything by its specific glow, even if from the height he's at the cars seem no bigger than toys.

It's Luke-Stiles' spectacular vision that helps him notice that Stiles is not the only one following the Hale quartet around this morning.

It's possible, of course, that this is a coincidence. After all, if someone's going to the Sheriff's station, it stands to reason they would appear to be following the car that's also heading there. But Stiles' doubts disappear when the same car creeps after Peter delivering Cora to the school and then chauffeuring Laura to an old building housing the local chapter of Boy Scouts, Alcoholics Anonymous, several charities, a fortuneteller Madame Cassandra, and a second-hand clothing shop. Stiles gets a look at the suspicious car with human eyes too, since Carl-Stiles is just starting today's job washing the windows of a storefront on the opposite side of the road. Mildred-Stiles notes down the license plate, color and possible model to make sure he doesn't forget or confuse anything. Mark-Stiles comes into the Sheriff's office, a mop and a bucket in his hands, and grumbles about the dirt the young deputies track in until Sheriff Graeme escapes to let him wash the floors in peace and leave, and then he looks up the car through her computer she didn't bother to turn off.

The car is a rental. Stiles diverts Leia-Stiles from her daily trudging over neuroscience and sets her in front of a separate clean laptop to start hacking into the rental company records. He's not all that good at hacking yet, so it's gonna take some time.

In the meantime, Luke-Stiles follows Peter to work. The suspicious car turns aside then, as if the driver is satisfied that Peter's not going anywhere for a while, and Luke-Stiles flies off after it, keeping a respectable distance. Peter comes into the office, eyes glued to his phone and completely unaware of Troy-Stiles' covert glance from beneath his eyelashes.

Vine

Are you goading me to disobey and do what I want, sweet Mockingbird?

This, Stiles reflects, is probably as close to an authentic human teenager experience as he'll ever get: studying for his GED and constantly getting distracted by text messages that make him giddy. He likes it.

Me

maybe but i think youre the type to do what you want anyway you just hide it better when youre told you cant in advance like people tell you themselves where to tread lightly what they are gonna look at what needs to be hidden deeper so nice of people to do that really

Vine

You seem very confident about what type of person I am.

Me

am i wrong though

Vine

Do you have any more insights into me?

Me

ha you asked

Me

i think your sisters right from her perspective not to let you go cause you have your own

agenda for going i mean sure i believe the old friend person is a threat sure sure you have legit proof things to lay at her feet for her to check if she mistrusts you

Me

but you have some reason to go to SF that you're not telling her about thats good for you maybe not so good for her it irks you that this part got thwarted not the first part about checking out a threat

Stiles waits for Peter's reply while pushing his way through the rental company protections at last. The car is registered to one Guillaume Alarie, a citizen of France. Stiles chews Prime's lower lip.

"What's your French connection, mon cher Vine?" He mutters with Leia-Stiles' mouth.

Vine

Well, I did ask.

Vine

At this point, I'm afraid, I'm going to have to ask you more questions. Do you know who and what I am? Who my sister and the old friend in San Francisco are? What exactly is it that you think I was hoping to do there in secret?

Stiles sees no reason to lie to Peter about these things. Besides, only ever hinting obliquely at his knowledge is going to get old real soon.

Me

i know youre peter hale i know youve got a furry little problem and your family do too your sisters got a red eye going on

Me

i have no idea whats in san fran either way

There's another pause after Stiles' messages, and Stiles belatedly, apprehensively wonders if this is where their bizarre yet addictive conversation will end for good. Surely, Peter is spooked by the idea of a creepy stranger at the end of a wrong number knowing so much about him. Maybe Stiles shouldn't have been honest with Peter after all?

He... didn't think of that in advance. Stiles doesn't like that. Normally, he's very good at thinking. He runs on forty-two brains, forty-one of them human, most of them engaged in menial jobs that require very little intellectual effort from him. Perhaps he ought to acknowledge that when it comes to Peter, he's also governed by bucketloads of hormones.

That sort of thing has never happened to Stiles before. He isn't sure what to do with it—if there is indeed anything he can do, considering that it crept up on him without him noticing anything and took a stranglehold of his cognitive processes.

Vine

It seems rather unfair that you know all that about me and I know next to nothing about you.

Me

thats sad too bad i dont really care about being fair

Vine

Not even a hint?

Vine

Wouldn't you like to play a game with me, darling Mockingbird, and scatter a breadcrumb or two that might lead me to you if I'm smart enough to follow?

Stiles laughs, no longer apprehensive but instead feeling rather like the protagonist of a teen romcom who has just been asked to the prom by their crush. Peter's words tingle in Stiles' blood like CO₂ bubbles. It's in this moment that he knows he will kill this Guillaume guy if the latter means Peter harm. No one is allowed to take Peter from Stiles, not when Peter proves more and more fun with every message he sends.

Me

oooooooooh

Me

you want hints huh

Me

here you go

Me

youve seen me many times youve heard me speak you never knew it was me yes i was hiding in plain sight but it was still me

Me

youve also never seen me and if you ever did youd probably dismiss me as unimportant inconsequential beneath notice part of background

Me

im closer than you think

Me

btw i liked the tie you wore yesterday better than todays one yesterdays was blue it brought out your eyes you have beautiful eyes

That last one just pops out of him, right into the message via Prime's fingers, and he sends it before he can stop and reconsider. He wants to flirt with Peter but he knows it's unlikely to ever lead anywhere, even to a one-night stand with an inconspicuous body; and even if he manages that, it won't be the Stiles and Peter who flirted over text meeting up.

Still, it has been sent and Stiles doesn't want to recall it. He *wants* to flirt, to give Peter all the sincere compliments, to come up with innuendos. It might lead to a massive, multiple heartbreak later on but Stiles will deal with that when that comes.

For just now, he's enjoying himself.

Vine

Do you find me attractive, my Mockingbird?

Stiles imagines Peter whispering the same words to him in the flesh, here and now, eyes dark with intent. Prime shivers.

Me

annoyingly disarmingly undoubtedly overwhelmingly so

Vine

I'm flattered and intrigued ;)

Vine

Perhaps I'd find you attractive in return if I could see you?

Me

wow sure hope that wasnt you trying lame Vine lame haha

Me

thats enough hints for you

Vine

They are rather vague, though.

Me

if its too hard you can always give up

Me

i heard theres plenty of fish in the sea maybe youll have better luck catching those

Vine

I shall go find some salve for this burn, I suppose.

Vine

In all seriousness, I have a work meeting now. Don't hesitate to text me with whatever comes to your mind, sweet Mockingbird.

Me

go go lawyer away be your hot smug lawyer self Vine shoo

Peter sends him a smirking emoji in sunglasses. Stiles finds himself smiling like an idiot with all of his lips as he stares at it with Prime's eyes.

Ugh. Peter will be the death of him. Peter and Stiles' own suddenly rampant hormones.

As Stiles immerses one-forty-second of his attention in a practice Physics test again, the car rented by monsieur Alarie rolls into the driveway of a suburban house and stops in front of the porch. The driver isn't getting out right away, and Stiles uses the pause to land Luke-Stiles

on top of the fence nearby. He thinks he's managing some light hopping around and pretending to peck at something by his feet rather convincingly. It's a pity the car windows are tinted and Stiles can't steal a surreptitious look at what the guy is doing without plastering himself against the windshield and attracting undue attention.

After a minute or two, the driver's door opens, and a man comes out. He's old; his face is generously wrinkled, and what remains of his hair is white. He's moving with the surety of someone much younger, though, betraying what has to be a lifetime of training. He's dressed inconspicuously in a dark sweater and pants and definitely looks the part of a European grandfather.

Stiles knows him. He's met the guy in person and has a scar on Emmett-Stiles' throat to prove it. He also read the file which was the only thing at the time that let the fake monsieur Alarie leave Stiles' house alive because it was clear Stiles would have a hard time impersonating him and, should he disappear, more would come looking for him.

Stiles was still incredibly young and very much scrambling back then, scared and learning on the go. If it happened today, he'd make sure to murder Gerard Argent in a way that would never be traced back to Stiles.

An anticipatory smile touches the lips of all of his bodies currently at home. The one he's ready to kill for Peter is also someone Stiles personally hates. Isn't it great, how these things fall into place?

Another man comes out of the house. This one is in his forties or so, grizzled and grim-looking; Stiles hasn't met him but there was a file on him, too, a sparse one but containing a picture of a much younger Christopher "Chris" Argent, with more pepper in his hair than salt but already just as grim.

"Don't block the driveway," Chris says. "We've got a garage."

"That's a disrespectful way to talk to your father," Gerard chides. "Is that the kind of thing you're teaching your daughter?"

"Leave Allison alone." Chris folds his arms across his chest. "Are you going to move the car?"

"I'll be going out again soon," Gerard says, deceptively mild.

"Alright," Chris says, turns around and disappears into the house.

"Insolent wretch," Gerard mutters when, as he thinks, he has no audience nearby to hear.

Luke-Stiles makes a derisive hurk-hurk sound deep in his chest. Gerard pays him no mind and goes up the steps into the house.

* * *

Troy-Stiles slips past Peter to the coffee machine and fiddles with the knobs. A nondescript man in his late twenties, sporting a well-worn button-up and cheap dress pants, he attracts no

more attention from Peter than the subtle wavy pattern on the tile behind the little office kitchenette counter. Peter is holding a fresh mug of coffee and conversing with another senior partner, Mr. Whittemore.

"I don't know if now's a good time for you to take a trip, Peter," Mr. Whittemore says. "The Martin divorce is really high-profile."

"And it's going to continue being high-profile for a while," Peter counters. "It's going nowhere fast. Besides, I'm not planning to go today. I was letting you know in advance."

"Well, of course not today. You'd miss my anniversary dinner," Mr. Whittemore says. They talk easily to each other, with the body language of long-time friends.

"Perish the thought," Peter grins. "The best restaurant in town on your dime? I'll be there with bells on."

"Where do you even put all that fat and carbs?" Mr. Whittemore wonders with a sigh. "I've been waiting for you to start growing blubbery and paunchy like the rest of us desk-sitters but you're still ripped like a twenty-something. What's your secret?"

"Exercise, exercise, exercise," Peter shrugs modestly, lying his shapely ass off. Stiles knows that being a werewolf is a one-way ticket to a six-pack. "Oh, and you invited my sister again this year, I hear?"

"Should I not have?"

"No, that's fine. Just don't mention my trip plans to her, alright? I'm getting together a surprise for her, and if she catches wind of it in advance, it'll all be spoiled."

"Sure thing, my lips are sealed." Mr. Whittemore mimes zipping his lips, turning the key and throwing it away. Peter laughs obligingly. They wander off, still not registering Troy-Stiles' presence in any way. "You know, I envy your family sometimes," Mr. Whittemore admits. "You all seem to have such a nice rapport with each other, and I can't seem to get through to my Jackson no matter what I do."

"It's a blessing and a curse," Peter says.

Troy-Stiles stifles his chuckle in the too-hot coffee.

So Peter's making plans to disobey his alpha, then, and go to San Francisco. Is he actually planning to return? Or is this Peter's escape from Talia's clutches?

If Peter's not coming back, will Stiles follow? Is he completely out of his mind contemplating that only for the pleasure of watching Peter live his life unaware of Stiles from up close?

On the other hand, he did want to test his range more and also to start laying the groundwork to spreading himself further. Isn't now as good time as any?

Or is he fooling himself?

Annoyed at himself, Stiles plonks Troy-Stiles back in front of his company-issued computer and bangs at the keys with a lot more force than is strictly required. Prime submits the finished test and looks at the results, but the perfect score fails to do anything to lighten Stiles' mood. He is not clinging to the first halfway genuine connection he's made with someone in years. He is not turning into an actual serial killer type of stalker with Peter. He is not making himself dependent on someone else's plans, whims and desires.

The aggressive mulishness spills into the other bodies. George-Stiles drops a half-full cup, Amy-Stiles takes three tries to scan a pack of sliced bread, Jonathan-Stiles makes five typos in a three-letter word, and Rita-Stiles slops some food onto an unsuspecting student's plate with enough force to splatter their jumper.

Stiles makes himself push the restless anger away from sight. It's still there, just under the surface, but all of him is now able to maintain straight faces and keep their movements steady. It needs an outlet, and suddenly Stiles knows just what that should be.

Prime, Emmett-Stiles, Leia-Stiles, Darth-Stiles, Han-Stiles, Jonathan-Stiles and Mildred-Stiles make their way into the janitor's closet. It's quite spacious, as far as closets go, and it keeps a large number of all manner of tools, both the ones purchased to maintain a building as large as this and the ones confiscated from less than willing newcomers. Stiles' hands pick up two hammers, a drill, a chainsaw, an axe and a spiky baseball bat. Darth-Stiles, the strongest among Stiles' bodies, takes a heavy length of metal pipe that he slings on his shoulder, narrowly avoiding clipping his curved horns.

In unison, silent, Stiles walks towards the room, that unassuming-looking place that still sometimes features in Stiles' nightmares.

Darth-Stiles winds up the pipe and slams it into header. A great cloud of plaster dust is born, spreading outwards from the thunderous impact and settling as fine white powder on Stiles' heads and shoulders.

Stiles hits it again and again. He takes the hammers to the sides of the door frame, too, and soon the door itself falls on the floor with a sharp crack. Stiles steps inside, bits of plaster and cement crunching under his shoes, bare feet, hooves, chitin and scales, fear and anger and defiance circulating between seven bodies like electricity jumping from target to target, calling up hormonal response. The plaster dust clings to his faces, slowly turning to paste as it mixes with his stress sweat.

He saws right through the middle of the bed. The mattress stuffing falls out in clumps.

He takes the axe to the nightstands and hammers to the second bed. The chainsaw shreds the leather harnesses, reducing the once unconquerable adversary to pitiful scraps. The pipe leaves dents in the walls and makes the most beautiful ringing, clinking sound as it smashes through the window. Fresh air rushes in; the bracing spring breeze makes the dust, mattress stuffing and wooden splinters dance around him.

Throughout it all, Stiles doesn't make a sound, not even when sharp things pierce Prime's bare feet and make him bleed. Only the ripping, cracking, deafening sounds of destruction break the silence. He won't scream. He's all screamed out.

He stops when the room around him no longer reminds him of the room of old even a little bit. If anything, it looks like it was bombed, and then a hurricane of razor blades went through it. Seven chests are breathing heavily as the tension and anger finally, finally bleed out of forty-two pairs of shoulders.

Stiles drops his tools, takes George-Stiles' phone out of Prime's pocket and snaps a picture of what used to be the room. There's nothing identifiable here; nothing to give anyone a clue where the room is or who did it, only bits and pieces broken beyond recognition, shards, chunks and fragments. It's only clear that the destruction is fresh since the plaster dust is yet to settle.

He wipes the picture's metadata and sends it.

Me

[photo attachment]

Vine

Is that what remains of the room? Does it still make you feel weak and scared?

Me

im free of it now Vine

Me

free free free free free free

Vine

Congratulations, my sweet Mockingbird. Do you do the same to anyone who crosses you?

Me

no

Me

i do worse ive done worse i regret none of it im alive free

Vine

Next time you're reluctant to drop me a hint as to how and where I can find you, consider this: I've never wanted to kiss anyone more than I want to kiss you after seeing what you've done to this room.

Me

consider this

Me

if you knew what i am youd want to bleach your brain of the memory of typing and sending that

Vine

Why?

Me

best you dont know

Me

i dont want to have to ever do the same to you

Chapter End Notes

- The song Stiles sings in the basement is [Peter Panic by Blur](#).
- Cariño (sp.) — dear, darling (gender neutral).
- Bombón (sp.) — literally "chocolate"; used informally to mean "sexy", "beautiful" (gender neutral).
- Mon cher (fr.) — my dear (male form).

Chapter 2: His Darling Vicious Bird (Peter's Interlude)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The dinner is a stifling affair.

Most things in Beacon Hills are stifling. The town feels like an old jacket that Peter can still wear but is too tight in the shoulders and doesn't really match the rest of his wardrobe anymore. The most exciting thing he's seen here in years is Mockingbird.

And he has actually seen his darling vicious bird and hasn't, according to the cryptic hints. Peter doesn't think Mockingbird is lying to make themselves sound more interesting. They don't really need to try. Peter is already enthralled.

He cuts his steak into precise pieces and keeps an attentive expression on his face as David tells some anecdote or another from the time when they were just starting the firm. Everyone around the table is dressed to the nines, and the restaurant is immaculate, with well-trained waitstaff in tasteful uniforms ghosting past tables without disturbing any conversations and with floors so clean that one could eat off of them.

Peter's fingers itch to take his phone out of his pocket and look at that picture. That carnage of a room, complete shambles bearing the brunt of Mockingbird's unchained fury; Peter has seen movies with destroyed CGI cities but none of that has left an impression on him like this very real photo. There's something wild and primal about Mockingbird, about how open they are about following Peter around and being attracted to him and how unfiltered their words are, something that reminds Peter of having blood on his claws and running through the Preserve on a full moon. Peter is excited in all the best ways whenever he receives a message from the phone number that used to belong to George Morris.

There is a very real danger in trying to find Mockingbird. Peter thrives on the sensation like a plant that has been put out in the sun after years in a dark, dusty room.

A waiter with "Eugene" on his name tag tops off Peter's wine glass and glides away. Peter watches the man go out of the corner of his eye, wondering if this could be Mockingbird. A service job would suit someone with a penchant for being around without being seen. Certainly none of Peter's fellow diners are giving the waiter a second thought, letting him close enough that he could slide a knife into their necks without arousing any suspicion until the very last moment.

He regrets that, apparently, none of the staff seem to be inclined to do that to his sister. Granted, she'd heal, but the blood would have ruined her dress. Peter has reached the point in his life where every plight of hers, no matter how small, brings him petty satisfaction.

There's unoffensive, quiet music playing in the background. It's some toothless, soporific Debussy; it's probably at the very edge of human hearing, meant to soothe and relax, but to Peter's werewolf ears it's very loud and he despises it. He longs for the chaos of that room

and the sound of Mockingbird's heartbeat. Would it be fast, right after doing something that obviously required a lot of physical effort? Would it become faster yet as Peter strolled up close and bent his head to scent Mockingbird, right where blood pulsed right underneath the thin skin of the throat?

"Wouldn't you agree, Peter?" Talia's voice jerks him out of his reverie. He wants to snap his fangs at her.

He also has no idea what she's asking him to agree with. His daydream about Mockingbird took him right out of the restaurant with its dim lights and polite chit-chat.

"Oh, leave him alone, Talia," David says, good-natured after a few drinks. "Of course he agrees. Doesn't mean the man has to be involved personally."

"It seems to me sometimes, David, that being a lawyer can make a person harsher," Talia sighs. "More cynical. It'd do Peter good to get involved with a charity personally, and Laura can show him the ropes. She already knows it inside and out."

A charity? Talia already bullies Peter every month to donate to this or that cause. Now she wants him to spend time where her narcissistic spawn can dog Peter's heels constantly.

Once upon a time, Laura was a sweet little girl with a streak of mischief a mile wide; his favorite niece. Peter stuffs a seared scallop into his mouth to mask his moue of distaste. Growing into her alpha heiress status hasn't done Laura any favors.

Which charity is Laura involved with again? Peter tends to forget these things after signing an appropriately-seized check. Something to do with old people, he thinks. Educating them, or providing companionship, or something along those lines.

Doesn't matter. Whichever one it is, it's going to be a waste of time and another way for Talia to keep Peter under her thumb. Peter has no patience for that, especially now that he's preparing his exit. Talia has already made it difficult by refusing to even hear about him going off anywhere which means he needs to cover his tracks until it'll be too late for Talia to do anything about it. David will help. Good old David. Until Peter accidentally texted Mockingbird instead of the random piece of ass he'd picked up in the Jungle the night before, his friendship with David was the only thing he was truly regretful to leave behind.

"A bit of cynicism is a requirement in our profession, you know that, Talia," David chastises her with a smile. "Someone's gotta be sharp and practical, and someone's gotta be softhearted and charitable. Why do you go trying to fit a square peg into a round hole?"

"Indeed, why, Talia?" Peter challenges, smiling at her blandly and swirling his wine in the glass.

He gets white-hot anger and prickling disapproval aimed at him through their packbond. It's on its last legs these days, it feels sometimes, but it's still fully capable of letting him feel his alpha's displeasure.

He doesn't show any reaction on his face. He's used to masking the instinctive desire to bare his throat and whine before his alpha, as well as his impotent anger. Not that he can hide it fully from Talia with the packbond connection giving him away, but at least he won't give her the satisfaction of seeing it with her own eyes. Also, it's quite stupid to provoke him with unaware humans watching them. Has her contempt for him outgrown her common sense?

"I just worry about you." She smiles sweetly, and Peter knows the sweetness is directly proportionate to the nastiness of the fight they will have later at home, in her soundproofed office. "I'm your big sister, after all."

It's a very useful room, a soundproofed office. No one can hear it if she gets a little too vexed with him and slaps him around in there. Peter doesn't hate it quite as much as Mockingbird hated their erstwhile room, but he doesn't have any warm and fuzzy feelings towards it either.

"I'm a big boy, Talia," Peter says gently, every inch the loving little brother.

He imagines stuffing a handful of wolfsbane down her throat and setting her on fire for good measure. It's a futile fantasy. She has never trusted him enough for any plans like this to ever be successful. This is why Peter wants to go to San Francisco and not look for what he wants closer to home; this, and the reluctance to turn his family against him. They would keep hunting him till the end of time if he killed Talia and they knew about it.

"In any case," he adds, "we've got a high profile case right now. I couldn't possibly find the time to spare for a charity."

David smells like amusement but keeps his poker face. Hopefully, Talia won't take it as suspicious.

"Poor Natalie," Charlotte says, an honest expression of anguish on her face. David's wife is possibly the nicest person at this table, and Peter knows she was the one to spread around that her former direct boss was sleeping with a colleague so she could swoop in and take the job for herself. She succeeded, too. "Oh, let us not think about sad things right now, we're celebrating. Look, Talia, David ordered this bag for me as a gift for this anniversary. Isn't it just darling?"

With Talia sufficiently distracted by examining an exorbitantly priced bag, Peter eats his food and has a conversation with David wherein the latter mostly frets about how distant his son is. According to Cora, Jackson Whittemore is a horrid little bully, but Peter doesn't pass that opinion on to David. He suspects David already knows and turns a blind eye as much as he can.

The other guests at the restaurant are having their own conversations. Peter couldn't really care less about those but he still tunes in, looking for a bit of a distraction there rather than risking losing the awareness of his surroundings while he thinks of Mockingbird. At least this way Talia won't ambush him again.

A man two tables over is, apparently, on his first date with someone and is trying to charm her with stories of his life as a paramedic. His voice is slurring a bit from a little too much Dutch courage, and Peter can hear in his date's voice that she's losing interest with every new

story. They are none of them completely appropriate, some too gory, some connected to sexual experiments gone awry, some plain boring. The man panics, picking up that the evening isn't going too well, and, instead of asking his date about herself, launches into a new story that Peter listens to with amusement and some second-hand embarrassment.

"Oh, here's one that's always a hit at parties," he says. "It was about six or seven years ago, I should think. Imagine, a normal shift, some broken bones, a minor car accident, all the usual stuff, the routine, one might say. Then suddenly we get a call to Eichen House—well, it was still called that then. Nowadays they've got some sect living up there, a religious commune, they call it to be politically correct, the name's Children of Unity or some such garbage, you probably heard of it, right? Right. Well. Anyways, it was still a psychiatric hospital back then, and we were wondering what we'd find when we get there. Some violent fit, we thought, a patient gone too far off his rocker, if you know what I mean. But then we arrive, and get this! A grown woman, a doctor in that place, for Christ's sake, is crying and saying she's dying because she's bleeding from down there. Naturally, we think of a pregnancy complication, and those things are hella dangerous, so we check her out in the car. And turns out, she was just menstruating!" He laughs, trailing off when his date doesn't share in the humor. "Took us a few minutes to explain that to her. She didn't want to believe it was a real and natural thing to bleed every month! As if she hadn't done that since she was a teen! Can you imagine? We thought she was maybe a patient who'd gotten loose but no, the orderlies in there confirmed she was a doctor. Gone nutso, I suppose, just like her patients."

His date gathers up her bag, gets up and throws her drink in his face. Peter mentally applauds her decisiveness and envies it.

"You're such a disgusting pig," she says. "Don't call me again."

She turns around and walks off, her high heels tapping out a determined staccato.

"Bitch!" The man yells at her back. The maître d' rushes over to the table the woman just abandoned to smooth out the unseemly situation that has all the other guests craning their necks towards it.

Children of Unity. Where did Peter hear of them just recently? It's on the tip of his tongue, but he can't quite remember. He doesn't have many dealings with the local religious commune. None, in fact. They are quiet and never try to recruit more members, preach on the corners or do anything else of the sort. Definitely more preferable to have in town than a psychiatric facility slash secret supernatural prison. That place gave off creepiness for a mile around before the radical change in inhabitants. So how did they even come to his attention at all?

Oh, right. When he traced Mockingbird's number, he came up with George Morris who was a member of Children of Unity. Peter supposes it would be easy for someone to swipe the phone of a man like Morris. In person he was like a wet tissue, the exact opposite of Mockingbird.

The dinner winds down at a decent hour, considering it's a weeknight and they are all boring adults with jobs. As they leave the restaurant, Peter makes his getaway, citing the need to

return to the office and look over some property deeds. It won't save him from another fight with Talia, of course, but that's not why he's doing it anyway.

He does go to the office to work on his plans for the future in peace and quiet, and also to mull over the mystery of Mockingbird. To keep him company, he puts on a bit of music he actually likes.

On a whim, he texts Mockingbird.

Me

This piece reminds me of you.

Me

https://youtu.be/EkwqPJZe8ms?si=2Vv_FvqkPGD9EzgE

The Rite of Spring is a controversial, sweeping, bizarre, violent piece. It suits his Mockingbird perfectly.

He doesn't get a reply; but then again, he doesn't expect one right away. Even if Mockingbird doesn't like the music, he thinks they'll give it an honest try before saying something one way or another.

Forty minutes pass as Peter arranges his affairs. He's already got fake identity papers and moved the money he managed to save up. For now he mostly tidies up his cases so it'll be easier for David to handle later and checks in with his contacts in San Francisco to make sure that his unpredictable target hasn't taken off; it's going to be difficult enough to nail him without chasing him all over the continent.

Mockingbird

its beautiful

Mockingbird

more beautiful than me feels like you romanticize me in your head

Me

I don't think so. It's about human sacrifice in spring, you know. Death by inevitable choice, the contrast of the complexity and the simplicity of a violent, mesmerizing pagan ritual. When it was first performed in 1913, it shocked the public. They had never heard anything like it because there hadn't been anything like it in the history of music.

Me

From what I know of you, it describes you rather neatly.

Mockingbird

you flirt weird

Me

Would you prefer a trite pick-up line instead?

Mockingbird

lol like what

Me

Very well, brace yourself, darling Mockingbird.

Me

Do you have any raisins? No? Then how about a date?

Mockingbird

hahahaha oh my god thats so stupid

Mockingbird

you should flirt the way you already do the cringe in the raisins line oh wow haha keep doing what youve been doing instead

Me

So it's working? Even if it's weird? ;)

Mockingbird

if by working you mean do i like it then yes if you mean do you get any more hints then no

The contrast between Mockingbird's raw honesty and their utter refusal to divulge anything about themselves puzzles and frustrates Peter. With how much interest Peter has shown, surely, they would have at least considered meeting face to face. Peter doubts Mockingbird is disfigured, too young, too old or under the impression that they are too ugly. Their protests seem to have all been centered around what they are; their supernatural identity. Peter knows a lot about things that go bump in the night, and none that he knows about would make him wish for brain bleach. Perhaps if Mockingbird was a wendigo... but those are normally not sparkling conversationalists. All they can think about is their hunger for human flesh, and a wendigo probably wouldn't have even bothered to reply to a message sent to a wrong number.

Nonetheless, Mockingbird is sincere with him. Peter can feel it in his bones. He can do nothing less than repay that with his own sincerity. He sends an honest reply, and being truthful for once in his life gives him a little illicit thrill.

Me

I wasn't fishing for any. I'm simply glad to know you liked the music that made me think of you.

Me

I do wish I knew more about you though. Not even from the point of view of hints. Do you have any family? Parents, siblings? What is your gender/sex? What kind of music do you listen to when I don't send you Stravinsky? What was the last book you liked? Do you have a favorite color, food, baseball team?

Me

Obviously, if any of that somehow identifies you, I don't expect you to answer. But I'm hungry for any knowledge you would be willing to give me, my sweet Mockingbird.

Mockingbird

oh alright i want you to know more about me too youre too insistent for your own good

Mockingbird

i dont have anyone but me gender sex are complicated varied often meaningless you can think of me as male because thats how i think of myself in absolute terms i like most music although ive never been into the classics maybe thatll change now

Mockingbird

last thing i read and liked was functions data and models an applied approach to college algebra yes really

Mockingbird

i love the colors of uv light best im addicted to reeses peanut butter cups i dont pay that much attention to sports

Me

Human and human-adjacent eyes cannot perceive UV light.

Mockingbird

that is a fact that is true

A brief Google search brings Peter another fact that is also true: birds have tetrachromatic vision that allows them to see UV light. So Mockingbird is, indeed, a bird in some way? A bird shifter, perhaps? Those are rare but not unheard of. With sudden suspicion, Peter tries to recall all of the pigeons, sparrows and other assorted birds he has passed without noticing over the last few days. If Mockingbird mastered full shift, that could be a perfect disguise and also a handy explanation as to how Peter could have seen him and not seen him at the same time. And if he ever looked directly at a pigeon, he'd one hundred per cent dismiss it as inconsequential.

No, that can't be it. Why would Mockingbird expect Peter to be horrified, disgusted or both upon learning what he was? There isn't any bird that is inherently disgusting... Maybe a buzzard could be perceived that way but Peter would have definitely remembered seeing one in town, and besides, it's still not as dramatic as Mockingbird makes it out to be.

Me

You are more and more fascinating with every word you say.

Mockingbird

you know what they say about flattery Vine

Me

That it will get me everywhere?

Mockingbird

so full of yourself Vine that ego of yours is fistfighting burj khalifa for the title of the biggest i really really like that

Me

I can't tell, are you being sarcastic or do you actually like my healthy and not at all disproportionate self-confidence?

Mockingbird

i fucking love how you strut around like you own the world

Mockingbird

that should be offputting Vine i dont know how this even works it spooks me how much i like it youre one big package of arrogance and sneakiness merciless insistent like a woodpecker going taptaptap all day long so so charismatic ive never met someone so unapologetically themselves as you

Me

Please go on. I do so enjoy you extolling all of my outstanding qualities, darling.

Mockingbird

hahahahaha

Peter wonders if Mockingbird's laugh is the kind that sounds like a high-pitched bird trill, clear and ringing through any room.

Speaking of rooms, the one Mockingbird showed him had taken a whole lot of damage. It couldn't have been quiet, and Peter doesn't think Mockingbird is stupid enough to allow somebody to call the police on them for the disturbance. This means that wherever Mockingbird's house is, it's somewhere secluded enough that no one heard it. That narrows down the area where Peter might conceivably find his lovely bird by quite a lot.

Peter pulls up a map of Beacon Hills on his phone and studies the outskirts as he packs up for the night. Where could you be, sweet Mockingbird?

Mockingbird

come on tell me stuff about yourself i wanna know you too

Me

I don't have much time to read for pleasure but the last thing I remember liking was No One Writes to the Colonel. In the original Spanish, of course. I'm quietly, low-key amazing like that.

He imagines Mockingbird, face hidden in the shadows, teeth glinting as he grins at the way Peter puffs up in that message. For all its vagueness, the image is intoxicating.

Me

I don't have a favorite color, and I'm partial to a rare steak with herb butter. I used to support The Giants, simply by virtue of them being somewhat local, but I'm a rather lukewarm fan, I'm afraid.

Mockingbird

i suppose being a fan of yourself is just too consuming to leave much room to admire random

sports players

Me

Very aptly put. Although I suspect I could make a not inconsiderable amount of room to admire you as well.

He is smiling, looking at his phone and waiting for a response, as he descends in the elevator and walks down the steps of the building. He hears hurried footsteps at the periphery of his awareness but his head is, once again, so full of the cotton-candy sweet, acid sharp dream of Mockingbird, that the reality takes him off guard one more time when a man collides with him at full speed.

Peter's phone and briefcase go clattering along the marble porch. He stops himself from showing his eyes and fangs in a snarl as he registers a human smell, with no traces of wolfsbane or gunpowder.

"Sorry! I'm so sorry, Mr. Hale, sir!" The man flails, still standing way too close to Peter. His face is somewhat familiar, and Peter has to make an effort to remember he's seen it around the office. It's a low-level clerk of which they have a dozen. What was his name again? Winters? Something like that.

"And you are...?"

"Oh! Summers, sir, Troy Summers! I work for the firm, and I'm ever so sorry, oh, I'm just happy you weren't carrying a coffee or something 'cause that would've been such a mess." Summers grins sheepishly.

Peter rolls his eyes. For all of his profuse remorse, Summers isn't in a hurry to help Peter pick up his things, so Peter goes to fetch them himself. Summers hovers close by like a shadow, wringing his hands anxiously.

"I do hope I haven't bruised you, sir, or anything," he offers. "Is your phone quite alright? The screen's not cracked, is it?"

Peter examines it. It looks fine, the protective glass and the shock-absorbent case have lived up to their promises.

"It's alright," he says curtly. The thing that bothers him more is that there's no new message from Mockingbird yet. "What are you even doing here at this time of night, Summers?"

"I left something in the office," Summers blushes a bit. "Had to come back here, sir."

"What was it? The office is locked up for the night, so if it's something you actually need, I can come back up with you and unlock it." Peter is not an unreasonable employer. Summers could have forgotten important medication at his desk or something along those lines.

"Ah, well, it's my pocket Bible, sir," Summers admits, rubbing the back of his head in embarrassment.

Peter stares at him.

"I think you can tide yourself over with the online versions until tomorrow morning," he says, incredulous. "It's late, and I'm going home."

Before Summers can try to plead his case, loud croaking comes from across the street, and then the sound of a gunshot. Summers jerks as if he's the one who's been shot, eyes widening, pulse skyrocketing, but Peter can't smell any blood.

Without any warning, Summers takes off like a bat from hell, towards where the shooting was. Peter follows him, inwardly condemning idiots who run in the direction of danger despite not being bulletproof or possessing supernatural healing.

At the very least, Summers seems to possess good hearing. He zeroes in on the source of trouble unerringly, crossing the street and climbing the fire escape to the roof of the building directly opposite the one housing Peter and David's firm. There's no one there but the door that leads inside the building is standing open, and a few seconds later Peter hears a car engine rev up and tires squeal. Summers throws himself towards what Peter dismissed at a glance as a spot of darkness that was slightly darker than the rest of it and draws his arms around it. It turns out to be a large bird, a raven or a crow—Peter has never known how to tell them apart. It doesn't try to peck at Summers in self-defense but instead curls into the embrace, a pitiful gurgling sound emanating from its chest. One wing is hanging downwards at an unnatural angle, and blood is dripping from the tip, black in the moonlight.

It smells like a lot of blood here, both human and bird, and like gunpowder. And there's also the unmistakable, hateful stench of wolfsbane.

"It's alright," Summers coos at the bird. "We'll patch you up, and you'll be flying again in no time!"

Is that his pet, Peter wonders.

He walks around the roof, watching out for any more armed assailants, but there's no one. A glint catches his attention, and he crouches down to pick up the thing, wrapping his hand in a handkerchief before he does. It's a bullet covered in bird blood. At one end Peter can see a faint outline of a fleur-de-lis, like a stamp. The bullet is the source of the wolfsbane smell. No doubt, the one who made it was very generous with the application.

The wolfsbane starts burning his fingers even through three layers of cloth, and Peter drops it with disgust.

"Don't bother patching up that bird, Summers," he says, getting up from his crouch. "The bullet had enough aconite on it to drop an elephant, and it's very much lethal... to birds..."

He trails off as he realizes that Summers is no longer there and that he's taken the bird with him.

What a bleeding heart, Peter thinks as he climbs back down the fire escape. It'll probably kill Summers inside a little when he realizes the bird was doomed the moment the bullet got all that aconite into its bloodstream.

The bird.

Peter stops with one foot on the ground. There was clearly a hunter lying in wait for Peter, most likely an Argent, and that bird got hurt attacking them. What normal bird would even bother attacking a random human sitting quietly on a roof? There wasn't a nest that needed protecting there, or at least Peter didn't see one close by.

Frantically, dropping his briefcase in his haste, he pulls his phone out of his jacket pocket and types out a message.

Me

What's your favorite movie? Perhaps we could watch it together and text in the process.

He waits, standing on the empty, quiet street. The smell of gunpowder and wolfsbane is clinging to his clothes. Minutes tick by.

There's no response.

Chapter End Notes

Peter's link is legit and leads to the London Symphony Orchestra performing The Rite of Spring by Igor Stravinsky. For those you as pedantic about details as I am, yes, the link is anachronistic since that video was posted in 2017. However, the older videos are, the worse the sound quality is, so I figured if any of you actually go and listen, you should at least enjoy good sound. Rest assured, if Peter were able to send this specific link to his darling Mockingbird in 2011, he would do exactly that.

Chapter 3: Rise And Shine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Luke-Stiles' heart stutters. It's too fast or too slow. Stiles can no longer tell. It hurts. He's dazed, reeling, and Troy-Stiles almost drives the car into a ditch on the way home.

He has forty-one healthy bodies, strong and whole, but it's impossible to detach from the pain, dizziness, weakness that come from one of them, the smallest one, the most fragile one. Luke-Stiles is a little bit of flesh and some hollow bones under a big bunch of fluffy feathers that usually create the illusion of volume. Right now they are matted with blood, the same blood that stains Troy-Stiles shirt and hands as he runs into the house.

Inside, a table has already been cleared and disinfected. Amy-Stiles and Xiuying-Stiles are already waiting, clad in the white doctor's coats they haven't worn for so many years, hands scrubbed in as close an approximation to a standard surgical procedure as Stiles could manage, guided by the Internet. Stiles is no vet, but it was a bullet that went right through the wing. Luke-Stiles just needs to be patched up, the wound cleaned and stitched, the wing put in a sling, and then he'll be right as rain. It doesn't matter that Stiles feels so muddled, so foggy and confused in that body, so profoundly unwell. It's just the pain and shock, that's it. He's never been shot before.

He's afraid. He's furious. Luke-Stiles' heart beats so weirdly.

Stiles pulls out the feathers around the wound and cleans it. It should hurt but Luke-Stiles feels already so far away from mortal things like pain that it doesn't really register. Stiles sobs through Leia-Stiles, Emmett-Stiles and Leo-Stiles. Amy-Stiles and Xiuying-Stiles' hands are sure and steady as they finish cleaning the wound, thread suture into a needle and start stitching.

Luke-Stiles' heart gives one last uneven flutter and stops.

The dead brain rejects Stiles as he reels anew at the sensation of dying. He has never died before. He is no longer muddled, or foggy, or confused but he feels raw all over as if someone took a metaphysical barbed wire to him. He thought before that his emergence was probably a bit like dying. Turns out, there's nothing else like dying. It's its own category of horror, distantly related to the realm of nightmares that feature wanting to scream but having no mouth.

He'll have to get used to the sensation. His bodies do not become more durable or long-lived just because he inhabits them now. Even excluding violence, sooner or later he'll have to die again.

He also feels tight, as if he's wearing clothes he's grown out of. He's had forty-two bodies for years, and it used to be fine but recently he's been feeling restless. Now, forcibly shrunk to

forty-one, he struggles to breathe with all his lungs for a moment because it's not enough to contain him, not nearly enough. He needs more, to be more.

He is present in reality enough to understand that he shouldn't do anything about it until morning. He will have legit opportunities then. For the moment all he can do is plan, and wait, and try to come to his senses. He wants nothing more than to rush the Argents' house and tear Gerard apart piece by piece but in this state he will get even more of himself killed.

It's hard to calm down. All the bodies watch Darth-Stiles bury Luke-Stiles in a corner of the backyard, and then he goes to sleep, teeth brushed, the bloodied table disinfected again, blanket after blanket tugged up to his chins, one pair of eyes after another closing in an attempt to relax into the darkness of his bedrooms. One by one he manages to slow down the heart rates and let his bodies drop off into sleep. Only Prime is still wide awake, staring at the dim lines of moonlight on the ceiling.

He remembers being fidgety and twitchy as a little kid. Prime—back then just Stiles, the only Stiles—had some sort of issue with concentration. AD-something or HD-something. He could never focus on anything. The last thing his mom did for him before she got all sick and twisted was bring him to a doctor so he could get pills for that. The pills helped some but he was still coping, not really thriving, and then, when he killed that woman's mind because she scared him, it went off the rails. He couldn't do anything; he forgot what he was doing almost the moment he started, distracted by the next thing. When washing his face, he'd leave the water running because he'd race off to read a book; he'd throw the book to the side to go to the kitchen for a snack, trip over his shoes by the door and start making a cat's cradle with the laces, the snack completely forgotten. It went on, and on, and on, until he became more, and his attention got split between dozens of different simultaneous inputs, an existence that probably would have been chaotic, overwhelming torture for someone else but was a blessing for Stiles. Finally, he could relax. Finally, he had so many things to do at the same time that he never had to pool all of his attention into only one of them and get overflowed like a bucket trying to fit a river inside. Finally, he was spread out as he had been meant to be all along.

Now, he's twitchy and fidgety all over again. His thoughts race a mile a minute, and with this body being Prime, the one that must still have the AD-thing, Stiles doesn't think he's likely to get any rest.

Prime throws off his blanket and pads out into the backyard in his pajamas. It's chilly enough at night that the earth burns his bare feet with cold even through the bandages he has to keep on after getting all cut up in the room; he climbs into the chair in front of the desk and pulls Prime's knees up, propping the heels on the edge of the seat.

For a few minutes, he just breathes in the fresh air, deep, in and out. The shine Prime's eyes give off is very noticeable in the dark, mixing with the pale moonlight to outline the phone on the desk in front of him.

Right. He forgot all about texting Peter when Luke-Stiles got shot.

Suddenly, he craves to hear a voice that is not his own. A voice that is engaging enough to carry Prime through a few bleak hours of the night and smart enough not to ask questions if

Stiles doesn't want to answer them.

In the darkness, every choice feels different. Perhaps under the harsh light of day, Stiles wouldn't have done it. But right here and now, he still feels a bit like he's dying with each moment of quiet stillness, so he takes the phone in Prime's hands and types out a message, ignoring the playful suggestion of watching a movie kind of together that came in while Stiles was occupied by dying.

Me

i died tonight

Me

it was unpleasant the consequences even more so

He half-expects Peter to be asleep; tomorrow is a workday, after all. However, a reply comes in right away.

Vine

Mockingbird, are you hurt? Do you need help?

Me

no yes i dont know maybe dying sucks

Me

Vine can you call me and talk to me i dont want to say anything i dont want you to know my voice i don't want you to hear me right now i want to hear your voice talk to me tell me whatever tell me about your beautiful snooty music your college days how you won your last court case where you learned spanish what you had for breakfast this morning if you darn your socks when you get a hole anything anything tell me anything just talk to me

Peter calls immediately.

Prime accepts the call, taps the speaker button and lays the phone on the table, face-up.

"Hi, my sweet Mockingbird." Peter's voice fills the empty backyard. Stiles closes Prime's eyes and lets it wash over him. "Talking about myself, huh? What rich, fruitful soil that is."

Peter chuckles, and Prime's lips twitch in an answering smile. There are muffled sounds in the background, like Peter is walking.

"I'm just getting out of the house and deeper into the Preserve so no one can eavesdrop on me," Peter says. "My family is notoriously nosy. I suppose that comes with the territory. Now, me! The worthiest and most intriguing subject of them all, with the only exception possibly being you. I know, I know, we're here to peel back the layers of my awesomeness tonight. I suppose I never told you that I have absolutely no interest in languages for their own sake, have I? I took a bit of Spanish in high school, passed it with flying colors and promptly forgot everything that wasn't required to navigate my way through a Mexican restaurant menu and tell people they were sexy. The most important things to know in any language, I assure you; when you have nice food and a pretty person inclined to kiss you, it has a way of making life

feel baseline good, you know? I would have continued in that vein, but then Talia decided she wanted all her children to speak at least one foreign language fluently, and she chose Spanish due to the many diplomatic relations we have with Mexican packs. And believe me, those were very dark days in the Hale household. Laura wanted to party with her friends, Derek wanted to play basketball, and Cora wanted to run wild in the Preserve, and none of them were the least bit enthusiastic about drilling verb forms and whatnot. They fought bitterly about it every single day, and every time I got an update about that when talking to someone on the phone, I was just glad I wasn't there to bear the brunt of both sides' displeasure. The wonders of being at college away from home really never do cease."

The walking sounds disappear, and there's some faint rustling.

"I've reached a pretty clearing full of lupines, by the way," Peter says. "I'm going to sit here on a fallen tree and narrate my life to you until you have fallen so madly in love with me that you won't be able to help saying yes to meeting in person. It's all part of my cunning, sneaky master plan. Hmm, should I not have revealed it to you in advance? Well, doesn't matter, it will work anyway, mi precioso."

Stiles presses a hand to Prime's mouth to stifle a giggle.

"Where was I? Right, my premature elation about not being part of the Spanish wars. I freely admit it was foolish on my part to go home that summer, never mind that Talia insisted. I should have found something else to do. An unpaid internship would have worked, Talia would have gotten off my back if it was in a prestigious enough firm. But back then I was not quite as embittered as I am now, so I came back to Beacon Hills and was promptly tasked with making sure that Laura, Derek and Cora studied Spanish seven days a week and reached September at a comfortable intermediate level at least."

Peter pffts.

"I'm sure you can imagine my dismay, mi cielo. Having left high school behind for some years by then, I was barely at that level myself and certainly not qualified to teach anyone a word of Spanish. Maybe a parrot, but not somebody sapient. And definitely not three someones who were inclined to fight me every step of the way."

So what did you do, Stiles wants to ask but clams Prime's mouth shut at the last moment.

"I started by being genuine about it. I got teaching guides, grammar books and all those accouterments. I spent a lot of my free time rapidly picking up Spanish myself so I would know what I was doing a bit better. I planned out lessons and tried to make my students write cards with words and draw pictures on them to make the knowledge stick better. To be honest, I couldn't even tell if it worked at all because Laura had studied strikes in History and got her siblings to start one when it came to Spanish. It would have been funny to see their mulish childish faces pouting at me while they refused to say a word, except that it frustrated me to no end, and I resented teaching—never even thought of it as a career, and Talia was demanding daily progress reports over dinner and was never pleased with the lack of said progress, even though, Moon knows, she hadn't done any better in the months before I came home. I was beset from all sides. I think that was when I first realized I was starting to hate

them being in my life. Not when I first started feeling it, mind you. Just when I finally put it into words for myself."

Peter sighs.

"There was a time when we all loved each other. Or at least when I thought they loved me as opposed to barely tolerating my existence. Surely there must have been? I can no longer remember it, Mockingbird."

Something rustles again.

"I laid down on the log," Peter says. "So now I'm staring up into the sky full of stars. Are you looking at the same stars right now, sweet Mockingbird?"

Stiles tilts Prime's head and looks. The sky is beautiful.

Peter's voice is more beautiful still.

Prime taps a finger on the desk next to the phone.

"I'll take one tap as a yes," Peter says. Judging from his voice, Stiles thinks he's smiling. "I'm glad. Well, onward with the Spanish saga, shall we? I've already gone over my initial approach that decidedly didn't work. I switched tactics at that point and went all out. I replaced all labels and instructions at home from English to Spanish, put away all the English books and got some in Spanish from the library, and even locked all English language channels in the TV away. The rest of the family, who all knew Spanish to some degree, were instructed to only talk in that language or, if they couldn't think of how to say something in the presence of the kids, to keep their mouths shut and consult a dictionary. Laura, Derek and Cora couldn't ask for anything unless they made an effort to do it in Spanish. It was a rather impressive endeavour, if I do say so myself. An immersion as complete as one bored and angry undergraduate student could manage."

Peter snorts.

"Almost to my surprise, it actually worked. Partially, at least. Derek gave up the strike then because he couldn't bear me and his mother being unhappy with him for long, and he was more than willing after I included basketball in the deal. Soon, he was happily chattering away while he and I played in the yard. My own Spanish, by the way, grew by leaps and bounds every day. I was the one most immersed in it, living and breathing Spanish at that point, and by way of, I suppose, Stockholm syndrome, I started to like the language. Cora is more stubborn than Derek but she is also the youngest, and at that point in her life she got bored with things quite quickly. Doing nothing, being unable to talk to anyone and just pouting all day following her big sister's lead was rather boring, and she started actively trying to pick the language up. It went the easiest with her, maybe because she was still very little or maybe she does have the makings of a polyglot, I have no idea. Laura, however, was a much tougher nut to crack. The oldest and most willful, she was already very much aware of her future alphasip and used to getting her way in most things. I loathed her attitude, especially seeing that at her age she was more than capable of understanding how much pressure her mother was putting on me and how... unpleasant I found the consequences of my

failures. She didn't care about any of that, though, and resented me more with every passing hour of the summer that her stupid, mean uncle wouldn't let her spend the way she liked. I think in the end it wasn't about learning a language for either of us anymore. By the middle of August, we just hated each other's guts and were locking horns purely for the sake of making sure we thoroughly spoiled each other's days."

Prime sighs in sympathy.

"You really are sweet, my Mockingbird," Peter murmurs. "I'm afraid I got a lot more maudlin and honest than I was planning to be. But I don't think you mind. Not you, my frank, forthright, free bird. If you didn't like hearing this, you would've hung up. Is that correct?"

Prime taps the desk once.

"Thought so. Well, this particular tale is nearing its conclusion. If I thought I was getting desperate before, it was nothing to compare with the situation in the middle of August. Despite the successes with Derek and Cora, my packbond with Talia constantly pulsed with her displeasure. I think she even liked it a bit. Seeing how miserable it made me to feel that my alpha was actively unhappy with me day and night, I mean. Our relationship had always been fraught to say the least, but that summer she was driving me insane. I didn't sleep well, didn't eat much, was jumpy as hell. So one week before September I went for broke. One morning, when all the adults were at work, and Derek and Cora were at friends' houses as a reward for their linguistic successes, I put Laura in a car and took her to Mexico."

Stiles can't fully hold back the choked-off laugh that tears itself from Prime's lips.

"I do wish I could hear your unabashed laughter," Peter says. "I suppose, for now I will have to content myself with simply knowing I made you laugh, *cariño*. I would like you to take note of the fact that I didn't take her to Mexico City, no. I found a sleepy little village where there was a lot less chance of anyone speaking fluent English, and I told her to get out of the car roughly in the middle of it. She stood there, arms folded, disdain on her face, and waited for me to get out as well. She must have expected some sort of language tour where I would try to ply her with local foods and brightly colored souvenirs, but I just said "Adiós", started the car again and drove away. You should have seen her face, Mockingbird. Oh, her *face*."

This makes Stiles laugh again, and this time he doesn't hold back. The image of a spoiled teenage girl realizing that she was being abandoned by the person she'd expected to bend over backwards to try and please her is just too funny.

"Your laughter is positively the most beautiful sound I've heard all year," Peter says. Prime's cheeks heat up as he blushes. "I didn't actually abandon her, of course. If she'd gotten into any trouble, Talia would have had my head, possibly literally. So I hid the car and followed Laura around the village, staying unseen. To my utmost satisfaction, she indeed couldn't find anyone who spoke English, especially not when the majority of people available to talk to at that time of day were children or the elderly. I made sure she'd left her phone at home, so she couldn't simply complain to her mother and get me to fall in line that way. That day, discreetly watching her increasing frustration and attempts to utilize whatever Spanish she'd absorbed through reluctant osmosis, I felt better than I had all summer. She tried to get people to let her use their phones but the children just laughed at the silly foreign girl and the

grandmothers didn't like her attitude any more than I did. I believe one especially fiery old woman actually swatted Laura away from her house with a towel while the neighboring grandmothers watched and cheered. In the end she went back to the main square, looking as defeated as I had felt for months, and sat on the curb. I let her marinade there for a few hours, and then I pretended to have had a change of heart and come back for her."

Peter hums a melody that Stiles recognizes as the opening bars for *The Rite of Spring*.

"She was rather subdued then. She said sorry for being so obstinate, Mockingbird. I thought a part of it was her being afraid that if she continued behaving like she had, I would snap completely and leave her there for good. And even if some of it was genuine, I found that it was not enough to make up for the hell her recalcitrance had put me through. I would have taught her any way she liked, had she only expressed any preference. I had been ready to take her shopping in Barcelona, sit through the sappiest telenovelas in existence, discuss hot Spanish singers with her. I had actually offered her anything and everything before we came to the point of an unauthorized trip to Mexico. How could she be old enough to drive, ready enough to be officially presented to other packs as the future alpha, but incapable of making a single step towards me, the uncle who always remembered how she liked her pancakes, taught her to ride a bicycle, sponsored her first forays into make-up, scared off a creep upperclassman in her freshman year? I didn't even need her to meet me halfway. I would have crawled most of the way on bloodied knees, if only so Talia would give me a fucking break." Old bitterness feels fresh in Peter's voice. "One sorry couldn't make up for everything. Even though after that she did crack a book open and Talia eased off with the disapproval through the bond, we could never be close again. Something broke between us that summer and stayed wrong afterwards. Like a bone that wasn't set before healing."

Stiles is spellbound. He doesn't know what exactly prompted Peter to open up so much, but he is wholly, irrevocably mesmerized. The memories of dying are distant in his mind now, pushed aside by Peter's voice, and Peter's past, and Peter's vulnerability. He feels like he's been gorging himself on the story, and now that it's over, he hungers for more. More of Peter, more of the openness, more of that voice reaching out to him through the phone to weave a connection that has nothing to do with electromagnetic waves, more, more, more.

"In a nutshell," Peter says, "this was how I learned Spanish. After I returned to college that fall, I took an advanced Spanish course, and by the time I graduated, I was fully and comfortably fluent. Would you like to hear another story? A more lighthearted one, perhaps?"

Stiles taps once.

Peter keeps talking for hours. Stiles learns about Mr. Whittemore's bachelor party organized by Peter (where the lesson is, apparently, never to trust a drag queen on cocaine if she offers to hold your dog while you're urgently sewing together a hot air balloon), Peter skipping a week of classes in his third year of college and spending it impersonating a dance instructor in NYC (Peter can dance tango and waltz and, incidentally, totally theoretically, would be absolutely delighted to teach his darling Mockingbird, should an occasion arise), the Great Pinball Disaster of 2003 (wherein Peter cannot play an arcade game to save his life or dignity) and many, many other things. Peter's life opens in front of Stiles like a portal into Peter's soul which is everything Stiles thought it was and also so much more.

Perhaps it was worth dying once to be here and now, Prime's body shivering from the cold, eyes smarting with the lack of sleep, and feeling blissfully, uncomplicatedly peaceful.

Eventually, Peter's voice grows hoarse, and Stiles' phone battery is on its last legs, and the first rays of the sun are starting to peek over the horizon.

"I should get back to the house before anyone notices I'm not there," Peter says. The rasp in his voice sends a delicious shiver through Prime's body and makes the dreams his other bodies are seeing grow decidedly heated. "Mockingbird..." He trails off.

Prime taps the desk.

"You said you'd died last night." Peter pauses. "You know, I'm not actually quite as conceited as all that, I don't think the world revolves around me, I just think it would be great if it did, but... I saw a bird about to die last night. I think that was you, and I think you died protecting me. Am I right?"

Stiles stays frozen for a few seconds, taken completely unawares by the question.

Then, slowly, he extends Prime's hand and taps the desk. Only once.

"Thank you," Peter says simply.

"No, thank *you*," Stiles whispers with Prime's lips.

He doesn't stay on the line to find out if the phone picked that up. He ends the call, takes the phone into the house to plug in and wakes up the rest of his bodies.

It's time to get to work.

* * *

Stiles speedruns his morning routine. As hot water beats against twenty pairs of his shoulders and twenty-one of his noses are breathing in the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, he feels revitalized, full of manic energy. His anger has cooled and hardened enough to just the right texture; it's there and it spurs him on but it doesn't get in the way of thinking.

Gerard Argent is going to die, possibly today. But first Stiles has to go kill some animals.

After breakfast he dispatches most bodies out. Some start work early, some swing by the Argent house to keep an eye on comings and goings before they need to start work. Logan-Stiles calls up the farm where he works and begs off for a couple of hours this morning, and then he goes to wait until the local dog shelter opens its door. Mildred-Stiles parks herself in a coffee shop opposite Beacon Hills' biggest pet store and waits too, nursing some herbal tea (it's not advisable to consume too much caffeine at her age). Leia-Stiles goes online and books an appointment to where he's going, the earliest there is; apparently, they don't just take walk-ins.

As for Prime, today is a rare day. Prime is going outside.

Stiles dresses Prime into something that sort of, maybe, possibly looks like clothes a normal teenager might wear, puts on someone's old shoes and settles Prime in the backseat of his best and fastest car with Emmett-Stiles behind the wheel. Technically, Stiles taught himself to drive, using online manuals, the ability to observe with many eyes and the five cars his bodies used to own and keep in the Eichen House garage, but he himself has never gone to get a license. Emmett-Stiles has one from before—it may have expired by now but it's better than nothing.

They shoot onto the highway. Stiles taps every foot in the car, impatient to get where he's going and also annoyed at the feeling of shoes on Prime's feet. In the beginning, he kept Prime strictly on the premises because of the weird eyes and also because there were still people who remembered him and would ask him many awkward questions if they spotted him. He grew out of the shoes he had pretty quickly, and, since there wasn't any urgent need for them, he just didn't buy any and saved that money instead. Over the years, he's grown used to Prime going without them, and now they feel weird.

He doesn't want to attract any attention, though. He's already anxious about his huge sunglasses and the glare of the spring sun not being enough to avoid quizzical stares. He should get himself the kind of glasses blind people wear, and wear them with Prime's eyes closed, and always have another body nearby whenever Prime goes outside so that he'd still see. This would also have an added bonus of immediately making people feel sympathetic to his perceived disability or repulsed by it—and either way, a person rattled by emotion would be easier to manipulate or swindle.

He watches the Argents' house through the eyes of Carl-Stiles and Leo-Stiles. The latter has already collected his usual morning walk buddies from their owners and has an excellent excuse to stand around as much as he likes, playing with the dogs and waiting while they sniff every bush.

Funnily enough, Peter is also there, loitering far enough away not to be seen but close enough to hear what is going on with his werewolf ears. Stiles doesn't know how Peter has come to the conclusion that it was an Argent waiting to snipe him yesterday, but then again, it's not like there are that many hunters in town. Peter doesn't pay the least bit of attention to Leo-Stiles, dragged past by five exuberant dogs, but both Leo-Stiles and Carl-Stiles get a good look at Peter from different angles. Peter is disguised as a normal person this morning, wearing faded dark jeans that cling to his body in sinful ways which make Stiles feel hot under many collars, a Giants sweatshirt and a baseball cap pulled down low; the overall effect is less an ordinary guy and more a celebrity hoping to blend in so as to avoid getting mobbed by adoring fans.

Stiles could absolutely mob Peter. Beg him for autographs, ask to have his babies, tell him how he, Stiles, had watched each of his movies two hundred and seventy-three times, show a (drawn with a Sharpie) tattoo of his name on an arm or five. The thought of how confused that would make Peter look is very amusing.

Chris Argent and his daughter spill out of the house, arguing as they go.

"I already told Scott I would go to his lacrosse game! Dad, do really I have to? Can't I just skip this Saturday?"

"She's your aunt," Chris bites out. "Visiting her is your duty."

"It's not like she even knows if anyone's visiting her!" Allison glares at her father. "I know what the doctors have been telling you for years—there's no brain activity! None! She's not just sleeping, Dad, she's not here anymore!"

"Allison, you will not speak to me in that tone."

"Or what?" She challenges. "You'll force me to spend half my life visiting the empty husk of a relative I don't even really remember? I want to have a life, Dad! She's a vegetable, and I'm not!"

"Allison!" Chris barks. It's a very authoritative bark, Stiles judges. It could probably make a puppy whimper and hide under a bed.

Allison, though, doesn't flinch, just lifts her chin higher.

"Go to school," Chris says, sounding weary. "We'll finish this conversation later."

Allison flounces off, back ramrod-straight. Chris rubs his hand over his face.

Looks like something is rotten in the state of Argent, huh?

On a whim, he has Han-Stiles come up to the still-charging phone that used to belong to George-Stiles and types out a message.

Me

arent you gonna be late for work if you snoop much longer?

Peter visibly starts and looks around. Besides the local residents walking to and fro on their morning business, Leo-Stiles is also very much in Peter's field of vision, laughing as the dogs play a new game they just invented, one called "let's run around the human in circles, getting our leashes around him, until he falls on his ass". Leo-Stiles does indeed fall on his ass and laughs even harder as the happy dogs crowd him, wagging their tails and licking his face. He looks about as non-suspicious as it's humanly possible to be, and Peter's gaze glides right past him.

Vine

You are here? Right now? Where are you? I can't hear any birds.

Me

im the pink flamingo doing splits on the argents lawn

Vine

Of course you are.

Me

aw youre not buying it i hoped id make you look to check

Vine

The curiosity is eating me from the inside out. Won't you have mercy on me?

Me

all out of mercy none left in stock please come back thursday before last

Vine

You're enjoying having me intrigued and clueless, aren't you, my (according to all evidence) invisible Mockingbird?

Me

you have lots of clues not my fault you dont know what to do with them

Me

alright its totally my fault but i am actually enjoying it probably too much but youre the one who suggested a game this is me being playful

Vine

The way you play is reminiscent of a big cat. You're so gleeful, watching me squirm under your soft but heavy paw. It's unconscionably attractive.

Me

i could be a cat if you like bring a dead mouse to your pillow see what you do with it

Vine

Perhaps not the pillow, I would prefer not to put my face where a dead mouse has been. Otherwise, though, I don't mind. So you can take forms of different animals?

Me

i can neither confirm nor deny well i can but i wont

Me

btw have you heard anything useful yet

Me

?

Me

i just got that squabble in the yard about visiting some relative

Vine

Kate Argent, yes. Do you know about her?

Me

what about her

Vine

Approximately seven years ago she suddenly fell down in the middle of a crowded diner here in Beacon Hills and stopped responding to all stimuli. In the ensuing chaos her brother arrived in town with his family in tow which was when it became public who she actually

was. She had been here under an assumed name, working as a substitute at the local high school. If anyone knows what she had actually come here for, they are not telling, but considering that she used to be one of the most prolific hunters on the continent, it could hardly have been anything good for the supernatural community.

Vine

It's equally unclear what happened to her, except that it wasn't an aneurysm or another natural cause, and over the years the event has grown many urban legends attached to it, much like a rock underwater acquires mollusks stuck to its surface. Chris Argent is said to be still looking for her assailant without much success, and she herself has been, as her charming niece fittingly put it, a vegetable all these years.

Stiles is a bit curious about those urban legends. Perhaps he'll ask Peter another time, but for the moment it's better to change the topic. If Peter thinks on it too long, he might start wondering if Stiles was the assailant, and that would be a huge fat hint that Stiles doesn't want Peter to have. After all, the mysterious culprit was indeed Stiles.

Me

i see so nothing useful then

Me

do you hear with your big ears if our guy is in there

Vine

Our guy?

Me

the one who killed me while trying to kill you yes Gerard Argent the grandpa with a gun

Vine

You didn't tell me you recognized the hunter on that roof.

Me

im telling you now is dying a good enough fucking excuse for me to be a tad preoccupied

Vine

I have to admit there are very few reasons equally valid. No, I can't hear anyone but Chris and his wife inside. If Gerard is there, he's being quiet.

Vine

Was he following me? Is that how you noticed him, because you were following me too? Why didn't you tell me there was a hunter on my tail?

Me

excuse me i missed the part where i put my hand on a bible and swore to tell you the truth the whole truth and nothing but truth all the time

Me

i wanted to know what he wanted with you i knew i could protect you and i did didnt i

Vine

And what if he decided to shoot me right after he pumped you full of aconite instead of bolting off that roof? I stayed on those steps long enough after the initial shot to give him that chance. Because I didn't know he was out there, actively wishing me harm.

Me

i had plans for that too

Stiles remembers vividly cursing himself for his stupidity when Gerard, seeing Peter finishing up through some military-grade binoculars, took a rifle out of his unassuming duffel bag. Troy-Stiles, the only one with a semi-plausible reason to be around Peter's office, broke a couple of speeding laws to get there in time, and he probably wouldn't have, had Peter not taken his time, straightening all the files, answering Stiles' texts, watering a ficus in the corner, and packing some papers into his briefcase. But he did get there, ready to be Peter's meat shield from bullets.

Vine

What plans?

Me

those are gonna be another thing im not telling you

Vine

Look, Mockingbird, I understand your need for privacy. But when the information you are holding close to your chest is not only completely irrelevant to your identity, but also directly pertinent to me, I have a right to know.

Vine

Don't treat me like I'm a child to be protected and kept in the dark. I can take care of myself.

Me

can you really i seem to remember a wolf strolling under sniper fire like he had no care in the world

Vine

And whose fault was it that I didn't know I had a care?

Vine

I put a lot of trust in you, Mockingbird. This makes me question whether I was right to do so. It makes me uneasy.

Me

this of all the things ive done and said makes you uneasy hah shows what you know fucking nothing youd be uneasy alright if you knew what you put your trust into an abomination a monster a nightmare

Vine

Your dark tendencies are not what makes me uneasy, and they never have been. You know that perfectly well. If you kill to survive, to thrive or both, it doesn't bother me. Don't do us

both a disservice by implying that it does. Do you really hold me in so little regard that you would keep me ignorant of danger and try to deflect me via aggrandizing self-deprecation?

Me

fine he rented a car under the name of frenchman guillaume alarie attached is a screenshot of the car info from the rental agency database he followed you in the morning yesterday followed you dropping off derek cora laura went back home for a bit came back to lauras dropoff went inside the building in a curly gray wig huge glasses knit cardigan spent a long long time ate a sandwich trailed you from work to the restaurant waited around then back to work swung back home for the rifle came back climbed the roof there you know as much as i do now have fun go nuts
[photo attachment]

Stiles runs through several more messages in his head, biting, poisonous, vicious, but in the end he's sad and confused more than he's angry. He has Han-Stiles put the phone down and go back to the books.

Does he really owe Peter respect and disclosure? Peter certainly behaved like Stiles did, and Stiles is genuinely not sure if, by the societal norms, that is indeed how it is. It's not like people sign a contract that spells these things out when they start getting to know each other; it's all the nebulous social stuff that Stiles simply never engages in when he's not faking it.

This time it's decidedly not the case of "fake it till you make it".

Since he was ten, everyone outside (the former) Eichen House has been a threat to prevent and a target to deceive. There was no exception, there could never be an exception. Stiles' very existence is pure, hair-raising, unequivocal evil. He kills minds and takes over the vacated bodies, and he has made his peace with the fact that it didn't make him feel bad, not when it was the only way for him to exist and be happy, and he refused to stop existing or not to work towards happiness, even if the other seven billion people on this planet would clamor he didn't deserve it if they ever knew. Their opinion didn't matter any to Stiles. But Peter has managed—as, Stiles suspects, Peter's generally went in life—to slip through a loophole Stiles didn't know was there. He started as a harmless bit of anonymous entertainment and has spun out into a tornado that sucked Stiles into itself before Stiles could even blink. Hurricane Peter.

Stiles has died for him. That seemed to be enough for Peter last night, but this morning he also wants regard, whatever exactly he means by that. Well, Stiles doesn't mind telling Peter of pertinent dangers right away, even if it annoys him a little that his protection has been deemed insufficient so openly, but he already failed to mention this one within the time frame Peter would have liked. What is Stiles supposed to do about that? It's not like he can turn back time.

Stiles has no personal frame of reference for this situation. Nor for Peter on the whole, really. Peter is something new, and wonderful, and painful, and fun, and Stiles lacks the words to define him.

He sulks throughout the rest of the way to San Francisco. When he arrives, there's still an hour to kill, and Stiles fills it with buying those blind people glasses and practicing guiding

Prime through Emmett-Stiles' eyes. It's no more weird than what he always does, looking out at the world through all of his bodies at once; it was harder to get used to Leia-Stiles' six eyes that only see in black, white and shades of gray.

He also splurges on some ice cream, a cone each of rich cookie dough stuff for Prime and Emmett-Stiles. He likes it, and popular media tells him it's the thing to do when fighting with somebody he likes.

San Francisco is beautiful, bustling and colorful, a city that pulses around Stiles like the heart of a hummingbird. It's so completely unlike the ponderous, provincial ways of Beacon Hills. He reviews his finances via Leia-Stiles, all of his painstaking spreadsheets and estimates. Perhaps it's indeed time to start moving out of the hometown. He has some money saved up, enough to give a body or two a head start in a big city like this. He could find better-paying jobs, too, and make sure he got hired. Pretending to be a religious commune was never a sustainable long-term plan anyway. He can't have his bodies go around being pointed at and gossiped about; in fact, he'd prefer it if they seemed completely ordinary and there was no visible connection between them whatsoever, he needs to keep a low profile. It all comes down to money. Nothing really holds him in Beacon Hills except the sheer expense of traveling and lodging somewhere he'd have to pay rent.

Could he sell Eichen House and the land it stands on? Or rob a bank? Or both?

Robbing a bank could definitely work. He'd need more bodies, of course, he can't afford to lose the ones he has now if anything goes wrong, and he absolutely doesn't need the police tracing a robbery to a vague religious commune in backwater California. He could take over some local thugs wherever he decides to do the robbery, someone whose involvement, should it come to light, wouldn't surprise anyone or make them look into the matter any further. Something to think of later.

Peter eventually leaves the vicinity of the Argents' house and goes to work where Troy-Stiles notices him as he comes in. Leo-Stiles takes the dogs back to their owners and collects the ones on his next walking shift. Carl-Stiles leaves not because he's got anything pressing to do but because it's too suspicious for the same person to loiter around all day; George-Stiles replaces him, seeing as his shift at the coffee shop only starts in the afternoon today, and he comes prepared with an old easel from the art therapy room so he can pretend to be an artist inspired by the quiet suburban street. Not that Stiles can draw worth a damn, but that doesn't matter. Any scribble can be served up as modern art if accompanied by a convincing enough speech about the tragedy of the human condition reflecting in the sharp angles and the aching combination of blue and orange (those colors being the only two tubes of acrylic paint in the art therapy room that seemed to be still usable).

Mildred-Stiles plays an affable grandma as she buys a society finch in the pet shop. He's a tiny bird, less than five inches in height, and he looks enough like a sparrow that most people would consider him one if they saw him from the corner of their eye. Logan-Stiles feeds the animal shelter people a sob story about how he wants to take their most troublesome animal and give it a good home. The animal shelter people are skeptical as they show him a two-year-old Newfoundland dog, unusually aggressive for his breed due to abusive first owners, but when Logan-Stiles doesn't even hesitate, their skepticism melts into a quiet elation. After

all, the dog, it looks like, has bitten them many times, and Stiles is good at presenting Logan-Stiles' natural appearance of a stereotypical mafia enforcer as that of a gentle giant.

Stiles wonders if Peter's stalwart support of Stiles' murderous tendencies would wane if Peter knew it extends to dogs and birds. Many people wouldn't bat an eye at the murder of a fellow human being, especially one they don't like, but they would draw the line at an animal, and Stiles, for his part, doesn't quite understand the phenomenon. Dead is dead. And while the normal argument for this is "humans can look after themselves and animals are innocent victims", no one can look after themselves when it comes to Stiles and everyone is an innocent victim.

Everyone but Stiles. And the last person who made him feel like a victim will die very soon, even if Stiles doesn't yet know precisely how.

When it's finally time to go to their scheduled tour, Stiles swaps the blind people glasses for the normal sunglasses again, and Prime and Emmett-Stiles head to the San Francisco hawking club and avian preservation center.

It's a lovely place. It's pretty big, the biggest on the West Coast if their website is to be believed, and they have hundreds of all kinds of birds of prey. This morning the business is slow: besides Prime and Emmett-Stiles, the only other person coming in for a tour is a sad guy of about college age who smells and looks like he was on a bender last night. Stiles makes up for the lack of a distracting crowd by making Emmett-Stiles incredibly enthusiastic about all things falconry. Their tour guide is very professional, polite and attentive to both the guests and the birds, but when Prime has a bulky glove on his hand with a peregrine falcon sitting on it quite calmly, Emmett-Stiles manages to get under the woman's skin by criticizing the practice of hooding birds of prey rather scathingly. With the guide distracted by refuting Emmett-Stiles points (pulled from the Internet by Han-Stiles) and the hungover college guy staring dejectedly at his phone, Stiles shifts to stand with Prime's back to everyone, slips the sunglasses up to his forehead and looks into the falcon's huge dark eyes.

The process is instantaneous. He puts the glasses back on immediately, with the same motion, and he feels his consciousness drowning the bird's, flowing into her brain through the usual grooves and gateways that he knows intimately by now. There's nothing the falcon can do to protect herself; she has not evolved to fend off or even comprehend a predator like Stiles.

Just like that, Stiles has wings again.

Boba-Stiles (a name that properly reflects Stiles' appreciation of the deadliness of his new body) makes a happy trill-screech and fluffs up her wings. With such big eyes and fluffy feathers, she looks a bit like a cute toy—that is, until one takes in her wickedly sharp talons and menacingly curved beak. Stiles adores her already.

Oh, how he missed seeing the world bloom into alien beauty with UV light. He drinks the sight in, something relaxing in him that he didn't know was tense. He relinquishes the bird and the glove reluctantly after the tour guide shuts Emmett-Stiles down and reapplies her professional demeanor, and when the tour is over, he lets Boba-Stiles be taken back to the enclosure. He can't fly off now. Even though it's highly unlikely anyone will connect some

teenager on the tour with the falcon's escape, he still prefers to wait so as to make sure there are no links to him whatsoever.

He refills the car, noticing it's low on gas, and goes back to Beacon Hills. An hour into the journey Boba-Stiles is left alone, and he promptly frees himself and claws off the tracker.

Her speed is incredible. She catches up to the car in no time but since there are others on the highway, Stiles has her soar high, ever higher, until she is not even a dot in the sky, and fly home under her own power. Back there, Mildred-Stiles is already preparing fresh meat for Boba-Stiles to tear into and clean water for her to drink after the journey.

As he waits out the car ride, he mulls over the Gerard problem. A hunter doesn't get old without being cunning. How does Stiles draw him out and kill him without being killed himself first?

The most obvious plan of attack is through his family. Chris is not going to be easy to get to, what with his own experience, and the same goes for his wife. Allison? She seemed like a pretty much normal teenager this morning. Could Stiles swipe her phone? Take over her? Just kill her?

No, all of these are too risky. It'd be way too easy to give away that it's not Allison living in her body seeing as he knows next to nothing about her. Direct obvious murder is something Gerard has to be prepared for. Stiles imagine he's not the first supernatural creature with a grudge against Gerard Argent who thinks the family looks like a softer target. And as for the phone, well, Allison is a teenager. Stiles would probably have to actually kill her just to pry that out of her hands.

Stiles frowns with the faces that are not currently in view of people. There has to be a way to get to Gerard that the latter wouldn't expect.

Oh. Oh, that is an *excellent* idea. Stiles laughs with Prime's mouth and slaps the car seat in exhilaration. This is the one. He'll get to it as soon as he's done taking over the animal bodies.

Back at the Children of Unity household, Prime jumps out of the car, runs inside and takes over the finch. He christens the bird Nien-Stiles which may not be a fully suitable name but, frankly, he's already gone through most of the important Star Wars characters and might have to switch to a different movie franchise later on. Marvel looks like it might be lucrative in that way.

He finds the Newfoundland in the backyard, where Logan-Stiles tied his leash to the desk leg before going off to work. Left to his own devices, the dog overturned the desk which fell in a way that made the edge pin the leash to the ground. The bowls with food and water have been kicked away, and the dog growls when he sees Prime leap out of the back door.

"You poor angry thing," Prime says. He doesn't bear the dog any animosity.

The dog is a magnificent representative of his breed; despite having already seen him through Logan-Stiles' eyes, Stiles admires him anew now. Huge and strong, he's got a great shaggy

coat that is fully black except for an uneven white spot on his chest. He could probably down a bear if need be or carry Prime's slight frame on his back like a horse.

"Your separate name will be Chewbacca," Stiles decides and takes off Prime's sunglasses.

With forty-four bodies in total, he feels so much more at ease. He wouldn't mind more, but he has to be careful about it. Every body is a mouth to feed, and he wants more humans now, useful ones, and it will take time and research to determine his targets. Besides the one he already has in mind, that is.

He spares a moment to stroke his new furry head as Mildred-Stiles in the kitchen sterilizes a knife and slices her forearm open. Stiles dons his sunglasses again, grateful for the California sun that ensures people never question Prime wearing those on his rare ventures outside, and goes with her to the hospital.

It's his biggest weakness: in order to take over a body, Prime needs to be there and look into the target's eyes. Then he is free to take over or let the target go as he pleases. He experimented with it a while back, on random flies that tend to come in from the Preserve as soon as the weather warms up in spring. Insect brains are too small to contain even a fraction of Stiles so they just drop dead when he tries. None of the other bodies were able to do anything to a fly, no matter how hard they stared, and their eyes never changed to look like Prime's. So, despite how much it unnerves him, Prime goes outside again. Stiles is very conscious of the possibility of being totally screwed if anything happens to Prime; his death may or may not kill Stiles in his entirety but it would almost definitely deprive Stiles of the ability to spread himself.

Once within the walls of Beacon Hills Memorial, Mildred is quickly whisked to the ER area by a very sweet and attentive nurse. Prime trails them, thankful for the sunglasses for yet another reason: the nurse is Mrs. McCall, the mother of Stiles' best friend from before Stiles was put into Eichen House. She hasn't changed at all in the intervening years, and even though Prime definitely has, there's still that niggling doubt that she could somehow recognize him.

She used to be so kind to him.

Stiles shakes off the memories of the past that is long dead and gone and settles on a chair by the wall while Mildred is treated, sitting on a bed. She is distracting the doctor with a million questions, listing her every ache and twinge, real or imagined, fretting over how her arm will heal, and demanding to know what the doctor thinks about the depravity of sex pills being advertised on television. Prime catches the eye of the exasperated doctor, who seems to be silently asking "Can't you get your grandma to calm down while I work?", and shrugs with an apologetic smile. Then he stops a nurse walking by—thankfully, someone he has never met before—and asks:

"Could you point me towards the vending machines, please? I think Gran's gonna be here a while."

The nurse points in a direction, and Prime calls out "Thank you!" as she hurries off.

He walks off where directed and does find some vending machines. With a paper cup of lukewarm, thin liquid that is hospital coffee, Stiles veers Prime to a side corridor and from there to the long-term care unit.

He used to come here often. Dad kept stubbornly taking Stiles with him to visit mom. He probably hoped for some short episode of lucidity that would create an illusion of them being a family again, but all mom ever did was scream that Stiles wanted to kill her, call him a monster and throw things at him. Not that she actually knew what he was before he himself did, of course. If she did, she would have tried to avoid looking him in the eye and warned dad not to do it.

He walks past the nurse on duty with a determined stride. The cup in his hand makes him look like a relative visiting someone, certain enough of what he's doing and where he's going that she doesn't stop him. She's more interested in a magazine anyway.

The patients normally stay here long enough to have their names written on pieces of paper and slid behind the little plastic rectangles that are glued to the walls next to the doors. That makes it very easy to locate the room where the empty body of Kate Argent has spent the last six and a half years.

There's no one else in the room when Prime slips in on careful feet. She is lying on the bed, dressed in a hospital gown, arms and hands bristling with IV needles and neat wires leading off to various machines. Looks like Chris Argent hasn't spared any expense in caring for his sister; still, Stiles almost doesn't recognize her. Pale, gaunt and vacant, she looks nothing like the woman whose strong, cruel features carved themselves into ten-year-old Stiles' memory like a bas-relief.

That day was the catalyst of him. Dad and he were just returning from yet another hospital visit, dad distant and not really all there, and they stopped at that diner because Stiles whined about being hungry. Neither of them had eaten anything since some cereal that morning, and it was well into the afternoon.

Stiles was extra hyperactive that day, his brain a battlefield of nervous energy and restlessness. Dad didn't seem to have any strength or wish to wrangle Stiles, so, after inhaling a huge helping of curly fries and gulping down half a milkshake, Stiles went running around the diner unimpeded. He was playing with something, something small and light he was kicking around... was it a shuttlecock? Or maybe one of those tiny solid rubber balls? He's no longer sure. He only knows that whatever it was, he accidentally kicked it over to Kate's feet, and she bent down to pick it up and handed it over to him. "Careful when playing, kiddo," she said, and it was all perfectly normal and nice, but Stiles looked into her face and her smile set off all of his stranger danger alarms. He knew, somehow, that she was a monster hiding in human skin, and he smelled fire that wasn't there and he heard screams that no one uttered.

They locked eyes, mind to mind, and Stiles burned her out of her body, terrified of both her and himself and having no idea what he was doing.

He never finished the job, jerking away and screaming before he could. People around him probably thought he was screaming because the woman in front of him suddenly folded over

and fell on the floor with a thud. After the police and the paramedics arrived, dad had to get him a shot of sedative and hand him over to a deputy to take him home because he just couldn't stop screaming and clinging to dad, not letting him work.

Now he's next to her again. Her blue eyes that used to sparkle with gleeful malice are so empty. There hasn't been anyone home since then, and Chris is a fool if he thinks that one day Kate might suddenly just wake up. Stiles is glad the man is a fool, though. It plays right into Stiles' hands.

"Rise and shine, Ms. Argent," Prime whispers, smiling. "Rise and shine."

He leans over her, his shadow falling across her face, and takes off his sunglasses.

Chapter End Notes

- Mi precioso (sp.) — my precious (male form).
- Mi cielo (sp.) — my sky.
- Adiós (sp.) — goodbye.

Chapter 4: Ugly, Unhinged, Unselfconscious

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Stiles walks Prime back to the ER through the side door that opens to the staircase, sipping his bad coffee, and the doctor all but pushes freshly bandaged Mildred-Stiles at him. Stiles takes her and Prime home while adjusting to Kate-Stiles' body.

It's a weak body. It has spent years in bed, and, despite whatever massage and physiotherapy Chris has paid for, the muscle mass is long gone. Kate-Stiles' eyes are pretty dry, too, and while she's not covered in bedsores, her skin is tender and uncomfortable. Stiles tilts her head to the side experimentally, hair rustling against the pillow, then to the other side, and studies the room from her lying position; he doesn't get much more time to move around because all the machines around her are beeping like crazy and nurses and doctors start rushing in, all shocked faces and frantic gestures.

They check him over and ask him a hundred questions. Stiles answers the ones about Kate-Stiles' physical health truthfully but when she's asked if she remembers her name, he wrinkles her forehead.

"I..." she goes. "I'm... Kate?"

"That's right!" The doctor, a man in his forties with warm hands, smiles at her encouragingly. "And what is your last name?"

Kate-Stiles pretends to contemplate the question.

"I—I don't know... That's not good, I should know, right?" She looks at the doctor, breathing fast in growing panic. "I don't remember. I don't, I don't, I don't remember anything..."

She clutches at her hair and hunches in on herself, rocking back and forth. The doctor stops asking after that and gets a nurse to give Kate something to relax her. She doesn't actually need it but she has to allow it. Thankfully, it's mild enough that it doesn't interfere with Stiles' ability to think with that brain.

She is poked and prodded some more. The doctors listen to her lungs, check her blood pressure and even take some blood for testing. They don't seem to really know what to do with her; it's clear that no one except Chris has ever expected her to wake up.

Very soon, the man himself, witnessed leaving his house by George-Stiles just a little earlier, bursts into the room. The door bangs on the wall, making Kate-Stiles jump, but Chris pays that no mind: he only has eyes for his miraculously healed sister.

"Kate!" He almost bowls her over as he rockets over to the bed and catches her in a bear hug. "Kate, you woke up! You really woke up!"

He smells like gunpowder and herbs. Wolfsbane, if Stile had to make a guess. His khaki jacket is rough to the touch and durable, and the strength of his hug squeezes the air out of Kate-Stiles with a squeak. He's a hunter through and through.

Kate-Stiles doesn't hug him back. Instead, she stiffens.

"Do I... know you?" She asks warily.

That gets him to back off a little. His hands are still on her shoulders but there's a bit of space between them now as he stares at her. His wild, ecstatic shock is slowly slipping off his face.

"Don't you know who I am?"

She frowns at him.

"No idea," she says decisively, and Chris looks like his heart just broke into a million pieces.

* * *

Back home, Prime takes some blankets into the backyard, puts them on a patch of grass, finally kicks off the stupid shoes and stretches out, staring up into the sky. High in that endless, clear, blue shininess Boba-Stiles is circling over the house, screeching victoriously. Her keen eyes pick out Prime on the ground, and he waves at her, giddy with the sensation of flying all over again.

Speaking of flying. Nien-Stiles hops over to an open window and takes off towards the town. He's small and relatively defenseless, if one discounts the human-level smarts driving him, and Stiles is careful to avoid cats, dogs and bigger birds. Overall, the journey goes without a hitch, and Nien-Stiles perches on the protruding window frame outside Peter's personal office, hiding his tiny body by the edge.

Peter is at his impressive-looking desk of dark wood, typing away at his laptop. His phone is lying next to him, face up, and Peter glances at it with what Stiles finds a gratifying frequency, at least twice a minute. Does this mean Peter's not all that angry with Stiles despite that whole thing earlier?

Oddly hopeful, Stiles has Prime fetch the phone that has been fully charged for some time, then plonks him back on the blankets and has Boba-Stiles come down and rub her soft feathers against Prime's cheek for some extra courage and comfort. Chewbacca-Stiles also lumbers over and lies down pressed to Prime's side, a warm, reassuring wall of furry muscle.

Prime probably looks like a Disney princess surrounded by her animal friends right now. Stiles snickers with Prime's mouth and checks his messages.

Vine

Thank you.

Vine

I'll go by that charity later and see what is going on there. Talia has been rather insistent that I do anyway. Have you been inside? Would you like to come with me, in whatever capacity?

Vine

Mockingbird?

Vine

Mockingbird, are you sulking?

Stiles presses a hand to Prime's heated cheek. He's as elated over seeing proof that Peter is not through with Stiles as he is over seeing UV light again.

Me

yes

Me

so what i didn't tell you about gerard and now you dont like me anymore

Vine

Is that what's troubling you? My sweet Mockingbird, I do still like you. More than I like anybody else I've ever met, which is insane considering that I've only seen you as a bird, briefly, in the dark.

Me

oh

Me

okay

Me

i really like you too

Me

i sound like a kindergartner dont i i was just upset that you were upset with me i didnt get why

Vine

Do you get it now, though? What do other people in your life say when you keep vital information from them?

Me

what people i told you theres only me Vine keep up

Vine

Friends? Allies? You can't be isolated from society, you have followed me around town quite freely.

Me

i dont have friends or allies im my own friend my own ally theres me and only me

Me

and now you

There's a lull in messages. Nien-Stiles stealthily peers at Peter through the window, proving his worth as an inconspicuous spy. Peter is looking at his phone with a very complicated expression on his face that Stiles can't quite understand. Is it surprise? Awe? Greed? Longing? All of the above?

Vine

What made you let in me of all people?

Me

what a stupid question Vine you are perfect even when you get mad at me over stuff i dont really get

Vine

Isn't it a little too soon to decide that I'm perfect?

Me

i already died for you last night what part of that says i take anything slow

Me

does it scare you to know how intense i am are you thinking about backing away letting me down gently changing your phone number

Vine

I'm scared that you'll change your mind after you get to know me better.

Vine

I have never been good enough for anyone.

After that last one Peter drops his phone on the desk with a clutter and leans forward on his elbows, rubbing his eyes. His lips are moving soundlessly, angrily, like he's berating himself.

He's in such obvious distress that all of Stiles' hearts skip a beat in sympathy and Chewbacca-Stiles whines pitifully. Nien-Stiles hops out from behind the window frame and taps the glass with his beak.

Peter's head whips towards the sound. At the sight of Nien-Stiles his whole face lights up, becoming even more impossibly handsome than usual; he leaps to his feet and pulls the window open.

Nien-Stiles flies in, lands on Peter's shoulder and rubs his downy cheek against Peter's. Peter closes the window again and slowly, cautiously strokes Nien-Stiles' back with one finger.

This is the first acknowledged, affectionate touch between them. An unfamiliar, heady thrill that is not unlike Boba-Stiles plunging down from the sky at two hundred miles per hour goes through Stiles' very soul.

"Mockingbird," Peter says, hesitant. "Is this really you?"

Nien-Stiles chirps, and hops around Peter's shoulder, and rubs his cheek against Peter's one more time. Peter laughs, somewhat tremulously, before taking Nien-Stiles off his shoulder

and cradling him to his chest. Nien-Stiles cuddles up to him, chirping all the time, and pushes his little head between the buttons of Peter's shirt to nip at his skin. Peter pets him again, with a touch so light and careful that it makes Stiles' every body's breath catch.

Me

yes that is really me

Peter frees one hand to read the message, supporting Nien-Stiles with the other one. Nien-Stiles tugs his head out of Peter's shirt and settles in the middle of Peter's palm, a ball of content feathery fluff.

Vine

But how are you sending me messages then?

Me

ah that comes down to what i am dont worry about it i just saw how sad you were i wanted to cheer you up im cute and nice to touch arent i

Me

do you want me to kill everyone whos ever told you youre not good enough im serious

Peter laughs. The vibration of it goes through Nien-Stiles' body, and he fluffs up to make a long, lilting, high-pitched trill. Peter's thumb comes up to stroke his tiny chest.

Vine

I know you're serious. To be honest, I am rather tempted to say yes. But seeing as I've already prepared my exit, it might be better not to disappear with a trail of bodies behind me.

Nien-Stiles crouches low and hides his beak under a wing.

Me

so when you go to SF you go for good i wondered about that

Vine

I didn't think there would be anything I'd be loathe to leave behind. Can you leave with me? No one can stop you, can they?

Me

hmmmm maybe i can in a way its complicated are you sure you want me with you you still dont know what i am no one knows what i am i have never told anyone i wasnt aggrandizing i am the stuff of nightmares

Vine

You look exceedingly cute to me.

Peter touches his lips to the top of Nien-Stiles' head. Nien-Stiles chirps and nestles his head under Peter's chin, flustered. It's the first time anyone has kissed Stiles in any body since mom fell ill.

Vine

Do you really think I'd be that horrified, whatever you are? I can't believe I would.

Me

you might be afraid ill change my mind im afraid youll change yours if you know if ill give you the creeps if next time you see me nearby you wont smile like you did when you saw nien-me wont ever again

Vine

Nien-you?

Stiles is annoyed at himself. It was a really stupid slip, never mind how distractingly comfortable it is to be cuddling up to Peter. Such a large clue, too. What if Peter figures it out right here and now? Stiles doesn't think he's ready for that.

Me

if anyone asks the society finch with you is called nien i can go with you anywhere if you like all day long just give me food and water sometimes

Vine

Is Nien your actual name?

Me

no

Vine

What is your name? You know mine. Surely, it can't be that ruinous for me to know a first name.

Stiles is torn. On the one hand, he's not listed as "Stiles" anywhere official, and he was too young to have any kind of social media profile back before Eichen House, and the only one around Peter who could possibly remember that name is Cora. They were never friends, just in the same grade, but she would have probably known him at least as that spastic kid who went crazy and got pulled out of school. Peter is highly unlikely to enlist his teenage niece in the search for Stiles' identity, though. And Stiles' parents certainly didn't put his picture on milk cartons. On the other hand, it's still a risk.

But isn't Peter a huge helping of deadly risk all by himself?

He finds that he desperately, mindlessly, recklessly wants Peter to know the true him, and surely, that starts with a name.

Me

you'd be surprised

Me

its Stiles

"Stiles," Peter says out loud.

Nien-Stiles shivers and trills.

Peter's throat and chest next to Nien-Stiles rumble in what feels like a purr. Nien-Stiles rubs the whole of his small self against the warm skin above Peter's top button and chirps discordantly, too blissed-out by the contact and the powerful sensation to bother making it melodious. Bird songs are such a pain to imitate, he found out as Luke-Stiles. They are a learned thing, and normal birds always treat Stiles like a freak when he tries to sound like they do.

"It's an unusual name," Peter muses. "Does it belong to another culture?"

Me

i made it up when i was a child couldnt pronounce my actual name everyone who knew me as me long ago called me Stiles

Peter chuckles and caresses Nien-Stiles again. Stiles thrives on this gentle affection.

"So it is indeed your name, and it also isn't. It suits you, my sweet Mockingbird."

Me

its all part of my mystique yes lol

Nien-Stiles flutters out of Peter's hands and lands on his head. Once there, he tugs the strands around, arranging them to his liking, then plops in the middle of it with a satisfied chirp.

"Are you nesting in my hair?" Peter asks. His voice is threaded through with laughter.

Me

mostly messing with you and youre letting me i also like your hair

Me

i can actually ride in your jacket pocket slip out and return whenever im not a half bad spy

Me

not the pants you wear pants too tight to fit a living thing in a pocket if your keys and wallet could breathe they would suffocate

"Are you critiquing my choice of pants, darling Mockingbird?" Peter's voice is sly.

Me

you know im not you vain vain thing you look like a wet dream wearing them thats why you buy them like that you want people to turn their heads and wonder if theres any possible way to get into those

"I'm merely fashion-conscious," Peter says primly.

Nien-Stiles flies off his head and nips him on the nose. Peter laughs, catches the hovering Nien-Stiles between his palms and kisses his chest. Nien-Stiles glides down and forward and swoops under the collar of Peter's shirt. Stiles hopes it tickles.

"If my attire gives you indecent ideas, that is on you, my keen-eyed Mockingbird," Peter sing-songs. "Me, harboring a plan to incite such desires in others? To cause fevered daydreams, the throbbing of hearts and other body parts, the longing to reach out and worship me with touch? Oh my, what an extremely salacious and indisputably untrue notion! You could tell me all about those ideas you're having, though, I'm sure I'll find them tremendously informative..."

Me

you want to sext when youre at work and got a finch me pecking your collarbone

Me

see see this is what i was talking about you really are fucking perfect see what am i even supposed to do with you

"Come away with me, that's what," Peter says, suddenly serious. It's a bit of a whiplash after all the lighthearted flirting. Nien-Stiles sticks his head out from under Peter's collar and chirps confusedly. "I don't want to leave you behind, and if I spend another week living with a family who never let me forget they are benevolently tolerating me in their midst, I will snap and kill them all. I swear, I'm not going to judge you, whatever you are. What do you have keeping you here? Can you leave it?"

Me

nothing holds me here per se there are circumstances holding me back moving elsewhere is a whole thing for me cumbersome hard needs to be done in steps careful thought out planned out

Me

and i want to kill gerard first hes not leaving beacon hills alive i took some steps towards that

"What steps?"

Me

ones only i could take i know i know its frustrating vague but if i do tell you what i am im not doing it over a text message i need you next to me so you can understand properly grasp the truth in its fullness i dont want it to be right now i can only say not all is what it seems to be

Me

if you leave before im done with gerard nien can go with you and we can still text while im putting plans into motion

Peter sighs. Nien-Stiles can feel the heavy beat of the pulse in his neck.

"Alright," he says. "Alright. Okay. I'm just... I want..."

He falls silent, seemingly at a loss for words.

Me

i know i do too

"Alright," Peter says again, and his voice sounds lighter this time. "What do you say we find you some food and water and then go see what's up at Laura's charity? I don't have any meetings scheduled until this afternoon."

Me

sounds perfect

"Come on, mi lindo." Peter cups his hand around the little bulge that is Nien-Stiles' body under his shirt collar for stability and heads for the door. "Let's find you something to eat. Admittedly, an office has slim pickings for a discerning bird like yourself, but I bet you eat fruit and I know Charlotte keeps forcing apples on David in the hope of getting him to eat healthier snacks..."

He keeps up the chatter, heedless of people craning their necks around their computer monitors to gawk at their boss cooing at a tiny bird who seems to be answering with agreeable chirps.

Stiles laughs with Prime's lips and considers Peter's promises.

Peter better live up to those.

* * *

The doctors are understandably reluctant to let Kate-Stiles go. She has only just woken up after years of having the brain activity of a potato, and they run a CT, an MRI and other many-lettered tests to try and determine what on Earth happened. Stiles lets it happen because he's curious about how he shows up on tests, but after Kate-Stiles demands the results be explained to her, turns out, there's nothing wrong at all. Hers is a healthy brain functioning on all cylinders, and, barring the general weakness, the only thing that can be cited as a problem is her slightly raised blood pressure.

Chris latches onto that one and declares that it's because of the stress of all the fuss and that his sister will have a much easier time recuperating with her family. Of course, she will come in every other day for her PT. Of course, she will follow a strict diet to get her stomach back on track. Of course, he will drive her back the moment anything seems to be wrong.

Kate-Stiles doesn't take much part in the whole argument. Chris is an immovable object, and the doctors are used to dealing with him when it comes to his sister's health, so she can just sit on her bed, arms folded across her chest, and watch Chris with visible mistrust.

To give the man some credit, he hasn't let it show that her apparent amnesia upsets him after that initial reaction. He's taking it in stride, weathering it the same way he likely weathered her inexplicably falling down and never getting back up all those years ago. Stiles respects him for that stubborn perseverance, if nothing else.

While Chris is signing a whole stack of papers, a new hurdle comes in: his wife, Victoria Argent. Kate-Stiles eyes her with immediate dislike. That woman looks sharper and more dangerous than Chris ever did, even though all she's doing is carrying a bag with some clothes for Kate-Stiles to change into.

"So happy to see you awake," Victoria smiles. "Chris told me over the phone that you don't remember much, but I'm sure it'll come back in no time. Here, I got something comfortable for you from my wardrobe."

Stiles expects sweatpants, sports shoes and a loose t-shirt but, apparently, Victoria's idea of something comfortable is skintight pants (well, they are probably meant to be skintight, but with how much weight this body has lost they are not going to be), high leather boots, a silk blouse and a short jacket. Kate-Stiles picks through the things with a dubious expression. The underwear and the socks are rather flimsy, too, not something Stiles would personally recommend for convalescence.

"You used to love dressing like this," Victoria comments with an impeccable smile and cold eyes. "I suppose you forgot."

Stiles wonders if Victoria's not ready to buy the memory loss just yet.

"I forgot lots of things," he agrees through Kate-Stiles' mouth. "For example, who the hell are you?"

"Victoria, your sister-in-law," Victoria says without missing a beat. "I'm married to your brother." She nods at Chris who is arguing with three doctors by the window. "We used to be rather friendly."

I bet you did, Stiles thinks and gives Victoria a hesitant smile with Kate-Stiles' lips.

"Well," Kate-Stiles says, piling the clothes up in her arms. "I suppose I should go change."

She gets up and stops mid-step.

"Could you point me to the bathroom here?" She asks Victoria. "Haven't used it myself once, you know, or so they tell me."

Stiles knows very well where the bathroom is, of course. The long-term care rooms are all built the same. The pretense works to make Victoria unbend just a little bit, though.

Kate-Stiles' hands and arms shake with the strain as she pulls on the clothes. Even a task as simple as this is a Herculean feat for her wasted muscles, and when she's done, she leans heavily on the sink and just breathes.

Despite the physical weakness of his new body, Stiles is in high spirits. It's going along nicely so far, and he can't wait to meet Gerard. He's got yet another plan for Gerard, one that is about as safe as sticking a limb into the mouth of a shark, and it excites him like few other things do. For so long, he's been confined to Eichen House, learning, hiding, accumulating resources, dreaming of going on the offensive and drowning the planet within himself like a rising tide. Things are changing, Stiles can feel it. This is him, going on the offensive, truly dipping his toes into the unsuspecting outside world. The pleasure of finally making a move is intoxicating.

Kate-Stiles grins at the mirror, for a moment eerily similar to her old self. She looks like hell. She's going to send someone *to* hell, too.

There's the sound of harried rapping on the door, and Chris' voice calls out:

"Kate, you okay in there? Do you need help?"

"I'm fine," she calls back. She pushes off the sink and tugs the hems of the jacket to straighten it up.

Time to have fun.

* * *

Nien-Stiles doesn't eat much. In fact, his breed only requires a spoonful or two of food per day, volume-wise. Peter doesn't look disappointed, though, when only a fraction of an apple is consumed; perhaps because Nien-Stiles finds it hard to balance on the slick top edge of Peter's mug and plops into the water inside with an alarmed chirp—Peter fishes him out immediately, laughing at his misfortune, but makes up for it by tilting the mug obligingly so that Nien-Stiles can drink while standing firmly on the desk.

It's all so sickeningly cute that it worries Stiles. Peter is definitely getting the wrong impression here of exactly what Stiles is like; some sort of bird-specific Dr. Dolittle, a happy-go-lucky, carefree avian whisperer who is secretly very loving and lonely kind of vibes.

The thought of creating such expectations makes him ill at ease, so he's glad when Peter deposits Nien-Stiles into his jacket pocket and heads out.

Stiles has never been in the building that houses Laura's charity. It's big, with echoing corridors; there's a bored girl behind a desk in the hall who quickly becomes less bored as Peter flirts with her shamelessly to find out where they are supposed to go. He weaves a rather seamless tale about worrying about his grandfather who's been very keen on a charity here lately and wanting to check personally if it happens to be some sort of a scam. The girl gives directions eagerly and even hands Peter that charity's brochure which he puts in the same pocket where Nien-Stiles is.

Under the all-caps heading of "SENIOR SMART: MODERN SKILLS FOR SENIORS IN THE CHANGING WORLD" the girl wrote down her phone number. Nien-Stiles claws and pecks the paper until the digits are no longer readable.

As they are walking along a corridor, Peter slows down and pulls the pocket open to check on Nien-Stiles.

"Everything alright?" He asks. "What were you doing in there with that brochure?"

Nien-Stiles, silent, gives him a beady look. Eyebrows furrowing in confusion, Peter pulls the brochure out, then chuckles when he understands what it was about.

"You didn't seriously think I'd call her, did you?" He questions.

Nien-Stiles utters his lowest, most menacing chirp—which, frustratingly, is still cute—and fluffs up, making himself as big as he possibly can.

"Honestly, cariño mio, if people fall all over themselves to please me when they think they've got a chance with me, I'd be stupid not to use it to my advantage. There's no need to be jealous," for some reason, Peter sounds happy when he says that. "I cannot even think of anyone but you."

He lifts Nien-Stiles out of his pocket and carefully strokes his back.

"We've got to be quiet now, though," Peter tells Nien-Stiles in a low voice. "Laura should be here somewhere, and her hearing is as sharp as mine."

Nien-Stiles acknowledges it with a nod and hops back into Peter's pocket. Stiles hates the reminder that Peter can and often does sleep with whoever catches his eye—that was why they even met—because it means that Peter has had a lot more experience in whatever the hell it is they are doing than Stiles does. It's all good and well while Stiles is an enigma, but what if Peter meets all of his human and human-adjacent bodies and then parts ways with Stiles not because he's horrified at the idea of a hive mind but because he's disappointed?

Well, Stiles could take over a supermodel body or five to please Peter. But even Stiles can see how that's cringingly pathetic.

Me

what did charlie look like

Vine

Who?

Me

charlie the one night stand who gave you the wrong number my number

Vine

What does it matter what he looked like?

Me

dont pretend to be stupid it doesnt suit you

Vine

Do you seriously want to have this discussion right now?

Me

fine lets table it for now dont think ill forget

Peter reaches a door at the end of the corridor and pushes it open. Nien-Stiles pokes the top of his head out to take stock of their surroundings.

It reminds him of an open floor office more than anything else. There are wide cubicles made of what seems to be cardboard and foam, each with a desk. Laptops rest on the desks, and in front of each there's an old person and a younger one, both immersed in a conversation. All

the voices are overlapping each other, creating a steady murmur punctuated by mice clicking and keys clacking. Only one desk doesn't seem to have a senior citizen in front of it, just a young woman who is familiar to Stiles. Her eyes are boring into Peter since, of course, she heard his approach. How much, exactly, did she hear?

Nien-Stiles dives back into the pocket. Not that it will save him from being detected by Laura who, as far as Stiles is aware, can hear heartbeats, but it's still better than drawing attention to himself.

Peter strides over to Laura, whistling nonchalantly.

"How are you doing, dear niece?" He inquires. There's a weird note in his voice that takes a second for Stiles to place as fake. This is Peter's pretend-affectionate voice.

The realization that Stiles has never heard it before goes a long way towards soothing Stiles' worries and insecurities.

"I'm fine, and what are you doing here?" Laura sounds accusing, like Peter's mere presence here means he's up to no good. Maybe planning to hold up all the seniors here and take their pensions or something. Nien-Stiles finds himself bristling at the attitude. Would getting an eye pecked out teach her some manners?

"Your mother has been rather insistent I take a look at what you do here," Peter says. "To be honest, I don't see myself volunteering any time soon—or late—but I figured I might as well swing by. I see you're the only one without a senior citizen to teach how to troll youngsters on the Internet?"

"I don't know what mother was thinking," Laura says icily. "You're not a good fit for charity, and she knows it as well as I do."

"The esteemed head of the family moves in mysterious ways," Peter shrugs.

"Uh-huh," Laura says. "What is it that you're actually after? I heard you talking in the corridor. Who is it you're dating and why do you call them "Mockingbird"? And who are you hiding in your pocket?"

"Let me remind you, dear niece, that personal life is called personal for a reason," Peter returns, his tone growing colder as well. "It's none of your business whom I might or might not be dating."

"No man is an island, Peter," Laura says. "It's family business to know who you might bring into the fold, and one day I'll be the one to deal with the consequences."

"As you keep reminding me every time you see me." Peter says in a very level voice. "Even if I ask you to pass the salt, you make sure to insert it into your response somehow. Do you think I'm not aware, after all this time?"

Laura sighs.

"Uncle, why do you have to be so difficult? I wouldn't remind you if you didn't behave like you don't remember. For example, you still haven't told me who it is in your pocket."

There's a slapping sound, skin on skin. Nien-Stiles cautiously pokes his head out again, just a little bit, so he can see what on Earth is going on. Laura's hand is inches away from the pocket, and Peter's fingers are closed around her wrist, tight enough for both of their skin to whiten.

"Be mindful of where you put your hands, cariñosa," Peter says. He sounds very calm.

"A bird?" Laura stares at Nien-Stiles. "Why do you have a bird with you?"

"He's a better conversationalist than you," Peter snaps. "Why wouldn't I want to keep him with me?"

Nien-Stiles climbs out, putting his tiny talons into the fabric of the pocket, and flies up, high enough that Laura won't be able to reach him.

From his vantage point in the air, he observes Gerard in that sweet old man disguise, coming in. What a clusterfuck.

Stiles contemplates his next move. Then he soars over to hover directly above Laura and lets his bowels loose.

The shit lands on her hairline—she was looking at him, face tilted up, and started to shift away in alarm after recognizing what was coming towards her. It's small, of course, and not as watery as the stuff pigeons bomb unsuspecting passers-by with, but it's moist enough to be perfectly disgusting. Stiles regrets that it doesn't really smell. Well, maybe it does to a werewolf; if so, then even better.

She cries out, and her hands instinctively go up to the foreign thing on her face and still at the very last moment as she realizes what she's about to touch; instead, she paws at her pockets, head held awkwardly in such a way as to avoid the droppings sliding into her eyes, and, after a few seconds of frantic searching, finds a handkerchief. It's a lovely one, too, white and monogrammed with "L. H."

Peter is doubled over with hysterical laughter. He gasps, trying to pull in enough air to keep laughing, great uneven gulps that turn into half-guffaws, half-sobs; his eyes are tearing up as he laughs, and laughs, and laughs, and doesn't seem to be able to stop. It's an ugly, unhinged, unselfconscious sound. Stiles relishes every second of it.

Everyone is watching, frozen in that gossipy stupor where they don't want to miss any part of a juicy scandal going on. Laura glances around the room, the handkerchief pressed to her forehead, and her lips thin.

"At your age you should be above frat bro pranks like teaching your bird to soil people's heads, uncle," she says in a frosty voice.

"The best part is..." Peter exhales and starts hiccuping. "I didn't... I didn't teach him that!"

He holds his breath to try and get rid of the hiccups but it's ruined when he looks at Laura and starts laughing again. Nien-Stiles makes a victory circle in the air and trills his triumph for all to hear.

"Laura? What is going on?" A French-accented voice asks. "This charity, it is for people, not animals, no?"

"Just my uncle being his man-child self, Guillaume," Laura says. "Excuse me for a moment, I need to go wash up."

She leaves, every step measured like she's a soldier in a parade. Peter's laughter ebbs gradually; he straightens up, wiping at his eyes, and extends a hand towards Nien-Stiles who graciously comes to perch on it and chirp. Then he hops over to Peter's shoulder, and from that safe spot he stares at Gerard.

Gerard's eyes are shrewd behind his (definitely fake) glasses. Stiles would bet a wing that Gerard is remembering another bird that attacked him without a discernible reason last night and connecting the dots. His picture is missing most of the dots he'd need to get any coherent results but Stiles suspects that Gerard is never going to trust another bird nearby again. Those bright puffy lines where Luke-Stiles' talons raked Gerard's cheek and neck will probably serve as a handy reminder as they scar.

Well, they would have. Stiles has no intention of leaving Gerard alive long enough for the scar tissue to form.

"Guillaume, huh?" Peter says, smiling pleasantly. "Here in NorCal all the way from the shores of France?"

"Ah, oui," Gerard says. His smile is just as pleasant. "I have the family in this town, you see. And you are Laura's uncle, that is right?"

"Guilty as charged," Peter agrees. "What's she teaching you over here, anyway?"

"The computer skills," Gerard says. "I am an old man, and I need to keep up with the times. You visit her here often? I have not seen you before."

"Once in a blue moon," Peter says. "How are you finding your classes then?"

"Your niece is a kind and patient girl," Gerard says. "Did you come to learn also?"

Stiles stifles an urge to move Nien-Stiles' gaze from one to the other as they are having this tennis match of a conversation.

"I have a good few years in me before I have to start frequenting charities for the elderly," Peter says. "What's up with your face?"

"The wild animal attacked me," Gerard says. "America is a violent country, is it not?"

"Couldn't agree more. What sort of animal was it? You ought to report it to Animal Control."

"The mountain lion," Gerard says with a straight face. "They are numerous here, the doctor tells me."

"A true plague," Peter agrees. "You got lucky. Some people turn up dead when a mountain lion attacks them."

"Mon Dieu!" Gerard shakes his head.

Stiles is almost expecting them to continue in the same vein until the thin veneer of plausible deniability wears off and they start threatening each other openly, but Peter chooses this moment to back off.

"Well, I'm glad to know you're alright. Or, at any rate, alright enough to come here for a class. I'm Peter, by the way." Peter sticks his hand out to shake.

Gerard takes it, clearly committed enough to his Guillaume act to pretend like he's politely happy to meet Peter.

"You have a very cute bird," Gerard remarks. "Where did you get it?"

"A pet store," Peter tickles Nien-Stiles' throat with one finger. Nien-Stiles trills. "He's a funny little fellow, isn't he?"

Nien-Stiles hops around Peter's shoulder, chirps a couple of times and starts pecking a jacket seam—a birdbrain if there ever was one. Not that this performance is fooling Gerard, judging by the latter's gimlet stare.

How much paranoia can one Gerard fit, Stiles wonders. Perhaps if he uses up all of his reserves on birds, he'll be sloppier around people, which is what Stiles really wants.

Laura returns, a bit of her hair flat with water where she washed off Stiles', let's say, mark, presumably over a bathroom sink. By Stiles' count, it can barely even be counted as a baby step towards repaying the way she's treated Peter... which might have actually been worse than Peter described, if her behavior today is any indication. Stiles wondered briefly if Peter had exaggerated anything but it looks like Peter has been nothing but honest.

The thought of that tastes better than any ice cream.

"Laura, here you are," Gerard gives her a warm smile. "I wanted to tell you that I have to cut the lesson short. The family emergency has come up," he lifts his phone for a moment, "and la famille, she is the most important thing of all, is she not?"

"Couldn't agree more," Laura smiles back just as warmly. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, absolutely, nothing that is bad has happened," Gerard assures her. Nien-Stiles might have been the one to use this room as a toilet but the biggest pile of bullshit in here has not been produced by him. "I will call you to reschedule, would that be okay? Your lessons, they are most helpful."

"Of course, call me anytime, Guillaume." Laura grins. "We're yet to set up your Facebook page, don't forget! Make sure to choose the best pictures of your family for the next lesson."

"Looking forward to it," Gerard says and hugs Laura. She hugs him back.

Gerard leaves. Laura watches him go with a fond smile, and Peter does the same but with a derisive smirk.

"Looks like your mother was wrong, oh niece of mine," he says when the door closes after Gerard. "You clearly don't need any help wrangling old people. This one seems to be eating out of your hand."

"Not everyone makes it their life goal to be as disagreeable as humanly possible," Laura says, no trace of that warm smile on her face. "Getting a bird just to humiliate me? Are you serious?"

"I told you, I didn't teach him anything," Peter says defensively. Stiles doesn't like that vulnerable note in his voice. "Birds are not cats, you know, you can't exactly teach one to only use a litter box."

"Right, and the fact that *your* bird mistook *me* for a litter box is just a huge coincidence," Laura says, her voice dripping with acid.

"You know perfectly well that I'm not lying when I say that I in no way planned it," Peter says. "How long are you going to keep harping on it?"

"Long enough for you to reconsider your choice in pets," Laura says. "I do hope you're not going to bring it home."

"Or what? An accident will befall him?" Peter raises his eyebrows. He doesn't sound like he's taking the threat seriously but his shoulder under Nien-Stiles' feet tenses up. "That's very mafia of you. Will you leave his head in my bed, too?"

"You've had your laugh, Peter," Laura says. "Please go away. I'll make sure to tell mother I don't want you within a hundred feet of my charity ever again."

"Does that mean you're committing to taking care of your own transportation?" Peter wonders. "Or just to a new drop-off spot in the morning?"

"Go away," Laura says again.

Peter does.

Stiles waits until they are out of the building and in Peter's car again.

Me

jeez shes a bitch

Me

and you call her cariñosa she doesnt deserve that

Peter snorts and types a reply instead of saying it out loud.

Vine

She's not normally that militant. We manage to keep to a sort of uneasy truce most of the time. Perhaps she's having a bad day. Oh, and she 100% deserved to be called cariñosa for trying to grab you. You don't know it, and she doesn't either, but that's slang for "female prostitute" despite sounding like a harmless derivative of cariño.

Me

right and the bad part of her day was hearing you talk to me and realizing you might have a relationship thats outside her control whos gonna be the punching bag if whoever it is you were talking to helps you fly the nest

Me

not that you need anyone to save you but she doesnt know that

Me

also your linguistic insult abilities bring me joy so much joy you called her a whore to her face and she had no idea joy joy joy Vine

Peter taps the side of his phone to his lips, frowning.

Vine

As I was composing a reply in my mind, it occurred to me that I was trying to look for excuses for her. You know what? Fuck her excuses, and fuck her too. That cariñosa had your little stunt coming, and then some.

Vine

Gerard clearly wants something from her or Talia, not me, if he put that much effort into duping her. He must have only attacked me due to my position as the left hand. A preemptive strike at the biggest threat to his plans, I suppose. With any luck, he'll believe I don't know who he is and was only there to do my duty and check if any hunters are sniffing around anyone from the pack.

Me

not gonna tell them theyve got a hunter on their tail huh

Vine

This time tomorrow I will, hopefully, have nothing else to do with any of them. Whether or not he gets one over them before you kill him is no longer my concern.

Me

tomorrow already

Vine

Yes. That has been the plan since before I met you.

Me

well at least nien is gonna be with you

Vine

It might be better if I don't bring him home with me tonight. I don't believe Laura meant her threat but if she has a fit of temper, he might not survive even a casual swipe. Can I bring him to you for the night? To whatever form you're using to type these messages?

Me

you can take him to the preserve ill send an escort for him shell take over guarding him hes very fragile yeah pick him up at the same spot next day

Vine

An escort?

Me

a peregrine falcon 3 pounds of pure killer instinct yes that is also me dont start thinking shes gonna eat him when she comes

Vine

How many birds are you? Was I partially right when I named you Mockingbird?

Me

no lol no mockingbird just the two right now

Vine

Intriguing.

Me

have you figured out what i am yet im sure youve been thinking wondering making theories

Vine

No. Do I have all the information I need to figure it out?

Me

no i think not but you have more than you think you do

Vine

You're the worst kind of tease.

Me

do you enjoy being teased though is the question

Vine

I absolutely do. I also find it very enjoyable that whether or not I like it was the first place your mind went.

Me

my only way to be is to be selfish to the core i do what i like for example stalk a cute guy who likes being teased i dont see any reason for you to be any other way i want you to like things to enjoy them to chase what you want

Vine

Even if the thing I like and want to chase and enjoy is you?

Me

especially then duh

Me

you're a predator it's in your nature

Vine

And you're one as well? Who or what is your prey?

Me

everyone everything

Vine

No exceptions?

Me

just you

Me

only you

* * *

Kate-Stiles rides to her family's home in style: in a wheelchair to the car, then in the car to the door of the house. Stiles tries to conserve her meager strength by relaxing against the soft seats (Stiles is totally getting himself a high class car like that or ten when he has the money); not that it helps much. From the point of view of the body, Stiles has already put it through the wringer today after years of inactivity and it's had more or less enough.

Following after Victoria, Kate-Stiles drags herself to the living-room. Chris hovers nearby, hands anxiously supporting an elbow, guarding against a door jamb; Stiles draws the line at the offer of being carried inside and stubbornly moves under the body's own power, sparse as that is.

He sits Kate-Stiles down onto the couch, keeping her back relatively straight. There his prey is, standing on the other side of the room and watching him with keen eyes: Gerard, sans the Guillaume disguise, looking deeply mistrustful of sudden miracles.

"Allison will be here soon, after school lets out," Chris offers, still hovering instead of following Victoria further into the house, to the kitchen. He's holding onto the top of the couch cushions and looking remarkably ill at ease. "That's our daughter, she's seventeen. She, well, she barely remembers you either, to tell the truth. In a way, you'll be in the same boat." He chuckles nervously.

"Right," Kate-Stiles says. She's staring at Gerard without hiding her interest and isn't even blinking. "And this is...?"

"Our father, yours and mine," Chris says. "Gerard Argent."

Kate-Stiles shrugs.

"Charmed, I'm sure," she says. Gerard says nothing.

There's a pause. Stiles savors how supremely, completely awkward it is.

"Well, I'll go change," Chris gives up on the conversation first. "You could, well, get to know each other..."

He retreats from the room and goes upstairs two steps at a time, leaving Stiles alone with Gerard.

"You lost your memory, they tell me," Gerard says into the quiet.

Now is Stiles' time to shine. This is, of course, nothing like he envisioned taking over people who have family; he planned for being smart, for gathering information in advance, for only having to wing it when it's impossible to avoid. At this moment, though, he finds that the conversation ahead is like stepping off a cliff without knowing for sure whether he will fly or fall, and it's exhilarating. It excites him like few things in his life, second only to Peter, and it's enough even to give some semblance of energy to Kate-Stiles, feeding adrenaline through her veins.

Kate-Stiles smiles, slowly, maliciously.

"So I tell them," she says.

Stiles has no knowledge of how Kate and Gerard spoke, what about, how much they trusted each other (if at all), even how they addressed each other. Is Gerard "Father", "Dad", simply "Gerard"? Or "Papa", with the second syllable stressed for the sake of their French origins? He doesn't have the extensive education of an elite killer that Kate, without a doubt, received. He has no idea of the family history, shared experiences, anything at all. He has a snowball's chance in hell of making this a long con with only conjectures and guesses to help him along, but he doesn't need it long. All he can do is play on Gerard's emotions to prod him into action, and there's one emotion that Stiles is certain Gerard has: marrow-deep, abiding hatred of the supernatural.

Kate-Stiles leans forward, one hand clutching at the arm of the couch; all of the anger and lethal intent Stiles feels towards Gerard is written on her face, masked as directed towards others.

"Chris has always been the weakest one," she says. Gerard is listening from his side of the room, not in any hurry to get closer. "He doesn't need to know what I remember. He doesn't have the guts to deal with them as they deserve. Those filthy animals..."

"Your neck was looked at first thing," Gerard interrupts. "Werewolves didn't attack your mind."

Stiles files it under "ask Peter later" that werewolves, apparently, have some sort of mind powers which leave visible traces on someone's neck and shakes Kate-Stiles' head.

"Not that. I noticed them in that diner just before I lost consciousness... for six and a half years," Kate-Stiles bares her teeth. "Six and a half years!"

She pushes off the couch and starts pacing around the room; the emaciated body is only held up and moving by Stiles' sincere hurricane of strong feelings he has about the last six and a half years. He spent them hiding, learning, scrambling, always thinking on his feet, always dreaming of bigger and better things, settling for a fenced backyard when a vision of freely wrapping himself around the planet haunted his dreams.

Far away from the Argents' house, Boba-Stiles lets out a screech that seems to echo from one end of the sky to the other and plummets towards the ground like a living bullet. Below her, a tight flock of dark-eyed juncos dissolves and splashes individual birds around like drops of ink, each of them frantic to escape a nearing death.

"They took this time from me," Kate-Stiles says, and her voice is very quiet and calm. "I don't know exactly how. They must have worked some magic on me. A borrowed artifact. Something their useless shit sack of an emissary did. I don't know. They tried to burn me out of my mind."

She whirls towards Gerard; the movement makes her dizzy but she stays upright as Boba-Stiles' talons rip through a plump junco, silencing its terrified squeak. Blood splatters across her light feathers.

"It burned, and burned, and burned," Kate-Stiles whispers. There's angry heat in her cheeks. "Only they didn't know me, those stupid mutts, they thought it would kill me. I will burn them all now, and I need your help."

That's what Stiles now thinks she was here to do back then. There was fire in her mind, and her soul sang in anticipation of seeing someone else's pain. She wanted to kill the Hale pack by burning them.

It's one of those conjecture things that Stiles is forced to rely on in absence of actual information, and if he's wrong, well. He'll find another way to put Gerard down.

"All of my plans have long since fallen through," Kate-Stiles continues. Gerard is watching her with an expression that is not easy to decipher. Is it pity? Is it anger? Is it contempt?

"They know my name. I'm not nearly strong enough after all this time. I need you to help me kill them all."

Whatever it is Gerard wants from the Hales, it likely doesn't include killing them all, at least not right away. It's hard to imagine what else a hunter might possibly need from werewolves, though, so maybe Stiles is wrong. It doesn't matter. Either way, he's going to have to include Kate-Stiles if he doesn't want her to mess up all his plans by acting alone.

Gerard isn't saying anything. Kate-Stiles half-steps, half-sways closer to him and squeezes his shoulders with the same desperate grip she had on the couch arm, and he doesn't shrug her

off.

"Well?" She demands. "Have you gotten old over the last six and half years? Should I kill them by myself?"

"Calm down, Kate," Gerard says. "We will kill them... a bit slower than you planned but it's going to be all the more satisfying."

He raises a hand and pets her hair the same way someone pets their dog. Kate-Stiles presses into the touch and lets the manic determination in her eyes die down a little.

Boba-Stiles rips off a strip of warm, bloody meat, swallows it and makes a loud, rasping sound: kack-kack-kack.

Chapter End Notes

- Mi lindo (sp.) — my pretty/cute/lovely (male form).
- Cariño mio (sp.) — my dear/my darling.
- Oui (fr.) — yes.
- Mon Dieu (fr.) — my God.
- La famille (fr.) — family.

Chapter 5: like satan fucking me in the solar plexus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Vine

My sweet Mockingbird, what do you look like?

Me

a loaded question huh why so sudden

Prime is in the backyard again, slumped in his chair, feet up on the desk. Chewbacca-Stiles and Boba-Stiles are getting their exercise, play-hunting each other and generally frolicking around; it helps Stiles use the animal senses better, too, and react faster. It's after lunch, and Nien-Stiles, tired from all the excitement of today, is taking a nap in a nest made of Peter's cashmere scarf next to Peter's laptop, soothed by the click-clack of the keys.

Vine

You asked what Charlie looked like. I actually tried to remember but realized that I cannot say for sure if the features I'm remembering belonged to him or to any of my previous one night stands. And then it occurred to me that you were only asking because you might be feeling insecure, and a much more productive use may be made of my time if I learned what you look like and reassured you that you are plenty attractive.

Me

okay well wow technically you know what i look like nien is me you can see him with your own eyes right now

Vine

And he is the cutest tiny bird I have ever seen but I suspect you have other forms. You are not always a bird, or not only a bird, or some combination of the above. You must be using some human-like form to send me these messages. This form of yours that is holding the phone in his hand and texting me, what does he look like?

This is edging perilously close to a premature reveal but there's hardly anything Stiles can do about that.

Me

fine fine sherlock

Me

uhm alright now youre making me nervous im tall but not too tall kinda skinny brown hair white young

Vine

How young?

Vine

I have to confess, if you turn out to be a supernaturally precocious twelve-year-old, I will put the flirting on the back burner until much later.

Me

oh bite me look at him he thinks i might be twelve hilarious would a twelve year old look at your ass in those jeans and basically drool

Me

im seventeen today

He really is. It's with a surprise that he connects today's date and his own age once he goes to double-check what number said age actually is. It has been maybe ten years since anyone made any fuss over his birthday.

Vine

Mm, seventeen. Happy birthday, mi cielo. With regards to the law, I'm still not allowed to touch you... but I bet I'd like to. Come on, my darling Mockingbird, tell me more. Is your hair curly or straight? Long or short? Do you have freckles or moles? What color are your eyes? Do you have scars, piercings, tattoos? Are your lips thin or plump? Do you have fangs, wings or other features giving you away as not entirely human?

Vine

You have evidently studied my ass in great detail (as is only natural for any being with eyes). I feel rather entitled to knowing a bit more about you.

Prime laughs.

Me

hard to argue with your opinion of that ass please note i dont give a fig about the law if you really turn out not to have any objections im looking forward to inspecting the front as well

Me

my hairs straight cut short uneven all over the place i have some moles all over no scars piercings or tattoos completely unblemished although i got my feet cut on some glass recently so that might or might not scar

Me

lips more thin than plump i guess i look mostly human except for the eyes they are kinda brown too i dont know i hide them if i go out my face is normal otherwise nothing special not ugly not pretty

Vine

A lot of people with moles consider that feature unattractive. In case you're one of them, let me assure you that I am very intrigued by the possibility of kissing each one and finding out exactly what "all over" means.

Vine

Do you go out often? You seem like you know what you want, do you have a lot of that

disregarding-the-law experience? Could I have seen you in the Jungle?

Me

never been there

Me

and i dont have any experience been busy with other things fending for myself to be frank other people are marks to deceive targets to use not the thing that gets me going

Me

youre special youre new i look at you and i want to learn all there is about sex how to take you apart how to let myself be taken apart im a fast learner

Vine

For someone who claims to be a consummate liar you are oddly sincere.

Me

you think that cause you dont know how many lies im spinning all day every day

Vine

Will I find out?

Me

you will

As they talk (flirt, bicker, tease, circle each other playfully—whatever this is, Stiles is enjoying it immensely), Xiuying-Stiles is finishing her shift at the car wash. She is a valued employee, punctual, diligent and always in a good mood, and the guy who's got the late afternoon and evening seems to despise her all the more every time she says hi and smiles at him. His name is Harris and he teaches Chemistry at the local high school; he's never polite to Stiles' bodies that work as lunch ladies there, so Stiles is always happy to greet him with a beaming smile and watch his face scrunch up like he's bitten into a lemon. He has no idea what Harris has got against Xiuying-Stiles, be it her gender, ethnicity, membership in a supposed religious commune or the ability to be more likable than Harris himself (not that it's difficult; an earthworm is easily more likable than Harris). He's just having a little bit of fun, being as gratingly nice as he possibly can.

"Have a great shift!" Xiuying-Stiles chirps, every bit as melodious as Nien-Stiles. "See you tomorrow!"

She waves at Harris and skips down the steps of the car wash office porch. Maybe the guy dislikes her for being almost forty yet behaving rather childishly sometimes. Not that it matters what Harris thinks, though. Stiles really is in a good mood. His plans are slowly moving along, Peter is a delightful obsession that seems to be completely requited so far, the weather is nice; Stiles is seventeen and if the world is not his oyster, well, it will be one day. He feels it warrants some skipping.

Xiuying-Stiles takes the bus to work and back. She has to walk a few minutes to the bus stop, and so this is what she does right now, humming along with the song playing from Prime's

speaker. She's got the nicest voice of all of Stiles' bodies.

"Fingertips that turn the magic key to wonder and adventure, growing up comes later, right now that world belongs to you and me," she hums under her breath. It's the latest addition to Stiles' newest playlist titled "Peter Songs" which he'll show Peter at some point, after they've officially met face to faces. Stiles doesn't think Peter will consider it creepy or inappropriate. Peter is perfect like that.

Stiles smiles with Xiuying-Stiles' lips at this thought. He's still smiling when someone grabs him by the throat from behind and squeezes until Xiuying-Stiles slips into unconsciousness.

* * *

Xiuying-Stiles comes to exactly fifteen minutes later from a harsh slap on the face. By then, Stiles is mightily ticked off because even though he immediately diverted Leo-Stiles from doing laundry and sent him out in a car with Chewbacca-Stiles for back-up, following Xiuying-Stiles' phone GPS, the trail went cold too fast—the phone got thrown into a ditch. Leo-Stiles picks it up, and Chewbacca-Stiles catches a weird scent where Xiuying-Stiles remembers being last but can't follow it.

Stiles doesn't have any special ability to locate his bodies. It comes, he supposes, as the inevitable drawback of his control over them being independent of the distance; whether a body is right next to him or within hours and hours of driving, it feels the same, so no "hot or cold" games for him. Although Xiuying-Stiles can hardly be already far away, unless whoever took her can somehow teleport.

He looks out at his captors through her eyes, her cheek stinging. He has never seen them before, neither the two identical-looking buff guys, nor the woman dressed like she's about to go to a yoga class.

"Hello," the woman says, She's got a naturally throaty, sensual voice. "Now you're going to tell us all we want to know, or it's going to get very unpleasant. For you, that is."

She smiles at Xiuying-Stiles.

"Please refuse to tell us what you know," she says. "It'll be a pleasure to teach you how wrong you are."

The buff guys are grinning, looking like they don't mind torturing Xiuying-Stiles at all. They might, in fact, pull out some popcorn if she refuses. Who the hell are these clowns and what do they know?

Stiles sends Boba-Stiles to scout out the grounds and finds an intruder lurking outside the fence. It's a man better characterized as a mountain of muscle, and he looks very peculiar in UV light. Rather similar to Peter and Laura, actually. A werewolf? Are the three by Xiuying-Stiles also werewolves? Where did they even come from? They don't look like Hales, and there's no other pack in Beacon Hills.

Well, the answers to those questions are a secondary priority. The primary one is staying alive and burying the intruder six feet under.

The Muscle Man is still patiently looking for a way in that doesn't include breaking anything or climbing over anything and possibly tripping an alarm. He doesn't seem like the type to have a lot of patience, so Stiles doesn't want to lose any time.

He walks Prime inside the house; Darth-Stiles, Leia-Stiles, Han-Stiles, Jonathan-Stiles, Mildred-Stiles and Emmett-Stiles fall into step with Prime as they head to the small pharmacy on the first floor. As he walks, he types a message to Peter.

Me

gotta deal with a cocky motherfucker be back soon

He knows Peter will be curious but explanations can wait. Right now he's walking through the pharmacy and unlocking the unassuming back door with "Authorized Personnel Only" still printed on it.

Eichen House used to be a really ghastly place. One could argue that now, inhabited by a hive mind with tentative plans for world domination, it's not much better, but Stiles would beg to differ. At least he doesn't go out of his way to be sadistic; although he did keep all of these things here, wondering if they might one day come in useful.

They have, he supposes.

As a covert prison for all manner of supernatural creatures, Eichen House had accumulated a wide variety of things used to subdue and overpower such creatures. The puny humans controlled minotaurs like Darth-Stiles with cattle prods and insectoids like Leia-Stiles with base mixtures that neutralized her acidic venom; besides the leather harnesses for human patients, the place boasted a lot of chains, collars and handcuffs, lined with mountain ash, silver and other special deterrents. And, of course, being ostensibly a hospital, it relied heavily on tranquilizers, including a few made on the base of wolfsbane.

It's a hunter's wet dream in here, even though it's lacking proper guns. Darth-Stiles takes an ax into his meaty hands and pours wolfsbane oil over it. Leia-Stiles, Jonathan-Stiles and Mildred-Stiles take a cattle prod each. Prime and Emmett-Stiles take tranquilizer guns, loading them with the wolfsbane-based drugs. Han-Stiles takes off his shirt and rubs wolfsbane oil on his scales that are already parting from the skin beneath, glinting and shifting restlessly. In addition, Prime, Mildred-Stiles, Jonathan-Stiles and Emmett-Stiles take full pockets of mountain ash—it doesn't deter any of the human bodies, and Stiles can actually command it to close into a circle, although that's about the extent of his magical prowess.

Not that anyone needs magic to kill. The main prerequisite is simply the willingness to put one's own life above that of another, and Stiles no longer remembers being the boy who would hesitate.

In the meantime, Xiuying-Stiles widens her eyes and starts breathing quickly and shallowly. Stiles is more angry than afraid but he's certain werewolves can smell fear, so he concentrates

on that, sending Xiuying-Stiles into panic as best he can.

"W-who are you?" She whimpers. An experimental jerking movement tells Stiles that her hands are bound behind the chair she's sitting on; her legs are free but that's hardly of any use. A human-strength kick won't hurt a werewolf all that much, and this woman seems the type to catch Xiuying-Stiles' ankle and squeeze until the bone is ground into powder, and what good would that do Stiles? "Where am I? What do you want from me?"

The woman slaps Xiuying-Stiles' other cheek, hard enough to make Stiles see stars; Xiuying-Stiles' glasses go flying and crash against the floor with the characteristic clink of shattering lenses. That's going to bruise and, should Xiuying-Stiles survive, make it difficult for her to go to work tomorrow. Also, it fucking hurts. The drawback of having a body at all is having to feel all the aches, pains and discomforts it experiences, and Stiles is normally quite good at keeping those to a minimum.

"Once again, we'll be asking the questions," the woman says. Stiles nicknames her Perra in his head because she is a bitch, because dog references must be extra offensive to werewolves and because Stiles wants to practice his meager Spanish. He hasn't put a lot of effort into languages thus far but he'd like to be able to talk to Peter in every language Peter knows. Also, taking over the world will require more than the various flavors of English he has been focused on up to now. "Forget it one more time, and I'll tear a finger off. Got it?"

Xiuying-Stiles nods silently, swallowing the blood in her mouth. She is crying, quite honestly so since it fucking hurts, and as she blinks the tears away, her eyes are moving quickly, taking the location in as much as her nearsightedness will allow. The stone walls and the concrete floor are bare; it smells dusty and abandoned. The room is huge, so it's not a residential building. Some business place that is no longer in use. Leo-Stiles, parked on the side of the road, starts searching for a suitable spot on his phone.

"Now," Perra says, looking disappointed that she doesn't get to play the he-loves-me-he-loves-me-not game with someone's fingers, at least not yet, "what does your shitty operation want with Deucalion?"

Stiles almost asks who the hell Deucalion is but remembers the questions rule just in time.

"I-I don't know who that is," Xiuying-Stiles whispers. "I don't, I don't want anything with him..."

One of the identical buff guys—Stiles christens them Zanco and Panco after having a body look it up on their phone quickly—makes a "wah-wah-wah" sound.

"Wrong answer!" He adds, apparently uncertain in the quality of his voice acting. Zanco the comedian. Stiles isn't sure how he's going to kill the guy yet but he hopes it'll turn out to be painful.

Perra leans down, eyes glowing alpha red, laying a finger on Xiuying-Stiles' cheek. The tip of her claw is so sharp that it parts the top layer of skin with the gentlest touch.

"Your head honcho was seen in San Francisco," Perra says, smiling. Her voice is husky and her eyes are sparkling, and Stiles wonders if she's getting off on this. "Sniffing around, and pretty much right after dear old Pinky gave up that the Hales are showing an unhealthy interest in their old family friend. The only use that will come of pretending it's all a giant coincidence is that I will get to make you talk in the slow way."

The tip of her claw travels down Xiuying-Stiles' cheek and chin, stopping at the top of the neck. Xiuying-Stiles moans in abject fear as Stiles thinks through Perra's words in a hurry. It would help a lot if he had any idea at all who Deucalion and Pinky are but there are enough hints that he might bluff his way through this until such time when he can send some reinforcements to Xiuying-Stiles' location.

With the power of forty-five brains to rely on, Stiles puts together the facts that are available to him.

First, Perra referred to a "head honcho". The only one of those associated with Stiles is Emmett-Stiles, the former head of Eichen House and the current figurehead of the Children of Unity religious commune.

Second, the only unusual place Emmett-Stiles has been seen recently was San-Francisco. This means, not necessarily but highly likely, that this is where Perra, Zanco, Panko and Muscle Man have come from.

Third, they are acting under the impression that Emmett-Stiles is somehow after somebody named Deucalion. Perra also mentioned an old family friend of the Hales who has been the target of unhealthy interest, and she connected it to her previous words about Emmett-Stiles' supposed ill intentions, so it stands to reason to postulate that Deucalion and family friend are one and the same person.

Fourth, Peter made an oblique mention of an old family friend in San Francisco he'd like to visit in order to fulfill some as of yet undisclosed purpose.

Fifth, someone named Pinky told Perra and her friends that the Hales were interested in Deucalion, although it was in actuality only Peter, acting on his own behalf.

Sixth, Emmett-Stiles' face must be known to supernatural creatures smart enough to plan for contingencies. The head of a covert supernatural prison must have been a bit of boogeyman around these parts, and having him show up out of nowhere had to be an alarming sign.

Seventh, less of a fact and more of a conjecture, that Deucalion guy must be supernatural as well, likely a werewolf. It's possible but not probable that Perra is the type to have human friends she'd care about enough to travel to Beacon Hills and interrogate people on said friends' behalf.

Ergo (ignoring some lack among the facts and making several assumptions, but Stiles has to work with what he's got), Deucalion got spooked badly enough that he might have suspected all of these people suddenly interested in his person were working together. The Hales in an unholy alliance with Eichen House; a force able to draw on a lot of resources. Thus someone connected to Eichen House getting grabbed off the streets—a werewolf would let their pack

know something's wrong simply via the distress coming through the packbond. A human is less of a security risk (at least a normal one, not a body of Stiles') and would be even easier to make talk. Stiles wonders why Xiuying-Stiles was the one targeted. Someone must have been going on about who she is and where she lives, even though most of the Beacon Hills residents have long since gotten used to the introverted little commune. Maybe it was Harris, the dick.

What's so special about Deucalion, though, that his alpha would come running here with some underlings for his sake? And why is he so paranoid, exactly? Has he been some special kind of thorn in people's sides?

Stiles should probably get used to operating this way. He's not likely to ever have complete information and every single fact verified via independent sources, much as he would've liked to. A hive mind who doesn't want to stay hidden in a remote corner of the world his whole life has to learn to use the crumbs he has managed to collect... or at least this is how Stiles sees it. He isn't sure anyone else like him exists; if they do, they and their habits haven't been recorded in the extensive database of Eichen House.

The thinking and the committing to a course of action takes just enough time for Stiles' armed bodies to leave the building through different doors and start moving towards where Muscle Man, under Boba-Stiles' watchful eye, has run out of patience and started punching a hole through the fence.

Now that's just rude.

Darth-Stiles is a wall of muscle in his own right. Towering over all of Stiles' other bodies, he is a match for Muscle Man's height and bulk but he doesn't have claws or fangs. What he does have is huge curved horns that are a pain in the ass to sleep with but look very impressive and a face that is more of a bull's snout. With a rather fearsome roar, if Stiles does say so himself, Darth-Stiles charges at Muscle Man, the ax lifted high and shining wetly in the sun.

Muscle Man proves that his lack of subtlety was not, in fact, a cunning plan by grinning and roaring back. He leaps towards his loud, impossible-to-ignore foe, and his eyes glow red as he pops out fangs and claws. Another alpha? That would be just Stiles' luck if they all turn out to be alphas, never mind that a pack consisting of only alphas sounds like a recipe for so much internal strife between egos that they should have all killed each other within days.

Darth-Stiles and Muscle Man clash in a whirlwind of sharp strikes and blood. Stiles bellows through Darth-Stiles' mouth at the fresh wounds that cross his torso in diagonal lines—uncomfortably close to minotaur guts seeing the light of day—and has Han-Stiles raise his arms and shoot his scales.

They are large, and iridescent, and sharp as knives. Darth-Stiles uses Muscle Man as an unwitting shield to make sure no friendly fire occurs, and five scales lodge themselves in Muscle Man's back. An alpha werewolf would normally brush off wounds like this but these are served with a generous helping of wolfsbane oil, and Muscle Man roars again, this time in rage and pain, as he turns around.

Darth-Stiles ducks low, and Prime and Emmett-Stiles peek out from behind the corner, firing from their tranquilizer guns, once, twice, three times each. One shot goes wide and another one plinks off Darth-Stiles' dratted horns but the remaining four hit Muscle Man in the back, thighs and one of his bulging biceps. Black lines of poison creep quickly away, and even though Muscle Man swipes the capsules away, he can't get rid of what's already in his system.

Sadly, this is not enough to put him down. Not that Stiles hoped it would be that easy. The weakness to wolfsbane is balanced out by incredible resilience and the ability to keep fighting for a long time after being dosed, or so the Eichen House records say about the multiple werewolves that were imprisoned there long before Stiles' time. Unlike those doctors of the past, Stiles doesn't have Muscle Man restrained with mountain ash lined cuffs so he needs to cut down on the guy's mobility in another way... literally.

Darth-Stiles takes advantage of Muscle Man getting distracted by the tranquilizer capsules and swings the ax at his leg just below the knee, the blade angled. With Logan-Stiles' experience in butchering, Stiles is very aware of the fact that straight-up cleaving through a bone is really, really hard, especially a bone as thick and durable as one meant to carry the weight of the body around, but the kneecaps are connected to the rest of it with much more vulnerable tendons and ligaments. As long as the ax doesn't get stuck in a bone, Darth-Stiles should...

Ah, yes. Cut right through.

Darth-Stiles promptly rolls away while Muscle Man stares numbly at his suddenly separate appendage. Han-Stiles pelts him with more scales. The impact is enough to make the shocked Muscle Man lose his balance and topple like a tree that has lost the title of a tree and become simply lumber.

The fall seems to have returned Muscle Man to his senses at least somewhat because he shakes off the shock and, glaring at Darth-Stiles with hot hatred, bunches up his arms to launch himself towards the one he still considers his main enemy. Leia-Stiles skitters up the fence from the backyard, light and nimble, and jumps down. The crackling cattle prod in her hand hits Muscle Man's spine just as Muscle Man makes his own leap; were her hands covered with slippery human skin, the force of the contact would have made her lose the prod, but as it is, the handle of the prod scrapes against her chitin and stays in her grasp.

The electricity travels through Muscle Man's body, making him fall on his face and twitch in the grass. Mildred-Stiles and Jonathan-Stiles jog over and bring their cattle prods to the party. The combined power would be enough to knock an elephant unconscious but Stiles isn't sure how an alpha werewolf rates next to an elephant in this case. He keeps the prods on for several minutes, just to be safe; ironically, this is only possible because these cattle prods have the normal safety feature of switching off automatically after two seconds of activity disabled.

He stops when his bodies next to Muscle Man start smelling burnt hair and cooked meat and Muscle Man himself is not reacting besides the involuntary twitching. With the prods switched off, Muscle Man stills completely. Stiles looks closer through the eyes of Mildred-Stiles, Leia-Stiles and Jonathan-Stiles and notices that the black lines of wolfsbane poisoning have stopped moving.

Muscle Man is dead.

Stiles looks at the hole in his fence, the blood dripping from Darth-Stiles' torso wounds, the one-legged electrocuted corpse and sighs. Really, it's a blessing that Eichen House is so far from the rest of the town. The clean-up is going to be a total perra.

* * *

"Please, you have to understand, I'm not privy to Father Emmett's secrets," Xiuying-Stiles pleads. "All I know is what I caught through the natural gossip and maybe, uhm, a bit of eavesdropping, but I don't do it often!"

She barrels right past the skeptical looks she gets at that.

"We are no longer a psychiatric hospital! We are a commune! We have seen the light of Our Lord and Savior!"

"Right, a nuthouse and a supernatural prison full of fresh saints," says Zanco. "Pull the other one, idiot."

Xiuying-Stiles squeezes her eyes shut and starts muttering:

"Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus..."

Perra roars in Xuiying-Stiles' face. The full-on alpha roar this close to a tender human face is suitably terrifying. Stiles lets the words dry up on Xiuying-Stiles' lips and whimpers instead.

"I don't fucking care if you were born again or not," Perra says. All three pairs of hostile eyes looking at Xiuying-Stiles are alpha red, because of course they are. "Start talking. Now. Or say goodbye to a finger."

She cuts through the rope on Xiuying-Stiles' wrists with a claw and jerks her right hand to the front, almost pulling the elbow out of joint. Perra's fingers are like steel forceps at the top of Xiuying-Stiles' palm, and Stiles wonders if he will indeed lose a finger, just from the preliminary threats.

"F-father Emmett has been heard saying that, that Deucalion is special," Xiuying-Stiles says, voice quivering. This is the shakiest part where Stiles makes something up and hopes that his captors will give him enough clues to tell a satisfying story. "There are still some experiments going on, you see..."

Xuiying-Stiles' right index finger tears off with a wet squelch of flesh. The pain is white-hot, so strong and sudden that Xiuying-Stiles cannot even scream, fully consumed by it. Stiles holds his other bodies back from screaming or flinching through sheer force of will; the pain flows through him like lava, and he makes himself breathe through it.

"Mockingbird? Are you alright?" Peter has noticed Nien-Stiles twitching a bit in his comfy nest, probably heard the elevated heart rate, too.

Nien-Stiles chirps somewhat shakily and nods. Peter doesn't look like he believes the nod but without further signs of distress he lets it go. When he strokes Nien-Stiles' back, Stiles is grateful. The tiny, sweet touch helps.

"Lying is useless," Perra explains. "We can hear it, you know. So try again, and remember, you still have nine fingers. Do you want to keep them or not?"

Stiles stares at them through Xiuying-Stiles' eyes, sincerely shocked by their collective lack of brains. He already said the truth when he mentioned that he has no idea who the fuck Deucalion is, and they just outright ignored it because it wasn't what they wanted to hear—or, perhaps, they didn't really care either way. So they won't accept the truth but will suss out the lies.

To sum up his situation, it looks like he might come back down to forty-four bodies again tonight, no matter what he says. They have never planned to let Xiuying-Stiles leave alive, and even if he finds out where she is right now, he's not one hundred per cent equipped to fight three alpha werewolves at once. She was probably meant to be pumped for any information she might have, just in case, then killed and used for intimidation. If she weren't a part of him but a normal human instead, having her mutilated corpse appear by the gates of Eichen House or something along those lines would be a very effective technique. It's possible that getting any information was only a distant bonus for them to begin with.

He has Xiuying-Stiles pretend to be in shock as he thinks the situation over again. Undoubtedly, they will soon find out that Muscle Man hasn't survived his mission, whatever it was he was meant to do here. Reconnaissance, very likely. So they will come here too, and he needs to be ready.

He's a bit miffed at himself for having wasted time and mental effort with trying to lie his way out and also somewhat annoyed at Peter for having been indiscreet enough in his interest that Perra and Co noticed it. Well, that can't be helped now. Besides, it's not like Peter could ever predict that said interest would end up harming Stiles.

He snaps a picture of Muscle Man's dead face and types out a message.

Me

so im not saying all werewolves know each other or anything but are you by any chance familiar with this late cocky motherfucker

[photo attachment]

Nien-Stiles is watching Peter as the latter reads the message. The reaction is rather more extreme than Stiles expected: Peter visibly pales, and his eyes widen. Has Stiles misjudged Peter? Does Peter, despite having a decent-sized pond of blood on his own claws, feel squeamish about Stiles killing? Or did Stiles read Peter wrong, and the visit to San Francisco was going to be a friendly one, maybe to ask for shelter from an alpha who is not his sister? Was Muscle Man a friend, maybe, and his death has turned Peter against Stiles?

"That's Ennis," Peter says. "He's a member of the alpha pack. What was he doing here? How did he get to you? Are you hurt? What about Kali, Ethan and Aiden? They're not near you, are they? They are dangerous."

Stiles frowns, confused. Is Peter afraid for Stiles? Is that what this is? Stiles isn't sure what to make of that. On the one hand, it's very sweet. On the other hand, it evokes some old memories that make him feel resentful towards a dead man, and Stiles doesn't want to deal with that can of worms, especially right now.

Me

a whole pack of alphas what the fuck

Me

he was lurking by my place and his friends have snatched someone with a connection to me i dunno what he wanted exactly but theyre not here for an invitation to tea he didnt leave a scratch on me well a couple of scratches theyll heal

"His friends?" Peter repeats. "They are all here, in Beacon Hills?"

Me

a crazy bitch in leggings and two twins yes kali ethan and aiden you said as i understand theres gotta be another one deucalion if thats how its spelled unless its one of the twins i havent seen him

Peter turns to his laptop and clicks open a messenger app. Nien-Stiles shamelessly hops over Peter's arm to peer at the screen; Peter doesn't seem to mind. The conversation on the screen is between Peter and someone named Pinky, and Nien-Stiles pecks at Peter's hand to stop him from typing.

Me

Vine wait

Me

thats the guy who sold you out

Me

the leggings bitch said something about pinky telling them all about the hales interest in deucalion i mean it was just you but i think they think youre acting as the packs left hand

"Fuck," Peter mutters and rubs his face with his hands.

Me

what did you even want with them theyre stupid as fuck

Peter laughs without any true mirth to it.

"I wanted to kill Deucalion and take his alpha spark for myself," he says. "A lone beta is pretty much sure to go feral. I need to be an alpha if I want to enjoy my freedom at all."

Me

that makes sense

Me

hes gonna be on high alert now though and he might be circling around you even now i

havent seen him but hes probably not just sitting around picking his nose

"But what do they want from you?" Peter stares at Nien-Stiles, frustrated. "I suppose they could have hacked my phone and traced your number... no, wait, that legally belongs to that Morris character. How do they even know you exist, much less that we're connected in any way?"

Me

i went to san fran this morning they noticed me well sort of i didnt know they were there didnt know who they were wasnt there for them at all they got spooked though

"That... doesn't make much sense," Peter says. "Is your face so known in the supernatural circles that a whole pack of alphas got up and came running at the mere sight of it?"

Stiles sighs, exasperated. Talking around the truth is becoming exceedingly difficult, and if he lies outright, Peter's going to be offended about the lack of regard again.

Well, it looks like Peter and he are gaining shared enemies at an alarming rate. Strategically, it'd make the most sense to join forces instead of keeping Peter in the dark.

And if Peter doesn't take the truth as enthusiastically as he insisted he would, Stiles would much prefer to know now, before hurricane Peter carries him off too far to land on steady ground safely again.

Me

yes and no

Me

look i think itd make sense for us to meet up

Me

some of our enemies are in clusters and we are separated not too smart is it its not how i planned hoped thought wed meet not much time rush danger but

Me

unless you wanna run far and fast and now nien-me can guide you to me to this form

Peter gawks at the phone. He looks astonished; and then his expression morphs into triumphant hunger. He is nothing so much as a wolf on a hunt, howling his victory to the moon with blood still dripping from his fangs.

He is magnificent. Stiles wonders if the hurricane has already carried him off too far while he wasn't looking.

"I'm not running away from where you are, mi precioso Mockingbird," Peter purrs. His voice is smooth and velvet-soft, sliding through Nien-Stiles' ear openings and straight into all of Stiles' human veins; Stiles makes an effort to hold back but five of his bodies shiver anyway. Those Spanish endearments will be the death of him. "Only towards you."

Nien-Stiles chirps, flutters up and lands on Peter's shoulder. Peter carefully rubs his cheek against Nien-Stiles, eliciting another chirp.

Stiles smiles with Prime's lips, then grimaces as Perra backhands Xiuying-Stiles again, without holding her claws back this time. Leo-Stiles has looked through every abandoned business in Beacon Hills that was possible to locate via online sources and narrowed it down to just one likely to have ceilings this high: an old bank. Not that Stiles has any idea just yet how to go about staging a rescue mission, or even a revenge one. In an all-out fight with three alphas (or four, if Deucalion is also skulking somewhere nearby) his chances are not very good.

"Please! Let me go!" Xiuying-Stiles wails. The cuts on her cheek burn with sharp pain but that's, frankly, nothing compared to the missing finger. Stiles constantly has to glance down at all of his hands, paws and feet to reassure himself that everything else is where it's supposed to be despite the phantom ache echoing through his bodies.

"Talk, and you might still get out alive," Perra says sweetly. Stiles doesn't need any fancy werewolf abilities to know she's lying.

"I just need to swing by the pack house," Peter says. "My getaway bag with all necessities is there, and the house should be empty right now. I have some weapons in there too."

Excellent. This is what Stiles needs: weapons, more weapons, proper ones. He wouldn't mind sniping Perra and her sidekicks from a distance, clean and safe.

Me

sounds like just what the doctor ordered

As Peter packs his wallet, his phone and Nien-Stiles into his pockets and leaves the office, Stiles contemplates how he can use Xiuying-Stiles to possibly stall for time. The longer they are busy with her, the longer they are not looking for Ennis.

Although... Now that Peter is coming here, Stiles finds himself disinclined to let Perra, Zanco and Panco to appear around Eichen House at all. Stiles has gone to considerable lengths already to keep Peter safe from harm, and it seems quite probable that, should there be three angry alphas on the loose around the Children of Unity commune, the situation will get out from under Stiles' control and Peter will suffer some harm, possibly irreparable. Peter doesn't have extra bodies, and even though he enjoys some advanced healing, he's not immortal.

Regrettably, Stiles will definitely have to write Xiuying-Stiles off altogether. Her death will not be in vain; and all the fucking annoying pain that Stiles is feeling in that body, torn, and scratched, and battered, won't be in vain either. He's also starting to feel woozy as Xiuying-Stiles because no one has bothered to put a tourniquet on the stump of the finger, instead leaving it to bleed freely and generously. One would think at least Zanco and Panco would have enough brains to do it because it looks like if anyone's going to have to clean up all that blood, it will be them, not Perra.

Stiles wonders if all three of his captors are born werewolves and therefore perhaps unaware of how fragile humans are. He didn't figure he'd have an opportunity to train in taking death

better so soon but it looks like here it is.

Me

tell me what you know about kali ethan aiden

As Prime ties a pouch to Boba-Stiles' feet and sends her streaking across the sky towards the abandoned bank where Leo-Stiles and Chewbacca-Stiles are also heading, Xiuying-Stiles lifts her head slowly and stares at angry Perra, grinning with bloodied lips. Stiles has spent a lot of time when he was still a child practicing different emotions with different faces. Playing insanity was always so frightfully easy.

Xiuying-Stiles keeps staring and grinning until Perra fidgets in a way that shows she's uncomfortable. Perra is definitely the type of person who deals with discomfort by hitting the thing discomfiting her until it stops doing that, so Xiuying-Stiles opens her mouth and speaks.

"Sins have a way of catching up with you, Kali," she whispers. Peter is playing storyteller again as he drives, delivering a great amount of dirt on the whole alpha pack to Nien-Stiles lounging in the warmth between the skin of Peter's shoulder and the fabric of his shirt. Talia is such an unbelievable fool. If Stiles had Peter and his information gathering abilities to himself, he'd be cherishing all that wholeheartedly.

Stiles supposes he actually does and is, at least for right now. The thought makes him want to smile, and he channels it into making Xiuying-Stiles' grin that much wider, that much more unhinged.

"What would Julia say if she saw you?" Xiuying-Stiles sing-songs. According to Peter, it was a juicy bit of gossip among all packs for three states in every direction that Perra and her emissary Julia Baccari were an on-again, off-again type of romance complete with huge rows, dramatic walking out on each other, throwing plates, loud make-up sex where the whole pack could hear and so on. And then Perra killed Julia along with the rest of the pack. Stiles wonders if Perra had enough genuine affection in her to give her lover a clean, quick death or if Julia got about as mutilated as Xiuying-Stiles is. Probably the latter. Some people just can't help but play with their food. "Do you think she'd clap her hands, and laugh, and say, good job, Kali, you're so strong, so impressive? Or would she wind her cold dead hands around your neck and squeeze the life out of you for your betrayal?"

Perra stares at Xiuying-Stiles, and Stiles can see fear, anger and death in her dark eyes. She really is quite beautiful. Poor fool Julia probably never had a chance.

"How do you know about Julia?" Perra growls. Her face transforms, and Stiles devotes a little bit of his attention to studying the change with scholarly interest; he's never seen a transformed werewolf in person before today. Do Peter's eyebrows also disappear? How do these long fangs not cut the lips and gums? Where does the extra hair come from? Is it stored somewhere under the skin until it's needed? Maybe Peter would be obliging enough to transform and let Stiles touch his face all over. "How dare you talk about her?"

Perra is clearly working herself up to tearing Xiuying-Stiles' throat out, and it's much too early for that. Xiuying-Stiles turns her head, very slowly again, not moving any other muscle

except those in her neck, and looks directly at Zanco and Panco.

"Your mother is crying," she tells them, and they pale in unison. Peter doesn't actually know much about their mother save for the fact that she was alive before they killed their whole pack and was not after that. Maybe they killed her, maybe not. "She lost her boys, oh, she did, so long ago. She is ashamed. She failed you, and you failed her, and she will never, ever stop crying."

Xiuying-Stiles fakes a hiccup—that, at least, doesn't seem to register as a lie—and jerks her head awkwardly up, staring at the ceiling with her mouth slack and her eyes open wide. Blood trickles down her scratched cheeks and out of her finger stump. She is so lightheaded.

"Ethan," she whispers in a low, desperate voice. "Aiden. What... what have you... become..."

Panco makes a wounded sound.

"Stop that!" Zanco snaps. "Ethan, get a fucking hold of yourself! She's trying to throw you off balance, and you're letting her!"

"Why would she do that?" Panco asks, his voice trembling a little. "It's not like that's gonna help her at all."

Xiuying-Stiles gives a long, agonized moan.

"K-kali," she chokes out. "Kali, why..."

"Shut up!" Perra kicks the chair Xiuying-Stiles is sitting on, and it flies up and turns over in the air before crashing on the ground, reminding Stiles of that toy he was kicking around a diner once upon a time. Was it a shuttlecock after all? It must have been. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Leo-Stiles is driving exactly at the speed limit. He doesn't have the time to get pulled over and receive a ticket or lead an exciting car chase through the city, so he stays just under the radar. Only a few minutes left. Boba-Stiles, who can move much faster than the stupid speed limit and doesn't have to suffer any traffic cops up in the sky, is already waiting outside the bank.

Falling down on his shoulder with the whole weight of this body and the chair is a new shade of pain, whitening the world before Xiuying-Stiles' eyes. Stiles is ready this time, and he takes the pain and he weathers it, spreading it out and letting it fizzle out before it can overwhelm him. George-Stiles' hands do not fumble pouring foam into a cup. The brisk rhythm of Amy-Stiles scanning several packs of potato chips doesn't falter. Against all expectations, Xiuying-Stiles stays conscious.

Stiles exhales mentally. Good. Good.

Xiuying-Stiles rotates her head as she lies on the floor. Stiles takes care not to move any other muscle besides the neck again, keeping them unnaturally still, and continues the head movement without breaks or changes in speed. Xiuying-Stiles' eyes fall on Zanco, then

Panco, then Perra, then back to Zanco, rinse and repeat. She smiles wide; the pain makes it very hard to come up with any true mirth but that's fine. The more rictus-like the smile is, the better.

"It hurts, Kali, why?" Xiuying-Stiles says in a voice higher than her normal one. "No, no, please, no. Ethan, won't you be a good boy? Kali, I thought you loved me, why, why do you only love yourself? Help me up, Aiden, mama needs your help, don't you turn away, young man!"

He keeps up the string of chatter and the head movements that are reminiscent of being possessed by a demon—at least as portrayed by the popular media. Perra, Zanco and Panco are frozen in momentary indecision, creeped out by Xiuying-Stiles enough that they seem to have forgotten they can end her with one swipe of claws.

As Leo-Stiles hits the breaks behind the bank, in a dirty empty alley, Xiuying-Stiles screams to cover the screech of the tires. Stiles has wanted to have a good long scream since the torture started, so it's a pleasure to open Xiuying-Stiles' mouth wide and let out a wail as loud as her lungs would allow, and they allow a lot. Perhaps it's not a coincidence she's the best singer of the lot. She must have had some training that Stiles has no way of knowing about.

Perra, Zanco and Panco flinch at the suddenness of the scream. Leo-Stiles scrambles out of the car, Chewbacca-Stiles following at a more sedate pace, and Boba-Stiles drops the pouch into Leo-Stiles' waiting hands. He plunges one hand inside and comes up with a full handful of mountain ash.

Some of Stiles' human bodies are better at handling it than others; Leo-Stiles is at the top of that scale, effortless and quick. Darth-Stiles, Leia-Stiles and Han-Stiles are hindered by it, and Stiles used that fact to experiment as soon as he found the stashes of mountain ash at Eichen and learned what it was and what it was for. One of the easiest things to test was whether or not the supernatural bodies could break out of a circle, and they indeed could, using whatever they had available that wasn't a part of them. A chair leg, for example, worked just fine. It was only possible if they were left alone with the circle, though; if a human body, especially one of the ones that took to the ash better, was sitting there and concentrating on keeping the circle closed, the ash repelled every attempt to outwit it.

Leo-Stiles throws the ash, a strong unbroken circle around the whole of the bank visualized in Stiles' mind's eye, and the ash obeys.

Perra shakes herself out of the spooked reverie and kicks Xiuying-Stiles in the throat. Perra is barefoot and her toes end in claws; Xiuying-Stiles' scream drowns in the gurgle of blood.

Stiles can't help it. Every body he has shudders deeply as he dies again, experiencing a thousand years of a silent, helpless nightmare compressed into a fraction of a second. It'll take him a lot more practice to get used to the sheer awfulness of it.

"Nien?" Peter asks. Of course he felt that, the sudden and violent movement against his skin. He can probably smell that Nien-Stiles is in some distress, too, with that werewolf nose. "What's wrong?"

Nien-Stiles chirps, rather pathetically weakly, and rubs his head against Peter's neck. His sense of smell is better than a human, although still miles behind Chewbacca-Stiles', and he likes Peter's scent. It's wild, and musky, and spicy, and cut through with the thin thread of civilization represented by body wash and cologne, unexpectedly soothing. Maybe it's only soothing because Peter has been ever so gentle and sweet with the cute, fragile, tiny finch; a learned response based on external stimuli.

"Mockingbird, did something happen?"

Leo-Stiles sits down by the mountain ash line, cross-legged. Chewbacca-Stiles brings over an afghan from the car so that sitting won't become unbearable in a few minutes and plops nearby to guard from any random threat. Leo-Stiles makes himself comfortable and focuses on the line. Keep the line. Keep them in. Keep them penned in like cattle so that they may be slaughtered with similar ease. Stiles' anger boils and hisses, hungry for blood.

Me

i died again fuck hate that hate them

"Died?!" Peter almost drives into a ditch, and only a sharp peck from Nien-Stiles makes him tear his eyes away from the phone and turn them to the road. "How did you die? Which of them was it? How often can you even afford to die?"

Stiles doesn't reply, conscious of the fact that all of his efforts to keep Peter alive will be in vain if Peter gets himself killed in a stupid car accident. When it's clear that no new message is forthcoming, Peter hits the steering wheel with the heel of his palm in frustration, eyes burning werewolf blue. The wheel cracks.

"Damn it, Mockingbird, I need to know what happened! Don't fucking ignore me!"

Nien-Stiles pushes himself out from under Peter's collar, flies over to the dashboard and points at the road with one wing.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Peter demands.

Nien-Stiles does his bird best to play out a more complicated game of charades: he flutters over to the phone and pointedly covers the screen with a wing, then comes up to Peter's face and, hovering by his eyes, points at the road again, punctuating it with an angry trill. This time the message is clear, and Peter subsides even though he's not happy about it.

"I expect a message as soon as I stop the car," he says, tense. Nien-Stiles chirps in acquiescence and settles on Peter's shoulder.

The rest of the drive is spent in stubborn silence. Stiles types out a message and hits the send button the moment Peter's car rolls to a stop in front of the Hale house.

Me

im fine i can afford to die a lot more than most people it just feels like satan fucking me in the solar plexus it was kali her toeclaws ew

"Jesus fuck," Peter says, slumping in the driver's seat. "So they found you?"

Me

they found something alright i dont think theyve got any idea what i am and they knew where to look before remember i caught ennis creeping about

Me

doesnt matter theyre not here where i am i got kali aiden ethan trapped behind mountain ash we need to hurry we dont know where deucalion is is he even in bh or what

"It's pretty easy to get past mountain ash if you have a bit of uninterrupted time and two brain cells to rub together," Peter points out.

Me

not if youve got someone to hold the line closed hurry get your stuff i dont like you being all alone out there right now nien-me cant protect you from anything bigger than a mosquito

Peter chuckles.

"You want to protect me? The big bad werewolf?" He climbs out of the car and starts jogging to the house, one hand curled protectively around Nien-Stiles riding on his shoulder. "That's the sweetest thing I've heard in... probably ever."

Me

you do realize im chopping ennis into pieces and planning to feed him to the coyotes in the preserve as we speak sweet is the last thing that i am

Me

also you fucking need protection you almost got killed this week as far as i know you can only die once

"That's a fair point," Peter acknowledges. "But you're still very sweet. My sweet, vicious, exasperated Mockingbird."

There's laughter in his voice. Nien-Stiles nips at his ear as Peter flings open the closet doors and starts rifling in the back.

"Oh, by all means, do continue that," Peter says absentmindedly with his hands moving under the cover of the tightly packed wall of jackets and shirts. "My ears are very sensitive so I'm regarding this as a delightful bit of foreplay, just so you know."

Me

you really are exasperating we have alphas to kill murder first sex later

"Sounds like a perfect date to me," Peter says in a voice that makes Stiles wonder if they should switch priorities. Something clicks and rattles at the back of the wardrobe, and Peter withdraws a duffel bag from the depths. Nien-Stiles chirps questioningly.

"A hidden compartment at the back of the closet," Peter explains. "Everyone snoops in this house like it's their job."

Me

right and snoopings actually your job only

"Exactly, mi lindo." Peter agrees, putting the closet back in inconspicuous order. "I'm glad you understand."

He takes the stairs again at a brisk run and throws the duffel into the car.

"Alright, that's done, so now we'll—"

There's a sound like a cough but not quite, and Peter's words turn into a pained gasp as he tumbles face-down on the ground, accompanied by Nien-Stiles' terrified chirp.

Chapter End Notes

- The song Xiuying-Stiles sings as she walks to the bus stop is [Peter's Song by Elton John](#). If you go looking it up, it may seem anachronistic because its release as part of the Jewel Box album happened in 2020, but as far as I can ascertain with my own research skills, it was actually first released in 2004 as the B-side of Turn the Lights Out When You Leave. Yes, various research took up a really big chunk of the total time I spent on this fic lol
- Perra (sp.) — literally "female dog", also the insult "bitch". In regards to people, used the same as the English equivalent. It should be noted, however, that it can't be used to describe difficult, unpleasant and draining situations like the English word "bitch" is often used (e.g. This was a bitch of a task). Well, technically, it can, but in doing so you will expose yourself as a newbie learner who is yet to pick up the intricacies of slang and swearing.
- Zanco Panco (sp.) — Humpty Dumpty.

Chapter 6: A Passion Project

Nien-Stiles flutters up, high in the air, furious and scared. Peter is lying on the ground, hands scrambling against the earth, trying to get up; blood is coming out of his left side, thick and plentiful.

With a visible effort, Peter turns himself over and rips his shirt and jacket into shreds over the wound. As he presses a hand to it, black lines start weaving their way out across his torso, soon diving under the remains of the clothes.

A man comes over, a rifle in his hands, his steps hitting the ground hard. Nien-Stiles recognizes him and can't help the deep sound of hatred he makes from his chest.

Gerard looks towards him at the sound and brings up the barrel of the rifle. Nien-Stiles jerks away just in time for the bullet to whiz past and makes for the trees, flying in zigzags. He is small and mostly brown, and Gerard has bigger fish to fry—he won't pursue.

There are two more people with Gerard. Nien-Stiles has never seen them before, or at least he can't recognize them while peeking from around a tree at some distance.

"Load him up into my trunk," Gerard orders. "Tom, you get his car after that. Make sure not to leave your scent behind, you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," says Tom.

They shoot Peter again—with tranquilizer guns this time—and he hangs limp in their arms as they load him into the trunk of the car rented by Guillaume Alarie. Nien-Stiles uses the time that takes them to scamper around under the cover of first trees, then grass, and hops up onto the axis connecting the front wheels of Gerard's car. He only just has enough time to find a stable position where he can plant his feet, grasp at curves and shallows with his wings and hold onto something rather vile-tasting with his beak when the car revs to life and starts moving.

A society finch is no peregrine falcon or even a raven. He has no hope of catching up to a car, especially on a forest road that's not patrolled by the Sheriff's department with speeding tickets at the ready, so he has to hitch a ride if he wants to know where the hell Gerard is taking Peter. He only hopes that he has calculated a position steady enough not to be thrown off by a sharp turn or the powerful vibration of the engine, and that this far from the exhaust he won't be overwhelmed by all the toxic stink a car produces while on the move. If he faints and falls off, he'll be a feathery smear on the road, and Stiles has died quite enough times for one day already.

He holds on, and he fantasizes about watching life leave Gerard's eyes.

* * *

Perra, Zanco and Panco hit the mountain ash barrier head-on. Leo-Stiles sits motionless on the other side of it as they hit it with their fists, only inches away from his face but he might as well be a thousand miles away for all the good it does them. Stiles has forty-fold will to bring to bear on this ash, and no matter how much power these three have sucked out of their dead packs, they have no chance.

When Perra takes out her phone, Leo-Stiles tenses up a bit. If she's calling Deucalion who would probably come running, he'll need to act quickly; Stiles can hold more than one circle of mountain ash at once but the trick would be throwing the ash in time to actually catch an unfairly speedy alpha werewolf charging at him, and that is only if Leo-Stiles and Chewbacca-Stiles see or hear him coming. Honestly, calling that guy would have been the smartest thing for Perra to do at the moment but she doesn't. She calls Muscle Man instead.

Smiling, Prime picks up Muscle Man's phone and answers the call—interestingly, from a contact named "Kali ♥". He probably should have had Emmett-Stiles answer but Emmett-Stiles is off, riding in another of Stiles' cars towards the bank with Jonathan-Stiles, and it doesn't matter in the long run. They will all be dead very soon.

"Hello, hello, hello," he sing-songs much like Xiuying-Stiles did. Might as well pick a tone and stick with it, and he does find being unhinged as easy as breathing. It's a pity it doesn't come up useful more often. "What can I do for you, Ms. Kali?"

"Who the fuck are you and why are you answering this phone?" Perra barks.

Stiles tsk-tsks with Prime's lips and has the pleasure of watching Perra bristle through Leo-Stiles' eyes. He pulls Prime's legs up on the chair to sit cross-legged and props himself on the desk with an elbow; one of Prime's hands is holding the phone and the other one is tracing Nien-Stiles' approximate progress across a map of Beacon Hills on his laptop's screen. He can only make an educated guess when it comes to the exact speed of the car but at least he can time how long it takes between each turn and knows for sure if the turn is to the right or to the left. Nien-Stiles is a hardy little trooper, capable of holding on through some truly nasty road turbulence.

"You might want to be a little more polite to me, you know. I'm the one who's got your poor, stupid muscled friend, and his further fate might depend on the way you talk to me. Would you prefer the coyotes to eat his dead body? Or should I bury him deep in the Preserve with so much mountain ash in and on and around him that you will never be able to touch him, provided you find him? The maggots will definitely touch him, though. They are very mundane little beasts, you know, they ain't care 'bout no ash. They will crawl all over him and feast for days and days and days. They might even establish a special holiday in honor of getting to munch on Ennis, a little maggoty Harvest Festival or somesuch. It would be very nauseating and very adorable."

"What do you want?" Perra bites out.

"Lots of things," Stiles says readily, Prime's voice happy and playful. "A cup of coffee, a shirtless Han Solo poster, a big throne from which to rule the world, you know, the usual. As for what I want from you, personally..." He hums as if in deep thought. "I'd like you to sit tight and wait until I come over for a bit of a chat. You see, I'm very interested in this

Deucalion fellow you're running around with. You, not so much. I might be inclined to be persuaded to let you live... especially if you give me some good information to use. More than that, I could even show a bit of mercy to poor Ennis. Whom do you like more, Ennis or Deucalion?"

"Who are you?" Perra asks. The phone creaks in her hand.

"Somebody you never should have pissed off," Prime says, matter-of-factly. Boba-Stiles is combing the sky over the city above where Stiles thinks Gerard's car might be right now but no luck so far. Either that, or Stiles is unreasonable when he hopes he can recognize a specific car via its UV light reflection that he saw with a different bird's eyes. "Please do not feel overconfident in your smarts and wiles if you think I sound young. Death comes wearing all sorts of faces."

"I will tear your face off of your skull and feed it to you," Perra snarls.

"Now, what kind of girl do you take me for?" Prime asks sternly. "None of that handsy stuff until the third date, and that's that!"

He laughs.

"Make yourself comfortable at the bank," he says. "Don't call anybody else and wait for me. And remember, you can try to look for some other way out but you're over there and Ennis is right here where I can do whatever I like with him. And I like a lot of things that you might disagree with, Ms."

He giggles and hangs up. She either likes Ennis more than Deucalion or she doesn't. At the very least, it'll take her a bit of time to think, and to try to intimidate Leo-Stiles again, and intimidate Zanco and Panco into going along with whatever she decides, and so on. Hopefully, it'll be enough time for Stiles to deal with the fucking *logistics* of it all.

Fucking alphas. Fucking Gerard. They have succeeded in killing him, and Stiles hates them with the power of a thousand burning suns.

He used to be so afraid of death. Back when he was just the singular Stiles Stilinski, innocent and kind, escaping it took up a lot of his thoughts, not because he had a strange obsession with it but because death lived in the same house as him and wore his mom's face.

The frontotemporal dementia wasn't that bad at first. Mom could function pretty well, and dad was so hopeful that the illness could be halted or cured somehow, that they could still be a family. Sometimes Stiles thinks that dad was the crazy one for believing in those delusions for as long as he did; but whether he was or not, he certainly stuck to his chosen course of action with the stubbornness of a burr. Mom told Stiles he was a monster, told him he wanted to kill her, told him she was going to kill him first, but never in dad's hearing, and dad didn't believe a word Stiles said about it. Despite getting continually punished for insisting it was the truth, Stiles kept trying until one memorable night.

One shouldn't really remember much from that age, Stiles is fairly certain. But those events are etched into his memory with sharp, acidic terror, so he distinctly recalls waking up,

panicking, to a pillow pressed against his face. He flailed and writhed, completely uncoordinated, led by his screaming survival instinct, and he got so very lucky when his knee connected with an elbow. The grip on the pillow went slack for a second, and that second was enough for Stiles to wrench himself away from the bed. He saw mom with a pillow in her hands, face as angry as it had ever been. She lunged at him, but he was small and quick, and he managed to slip past her and leg it to the master bedroom. Surely, dad would believe Stiles now, he remembers thinking. Surely, dad would protect him now.

By the time he woke dad up and explained in a way that wasn't just hysterical bursts of unconnected words, mom came back into the master bedroom and stood at the threshold, blinking in a very confused way and holding a glass of water in her hand. When she told dad she'd just gone down to the kitchen for some water and then heard Stiles making a ruckus upstairs, dad believed her without hesitation. Stiles remembers so clearly hearing that he was grounded and staring up at dad in horror so all-encompassing that time seemed to have stopped. Grounded, dad said, and all his sleep-soft features were limned with Stiles' fear over the buttery yellow light of the bedside table lamp. Stuck day and night in the same house as mom and her illness that had already tried to kill him five minutes ago. Dad was so angry with Stiles for making up horrid lies in order to get attention, he wouldn't listen to anything Stiles tried to say, not when his wife whom he loved more than anything in the whole world was there, soft-spoken, gently sad, needing comfort and support. That was the moment Stiles knew that he couldn't rely on anyone else to take care of him, not where it mattered.

It was also the moment Stiles felt endlessly terrified of dying. He knew death as viscerally then as was possible without it actually happening; that pillow had been strangling him, and gasping for air without getting any was the single worst thing Stiles had felt in his short life, bar none. He didn't want to feel that again, ever.

He'd been managing pretty well until Gerard and the alphas came sniffing around. The experience might turn out useful in the long run but Stiles wouldn't go so far as to say he's grateful in any way.

He sighs with Prime's lips and rubs Prime's face with his hands, taking care to avoid his nose so as not to obstruct his breathing even for a moment. Then he walks Leia-Stiles to the kitchen to make coffee. None of the bodies in the house feel sleepy but he wants the sensation of drinking something hot and sweet. It might help him feel a bit less...

Just less.

Emmett-Stiles is still driving. Nien-Stiles is still holding on. Stiles drinks his coffee, thinks a bit about his next move and wakes up Kate-Stiles.

* * *

It's been a rather trying day for Kate-Stiles. She hasn't done that much, all told, but she is just so weak; every step felt like a heroic feat, and every word was heavy on her tongue. So she fell asleep before even her niece got home from school and could be properly reintroduced.

Stiles opens her eyes now, still feeling tired but more refreshed than he was. The room is dim, with only a few golden rays of the afternoon sun making their way past the edges of the

closed curtains. There's no one else here, and the door is closed. The room smells of lavender, and the mattress beneath Kate-Stiles is sinfully soft. If he didn't have things to do, he'd be tempted to stay in bed a while longer; enjoy the comfort meant for someone else that Stiles took for himself. He's a liar, a changeling, a thief, a murderer. It's a thrill like none other. He wonders if Peter would find it so as well; if, should Stiles tell him all about it, about invading someone's home while walking around in the body of their loved one, smiling ever so guilelessly with stolen lips, Peter would feel the same dizzying, shameless excitement.

He sits Kate-Stiles up and swings her legs down on the floor. Someone took her boots off—Stiles doesn't remember having done that himself—and threw a light blanket over her. It's disconcerting to know someone was so close to a body of his, doing things like that while Stiles was unaware. He'll have to get used to that too as his circle of bodies expands. Or, alternatively, employ a combination of security cameras and animal bodies to make sure nothing slips past him when he's asleep. Yes, that last one sounds better.

Kate-Stiles pads into the bathroom, then, much refreshed, pulls the boots back on and goes downstairs.

Chris is in the living-room, staring at a book but, as far as Stiles can tell, not really reading it. He looks subdued and sad, and though he smiles when he notices Kate-Stiles coming down the stairs, the smile doesn't reach his eyes.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi," Kate-Stiles echoes. "Where's everyone?"

"Vicky's gone out to run some errands, and Allison is off with her boyfriend."

"And Gerard?"

Chris shrugs.

"Who knows what Gerard is doing." Stiles does. "He keeps to himself, mostly."

"Right," Kate-Stiles says. "I'm gonna go out too."

Now that gets Chris' attention. He straightens up, setting the book aside, and frowns at Kate-Stiles.

"You can't be serious. You only just woke up from years of coma—"

"And I've had just about enough of being cooped up within four walls," Kate-Stiles interrupts. "I might not remember it but some part of me does, I think. I need to go outside."

"I'll go with you, then."

"No," Kate-Stiles says flatly. "I'm a big girl. Amnesia or not, I can handle a walk around the neighborhood."

"That's ridiculous, Kate. You don't even know our address. You don't have a phone. You're only just beginning to convalesce." Chris gets up from the sofa, his face mulish. He doesn't look like a man who's likely to budge. "You don't even have any weapons! What if whoever did this to you comes back?"

"Whoever did this to me?" Kate-Stiles repeats. "Someone put me in a coma intentionally? And I need to carry around weapons? What are we, some sort of mafia? Am I likely to start a gang war by window-shopping on the Main Street?"

Chris rolls his eyes.

"Of course we're not mafia."

"Right, but we carry weapons around in case someone jumps us," Kate-Stiles nods. "What are we, then? Ex-mafia in witness protection? Secret service agents? Royalty in exile?"

Her speculation startles a laugh out of Chris who looks surprised at his own reaction. Did Kate not have a sense of humor?

"No," he says. "We are just... safety conscious."

Suddenly, he sobers up and pins Kate-Stiles with a heavy look.

"You're not going out alone, and that's final," he says. "Don't think I won't stoop to keeping you inside physically if I have to."

Perhaps in her best shape Kate-Stiles could take him in a brawl but as it stands, said shape is a distant dream on the horizon. She shrugs.

"Alright. Come on then, grab your jacket, grenade launcher and whatever else you need to leave the house."

Chris does not, in fact, take a grenade launcher with him but he does take a handgun he conceals under his jacket as well as a bunch of knives he hides mostly in his sleeves. Kate-Stiles gets two knives, light, sharp and bloodthirsty-looking; no one would mistake these for the peaceful kitchen variety. Per Chris' instructions, she conceals one in her boot and the other on the inside of her jacket. Both of these places already have sheaths sewn in. Hunters, Stiles thinks with some exasperation and grudging respect.

Kate-Stiles leads the way out of the house, hands in her pockets. She doesn't talk, and Chris doesn't either as they walk slowly, seemingly aimlessly, one step closer to Stiles' goals at a time.

* * *

Stiles cradles the empty coffee cup in Prime's hands. The phone that George-Stiles used to carry with him is lying on the table, and Stiles can feel anxiety scratching at him from the deep places inside what Stiles is—a pure consciousness and a complete mess. Is Peter still alive? Is Stiles going to be able to talk to him again? He has so much to throw at the alphas but the only body focused on Peter is the tiny, weak Nien-Stiles whose muscles are already

aching. It doesn't help that he's being pelted by the gravel and enveloped by the dust coming from under the moving wheels; at his size those might as well be projectile weapons and choking gas. How is this going to end, with Nien-Stiles falling off and getting flattened on the road or with Gerard finally stopping?

Emmett-Stiles stops the car out of sight of Perra, Zanco and Panco. Together with Jonathan-Stiles, they come up to where Leo-Stiles is still sitting, focused and quiet. Stiles has Han-Stiles pick up Muscle Man's phone and call the last number.

"Now what?" Perra says instead of "hello".

"Thank you for being such a good girl for me," Prime purrs into the phone as Han-Stiles holds it up to his ear. "You sat and waited, just as I asked. You're about to be rewarded."

"You piece of shit..." Perra trails off and takes a deep breath. Zanco and Panco are staring at her, unabashedly eavesdropping on the conversation. "Where's Ennis? Have you let him go?"

While the three on the inside of the circle are distracted, Leo-Stiles, Emmett-Stiles and Jonathan-Stiles put their hands in a pouch, jacket pocket and jeans pocket respectively, then throw their clenched fists forward, opening them with perfect synchronicity. The movement draws attention but not before the ash settles around each of the alphas.

"Of course I haven't let him go," Prime says to snarling Perra. "He's dead, and the coyotes are dining on alpha as we speak. And now you're about to be rewarded with dying too. Isn't it nice? If you believe in afterlife, this might be a chance for you two to be reunited."

"I'll fucking kill you!" Perra howls. "I'll tear you limb from limb!"

"Oh, get some new material," Prime laughs. "You have already killed me once today. Clearly, it's not a strategy that works."

Perra, Zanco and Panco glance back towards the bank where Xiuying-Stiles is currently lying, dead and broken.

"You must be wondering what the fuck I'm talking about," Prime adds. "Sadly for you, you'll die wondering."

Is it a cheesy villain line? Yes. Does Stiles give a fuck? No, absolutely not.

Emmett-Stiles and Jonathan-Stiles have already helped Leo-Stiles to his feet and shared with him the supplies they have brought. Together, they start shooting the tranquilizer guns loaded with capsules of pure wolfsbane oil.

In the new tiny circles that are just about big enough to stand, there's nowhere to dodge, and Stiles is shooting pretty much point blank. He doesn't have so much wolfsbane oil that he can afford to use up too much, though, so after a couple of rounds he switches to mountain ash which he puts on his palms and simply blows on. It's light, airy, something in between normal ash and sand, and Perra, Zanco and Panco can't help but inhale some. It works especially well

when Leo-Stiles does it because his breath makes the ash stream through the air directly where he wants it to go instead of floating around in a little cloud.

Alpha werewolves take a lot of killing. They are also very loud in their—admittedly, justified from their point of view—anger; fangs and claws out, red eyes burning, black lines sprawling across their bodies, they growl, and swear, and scream, and work themselves into some sort of berserker rage. Stiles holds the circles and alternates shooting and blowing more ash across the boundary. He'd like to stab them with something and cut off Perra's finger in a symbolic gesture but those are meaningless fancies that will get him killed (again). He will not be so stupid as to hand a werewolf a weapon he or she could throw at Stiles' squishy human bodies. He will be methodical, and he will be smart.

Finally, they slump inside their little circles. Chewbacca-Stiles' nose and ears confirm that Zanco and Panco are dead but Perra is only playing possum.

Stiles thinks of a dozen cons with which to trick her back but discards them all immediately. He doesn't have much time, and even though she seemed like a huge and important problem a little while ago, she doesn't matter now. None of these three matter, really. He has other things to attend to, vital things.

He spares a few seconds to kick Zanco and Panco's bodies in order to get Perra off her guard, but when Leo-Stiles comes over to her circle, he simply lifts his tranquilizer gun, puts it right by the barrier and shoots at her neck, aiming down. This close, the capsule has enough kick behind it to bury itself deep in the flesh, and when Perra arches, gasping for air, and tries to claw it out, her efforts are, of course, in vain.

Stiles watches her thrash and spew bloody foam full of black flecks as she dies. Then, when he's satisfied that she is finally dead, he leaves Leo-Stiles and Jonathan-Stiles to clean up and has Emmet-Stiles and Chewbacca-Stiles ride away towards Kate-Stiles.

Logistics, logistics, logistics.

Prime doesn't blink as he follows Peter's progress through the city; he's no longer marking it on the map, more than capable of following it in his mind—indeed, incapable of not doing so. There's no sound from the trunk that Nien-Stiles can hear, and Stiles doesn't know what that means. Is Peter only sleeping under the influence of the tranquilizers? Or has the wolfsbane reached his heart and stopped it?

Stiles wants to scream.

Darth-Stiles returns from his careful foray into the Preserve where he has strewn Ennis' body parts around coyote dens; it's very useful that he is done with that task because now Stiles is using him to pace around the backyard while Prime is watching the map, motionless. The anxiety grows and grows. What will Stiles do if Gerard winds up taking Peter from him? No amount of revenge will get Peter back. Stiles doesn't know what is so special about Peter but something clearly is.

The anxiety grows bigger yet. What does anxiety want to be when it grows up?

It, Stiles discovers, wants to be anger. So much hot, blind, snarling anger. No one is allowed to take Peter from him before Stiles has managed to even have him in any meaningful capacity. If someone does, Stiles will raze this whole useless town to the ground. He will sabotage the power plant and light up the night with fires from Molotov cocktails. He will strap bombs to animal bodies and carry them into the Sheriff's station, the mayor's office, everywhere important, and set them off. He will take over panicked people in the streets and direct his new bodies to kill and destroy.

Peter is *his*. And if Peter dies, the least Stiles can do is give him a funeral pyre that will be seen from space.

All around the city, his bodies still for a moment, a faraway expression on their faces. If there was anyone around who could look inside their minds like Stiles did with Kate Argent all those years ago, they would have seen much the same thing he did: fire, death and destruction.

Perhaps there even is someone like that in town. But if so, they don't pay attention to the meek, kind, eager-to-please members of the Children of Unity commune. No one ever does.

* * *

Getting Kate-Stiles away from Chris' watchful eye is laughably easy. Kate-Stiles leads her technically brother into an empty alley, and Emmett-Stiles turns the corner with Chewbacca-Stiles on a leash just in time to meet them in the middle of it. Out of nowhere, Chewbacca-Stiles growls and makes a leap for Chris.

"Rex!" Emmett-Stiles exclaims in a feeble old man voice. "Back! Heel, Rex!"

"Rex" is not listening. He looks to be too busy trying to sink his huge teeth into Chris, and the tense look on Chris' face is ever so much fun.

"Get behind me, Kate!" Chris barks.

Kate-Stiles does. Out of Chris' view, she picks up a trash can lid and swings it at Chris' head.

Stiles has no idea how hard one is supposed to hit in order to knock somebody out and not kill. He goes as hard as he can on this one, taking into account Kate-Stiles' non-existent upper body strength. The blow vibrates through the metal lid, and Chris goes down, out cold but still breathing. Emmett-Stiles and Kate-Stiles strip him of weapons because Stiles would like to use every advantage he can get his hands on.

He considers the pros and cons of killing Chris versus leaving him lying in the alley when a wondrous, amazing, wonderful event occurs: Gerard rolls to a stop and doesn't start the car again.

It's quiet; Nien-Stiles can't hear other cars or people so it's not a red light stop. A car door opens and closes, and footsteps circle the car before the trunk is opened.

There's nothing there on the map that Prime is looking at, just a patch of wilderness like any other. Prime rifles through a bunch of other maps while Emmet-Stiles, Chewbacca-Stiles and Kate-Stiles are rushing to where Stiles thinks Peter is, and one old map is where he strikes gold: there's a distillery there. It has, apparently, been standing unused since before the second World War, which is why no one cared enough to put it on the newer maps, and Stiles has no idea why or how Gerard even knows of it. Not even the city council knows about it, or they are pretending not to, otherwise it would have been condemned long ago.

Nien-Stiles half-hops, half-falls off his improvised perch. He's exhausted, thirsty and battered, but he's still the only body there so Stiles has him creep behind a wheel and peek out. Gerard and his second henchman are carrying Peter towards the distillery. As far as UV light goes, Peter looks sort of, maybe similar to Gerard and Number Two, and Stiles hopes that means Peter is alive. He never really paid attention to telling whether or not somebody is alive or dead just through that. He's been lax, and he didn't even know it.

Boba-Stiles is a streak of pure speed above the city, and the car with Emmett-Stiles, Kate-Stiles and Chewbacca-Stiles is going right at the limit again. Impatience is warring with caution inside Stiles. Dead bodies don't produce melanin, don't tan, they must interact with UV light differently... Before he can build a solid theory on detecting life via a bird's eyes, the humans disappear inside. Nien-Stiles hops out from under the car and flies over to the distillery building. Flying hurts, but he has to look inside, he has to know what's going on.

There's a window high, high up. Getting there feels like running up twenty flights of stairs without stopping, and Nien-Stiles almost brains himself on the windowsill rather than landing gracefully. Still, he can see inside from where he's lying.

Down below, Peter is lying on the floor. Gerard is standing over him and, just as Nien-Stiles looks, kicks him in the injured side. Peter twitches but doesn't move otherwise. Gerard kicks him again, probably for the pure enjoyment of it, and digs something out of his pocket. It's too far to see what he's doing with some small thing—why the fuck don't society fucking finches have the same acuity of vision as birds of prey?

Nien-Stiles strains his eyes. Gerard kneels next to Peter, shakes something down on the floor and brings a hand to it. There's a spark, and then Gerard scoops something up off the floor, uncaring of all the dirt that's going with it, and slaps his hand at Peter's side.

Oh, Stiles gets it. Burning the same strain of wolfsbane that was in the bullet and introducing it to the wound, the surefire way to stop the poisoning. Gerard must not want Peter dead just yet.

Peter arches off the floor; his eyes fly open and shine unearthly werewolf blue. Gerard pays that no mind, turning Peter over, dragging him closer to the wall and cuffing his wrists together with the chain of the handcuffs behind a pipe. Peter's head lolls forward on his chest briefly before he gets a bit more energy through the soup of tranquilizers that must still be in his system and wrenches himself forward, fangs snapping inches away from Gerard's face.

Gerard doesn't even pay any attention like this is business as usual for him. Likely it is. He snaps another pair of cuffs around Peter's ankles and straightens up.

They are saying something but Nien-Stiles can only hear that there are voices, not what they are saying. Maybe if the window was open... He glances up, and nope, the window makers failed to anticipate that a finch would like to be able to open it from the outside. No dice.

Boba-Stiles comes in, settling down next to Nien-Stiles. He huddles closer to her for protection against the chilly wind up high.

Her second perspective catches what Nien-Stiles missed with the frantic need to know if Peter was still alive: Laura is there too, trussed up like a turkey in chains that have sparks of electricity running through them at regular short intervals. Her face is bloodied but she looks awake, if not able to move. Gerard's flunky whose name Stiles doesn't know is standing over her, the muzzle of his rifle pressed to Laura's temple.

Looks like Gerard is collecting guests for a party. Who else is coming?

A car rolls in, and Stiles recognizes it instantly: it's Peter's. Gerard's flunky, Tom, comes out of the driver's seat and starts spraying something inside; getting rid of his scent, as far as Stiles understands.

That pile of garbage shaped like a human being has dared to take what is Peter's and leave its stink everywhere. It took Peter's car here, and Stiles doesn't know exactly why but he bets it's to frame Peter, to make it look like he came here out of his own volition.

Red-hot, violent anger drowns Stiles to the point that he struggles to keep it from showing in the bodies that are in view of other people. Boba-Stiles suffers from no human limitations, and as Tom takes a step away from the car, about to close the door, she drops down on him from high up. He only has enough time to widen his eyes when her talons rip his throat open.

Her lovely feathers, white and blue-gray, are sprayed with blood. Boba-Stiles makes a low, raspy sound deep in her chest; Stiles' hungry, deep anger is partially sated by an enemy brought low. He can understand now why the Eichen House files noted that one behavioral peculiarity of werewolves is that, in general, they abhor weapons and prefer their claws. This has been so much more viscerally personal than shooting the alphas—that one felt like a chore to be done; pest control to carry out. Stiles has never killed an enemy with his own claws before. Sure, Luke-Stiles brought in some rabbits from the Preserve to keep everyone off the edge of hunger during a period when Stiles had some trouble with jobs, and Logan-Stiles and Darth-Stiles brought down a deer between them one winter when seven of Stiles' bodies had been let go and the question of how not to starve became very urgent, but those weren't enemies.

Even Leo-Stiles' mother wasn't really an enemy, just a woman who, unlike the families of the rest of his patient bodies, loved her son and refused to believe he didn't want to see her. Boba-Stiles fluffs up as Stiles remembers that clusterfuck. The Stiles of now would have killed her in a much more efficient and subtle way, like staging a car accident, or even let Leo-Stiles go with her, to practice being a cuckoo fledgling in an unsuspecting nest if nothing else, but the Stiles of then couldn't drive and was still wrestling with himself over the ethical implications of his own existence (insofar as a ten-year-old could hold two sides of a philosophical debate about body-snatching). Those were extremely early days, well before he came up with establishing a fake commune or with really much of anything useful; and she kept yelling at

him and threatening him with the police, the press, lawyers and anything else she could come up with. He wanted her to go away and leave him alone, and she wouldn't, and he was terrified out of his wits at the idea of all those official people coming here and finding out what he was. And then she called the orderly bodies who were speaking to her monsters, and Stiles knew what was to be done with monsters. His mom had thought he was one and tried to kill him even though she'd been wrong at the time. What horrible things would the world do to him now that it was true?

He had to kill this woman before she could kill him.

With that decision in mind, sweating from the panic with every body, he let her through to Leo-Stiles, who was sullen and monosyllabic, and while she was trying to get him to talk to her, Logan-Stiles came into the room with a kitchen knife and stuck it in her back. Stiles' knowledge of human anatomy at the time didn't go any further than "the heart is somewhere on the left", and the knife slid across a rib without actually hitting anything vital and stayed in her. He tried to get it back but she was screaming and dodging, and there was also blood. Stiles was still unable to bear the sight of it then, so both Logan-Stiles and Leo-Stiles promptly fainted from the horror of being in the same room with actual blood.

She might have saved herself if she'd just run out and gotten into her car. But she stayed, trying to get who she thought was her son to wake up and come with her, and by the time she slapped Leo-Stiles back into consciousness, Darth-Stiles came into the room, and hit her with his big, strong fists, and, more by accident than any sort of design, broke her neck. After which he fainted too.

It took Leia-Stiles to clean up the blood in the room because, it turned out, her insectoid physiology didn't come equipped with the mechanisms necessary for fainting. By the end of it Stiles grew curiously numb to blood; it stopped being this terrifying herald of unfathomable wrongness and became just a sticky red liquid he had to wash away. That adjustment certainly made getting rid of the corpse easier.

This, here, now, is something entirely different. Stiles hated Tom and wanted him gone, and Tom is gone, his blood already cooling on Stiles' talons and bringing satisfaction with it rather than revulsion. Stiles supposes, since Peter is still alive, all the readiness to kill had to go somewhere.

He'll probably still be the one who has to get rid of the corpse. They are piling up today, aren't they? Well, it's not like he's lacking for hands for the task.

Boba-Stiles cleans her talons by plunging them into the soft spring soil, flies back up to the window, crowds Nien-Stiles who is definitely feeling very cold by now and starts grooming her feathers. Even though getting her has brought a pack of sadistic alphas on his heads, Stiles can't bring himself to regret going to San Francisco for her. She is truly a magnificent body to inhabit.

Another car comes in, this one in a hurry. Tires squeal as it stops abruptly, almost bumping into Gerard's rental. Talia leaps out of the car, not really dressed for a party but making up for it with haste, and dashes for the building.

Boba-Stiles carries Nien-Stiles down to Peter's car, to rest on the soft seats, protected from the winds and huddled under the passenger seat belt like under a long and stiff blanket. The sharp smell of whatever it was that Tom sprayed around is already dissipating, and Nien-Stiles manages to catch a tiny whiff of Peter's scent still present here.

A perfect place to rest, Stiles decides and has Nien-Stiles curl up and nap lightly while Boba-Stiles lands next to the distillery door where it's much easier to hear what is going on, although she can't see anything. Emmett-Stiles, Kate-Stiles and Chewbacca-Stiles are still a few minutes out but at least they are out of the city proper so Stiles can put the pedal to the metal.

"...Easy now," Gerard says, sounding confident like he's dealing with a nervous puppy. "Easy. Even if you charge full-speed, you won't get to her before James here blows her brains out."

"What do you want, then?" Talia bites out. "Money? Information?"

"Nothing so pedestrian." Judging by his voice, Gerard is smiling. "I want you to bite me."

What?

"What?" Talia asks, as if echoing Stiles' thoughts.

"Aren't you supposed to have good hearing?" Gerard asks. "I want you to bite me. Put your fangs into my arm. Give me the bite. Is it clear now, or should I go on?"

"But why..." Talia stops and sniffs the air unabashedly. "Ah. You're sick. You're dying."

A deadly illness? Couldn't have happened to a nicer fellow, really.

"That's none of your business," Gerard sounds annoyed now. Was he hoping Talia wouldn't smell that? Well, Laura didn't seem like she had when Peter and Nien met her at the Senior Smart charity, and Peter didn't either, so maybe Gerard took some pains to cover it up. Perhaps he hasn't had the time for that this afternoon. He likely moved his plan up some because Kate-Stiles was very insistent on butting in. It was a stroke of luck for Gerard that Peter left the office early and headed to the Hale house then, Stiles realizes with not a little annoyance. If that hasn't happened, Gerard might have just scrapped Peter's involvement altogether; he'd hardly have gone and kidnapped him from an office full of people. "Get over to those pipes."

"What for?"

"I'll chain you up so you wouldn't be tempted to do something inadvisable, like swiping at my throat with those claws of yours." Gerard jingles something metal. Another pair of cuffs, Stiles guesses. "Go on. I promise, after I get what I want, you and your packmates will go free. I have no interest in you otherwise."

Stiles doesn't need to be a werewolf to know this is a lie. He doubts Talia believes it either, and maybe if Peter was the only one on the line, she'd risk him, but there's Laura. Talia's

beloved heiress. From the byplay of sounds, Talia does as she's told and Gerard cuffs her to the pipes.

Kate-Stiles, Emmett-Stiles and Chewbacca-Stiles arrive. With their car parked around the bend of the road to avoid Gerard and James hearing the noise, they walk over the rest of the way. Rather interminably slowly because of Kate-Stiles who is worlds away yet from jogging, but she's the one who has to be here, so Stiles pushes down his impatience and walks.

"Now, bite me here, in the arm. One clean bite and then put the fangs away, no funny business."

"I hope you reject it and die in pain," Talia says. Stiles agrees with the general sentiment but... Is that really what she's doing? Sitting there and hoping a rare case of bite rejection will kick in? Stiles hopes she's actually got a plan, otherwise it's just embarrassing.

Not that she will need a plan. Stiles already has one of his own.

"Oh, don't look at your left hand," Gerard says, amused. "I caught him with a getaway bag in the middle of the day. Looks like he decided you were going to be just fine one-handed from now on."

Peter gasps, pained, choked, even though there's no sound of assault. It must be Talia lashing out through the bond between them. Oh, how Stiles hates her.

"Quit stalling," Gerard says, his tone commanding. "Bite, or dear Laura will lose a body part."

There's silence after that. Boba-Stiles' hearing is not so sharp as to catch the sound of fangs sliding into flesh, and Stiles only knows that it's done when Gerard says, satisfaction dripping from his tongue:

"There, now that's better. James, shoot that one."

A shot thunders through the distillery, and in its wake Talia screams. Boba-Stiles can hear the clang of metal against metal as she tries to free herself.

Emmett-Stiles and Chewbacca-Stiles stop to the side of the door; it's likely that the werewolves inside can hear the extra heartbeats but Stiles hopes that even Talia is not stupid enough to announce those.

Kate-Stiles pushes the door open without breaking her stride and strolls in, clapping slowly.

"Congratulations," she says, smiling. "You've got one over poor little invalid me, haven't you?"

Gerard is still standing with one sleeve rolled up, a huge jagged bite bleeding generously, and Talia is trying to hurl herself at him over and over, face shifted, blood staining her fangs. There aren't really two ways to interpret this.

"How are you even here?" Gerard's face darkens with fury.

"Now, daddy dearest, you're not expecting me to give away all of my secrets, are you?" Kate-Stiles pouts. "You're certainly hoarding some of yours. Getting a mutt to bite you... Why would you do that, I wonder?"

Gerard has a pistol aimed at Kate-Stiles in the blink of an eye. She glides forward, unconcerned with the threat, and circles Gerard, looking at him thoughtfully.

"I'm pretty sure this is not some fetish you've been hiding from the family all these years," she muses. "And you'd hardly stoop to this out of sheer curiosity. Hmm, what kind of benefits does a werewolf bite bring? Are you, by any chance, dying, papa?"

The French word inserts itself without much of a conscious decision on Stiles' part but Stiles thinks it might be what makes Gerard relax a bit. Makes sense that this would be a family thing, what with his French predilection.

"Not anymore, Katey," Gerard says, all fatherly warmth. Stiles is delighted with this attempt to pull the wool over Kate-Stiles' eyes. He might have even believed it if he didn't know what a thoroughly rotten son of a bitch Gerard is. "You understand why I couldn't tell you what I'd planned, don't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I understand," Kate-Stiles acknowledges, nodding. "But who cares what one has to do in order to survive? We shouldn't tell Chris, though. He's such a wet blanket. He'll spoil everything if he knows."

She stops close to Gerard. Through the half-open door Boba-Stiles spies the gun in Gerard's hand moving a bit, turning to keep pointing squarely at Kate-Stiles.

Kate-Stiles whirls around, grinning, and Gerard quickly moves the gun away.

"Do we get to kill her now?" She asks, giddy like a child in front of an ice cream cart, and it's not even a lie. Stiles would like to kill Talia very much. One more body will hardly make a difference to today's clean-up, and a dead Talia would never be able to torment Peter again. "Oh, can I? Please?"

"Oh, alright," Gerard says obligingly. "Have you got a gun?"

"Chris wouldn't let me have one, spoilsport," Kate-Stiles grimaces. "I've only got a couple of knives. Lend me yours?"

Gerard hesitates.

"Please?" Kate-Stiles rounds her eyes and puts her palms together in front of her chest. "Pretty please? With a cherry on top? I'll give it back right away! I just want to shoot her in the face, that's all."

Someone obsessed like that is beyond easy to manipulate, and Gerard, of course, knows that. He hands the gun over, handle first. Kate-Stiles takes it and turns back to Talia, hoping that her amateurish grip and stance won't give her away at the last moment; whatever muscle

memory this body used to have when it came to shooting, it's a bit hard to access now that said muscle is gone. Behind Kate, Gerard is slowly tugging another gun from a holster hidden under his jacket.

"Say hi to all the other mutts I put away in your mutt paradise," Kate-Stiles says—not Stiles' best, but it will do.

She stretches out her hand, the muzzle of the gun only an inch from Talia's forehead—and pirouettes on the spot, bringing the gun to Gerard's chest and pulling the trigger.

These days, Stiles' knowledge of human anatomy is rather extensive. The bullet hits Gerard square in the heart. He looks stunned more than anything else as he falls, pushed off-balance by the force of the impact. His own gun clutters along the floor. Kate-Stiles crouches next to him and puts another bullet in his brain.

The life drains from Gerard's eyes, leaving them glassy and empty, and Kate-Stiles sighs in happy relief. It's always nice to finish a passion project. Very liberating.

"Should I cut off the head?" She muses out loud. "It would be very awkward if he managed to turn and heal all that somehow."

"What... what the fuck did you do?!" Ah, James found his voice. To be honest, Stiles forgot all about him.

"Didn't anyone teach you not to meddle in someone else's family affairs?" Kate-Stiles asks.

She raises the pistol again and shoots. James dives out of the way, having seen the movement, but Chewbacca-Stiles and Emmett-Stiles enter the distillery, and Emmett-Stiles has the gun Stiles lifted from Chris and Chewbacca-Stiles has very sharp teeth. It's over in seconds; in fact, Kate-Stiles even tucks her gun into her jacket pocket and doesn't take any more part in the fight after they enter. She's busy searching Gerard's pockets.

"Ah-ha!" She exclaims triumphantly as she locates a ring with keys.

With those in hand, she approaches Peter who looks like he's ready to sell his life dearly.

"I'm going to open the cuffs," she says. "Please don't attack me? I don't mean you any harm, honest."

It's probably not the best body to try and encourage trust in, is it? Kate-Stiles gives Peter a rueful smile. Peter stares at her, suspicious.

"Why?" He asks.

Kate-Stiles gaze flickers over to Talia who seems so dumbfounded by the turn of events that it has even taken the edge off of her hysterical grief.

"When you'll know, you'll know," she says and kneels by Peter's feet to start with the ankle cuffs.

If Peter kills Kate-Stiles anyway, Stiles is going to be so miffed. Still, even with that very real risk Stiles wants Peter to be free more than he wants to keep Kate-Stiles safe.

So he tries a few keys until one fits, and then he turns it.

Chapter 7: My New Favorite Toy (Peter's Interlude)

Peter can honestly say that this is the most surreal moment of his life.

Two minutes ago he was certain he was going to die here, on the dusty floor of this old distillery, and now a miraculously risen from years-long coma Kate Argent is unlocking his cuffs and taking them off carefully as if it matters to her whether or not they scrape against his skin. Freed, Peter wastes no time scrambling away and getting to his feet; as he does that, his gaze briefly meets Talia's and they share an extremely rare moment of complete accord, both equally bewildered.

He tries to keep all three of them—Argent, the man who entered after her and the huge black dog whose bulk seems to exceed that of Argent and the man put together—in his field of vision at the same time. It's no mean feat, considering that the man and the dog are standing on the other end of the large distillery. It helps, though, that they are doing nothing but staring at him and smiling.

He'd consider these evil smirks in anticipation of some cruel trick but Argent, who is still kneeling, hands raised in a gesture of surrender, smells of happiness and relief, and the dog's tail is wagging so hard that there's barely a pause between the thumps it makes when it hits the floor. Peter peers closer at the man, whose face seems vaguely familiar, and, after a few moments of prodding his memories, he puts a name to that face: Dr. Emmett Quentin, the head of Eichen House back when it was still a supposedly covert supernatural prison. The reputation of that place wouldn't have been half as fearsome if it weren't for this man's infamous cruelty. Peter sees absolutely no reason why Dr. Quentin's eyes should be shining with pure adoration when aimed at Peter but the fact is that they are.

Is this a hallucination? Has wolfsbane reached his brain and is now giving him bizarre visions before it kills him? It doesn't feel like a hallucination, but then again, Peter has never hallucinated before. How would he know?

He pinches his arm, a method that's supposed to be used for checking if one is dreaming; Peter has no idea if it can help any with hallucinations but it's the only thing he knows to try. It hurts like it should.

"I'm real," Argent says, amused. "I promise, this is all real. It will make sense very soon."

"Why not now?" Peter arches an eyebrow. Only his mirror knows how long he worked to perfect arching just one at this exact sarcastic, jaunty angle.

"There's extra ears in here." Argent nods at Talia. "I mean, I'll probably kill her unless you really mind me doing that, but I don't want to risk her knowing anything she shouldn't."

Talia bristles, and a wave of her indignation scorches Peter through the bond. He ignores it with the ease of long practice.

"So what you're saying is that I'm in control of what happens next," he says.

"You sure are," she agrees. Her heart doesn't skip a beat.

"And, for whatever reason, you are going to follow my lead and will not attack me."

"Yep."

"Prove it," Peter demands, annoyed by her flippancy. "Discard all your weapons. Both of you."

Without hesitation, Argent pulls out her gun and throws it to the side, looking unconcerned that it can fire accidentally from the impact. She also produces no fewer than five knives from various places upon her person, and she sends them after the gun. Dr. Quentin does the exact same thing to his own gun and knives, which he follows up with kicking James' rifle away. He also takes off his jacket and folds it before lobbing it towards the weapons.

"Mountain ash in my pocket," he explains, noticing Peter's questioning look. "Wouldn't want you to think I'm concealing it as a weapon."

"Unfortunately, Chewie here can't really put his teeth or claws away," Argent winks at Peter. "But he promises to be a very good boy, don't you, Chewie?"

The dog barks as if in reply. He's got a big doggy grin going on, with his tongue lolling out, and Peter suspects that only a deeply instilled sense of discipline is holding the dog back from tackling Peter to the ground and licking his face like crazy. Humans can have all sorts of crazy motives, but how could Peter have possibly earned this kind of loyalty from a dog he's never even seen before?

"Why did you do it?" He asks, desperate to make any sort of sense out of this. "Why make yourself vulnerable just on my say-so?"

"Well, disarming seemed like a good way towards earning a modicum of your trust," Argent says. "If I refused, I suspect you would've torn this throat right out."

She points at her own throat with her thumb. It's such a weird thing to say: "this" instead of "my". It sounds as if the speaker has this throat, and that throat, and maybe a few more stocked up for emergencies—

Peter stills utterly as a jumble of random facts reassembles itself in his head and clicks into an impossible, jaw-dropping, spine-tingling picture.

Having seen Mockingbird and yet never having seen him before.

"I can afford to die a lot more than most people."

The distasteful anecdote told by a tipsy paramedic.

"Nien-me."

Summers suddenly appearing by the office late at night under the flimsiest of excuses, hovering right between Peter and the roof where Gerard had been hiding, knowing exactly

where to go to find the dying bird.

"Not all is what it seems to be."

Mockingbird's remote, private home where no nosy neighbors can hear a room being demolished.

George Morris' offhand mention of a certain Father Emmett.

Peter forgets to breathe as a thousand tiny details add up to his understanding where they seemed to be insignificant before. He's still missing a lot, so much, but he thinks he gets the gist.

Oh, his brilliant, loyal, insane, cunning, fearless, ruthless Mockingbird.

Peter swallows, even though his own throat suddenly feels dry under the onslaught of half a dozen different emotions.

"Mock—"

"Uh, uh, uh, shh," Argent—Mockingbird—stops him, pressing a finger to her lips. "If you're about to say what I think you're about to say, best not to say it out loud. You're right... although it does spoil the whole big reveal I had planned. Hmm, maybe if I still do it, you'll act surprised? Like a surprise birthday party that someone has let slip about in advance?" Her voice sounds light, joking, but Peter can smell the anxiety coming off of her.

Is Mockingbird really so worried about acceptance? After all this? Although, Peter has to admit that if his conclusions are correct, Mockingbird has every reason to be cautious.

Still, there's no need for him to feel that way around Peter of all people. On an impulse, Peter crosses the distance between him and Mockingbird in Argent's body—Argent-Mockingbird?—and hugs him... her... oh, who the hell knows. The English language, like so many things in this world, is clearly simply not ready for Mockingbird.

Argent-Mockingbird is scarily thin and feels very cold against him; he runs hotter than humans but even taking that into account she doesn't seem to have anything at all on her bones to pad her body against the elements. She lays her head on his shoulder and relaxes into his hold. Her scent fills with hopeful contentment.

"I take it, this," Peter pats Argent-Mockingbird's back, "is a recent development?"

She laughs.

"A recent one and an ancient one, both at the same time." Of course it's both at the same time. When has it ever been anything else with Mockingbird? "Later, I'll tell you everything you like. Peter," her voice suddenly breaks, and her scent saturates with sorrow and anger, "I thought you might die. I thought I hadn't been able to protect you."

"I do want to protest needing protection," he sighs, "but at the moment the facts are against me, I'm afraid. I will regroup later and tackle this argument when I have something to shore it

up with."

Argent-Mockingbird snickers.

"Very lawyer of you," she says. "Also, incoming."

"What?"

Before Peter can get an answer, what feels like a furry boulder bowls him over and dog-Mockingbird licks his face with great enthusiasm, heavy paws planted on his chest.

Peter blinks away the plentiful dog slobber and narrows his eyes up at him. Dog-Mockingbird barks happily. Peter is, as ever, rendered quite helpless by Mockingbird's charm in an animal form; giving up on pretending to be cross, he buries his fingers in the long fur and pets the dog for all he's worth.

Speaking of animal forms.

"Is Nien alright?" Peter asks, worried. "He was with me when Gerard got me."

"He's resting in your car," Quentin-Mockingbird says. He doesn't seem about to tackle Peter as well, but his and Argent-Mockingbird's mischievous grins are identical. Peter would bet a limb that this expression doesn't belong to either of the people who used to inhabit these bodies before. "He's a tough little birdie, that one. Remind me to tell you all about his contribution later."

There's much that is promised to only come later, and Peter doesn't like it. He has a million and one questions, and he'd prefer to have at least some of them answered now. He doesn't push, though; if Mockingbird doesn't want to speak in front of Talia, that's Mockingbird's right.

It just means that Peter has to decide what to do with Talia and do it, and then he can have Mockingbird all to himself. He wonders if Mockingbird would have been as open, as glad, as playful at Peter's first acknowledged meeting with a human body of his if Peter hadn't been something of a damsel in distress in this situation; it grates on Peter to need rescuing but he doesn't mind it if the sheer relief of having him back safe and sound makes secretive Mockingbird promise all sorts of intriguing and tantalizing information. Peter should press this advantage while he has it.

He takes the dog's paws off his chest with the same delicate care that Mockingbird has shown with the handcuffs and sits upright, leaning against the dog's side. In this form, Mockingbird feels powerful, immovable like a cliff, a hairy safe harbor. Talia is glaring at Peter, eyes both alpha red and red-rimmed with grief. Right, Laura's dead. Peter looks for a fuck to give, faintly interested in whether or not he can find one, and there are a few but they are all for the Laura who has been effectively dead for years; the young Laura who adored her weird, dorky, creepy uncle without hesitation and was adored in return.

"Would you kindly care to explain to me what's going on?" Talia says with the sort of deadly calm that means her fury has grown too big to express it via screaming and thrashing, and

something deep inside Peter automatically cringes and curls in on itself.

Her will presses down on Peter through the bond, harsh, unforgiving. Peter used to wonder when he was younger what exactly it was that his sister couldn't forgive him for. These days, he's fine with never knowing as long as he can be far, far away from her.

There's no going back from what happened in this distillery today, and Peter doesn't want to go back. He's been part of a pack since birth, and the thing that scared him the most about his plan to kill Deucalion was not potentially getting himself eviscerated by an enraged alpha but being alone in the world. Having no one to bond with, no one to call his own; a wilted leaf in the wind, no longer connected to a branch.

But Peter will not be quite so alone, will he? He has Mockingbird... and if he doesn't have Mockingbird just yet, he'll make sure that he does.

Snapping his bonds is easy. They are none of them especially strong, and a dedicated effort of will is all that is required. They fall away one by one, and when he snaps the last one, to his alpha, Talia's face goes slack with horror.

Peter feels untethered. Where a pack used to be, there's now empty space, far too much space; Peter doesn't know what to do with it, and he's reeling, his breathing coming fast and uneven.

Dog-Mockingbird whines and licks Peter's cheek with a sandpaper-like tongue. The sensation helps ground Peter.

"What have you done?" Talia whispers. "Have you just... and for what? For that hunter bitch?"

"Oh, shut up and go fuck yourself with a rusty spoon," Argent-Mockingbird says cheerfully. "Peter? What have you decided?"

Peter gets up with one last scratch behind dog-Mockingbird's ears. He feels a bit detached; like he's floating. He needs to be an alpha in order to survive without a pack and not go feral. And every argument he's ever found against killing Talia seems insignificant now, with the scent of blood heavy and thick in the air. His hands are itching like they often do whenever he entertains the dream of lashing right back out at her. That violent, primal wish to *hurt*, an urge boiling under his skin, an unseen turbulent monster seeking to tear apart and away the thin sheen of reason and restraint. He's always stayed his hand before.

Talia renews her attempts to get free with fresh vigor, her fear lending her extra motivation. The thick pipes she's chained to are groaning and creaking but not giving yet.

"Wait!" She yelps. "If you kill me, you'll never know that—"

Peter closes a clawed hand over her throat and rips it out. The chunk of meat and tendons stays between his fingers. Blood sprays everywhere, coppery and salty, tangible evidence that Talia will never try to hurt him again. The alpha spark ignites Peter's veins, and he shudders under the onslaught of power.

Oh. Oh, that's definitely the stuff.

"Congratulations," Argent-Mockingbird says, smiling. She smells like pride and affection, as if a brutal murder of a chained-up woman is an accomplishment worthy of praise. How wondrous is it that Peter has somehow managed to find the one being in the world to look at him with such warmth and sound sincere in his congratulations? "What's it like, being an alpha? I killed four today but there wasn't any power transfer. I guess I'm just too different from a werewolf for that."

"It feels amazing," he tells her. "Like everything I am has been dialed up to eleven."

"Awesome," Argent-Mockingbird nods decisively. "Listen, I hate to harp on and on about the same thing, but Deucalion is still out there somewhere. Shall we go for take two and try to regroup with Prime again?"

"Prime?"

"The one that mostly texted you."

"What kind of name is Prime?" Peter chuckles. "Is it after the Transformers?"

"It's not a name, per se, it's a designation," Argent-Mockingbird shrugs. "All of me is Stiles, so I had to differentiate the one that has only ever been Stiles somehow."

The first body. The original. Peter's curiosity is burning him from the inside.

"Let's go now," he offers.

Argent-Mockingbird laughs.

"Clean-up first," she says. "We don't want the authorities finding these bodies, do we?"

Peter looks at body after body littering the distillery and groans.

"There's one more outside," Quentin-Mockingbird adds. He sounds helpful, but Peter is certain that Mockingbird is, well, mocking him.

Peter probably shouldn't find it as captivating as he does.

* * *

The clean-up done and Peter's face freshly washed of blood and dog saliva, they set off in three cars. Peter drives his own, with Nien-Mockingbird chirping tiredly but happily from the passenger seat; Argent-Mockingbird has taken Gerard's, and Quentin-Mockingbird, who's got the dog-Mockingbird with him, is driving the one that apparently belongs to Mockingbird. They have pushed Talia's into the lake, where it will hopefully remain for a long, long time.

It has taken a while to get rid of every trace as best they could, and the sun has almost set by now. The roads are flooded by office workers going home, and Peter drums his fingers on the

steering wheel, impatient. A subjective eternity passes before they roll through the imposing black gate and stop in front of the former Eichen House.

Peter picks up Nien-Mockingbird, a tiny warm pile of feathers in his hands, and carries him up the porch.

"I'll take that," an elderly woman says, appearing in the doorway. She must be also Mockingbird. "He needs a bit of care, and I suspect you'll be busy."

Peter hands the finch off with a pang of regret. He's grown to like having a feisty little bird around.

"Come on in," the woman says.

She leads the way into a big room that must have served as a place for patients to socialize back in the day. It's full of people, and even though Peter already put it together, seeing it with his own eyes makes him stop in his tracks.

"Hi, I'm Mockingbird," a young black man beams at him from the couch. Peter saw him in front of the Argents' house playing with with several dogs and never suspected him of being anything but a goofy dog-walker.

"Me too!" This comes from a humanoid who would pass for human if not for the iridescent blade-like fish scales that grow up to his cheekbones.

"And me," a middle-aged woman says. Peter is fairly sure he has seen her in passing before. Is she one of the cashiers at the supermarket?

"I'm Mockingbird as well," Summers adds, grinning, from where he's straddling a chair backwards.

"Good evening, I am Mockingbird, may I interest you in today's specials?" A waiter whose hands ghosted right over Peter's as he topped off Peter's wine glass during David's anniversary dinner gives an exaggerated, goofy wink.

"Hello, I'm also Mockingbird," rumbles a towering minotaur.

"Welcome, sir, I'm Mockingbird, your barista for the evening," says George Morris, cheeky as anything, and his eyes are sparkling with such merry mischief that Peter cannot believe he's ever let himself be duped into thinking this man was inconsequential.

One by one, they introduce themselves, never interrupting each other or letting there be a pause between their words. They are all one, the same entity looking at the world through their eyes. Children of Unity.

The last one to speak is a tall, slender boy of about seventeen standing at the far side of the room. His bare feet are wrapped in fresh bandages. His jeans are worn out by age, not fashion, and far too big for him. His shirt is white and rough, and it has way too many clunky clasps; that and the rugged hems of the sleeves make Peter suspect it's nothing more or less than a straitjacket with the extra sleeve length cut off.

The boy's hair looks soft and messy, and his face is beautiful in an understated, sweet, clean, innocent way that makes Peter want to do all manner of filthy, deliciously depraved things to it immediately. His skin is creamy and smooth, with a smattering of brown moles, just as advertised. A peregrine falcon sits on his shoulder, her curved talons gripping gently so as not to rip the fabric and the flesh underneath.

"Hi, Vine," the boy says. "You might have guessed it already, but I'm Mockingbird."

And then the boy takes off his sunglasses.

His eyes do not have irises, pupils or whites. They contain what looks like molten gold and amber, every shade of warm brown and brilliant yellow there is, and the currents of color are moving, chaotic and fast, swirling, darkening and lightening, as if these eyes are windows into a fantastical storm in another universe.

And they glow. Even with the electric lights on in the room, Peter can clearly see the bright shine they release.

"Kinda brown", Mockingbird described them. What a perfectly sneaky, devastating joke.

All of Peter's prearranged, pithy, dashingly funny remarks about knights and damsels, multitudes of bodies living and dead, and Mockingbird's dramatic flair have evaporated, and what tumbles off his lips is an artless, honest confession, the most sincere thing he's said since he was six and told his mother she was the bestest, most awesomest alpha in the whole wide world:

"You have the prettiest eyes I've ever seen."

Mockingbird's mouth opens slightly in surprise—he was clearly expecting a pithy remark, too—and he blushes. That dusting of pink on his cheekbones is wildly incongruous with the image of someone who has cut a bloody swath through town today. It suits him to a T.

"And you call me sweet," Mockingbird says, almost reproachfully. "What am I even to do with you when you say something like that?"

Peter stalks across the room, eyes on his Mockingbird. The falcon takes to the air, circling under the ceiling. He can hear Mockingbird's heartbeat picking up and see Mockingbird's pink tongue darting out to wet his lips.

"I can think of a few things," Peter says, rests one hand on Mockingbird's shoulder blade, lets the other one dive into that soft hair, and kisses him.

Mockingbird kisses back, hungry, inexperienced, and clings to Peter with his whole body. His arms wind around Peter, stroking his back, sliding down to squeeze his ass, worming their way under Peter's shirt, exploring all the skin on offer. Every touch is a burning brand of lust; Peter licks into Mockingbird's mouth, and the taste of him goes straight into Peter's cock, heady and spicy. Mockingbird's own scent is intoxicating, and it makes Peter's head swim when it's tinged throughout with arousal like this. Peter wants it all over him, now. Scent is a huge part of attraction for a werewolf, and Peter doesn't remember the last time he met

anyone who smelled like this, like Peter might burst at the seams if he doesn't fuck them within the next five minutes.

Peter cups Mockingbird's ass in his hands and lifts him up; for an alpha's strength, he weighs about as much as Nien. Without missing a beat, Mockingbird wraps his legs around Peter's waist and keeps kissing him, fighting him for the dominance in the kiss, tasting Peter deep. Mockingbird's hips jerk forward, rubbing a hard length against Peter's stomach, and he moans into the kiss. That sound burns through Peter like wildfire.

Peter takes a few steps and presses Mockingbird against the wall. With that additional support, he snakes one hand between them and undoes the button and the fly of Mockingbird's jeans. He pushes all the maddening fabric down and aside and gets his hand on Mockingbird's cock, already fully erect; all that gorgeous silky hardness twitches under his touch, and Mockingbird breaks off the kiss to moan louder. Peter bends his head down and kisses Mockingbird's throat. Catching some of that delicate skin between his teeth, he sucks on it mercilessly. Mockingbird gasps and throws his head back; Peter swipes a thumb over the head of his cock, and another moan is torn out of Mockingbird.

In stereo.

Peter stops, unsure of how to react to that. Mockingbird looks at him, those magical eyes swirling lazily, randomly, as in trance.

"Sorry," he says, and he sounds hoarse already. Peter longs to know what his voice will be like after he screams properly. Or spends some time with Peter's cock in his mouth, looking up at him with those eyes. "Feels too good, I couldn't keep it away from the other bodies. I'll put more effort into it."

Peter can't hold his laugh back.

"It's alright," he says, pressing smiling kisses into Mockingbird's neck. "Getting off several dozen people at once is very good for the ego, you know."

"Much as I'd like to stroke both your ego and your cock at once like the born multitasker that I am," Mockingbird grins, "consider this: if I don't learn how to keep sex confined only to the body or bodies involved, there will be no funny business while any of them are outside. This body doesn't have to go to work or run errands, you know. Just in case you were wondering if fucking like bunnies on Viagra was an option for tomorrow's morning, afternoon and evening. I know I was."

Peter contemplates that perspective.

"Try your very hardest to keep it to this one," he says and starts sucking another hickey into Mockingbird's throat.

Mockingbird makes a choked "ah" sound—with one voice only—and presses on the back of Peter's head in a clear demand for more. Peter is more than happy to oblige.

"And you're such a good Samaritan that you'll do your best to give me lots of opportunities for practice, huh?" Mockingbird's voice is breathy, ragged, a heavenly music to Peter's ears.

"Just doing my civic duty," Peter says, bends a little lower and closes his lips and teeth around one of Mockingbird's nipples through the shirt.

"Fuck," Mockingbird chokes out, desperate, "fuck, so good, Peter, more..."

One of Mockingbird's hands pushes between them and fumbles at Peter's fly, losing its grip on the slider when Peter presses the flat of his tongue against that hard, sensitive nipple. Eventually Mockingbird manages to get it all the way down and pulls Peter's cock out, too impatient to bother with any more undressing. His fingers close around Peter's cock and pump, awkward due to how little space he has to work with. Peter shudders, a moan of his own vibrating into Mockingbird's chest under his lips, and rolls his hips forward, thrusting into that eager hand.

Mockingbird comes first, hips stuttering as he pushes into Peter's grip, chasing every last drop of pressure and friction with a long, incoherent moan from the prime body and a collective choked-off gasp from the rest of the room. Peter milks him dry and then wipes his hand against his own cock, slicking the movement for Mockingbird's hand and getting that wonderful scent all over the most intimate parts of his body.

"Hngh," Mockingbird says, looking down. He seems mesmerized by Peter's cock covered in his own come and wrapped in his hand. He works it fast and tight, quickly learning to sync it to Peter's thrusts, and the glow of his eyes illuminates the view. Peter watches it too, out of his mind with pleasure, right up until Mockingbird tries that same thumb swipe Peter did to him, and Peter is pushed over the edge with a low growl, splashing thick ropes of come all over Mockingbird's shirt and groin.

He shivers at the idea that his own scent now clings to Mockingbird as well.

"Am I supposed to let go now?" Mockingbird wonders, idly sliding his hand up and down Peter's spent cock. "I kind of don't want to. I might have found my new favorite toy."

He drags his thumb over the head again, and Peter's laughter turns into a moan halfway. He needs a few minutes before he can get it up for a second round, he's achingly sensitive, but he's not about to discourage Mockingbird from touching him. It feels too damn good.

He leans in and worries the lobe of Mockingbird's ear with his tongue and lips, enjoying the salty taste of his skin and the full-body twitch the touch elicits.

"Fuck, I want you so much," he exhales.

Mockingbird lets go of Peter's cock to put his arms around Peter and pull him closer, closer, until they are flush against each other.

"If you want me," Mockingbird whispers, his breath hot and wet against Peter's cheek, "then take me."

* * *

Mockingbird, Peter discovers, is a cuddler. Unconcerned with being sticky and sweaty, he lounges on top of Peter, their legs intertwined, his chin pillowed on his hands, those luminous alien eyes peering at Peter. Peter strokes his shoulder and back, not to incite yet another go—frankly, he thinks they both need a longer rest before then, and definitely water and food—but just to keep touching. He's tired in a pleasant, sore way, and his brain feels like it's paddling in a pool of happy hormones.

"So, mi lindo, I have approximately three thousand questions," Peter says.

Mockingbird's chuckle is raspy now but no less genuine for it. Should Peter learn to call Mockingbird Stiles in his head? That is, by his own words, his name. It feels strange to think "Stiles", though. He will always be Mockingbird first in Peter's mind.

"I don't know that I won't fall asleep before I can answer all of them," Mockingbird says. "But go ahead, let's try and make a dent in those."

"How come you're here alone? Where's your family, if you had one? Did some of the bodies outside belong to them?"

"Coming in swinging, I see," Mockingbird says. The currents of gold in his eyes pulsate. Does that indicate distress? Sadness? "From that question I assume you didn't find my real name. Mieczysław Stilinski, at your service."

"Stilinski," Peter repeats. There used to be a Sheriff of that name in Beacon Hills.

"Uh-huh. My dad was a Sheriff here. Since it was all a long time ago, you might not remember even though you probably heard about some of it through your left hand grapevine, so here are the cliff notes: my mom got sick with frontotemporal dementia, eventually dad had to settle her into the long-term care unit in the Memorial, some time after that I started going crazy too because my, uhm, abilities were looking for a release, and dad stuck me in here. I like to think he meant to return for a visit after my mandatory seventy-two hours without contact with the outside world ran out, but within the first forty-eight hours of those seventy-two mom died, and soon after dad got blind drunk and drove himself into a ditch. The ditch didn't like it, I suppose, because the car overturned and he broke his neck."

"No one looked for you? No other relatives?"

"The closest ones I've got are some distant cousins in Poland, on mom's side, and I don't think we'd ever kept in touch. Tara looked for me, that's Sheriff Graeme, she used to help me with my homework and was generally nice to the hyperactive walking trouble that was little Stiles. I told her I'd run away. Didn't want to risk anyone finding out what I was."

"So you took over this whole place body by body?" Peter wonders. "How did you even come up with it at that age? Was it difficult? By the way, how exactly do your abilities work? Is it possession?"

"It's murder," Mockingbird smiles. "It's not that I push the true owner of a body into a corner and take over the driver's seat while they rage and plot revenge. I kill the mind and then move into the vacated space. If I leave a body whose mind I killed, they become functionally a vegetable. No brain activity."

That explains a lot about the Kate Argent enigma.

"And as for coming up with the idea of conquering this place..." Mockingbird snorts. "Of course I didn't come up with it. Let me paint you a picture, Vine: imagine a ten-year-old kid whose supernatural powers are waking up in a way that leaves him unable to concentrate on anything. A scatterbrain of the "turn on the gas and forget about it" proportions. Said kid gets dumped in a psychiatric hospital, and that would be already pretty sad, but the kid also knows the hospital is a monster and the kid's dad won't listen to it. Silly childish ramblings, am I right?"

"A monster?" Peter frowns.

"Yeah. I don't know what it was by name and species but as I understood while I was peeling it apart layer by layer, it was some sort of... seepage ghost."

"Seepage ghost," Peter repeats, not bothering to hide his skepticism.

Mockingbird pokes him in the ribs.

"When you fight one of these, you're welcome to come up with a better description," he says. The currents of molten gold and amber in his eyes are streaming upwards, and Peter decides that must mean Mockingbird is rolling his eyes. "It seeped into everything, people, furniture, walls, all of it. It was in the whole building. And it wasn't a person like me, it was something less substantial. I couldn't live in someone else's head without killing them first if I wanted to, you know, because I occupy all the same spaces as the original owner. This thing didn't do that, it just seeped inside a little and did some insidious nudging, you know, whispers with questions like "Why not steal that?" or "Why shouldn't you hit that guy in the face if you think it looks punchable?", something along those lines. In terms of occupation, well—if you imagine a brain as a room, then I'm a violent squatter who comes in and takes the room for himself, and that thing was a spider skittering in the corner."

"So you fought an epic psychic battle with the seepage ghost?" Peter cards one hand through Mockingbird's hair; even damp with sweat, it's still light as feathers.

"In a way," Mockingbird grins. "As soon as the door closed after my dad, the orderlies grabbed me and pumped me full of drugs. I don't know which ones but I suspect it was something like haloperidol, to make me quiet. The thing whispered to them I wasn't just a kid, you see, it knew I was something else. It backfired on all of them quite spectacularly."

He extends one hand to catch Peter's free one and tangle their fingers together. Then he keeps talking without prompting.

"What the drugs did was push me out of my body. It was lying in the bed, docile as you please, but the real me was free. Outside of bodily constraints I could think clearly for the

first time in a long while, and I was scared, angry and strong. Much stronger than the thing, even though it was a lot older than me. It was just a matter of our different states of substance, I guess. If a human toddler stomps on a spider, the spider will die, its wisdom, cunning and age notwithstanding. Not that it was as fast as stomping. It tried to bite pieces out of me, and I kept retaliating, having no idea what I was doing and if any of that was actually real. Every blow it took peeled off a part of it, and eventually it became so small that it got properly scared and tried to hide in someone's mind, probably with the idea that it could stow away in there and catch a ride out of Eichen House and to somewhere I was not. But I saw it do that, and that was how I learned that I could get into someone else's mind through the same grooves it used. I killed it and whoever it was that it chose to use as a hiding place, although I'm not sure anymore if I realized I was killing a person or not at the time. I just knew it was easy and fast, and it felt right to spread myself into that vacated brain, even though I couldn't seep into non-living stuff like the thing could, so after that first one I sprawled myself over the whole building and took over the rest of the living creatures in it in one fell swoop."

"It must have been a shock when the drugs wore off," Peter notes carefully. This topic is obviously still an emotional minefield for Mockingbird.

"Probably," Mockingbird says. "The first day or so after they wore off is really sketchy in my memory. I think I was messed up by the new brains."

"How so?"

"Well, the patients here might have been a cover for the supernatural prison thing, but they were actual, legit patients, not actors or something. They had real diagnoses which I read in their files later, and mental illness goes hand in hand with screwy brain chemistry which all became my brain chemistry at once." Mockingbird grimaces. "Take Leo-me, for example. He was clinically depressed, so much so that he tried to off himself and was almost successful. I always have him wear long sleeves because those scars really stand out. There must have been a lake's worth of the despair hormones in his brain and not a single teaspoon of serotonin. And if someone wasn't a patient, that didn't mean they were fine and dandy. Logan-me, for instance, was an orderly here and also an honest to God serial killer. He injected patients with lethal doses of drugs for the purposes of helping them to ease their suffering, and he did audio recordings of them as they died. And trust me, from everything I unearthed in the house, it only goes downhill from there."

Peter pulls Mockingbird's hand up and kisses the back of it.

"It's fine," Mockingbird says, eyelashes fluttering as he closes his eyes and presses one cheek to Peter's chest. "I got over it."

Peter is not sure how true this statement is, but Mockingbird himself seems to believe it and Peter really shouldn't throw any stones where it comes to being not completely sane.

"How do you manage living in so many bodies at once?" Peter can't help asking. "It sounds to me like the sort of thing that would drive someone crazy even with textbook normal brain chemistry to go with it."

"Someone, but not me." Mockingbird shrugs. "I can't be sure, of course, but I think that was actually the one thing that kept me functional. I was born to be like this, you see."

He opens his eyes, and the currents of molten light in them look peaceful.

"I take it you woke up with these eyes after that first day?"

"Yep."

"And now what? I mean, do you need to take drugs to get a new body?"

"Oh, no, I'm keeping away from the drugs. That shit sounds like a bad idea all around—even if I don't get myself addicted or overdosed, I don't think it'd be smart at all to lose control over what I'm doing or saying. No, all I need is to look somebody in the eye with these. No other body works for that, sadly."

"So you could have taken over my body pretty much the moment I walked in." Peter doesn't know how to feel about that. Yes, Mockingbird didn't do it, but Peter likes to be aware of potential dangers.

"Why would I? I like your mind."

"It's my mind you like, huh?" Peter teases. "You sure it's not the ass you waxed lyrical about?"

Mockingbird laughs.

"You do realize I've been working for your firm for the last four years, right? Troy-me has had ample opportunity to observe your ass. I knew who and what you were, and I knew you were hot, of course, but all of that never caused me to want to try anything with you. But then you messaged me by mistake, and I was hooked since the moment you called me to have me prove I wasn't Charlie. You were so arrogant, rude and presumptuous about it." Mockingbird sighs dreamily like a preteen girl thinking of her beloved pop-idol. "I really had a snowball's chance in hell."

"And those are the qualities you look for in... someone to try something with?" Peter raises both eyebrows this time. This list of his character traits warrants nothing less, he feels.

"I wasn't looking, you know. You just fell into my hands by chance. And what, pray tell, would I do with a goodie-two-shoes? Somebody nice, and kind, and polite who would kill me because I'm evil and then themselves because they have basically committed mass murder?" Mockingbird wrinkles his nose in contempt. "You were fun, and I couldn't get enough of you. Of all those things that sound like flaws when I list them out loud, yes. Don't you dare go changing any of that, mind you. I want you exactly as you are, selfish, and pushy, and sneaky, and fun."

"Well, if you insist." Peter kisses Mockingbird's hand again and rubs his cheek against it, basking in Mockingbird's scent.

Mockingbird yawns.

"Have we made a dent yet? I kind of want to wash all the spunk off, brush Prime's teeth and go to sleep. If you like, you can keep talking with another body, not all of them are equally tired."

"I wouldn't mind some rest myself," Peter admits. "Don't forget, I didn't sleep a wink last night, I was on the phone with someone for hours."

Mockingbird pushes himself up on his elbows—Peter immediately misses the sensation of him—and gives Peter a chaste kiss on the lips. His eyes are almost hypnotizing, whirlpools of light rotating slowly like distant galaxies.

"Then let's go do all the hygiene things and come right back to this bed for some sleep."

Peter finds that there's nothing else in the world he'd like to do more.

Chapter 8: Won't You Look At My Bird (Peter's Interlude)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Peter wakes up alone, rested and peaceful. He can hear some sounds of the house, music playing somewhere and the distinctive clunking of dishes. The bed is layered with Mockingbird's scent: this is clearly where the prime body sleeps every night. Peter doesn't even try to resist the temptation to roll around a bit, luxuriating in it. Eventually, though, he gets up, pulls on his pants, detours to the bathroom and finds the source of the clunking.

The kitchen is huge and has an industrial feel to it, clearly meant to feed many people every day. The many bodies in it are tending to bacon, eggs, fresh vegetables, oatmeal, bread and fruit, knives blurring, spatulas sliding under things nimbly, spoons stirring in flawless circular motions. Not once does anybody drive an elbow into anything by mistake, stumble into anybody else or even show hesitation about what to do. Peter occupies a chair in the corner so as not to get underfoot and watches the well-oiled machine in action.

Nien-Mockingbird lands on his head with a chirp and starts exuberantly tugging at Peter's hair.

"Good morning," all the bodies say in unison. This is both disturbing and exhilarating.

"Good morning, cariño," Peter says.

Dog-Mockingbird paddles over and nuzzles into Peter's side with his cold wet nose. Prime appears from the throng of bodies, clad in those ancient ill-fitting jeans and the repurposed straitjacket again, a big cup of coffee in his hands, and drapes himself over Peter's lap. Peter wonders if this is because Mockingbird has grown up somewhat away from society so he doesn't know about the morning after awkwardness or if he knows but doesn't care, preferring to do what he wants, in this case use Peter as a seat. Either way, Peter likes it.

Mockingbird smells clean and awake. He's definitely been up for some time, busy as a bee. Peter kisses him, and Mockingbird hums against his lips, melting into Peter's hold. What was it Mockingbird said yesterday? Fucking like bunnies on Viagra? That sounds like a plan.

"Hey," Peter says, rather stupidly, when they part.

Mockingbird's lips curve into an impish grin. His eyes shine brightly, and the molten currents in them are dancing like a kaleidoscope. Peter files that particular movement under "mischievous".

"Hey yourself," Mockingbird says and takes a sip of his coffee. "What do you want for breakfast? There isn't anything fancy, of course, but at least these days I've got bacon from the supermarket rather than deer from the Preserve."

"You hunted deer?"

"Once. It was that or go hungry. Oooh, would you maybe like deer better?" Mockingbird perks up. "The Eichen House files were all about werewolf physiology, nothing about your culture. I don't even know if you have a separate culture. Do you have any bonkers mating rituals like in trashy urban fantasy? If I give you the fresh heart of a deer I killed myself under a full moon, will we be werewolf-married?"

Peter pressed his face into Mockingbird's neck and laughs.

"I guess that means you don't," Mockingbird says with complete lack of embarrassment. On the contrary, he smells pleased as if making Peter laugh is an achievement in and of itself. "In hindsight, the word 'trashy' should have probably given me a clue. On the other hand, one could have all the real information and just be a bad writer."

"I assure you, we don't have bonkers mating rituals." Peter licks one of the hickeys he left on Mockingbird's neck yesterday. Mockingbird shivers, almost spilling his coffee. "If there ever were any, they are long lost to time, so if we want to get married, we just do it like everyone else, with a license and an official."

"Boring," Mockingbird decides. "Well, if you want deer, tell me in advance. It takes a bit of an effort on my part, what with having to find one, kill it and avoid both Hale patrols and ranger patrols."

"That sounds like a lot of trouble to go to for a whim." Even in absence of mating rituals, Peter finds the idea of Mockingbird hunting for him weirdly titillating. It would be such a delightfully savage thing to do in the age of plastic-wrapped steaks from a sterile-white shelf.

Mockingbird quirks a smile at Peter.

"At least that's a whim that can be satisfied via going to some trouble. I'd give several limbs to have Reese's peanut butter cups grow on trees so I could trouble myself to go out and pick some, but as it is, it's a daily temptation not to go and blow all of my savings on a truck full of those."

Mockingbird's bodies start carrying plates and bowls out. In this utilitarian kitchen there isn't a dining table, so the hospital cafeteria it is.

"Breakfast is ready," Mockingbird says.

"You should get off me so we can walk over there," Peter points out.

"Don't wanna," Mockingbird says. "Carry me around if you want to get anywhere."

He snickers into the coffee, pleased with his own joke. Peter takes the cup from his hands and, before Mockingbird can even blink, hauls him over the shoulder in a fireman carry.

Mockingbird gives a startled yelp.

"Caveman," he says, accusing and approving at the same time.

"If I were a caveman, I'd take you to my metaphorical cave, bend you over and fuck you thoroughly right now," Peter says. "I'm a gentleman. I'll wait until you've eaten, and then I will take you to my metaphorical cave, bend you over and fuck you thoroughly."

Mockingbird pinches Peter's ass in retaliation.

Even with the empty, aching space in his soul where his packbonds used to be, Peter doesn't think he's ever felt this alive and happy.

The fragility of it scares him. But it would take much more than fear to stop him holding on to it.

* * *

Peter has never had what could be classified as a relationship before. He's been on dates, sometimes even two or three in a row with the same person, and he's had a lot of one night stands. There was always something getting in the way, either the supernatural secrecy, Peter's own secrecy or just Peter's lack of interest in making that kind of effort. This Saturday, though, feels like a relationship, one that started while Peter wasn't looking and is already underway.

They have sex, and they talk, and they eat, and they play chess (Peter loses in ten moves and suspects Mockingbird has actually gone easy on him), and table tennis (Mockingbird loses, even with Nien-Mockingbird flinging himself into Peter's field of vision all the time so as not to let him see where the ball is), and cribbage (which devolves into a competition of shameless cheating and then into more sex right there on the scattered cards). Peter and Mockingbird are in a bubble of their own, and the outside world seems distant and not entirely real, at least to Peter.

By the afternoon they have spent most of their energy, and they just... lie there in bed, Mockingbird twined around Peter, talking and exchanging lazy kisses with no intent behind them except spur-of-the-moment affection. Peter likes it as much as he's puzzled by it.

"You've been surviving here on your own for a long time," Peter says. "Are you planning to keep doing that?"

"Surviving seems like a duh," Mockingbird says. "But I'm not going to spend the rest of my life working minimum wage jobs and pretending to be a religious commune in a small town. For one, I'm sick of being all pious. And I've got plans, you know."

"I don't know, actually," Peter objects. "What plans?"

"Oh, right," Mockingbird says, suddenly bashful. "I never did tell you what I want to do when I grow up, did I?"

This ought to be good, Peter can feel it.

"And what is that?"

"I'll show you," Mockingbird says.

Light on his feet, he jumps off the bed and tugs on Peter's hand.

"Come on!"

Bemused, Peter follows. Mockingbird doesn't bother with waiting for either of them to get dressed, and as they pass the big socializing room, several bodies look at Peter with obvious appreciation. There's Quentin-Mockingbird, Darth-Mockingbird, Leia-Mockingbird (Peter despairs over Mockingbird's deep and abiding love of Star Wars; Mockingbird just tells him to be happy that little Mockingbird had enough imagination not to call the bodies whose actual names weren't in the files "One", "Two" and "Three") and a man with half his face paralyzed whose separate name Peter doesn't yet remember, all of them typing away at laptops. Argent-Mockingbird would have probably mastered an excellent lewd leer but she's asleep on the couch.

"Feels a bit like I'm committing public indecency," Peter remarks.

"They are all my bodies," Mockingbird says impatiently, "it's just me looking at you, and I'm sure as fuck not going to be scandalized by the sight of your dick swinging free. No, don't stop to preen right now, we need to go into the basement."

"What happened to that one's face?" Peter asks as they are going down the stairs.

"Jonathan-me? Ah, well, I was experimenting with leaving a body and coming back, you see. I didn't know it would have any effect on the body, but on the fifth time he had a bit of a stroke, so yeah. I started looking into neuroscience after that to see if there's a way to trace what I do to a brain and where I am in it. Kate-me has had some scans at the Memorial that I absolutely have to get my hands on. The doctors who looked at those didn't see anything weird but then again, they had no idea what to look for."

The basement is, apparently, where the prison used to be. Cells stand empty and dusty on either side of the corridor, doors swung half-open like jaws waiting to snatch up an unsuspecting werewolf passing by. Mockingbird stops at what, at first glance, looks like the end of the corridor and pries off the wall... no, a large piece of meticulously painted cardboard.

Amused and intrigued, Peter follows Mockingbird into the continuation of the corridor.

The walls here are white—papered over with ordinary printer paper, fitted together so that the corridor and the cells have become one giant, continuous writing surface. About two thirds of it are covered with print-outs, photos, diagrams and a whole lot of writing. It starts out childishly round and uncertain and turns into a decisive but mostly illegible chicken scratch as the corridor goes on.

The walls seem to be divided into sections titled "USA", "GB", "Canada" and "Australia". The first one is the most extensive, spanning a bunch of cells and the corridor spaces in between. Peter walks along the walls, scanning their content, and it seems to be an exhaustive description of the government structure with the key positions noted, the names of people currently occupying it listed and detailed plans for their impersonation provided.

Stunned, Peter studies the walls for long minutes. Then he turns and looks at Mockingbird who has been waiting in uncharacteristic silence.

"So, uhm, my plans," Mockingbird says, the molten gold and copper in his eyes intertwining and dissolving into each other with anxiety. "In a nutshell, I'm going to rule the world."

That's... so very far from anything Peter could have come up with if asked. Ruling the world is a comic book villain goal—but then again, Mockingbird is hardly planning to topple the existing governments with a death ray or an army of killer robots. He will simply take over the bodies of the people who have been handed the authority already, and no one will be the wiser.

Peter can see the progression of it in his mind's eye already. The first couple of countries will prove the trickiest, and after that Mockingbird can simply help himself. Make treaties with himself. Go on diplomatic visits to himself. Pick and choose the most promising candidates for high positions from other countries to support with the money and agencies at his disposal, the candidates without too many close friends or family members who could notice the swap and start suspecting something. An unseen net of Mockingbird, wrapping around the planet.

"...I've got most things thought out for the US, I'll start with an intern for each candidate's office, and I'll work my way up slowly and cautiously," Mockingbird rambles nervously, "the trickiest part is to get whoever I need to meet with this body in private but it doesn't always have to be a scheduled meeting, see, in that corner over there I have the security detail procedures pinned down, I don't need to, like, kidnap someone and hold them for a while. I just need to get them away for a second... Will you say something? You don't think it's stupid, do you?"

"I think it's amazing," Peter says. Everything in him covets Mockingbird who has turned out to be even more brilliant, ruthless and insane than Peter already thought him to be, and Peter gladly gives into the urge to reel Mockingbird in and kiss him senseless.

"You're amazing," Peter says when Mockingbird in his arms has been kissed sufficiently to tremble with desire. "Your plans are amazing."

"A bit one-note but positive," Mockingbird snickers. "How would you like a shiny new Australia for... well, not your next birthday but within maybe five years?"

"How would I like it?" Peter repeats. "So I'm taking over the world with you?"

"I mean... don't you want to?" Mockingbird draws back a bit. Peter is rather speechless at the prospect of being a co-ruler of the world and doesn't fill the pause Mockingbird seems to be providing for him. "And I, well, I could really use someone who knows how to deal with people the way you do, I mean, I'm basically a sociopathic Mowgli—but maybe you don't want to stay with me?"

He takes a step back, eyes narrowed. His quick switch between anxious, amused and angry gives Peter a whiplash on top of everything the idea of going from a disfavored beta of a provincial pack to covert world domination is making him feel.

"Is that it?" Mockingbird lifts his chin. "You've had a bit of fun, and you're ready to move on to the next piece of ass?"

Peter knows poking an angry predator is not a good idea (in most situations, he's the predator; he cannot recommend this course of action to anybody who values their health and dignity) but, well, if they are going to be taking over the world together, he has to be sure they can survive a little poking as a unit.

"What would you do if that were the case?" He wonders.

This answer clearly sounds to Mockingbird as "yes, that is exactly what is happening". Mockingbird wraps his arms around himself, as if cold, and the scent of anger is replaced by pure hurt.

"I would be sad," he says quietly.

"Would you kill me?" Peter asks. "Take over my body? Or shoot me full of wolfsbane and bury me in your backyard?"

"No!" Mockingbird flinches away like Peter's words have stung his bare skin. The molten currents of light in Mockingbird's eyes are pulsing madly and streaming at dizzying speeds. "I'm not going to hurt you, Jesus fuck, Peter. Just... if you wanna go, then fucking go."

He turns away as if he can't bear to look at Peter right now. He's still hugging himself, and the sharp points of his vertebrae are visible enough under the skin to count without touching.

"I'll probably still stalk you, and you will never know if anything living you ever meet is me or not," he adds. "But I won't hurt you."

Peter takes a step towards Mockingbird and hugs him from behind. Mockingbird stiffens under his touch.

"You really do need someone like me," Peter says and brushes a kiss against Mockingbird's neck. "You're much too kindhearted, mi lindo. Just for your information, if someone who knows as much about you as I do wants to walk away, you kill them very dead, and you bury them very deep, and you preventively exorcise their ghost."

He slides one hand across Mockingbird's chest, brushing against a nipple. Mockingbird gasps. So responsive to Peter's touch.

"I'm never going to leave you," Peter whispers into Mockingbird's ear. "Now that you have flown into my hands, my sweet bird, I'm not letting you disappear in the sky ever again. And if you happen to decide at some point that you'd like to replace me with someone else, I will kill them, and bring their head to you, and fuck you into the nearest surface until you forget everything except my name so that you would know that you're mine."

There's a long pause during which Peter wonders if he's pushed too hard. If Mockingbird is not as invested in Peter as Peter is in him after all. If Mockingbird's hold on sanity is more tenuous than it has seemed to Peter.

Then Mockingbird turns around and pushes Peter against the wall; Peter could have stood his ground with how much stronger he is physically but he goes with it willingly. Mockingbird's eyes are blazing; Peter has never seen them this bright.

"Don't you fucking dare test me like that again," Mockingbird says, and his voice is so low and intense that it sends goosebumps across Peter's skin. He regrets not having any lube on hand because he would have loved to have Mockingbird pound him into this papered wall while talking to him in this voice. Perhaps that can be arranged later. "Or I will actually kill you."

Peter believes it. He is reasonably sure he has never wanted anyone more.

"Mi hermoso," Mockingbird says and kisses Peter's face furiously, uncaring of where exactly the kisses land. "My Vine. Mine. Mine."

Peter pulls Mockingbird closer and lets himself be claimed.

* * *

Afterwards, they do get dressed again and go out into the backyard. Mockingbird's other bodies bring out an extra chair for Peter to sit by the desk that is apparently where Prime spends most of his waking time, tea for Peter, coffee for Prime and some snacks. The selection looks rather sad, if plentiful: sliced carrots and apples and PB&J sandwiches. It's all clearly supermarket food, cheap, generic and more tasteless than not. If it were up to Peter, he'd pair the apples with a soft cheese, add hummus to dip the carrots into and get rid of the sandwiches altogether because the effort it would take to mask their flavor of sadness is not worth it. It's not up to him, though, and he keeps his ideas to himself. He's got manners, after all, and he doubts that Mockingbird wouldn't eat better if he could.

"So, as I understand, the main problem with moving away is money?"

"Give the man a prize." Mockingbird bites into an apple slice. "The upkeep of all the bodies and this monstrosity of a home almost made me faint the first time I calculated it. I'd never even seen that much money all at once, and I was supposed to find it somewhere every single month, even though the only thing I was qualified for was middle school. Moving away means plane or train tickets, gas money, shipping some stuff, renting apartments with all the deposits and shit, and so on, and so forth. Not to mention that Darth-me, Leia-me and Han-me can't travel the same way as everyone else since they won't pass for human, so I'll need to come up with some plan to smuggle them away in the dead of night. I don't know, rent a windowless van and have a human body drive it. So yeah, I was thinking I can try moving out gradually. Send out two or three bodies at first, then, when they are established and earning a decent amount of money, dispatch a few more."

"And earning money will take up a lot of your time and attention," Peter adds. "So you'll have to stagger your plans. It'd be a shame to miss the presidential elections next year, though. A candidate kicking their campaign into gear is a low-hanging fruit, really. So many behavioral changes can be justified as the stress of running for president."

"I know, right?" Mockingbird sighs. "And I'd get such a kick out of debating with myself on TV, too. But I can't do much about it unless a briefcase with a few million dollars falls from the sky and right into my hands. I'm thinking about robbing a few banks but that still needs to be planned out, and I'll have to get Prime to wherever it'll be to take over some local thugs, and all that. It'll take time. Although I guess it'll be worth it for the payout."

Peter takes a bite of his PB&J. It tastes like disappointed privilege.

"You know, cariño, I think I can contribute more to taking over the planet than just my worldly wisdom," he says.

"What do you mean?" Mockingbird looks at him curiously over the rim of his coffee cup. "If this is a veiled hint at sex, then I'm all for it but not before I'm done with my coffee."

"While my dick is also an incredibly valuable contribution the importance of which cannot be overstated and which should rightly go down in the annals of history as the fulcrum for our entire civilization," Peter says, mostly to make Mockingbird giggle into the cup, "I was thinking of something else. How about I go get it right now and absolutely blow your whole mind?"

"Sounds promising, but what is it, exactly?" Mockingbird frowns. "I'm not really a fan of surprises."

"You'll love this one," Peter promises. "I can guarantee it."

He drains the remainder of his tea in one gulp, leans over the desk to plant a kiss on Mockingbird's lips and gets up. Mockingbird still doesn't look too happy about getting a surprise but he doesn't try to stop Peter.

"Take a few of my bodies with you," he says. "It's not safe out there alone."

They haggle it down to one body with pockets full of mountain ash. Mockingbird picks Leo-Mockingbird for it, the one who tried to kill himself and who is apparently a natural with the ash. It's the dog-walker one. Peter really needs to sit down and learn at least all of their faces, separate names and current jobs.

The first few minutes of the drive are a little awkward because the face of the man in the passenger seat essentially belongs to a stranger. It's Mockingbird inside, Peter reminds himself. Get with the program.

"It's going to take some getting used to," he says. "I think I've assigned Prime's face to Mockingbird in my mind, and the understanding that it's not the only one is so far mostly intellectual."

"Must be strange," Leo-Mockingbird grins. "Wherever you look, there I am."

"A little strange," Peter agrees. "Not bad, though."

He turns into town and reflexively pulls his cap down lower. The rest of the Hale pack is bound to be looking for its missing members; if, say, Derek sees Peter casually wheeling

through the streets, he will jump on the hood, punch through the windshield and try to pull Peter out by the shirt collar. Derek has always been a very passionate boy, and after the regrettable incident with his childhood girlfriend said passion has been mostly channeled into aggression.

"I couldn't help but notice you using a Spanish endearment down there," he says. "Are you learning Spanish?"

"Yeah." Leo-Stiles is watching the people on the sidewalk intently enough that Peter is certain he'll notice whatever threat Peter himself might miss. "I'm going to need to speak enough languages to spread everywhere, after all. I don't get any of the knowledge that the previous owner of a body used to have, the best I can hope for is the tongue and lips muscle memory helping me shape new sounds with more ease, so learning it is. And Mexico is right nearby. The Mexican-specific Spanish, and Canadian French for Canada, and most of the continent will be mine. Well, if you subscribe to the seven-continent model they teach in the US schools."

"I could teach you some," Peter offers. "Spanish, that is. I'm afraid no version of French is in my repertoire."

"Oh, fuck no," Leo-Mockingbird says with unexpected fervency. "I don't want to do things that remind you of Talia, and using you as a teacher would one hundred per cent do that. I've been in charge of my own education since I was ten, I think I can manage without making you quietly resent me."

"I doubt you would whine, sabotage lessons, ignore whatever I say and punish me for it," Peter shrugs. He is a bit relieved that Mockingbird is so adamant about it, but he could deal with teaching again in this case. He wouldn't have offered otherwise. "Then at least practice what you've learned with me? I've been to Mexico a few times, I'm good enough with the local particularities."

Leo-Mockingbird hums thoughtfully.

"Trato hecho," he says eventually, smiling. He needs to make his r's harder and his ch's softer but for a beginner it's a very decent attempt.

"You just had one of the other bodies look it up on the Internet, didn't you?"

"You cannot prove anything," Leo-Mockingbird says primly. "And in case you try, I'll have you know that all of my browser history from the last five minutes has just mysteriously vanished into the ether."

They keep up the banter all the way to the Beacon Hills High School, and Peter does end up teaching Mockingbird a few things, mostly insults and the informal way to ask "What's up?" that is common in Mexico and literally means "What fart?". Mockingbird has to check it online before he believes Peter's not messing with him.

It's strangely joyful to share these random tidbits and know Mockingbird is absorbing them like a sponge. Peter almost regrets it when he has to stop the car and they need to get out.

Despite it being Saturday evening, the lacrosse field is chock full of people. There's a game on today, presumably the same one Allison Argent wanted to attend instead of visiting her comatose aunt; since Argent-Mockingbird is currently at Eichen House, Peter supposes that's where the girl must be. Not that he cares, as long as he doesn't come face to face with her seasoned hunter father.

They circle the school to avoid being in view of the field. Leo-Mockingbird smells suitably intrigued after recognizing where they are but doesn't ask any questions, presumably because Peter wants it to be a surprise.

There's no scent of another werewolf around the entrance to the vault, familiar or unfamiliar, and Peter unlocks it, accompanied by Leo-Mockingbird's appreciative whistle.

"You built a secret vault under the school?" Leo-Mockingbird fumbles down the stairs, unable to see in the dark as well as Peter. Peter uses the opportunity to show off his gentlemanly side and lead him down with a hand on the small of his back.

"Rather, the school was built above the vault," he says, lighting up the lantern left here specifically for when human members of the pack might need to come down here. "The Hales have been here much longer than anyone around these parts cared overly much about educating children in a centralized way."

"And that's secure?" Leo-Mockingbird wonders. "A school full of bored teenagers? Wouldn't it be a constant risk that one of them might find their way down here?"

"The locks can only be opened by the claws of a Hale shifter," Peter shrugs. "And if there was an explosion big enough to destroy the vault's walls, the humans would have more pressing problems than digging all the way down to here."

"Fair enough." Leo-Mockingbird takes the lantern and looks around. The firelight dances across his face, highlighting the curious gleam in his eyes. "Mind if I snoop?"

"I wasn't planning to stay here for long but we can spare a few minutes. Help yourself to anything you like."

"A robbery spree?" Leo-Mockingbird flutters his eyelashes and presses his free hand to his chest. "Tesoro, you're spoiling me. How am I ever to top a date like this?"

"Well, you did say something about a shiny new Australia." Peter winks at Leo-Mockingbird. "You could bring me there for a date with Prime once you're in the position to gift it. It'll be great. You will eat as much Pavlova as physically possible, I will wrestle a crocodile, and then I'll get to rub sunscreen into your skin which will naturally turn into sex."

Leo-Mockingbird laughs. His fingers skim the spines of a row of books, delicate and careful.

"Why do you have to wrestle a crocodile?"

"It seems to be a thing to do in Australia." Peter smirks. "Besides, you wanted there to be bonkers mating rituals. We could make one up, and I could give you a fresh crocodile heart."

"I'm glad we met instead of just keeping to texting," Leo-Mockingbird says, grinning. "You're even more fun in person."

"I do my best, cariño." Peter gives Leo-Mockingbird a quick kiss. "Now, pick out whatever you like the look of, but remember, it's best to leave quickly."

While Leo-Mockingbird is distracted by the books and artifacts, Peter finds the briefcase with the bearer bonds. He opens it to check, and yes, they are all still here. No one has thought to come down here and take away the most valuable things, probably because all three of them—Peter, Talia and Laura—are assumed dead instead of turned traitor. Not many things besides death are capable of breaking all packbonds... unless they are already frail and the werewolf in question is very motivated to let them go.

Peter gives Mockingbird a few minutes for his gleeful "robbery spree", and Mockingbird, to his credit, doesn't need to be dragged away from new toys; he flips through books, studies some artifacts in the light and makes his decisions quickly, selecting what he wants. Very soon, he bounds over to Peter, pockets bulging with artifacts and arms full of books.

"I'm done!" He declares, beaming. "Have you gotten the surprise thing? I can't see if you're holding anything from behind this stack."

"I have," Peter smiles at his enthusiasm. "Come on, let me put out the lantern and help you up the stairs."

They leave the vault and the school premises without any incident. Peter hides the briefcase under the driver's seat, Mockingbird unloads his haul into the back seat, and Peter starts the car.

However, they are only maybe halfway there when Leo-Mockingbird straightens up in the passenger seat.

"Shit!"

"What is it?" Peter glances around but doesn't see anything to warrant the reaction.

"Deucalion is at Eichen House," Leo-Mockingbird says, and Peter's stomach drops. "Shit, shit, shit, I wasn't ready for him... Should've had Boba-me patrolling. Stupid, stupid... Come on, we need to get there before he slaughters me!"

Peter puts the pedal to the metal, even though he's not quite sure that the two of them will be enough to tip a battle with the self-proclaimed alpha of alphas in their favor.

They get there fast, with Peter ignoring a bunch of traffic laws, but not fast enough. Just as they are rolling into the gates, Leo-Mockingbird screams and spasms in an epilepsy-like fit.

All of a sudden, his eyes blaze with otherworldly, blindingly bright gold and amber.

* * *

Peter leaps out of the car; Leo-Mockingbird more or less falls out in an awkward heap of limbs and doesn't make an effort to move any further. He stares into the darkened sky with golden eyes, and his lips are moving silently like he's saying something.

Peter takes off inside, having little idea of what he's going to do when he gets there. The rooms and corridors are littered with Mockingbird's bodies—not dead, just slashed across the torsos like they were casually swiped aside by a clawed hand. All of their eyes are shining with that furious magical light, and Peter's chief fear—that Prime is dead and now Leo is the main host—is assuaged, but that only makes it more confusing. Didn't Mockingbird say something about how only Prime ever had those eyes?

He finds Prime in the backyard, in the company of the supernatural bodies, animal bodies and about a dozen of the human ones. They are all either lying on the ground or kneeling, all alive, hearts beating fast, so fast, like that of a trapped bird.

Deucalion is there too. Kneeling in front of Prime, head thrown back; his right shin looks savaged by big teeth, deep talons slashes that are already healing are crossing his face, and his eyes are glowing with the familiar gold and amber. His little black glasses, bloodied, are on the ground next to him.

Peter doesn't think the alpha of alphas is a threat anymore.

He dashes across the courtyard and throws himself in front of Prime; the latter is hunched over, hands pressed against the ground, arms trembling. His lips are moving without making sounds, same as everyone else's. Peter's hands hover in the air, uncertain. Should he touch Mockingbird? Would that make it worse? What exactly even is it?

"Mockingbird?" He calls softly. "Cariño?"

At the sound of his voice Mockingbird flinches in unison, and Prime's fingers dig into the hard ground.

"Don't look into my eyes!" He cries out in a chorus of voices.

"What happened?"

"Couldn't do..." Quentin-Mockingbird says.

"...Anything..." Prime continues.

"...Snatched his glasses..." Leia-Mockingbird says in her soft hissing voice.

The peregrine falcon screeches.

This seems to be as much as Mockingbird is capable of handling right now in terms of coherency because all of his bodies start talking at once, and each one says its own thing.

"Cubum autem in duos cubos, aut quadratoquadratum in duos quadratoquadratos..."

"Break, break, break at the foot of thy crags, O Sea!"

"Three point one four one five nine two six five three five eight nine seven nine..."

"Uno, dos, tres, cuatro..."

"Synaptic arrangements in the CNS fall into a wide variety of morphological and functional forms..."

"Sugar, partially defatted peanuts, hydrogenated vegetable oil, corn syrup solids..."

Their voices overlap and intertwine, quickly becoming an overwhelming buzz. Mockingbird lays out chemical equations, proves theorems, plans out meals, quotes poems and prose, lists all the fifty states, narrates a brain surgery, designs what sounds like a rocket engine, plans a bank robbery second by second and so much more. The breadth and depth of his knowledge is leaps and bounds ahead of Peter's own, it seems. His human voices are frantic, urgent, pained; the dog body whimpers so desperately that it breaks Peter's heart. All of Mockingbird's hands are moving, tapping out a rhythm, a melody—each one its own separate song.

It horrifies Peter to the bone and thrills him a bit, too. He has never seen anything like it.

"Mockingbird," he says, laying a hand on Prime's shoulder. Mockingbird shudders in unison under the touch but doesn't shy away. "What do you need?"

"Bodies," Prime says. The word comes hard, stilted, as if he has to work to regain control of his tongue. "More bodies. More, more, more, more, more, more," he chants through a dozen mouths until the word loses all meaning.

"Don't!" Prime suddenly demands and curls in on himself. "Don't look into my eyes!"

For the second time in as many days, Peter puts facts together to get a picture that astounds him.

Mockingbird told him earlier how he killed the other alphas: with weapons, not via taking over their bodies. It was a smart decision, considering that risking Prime is risking everything, but looks like Deucalion didn't leave Mockingbird any choice by showing up unexpected and going through the bodies before they could regroup and arm themselves. The only recourse Prime had was to look into Deucalion's eyes and take him over, and that, unlike the impersonal killings, triggered a power transfer.

However, Mockingbird is not a werewolf. He couldn't benefit directly from killing an alpha by raising his status like Peter did; no, all of the power that Deucalion had reaped from others and hoarded translated into Mockingbird becoming more—and that *more* could no longer be safely contained by the paltry forty-something bodies. Hell, Mockingbird might need a couple hundred at this point just to get back to full coherency.

And Peter himself is the nearest available body. Peter cannot imagine how much of a temptation it must be, to just reach out and take, to allay that evident, maddening torment just a tiny bit, but Mockingbird's first reaction upon realizing Peter was here was to order Peter not to look into his eyes.

Oh, his sweet, sweet bird.

Peter's shriveled, wilted heart sings when he thinks about how well he chose in Mockingbird. He leans his forehead against Mockingbird's and reaches out, not with his hands but with his soul.

The connection is immediate. The packbond springs into being, bright and strong, and Peter gasps. He has never been connected to someone like this, someone like Mockingbird, more than human, more than werewolf, a pure, unadulterated, endless consciousness. A packbond, Peter always thought, is like a channel between two rivers. Each member of the pack is a river, some mightier than others and some almost brooks, especially children, but they are more or less equal in what they are, constrained by the limits of their selves.

Mockingbird is a vast, boundless, churning ocean. Peter knows now how all of the previous owners of Mockingbird's bodies died. If Mockingbird forces his way over through the bond, he will swallow Peter's river with as much ease as if the river were a mere drop, and Peter will not be able to do anything; indeed, he will hardly understand that something needs to be done before a tidal wave breaks his shores, and annihilates his cliffs, and sends him into eternal oblivion.

"Told you," Prime moans. His breath tickles Peter's lips. "Don't... test... me..."

"This is not me testing you," Peter says and kisses Prime gently. "This is me trusting you."

"Idiot..." Mockingbird's word echoes through the backyard in a chorus of strained voices.

"Now that is just not fair, mi lindo. Who isn't an idiot compared to you?"

Peter smooths Prime's hair away from his forehead.

"Any body of yours can claim more bodies now, right? Anyone will do, not just Prime?"

"Yes," Mockingbird bites out before starting up his desperate diverse monologues again.

Peter picks Nien-Mockingbird up from the ground, a little ball of soft feathers that can only chirp weakly. The ocean on the other side of the bond is a turmoil of violent storms, but not a single stray wave makes it over to Peter.

"Come on, cielo," he says. "We've got some bodies to round up."

* * *

Body-snatching requires more thought behind it than it might seem, especially on a grand scale. Where does one find a group of at least a hundred and fifty (Peter has no way of knowing the real numbers required so this is the ballpark he chooses to work with—getting rid of any extra will be easier than looking for yet more) people on a Saturday night in Beacon Hills, preferably isolated from the rest of the residents and not right in the middle of the town so that no one can run away and get lost in the maze of streets if they suspect something? Thankfully, Peter knows just the place.

The drive back where he just came from feels much longer than the first time he did it today because of Nien-Mockingbird in the passenger seat, half-chirping and half-gasping. His beady little eyes shine like dots of pure liquid gold.

"It's going to be okay," Peter tells him. "You just need to hold on a little bit longer."

The sound Nien-Mockingbird makes after that is distinctly annoyed, as if he means to say "what the hell do you think I'm doing over here". Peter snorts.

He stops the car behind the school and scoops Nien-Mockingbird up, cradling him in his hands. The entry to the lacrosse field is completely free; more than that, no one pays Peter any attention at all as he slips in and comes up to the first row of the bleachers.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he says in his most polite tone. "Won't you look at my bird?"

The woman's long dark hair whips around as she turns to stare at the stranger with a ridiculous request. Peter lifts Nien-Mockingbird up, and within less than a second the woman's warm brown eyes blaze with otherworldly light.

Even as her lips start moving in a silent conversation with herself, she immediately turns to the man next to her and taps his shoulder. Satisfied that this row will sort itself out, Peter walks up a step.

"Hello, won't you please look at my bird?"

The bleachers are pretty full tonight. From the memories of his own sport exploits at school, Peter thinks that this spring game must be a step towards the state championship or something of the sort. This kind of thing brings every parent to watch their child play and to cheer for them, as well as girlfriends and boyfriends and other assorted students who don't play themselves, and then there are family friends, local sport enthusiasts, all of the teachers, perhaps even scouts for colleges or national teams sniffing around (although the latter is not very likely, considering how small and insignificant Beacon Hills is) (it amuses Peter immensely that the power that is going to conquer the world is coming from here of all places, born and bred).

Peter works briskly, a business-like butcher at his slaughter, just without blood and other unseemly fluids. Row by row, the person at the very end looks into Nien-Mockingbird's eyes, dies and surrenders their body. By the time Peter reaches the top row, he can feel the crazy speed of Nien's heartbeat go down a bit. The involuntary, discordant chirps also stop, but the people who have been taken over are not pretending to be cheering so as to avoid suspicion from onlookers, and they are all hiding their eyes but that much golden glow is hard to hide, especially after sunset.

Mockingbird needs more bodies, and Peter jogs over to the other side, stopping for a moment to show Nien to a loudmouth coach trying to get Peter off the field and three players.

The other side of the stands is harder to deal with: they have noticed that there's something amiss, so they don't turn automatically after hearing "Excuse me" and don't care about looking at some bird. Peter resolves the issue by grabbing their heads and turning them

forcefully. Perhaps that's rude but it is also rude of them to ignore him, isn't it? And besides, they are no longer alive to complain the moment Nien looks into their eyes.

One of the players proves to be smarter than an average stereotypical jock and tries to run away, even though it's highly unlikely he has any idea what is actually going on. He's fast, too, and Mockingbird can't run very well yet, so Peter catches up with him, the alpha strength in his veins making the task laughably easy. Who would have thought Talia would turn out to be so useful in the end?

He tears the helmet off of the terrified boy, and soon the latter's dark eyes become molten pools of gold and amber.

Stragglers are easy to round up for someone like Peter who has had practice with his senses since birth. Mockingbird's heartbeats are evening out, slowing down because Mockingbird is getting better and feeling safe, and so now any quick, terrified ones are the humans trying to get away from the weirdness. They are slow and unarmed, and there's no crowd to hide in next to the school, no bus or taxi to jump into, and Peter finds every single one before they make their way to the parking lot.

When there's no one else around but Mockingbird, Peter stops. Has this helped? Is Mockingbird back to normal? The ocean he can feel through the bond is calming down but that, while a good sign, is hardly a definite confirmation. He lifts Nien-Mockingbird up to his own face and looks into the golden eyes.

After a moment, the unearthly light in them winks out, and they return to their normal, unremarkable state.

"Cariño," Peter beams so widely, his cheeks are hurting. "You're alright."

Nien-Mockingbird chirps happily, flutters up from Peter's cupped hands, lands on his shoulder and rubs his little head against Peter's neck. The happy chirps grow louder, unstoppable, then turn into a triumphant trill; Peter laughs and pets the tiny bird with one finger.

"You did it," a vaguely familiar voice says.

It's Jackson Whittemore—or, more accurately, once Jackson Whittemore's body, now inhabited by Peter's very own favorite bird. The smile looks foreign on that face: Peter has seen the boy in passing several times, and he was always sullen and haughty. Those eyes certainly never shone with adoration and affection the way they do now.

"I don't know what would have happened to me if you didn't find me all these bodies," Jackson-Mockingbird says. He leans against Peter, hugs him in that way Mockingbird does, like his arms want to wrap around Peter and hold him forever, and inhales deeply where his face is pressed into Peter's neck. "Maybe I'd die, or go catatonic, or something. Or maybe crawl over to the pharmacy and experiment with random expired drugs as a last resort, and who knows what that would have done."

"I have a suggestion for the future." Peter kisses the top of Jackson-Mockingbird's head. "No more taking over alphas without a plan for more bodies in place."

Jackson-Mockingbird laughs.

"I second that," he says. "I was at my lowest possible limit at the time, too. It feels like I've reached my new lowest now."

"Will you still need to take over new bodies with Prime?" Peter wonders. "Or was there a qualitative change from killing Deucalion as well as a quantitative one?"

"Oh, Prime can now sit at home and never do anything more strenuous than waking you up with a blowjob in the morning," Jackson-Mockingbird chuckles. He leans back a little, giving Peter a good view of his face, and the currents of golden and amber light blaze into being where his human hazel eyes have just been. Then, after a few seconds, the light winks out again. "I can do this at will now. Well, except for Prime. That one, I think, is stuck with the glow spheres forever."

"Hey, I happen to like those," Peter protests.

Jackson-Mockingbird smells shyly pleased but otherwise ignores the comment.

"Do you think taking over more alphas will give more qualitative changes?" He wonders. "Would I maybe be able to keep someone's knowledge after I kill them? That would be so fucking helpful, I can't even begin to tell you how helpful."

"There might be," Peter allows. "But there's no way to predict what kind of change it will be, and I think we can be certain that every time you'll need more bodies, even if the increase in number won't be quite so drastic as with Deucalion. So please don't go hunting for more alphas carelessly."

"I won't," Jackson-Mockingbird promises. "Oh, I'm glad today's Saturday. I'm going to need a lot of time to sort out through everyone's IDs, phones, purses and pockets. There's so much to learn, names, addresses, jobs, medical history, everything, including how to disengage the alarms on my new homes."

He wrinkles his nose.

"Did you notice someone had brought a toddler to the game? What the fuck did they think a kid that small would even understand here, much less enjoy? Why not get a babysitter like functional adult people do? And now I'm three or four years old, and I'll have to go to a kindergarten." He says the word with such disgust, it's as if someone offered him to eat a dead fly. "Maybe I can be homeschooled."

"I bet there were some functional adult people here who had left their smaller children at home," Peter says, chuckling. "Congratulations, mi precioso, you're most likely a parent."

"Eh," Jackson-Mockingbird waves dismissively. "How hard can parenting be when you don't really care? Keep the child alive until they're eighteen, and they'll sort themselves out after

that. I don't want to take over more small children unless I have to, so parenting it is, I guess. They can be a cover as well as a stock of bodies for emergencies."

That makes a certain amount of sense. Peter suspects Mockingbird will actually be a better parent than some, even if he won't love these kids; he's unlikely to sell a child in his care to human traffickers to get money for the next hit of crack, or get drunk every week and beat them up, or do many other things humans often dole out to helpless smaller humans in their power.

"Oh, some might have spouses or partners who are just not here today," Peter remembers. There's a small spike of hot jealousy in him. "You should be ready for that too."

Mockingbird sends some amusement through the packbond and not a small amount of obsessive devotion. In fact, the force of it makes Peter go weak at the knees, unused to receiving anything of this volume and intensity. He wonders if Mockingbird was actually careful and only sent through a tiny bit of what sprawls underneath the surface of his ocean.

"Silly Vine," Mockingbird purrs and kisses the side of Peter's jaw. "I don't want any of them. I'll do my best to avoid fucking anyone else with any other bodies, but if I have to... I think I'm gonna need to be fucking you at the same time, or I might not even get it up."

"You're exaggerating," Peter says, flattered nonetheless.

"Why would I do that? I was never overly interested in any of that stuff until you came along. I even figured those infamous puberty pitfalls, like getting a hard-on from a stiff breeze, had just bypassed me completely since the majority of my bodies were adults and some were outright old, and I liked it that way. I had enough to do without sex taking up a part of my attention. And then..." He shrugs. "There you were."

He pokes an accusing finger into Peter's chest.

"You made it so hard to think properly, you know. You're still very distracting."

"Oh, the horror." Peter catches Jackson-Mockingbird's hand, laces their fingers together and brings that hand up to kiss the knuckles. "However can I make it up to you, mi lindo?"

"I can think of a few things you might try." Jackson-Mockingbird gives him a wicked grin. "If you want, you can try them with this body. Or any other body I've got, really. Or several, come to think of that."

"I think I'll stick to Prime for the time being," Peter says. The offer of an orgy is intriguing but not enough so, even if Mockingbird did just acquire quite a few spectacularly attractive bodies. Perhaps later. "Now that you've got a werewolf body, pay attentions to scents. Everyone has their own unique scent, and, to me personally, Prime's is the sexiest thing in the world."

"Oh, is it?" Jackson-Mockingbird raises his eyebrows. "How would you describe it?"

"Scents are hard to describe with words," Peter says, a little defensively. "A bit spicy, I guess? Heady. Sweet. I don't know, its main quality is to rush straight to my cock."

Jackson-Mockingbird glances down.

"Wow, even thinking about it gets you going," he says. "I wonder what smelling you via Deucalion-me's nose will be like? Chewbacca-me has the nose for scents, too, but there isn't a reaction like that. Which is, you know, actually for the best, because he is a dog. I'm definitely a bad guy, but some things I'd much prefer never to even think about."

"Your mind is a dark place," Peter says, absolutely sincerely.

"The most fun things always happen in the dark." Jackson-Mockingbird winks at him.

Then he sobers up a bit.

"You don't regret helping me, do you? Because one of my new bodies used to be Mr. Whittemore. I know you two were friends."

"I would lie if I said I'm not grieving for him," Peter admits. "He didn't know about the supernatural but he was a good friend, as much as one can be when they are always kept at a distance they're not even aware exists. But I would never see him again anyway if my original plan went through."

He smiles at Jackson-Mockingbird who looks and smells anxious.

"You're my present and future, cielo. We're pack, and this time I think it means something. Even if you asked me about him specifically in advance, I'd give him up without a second thought."

Jackson-Mockingbird tilts his head to the side in a gesture reminiscent of Nien.

"If that helps, I killed a friend of mine as well," he says. "Before I got put in Eichen, I had one single friend, Scott. And after my mom's illness got bad, Scott's mom was very kind to me, kinder than even my own dad. There their bodies are."

He points a thumb backwards. A dark-haired teenager with a crooked jaw and the equally dark-haired woman Peter approached first wave at them, eyes briefly flashing with Mockingbird's unique magic.

"It does help, in a weird, twisted way," Peter confesses. They both made a sacrifice of their last genuine human ties, and that makes it some kind of even.

He sends reassurance through their packbond, and Jackson-Mockingbird beams.

"Do you need any more help here?" Peter asks. "Because if not, I'd love to go back to Prime, enjoy his face when I show him my surprise and see if I can't kiss every single one of those moles of his. They drive me crazy, sitting there all unkissed."

Jackson-Mockingbird laughs.

"Go," he says. "I've got this under control now."

* * *

Mockingbird is properly appreciative of Peter investing one hundred and seventeen million dollars in bearer bonds into their plans for world domination. So appreciative, in fact, that afterwards Peter is worn out enough to fall asleep as soon as he relaxes against the pillow, Prime safely ensconced in his arms.

He still wakes up immediately when Prime bolts upright with a jolt and a scream.

"What?" Peter says, trying to shake deep sleep off. "What izzit?"

Prime hops off the bed, molten eyes illuminating the room, brighter than the faint moonlight.

"I just died again," he says.

Chapter End Notes

- Mi hermoso (sp.) — my beautiful/gorgeous (male form).
- Cielo (sp.) — sky; used both to refer to the actual sky and as an endearment like "sweetheart".
- Trato hecho (sp.) — It's a deal!

Chapter 9: Monsters Of Different Flavors

"Why?" Peter asks.

Stiles would like to know that, too. All he knows is that all of his bodies that comprise the Children of Unity were sleeping, exhausted after their brief and spectacularly failed struggle against Deucalion, and then Jonathan-Stiles started choking and coughing violently and died without ever fully waking up.

He has Prime pull some pants on as he has all of his other bodies look around for some kind of assailant. His most troublesome acquisition, Deucalion, notices it almost immediately. Those werewolf noses really are something, better than a dog's.

"Smoke inhalation," Stiles says, as Mildred-Stiles comes up to the kitchen window and actually sees the gray-white smoke seeping in through the tiny cracks in the walls with her own two eyes. She pulls the curtains aside to see flames licking the windowsill outside. "The house is on fire."

Peter swears up a blue streak, almost falling out of bed. Woken up abruptly like this, he looks disheveled and tired. He certainly needs some more rest but it seems like it'll be a while before he gets it.

Stiles sends Darth-Stiles, Leo-Stiles and Logan-Stiles to Emmett-Stiles' study to collect the briefcase with bearer bonds, Stiles' own savings and everyone's IDs, passports, driver's licenses, etc. from the safe—the whole pile fills a pillowcase to the brim. Prime picks up Peter's getaway duffel from the bedroom floor while Peter puts on a pair of jeans the wrong way around, then, swearing some more, the right way around.

"Come on," Stiles says with Prime's lips. In the meantime, Mildred-Stiles dials 911 and George-Stiles with a wet handkerchief pressed to his mouth braves the smoke on the ground floor to go out the front door. "We don't want to be here if or when the roof collapses."

"Wait, the bonds," Peter remembers.

"I've got them," Stiles says. "Now let's go, the smoke's getting worse, come on!"

They make it exactly two steps out the bedroom when there's a deafening bang outside, and sharp, white-hot pain streaks right through George-Stiles' arm.

"Wait!" Stiles catches Peter's wrist with Prime's hand. "Someone's outside shooting at whoever tries to get out the front door."

"Hunters," Peter says immediately. His eyes flash alpha red, and fangs poke out of his mouth.

"How would a hunter even know there's someone worth burning here?" Stiles wonders. "Never mind, we'll ask whoever it is in person. We'll go out the backyard."

"There's a door or a gate in the backyard?" Peter asks as they run through the corridors. Stiles' other bodies pour out of side rooms, creating a crowd behind them; the ones entrusted with the money and the papers are between Peter and Prime and the others, hidden in the safest spot. "I didn't see it."

"Not as such," Stiles says. They are on the ground floor now, and the heat is oppressive. "But there's a fence that is breakable if enough force is applied to it, and I've got a big strong alpha running next to me. So that's a way out, assuming there aren't enough people with guns out there to surround the whole property."

"If someone could assemble a group that big to come here, it'd be practically a small army. They would have probably just bombed the place from above instead of hoping the fire will do us in," Peter points out. The running seems to have woken him up completely. Stiles, on the other hand, is feeling kind of dizzy in many of his bodies as they continue to inhale smoke.

"Makes sense," Stiles says. "Just in case though, I'll send Emmett-me through first. Not too valuable to lose to a bullet and well-known enough in certain circles to be a sure target."

Peter nods and catches Prime by the shoulder when he stumbles over a loose end of a bandage. At least his feet have healed enough that running is not torture.

Rushing through the doorway laced with fire, they stumble into the backyard, a crowd of half-dressed humans and supernaturals, a peregrine falcon, silent on her wings, and a society finch riding an enormous Newfoundland dog. Peter puts his fist through the nearest fence plank but his hand stops abruptly as if hitting something it can't actually punch through.

"Fuck," Peter says, and there's a note of anxiety in his voice the first time since they woke up. "Mountain ash. If someone's holding it closed..."

"Just get that plank off," Stiles waves his concern away. "We'll be fine."

He doesn't feel quite as certain as he sounds because it has never occurred to him to try and break a circle he was holding with another human body; he was primarily interested in ways of getting a supernatural body locked in or freed. Besides, he never tried to do anything to a circle held by another, mainly due to lack of people other than himself in his life.

Still, he has almost two hundred bodies now. He can surely overpower any normal human, if not via talent or skill, then via the sheer weight of his will.

Emmett-Stiles gets out first, as planned. The mountain ash doesn't hinder him, as usual, and there are no shots. Stiles risks sending Leo-Stiles then, his pride and joy, the mountain ash master extraordinaire, and one quick movement of Leo-Stiles' foot breaks the line. Stiles doesn't know if that's because he's so much stronger than a lone human caster or if whoever put the ash down didn't bother holding it afterwards; either way, there's no resistance and the circle doesn't reform.

"This way, sir," Leo-Stiles makes an inviting gesture to Peter like a doorman from old movies.

Unimpeded, Peter slips out, smiling in a way that makes several of Stiles' bodies break out in goosebumps and simultaneously feel extra hot under the collars. This smile says that someone is going to die messily and soon. Stiles kind of regrets that it's not a good time or place to go down on his knees and suck Peter off. Although...

Before he can finish that thought, Leia-Stiles who has crept ahead around the house—her brown chitin is excellent camouflage in the dark—sees their main assailant.

Chris Argent is standing a few yards away from the front door, shoulders straight and rigid, a rifle in one hand, face frozen in a grim mask of sharp angles and lines highlighted by the fire. A modern hero, come to finish off a monster. Very impressive, even if he seems to have assumed that mountain ash would work on Stiles.

Stiles gives a nudge to Allison-Stiles who has started to fall asleep again by now after the jolt of dying and has her dress and climb out the window of her bedroom.

"You're right, it's a hunter," Prime says as the last of Stiles' bodies file out through the hole in the fence. "Why the fuck is Chris Argent burning down a peaceful religious commune?"

"Let's go ask him," Peter suggests and immediately starts moving towards the front of the house.

"Wait," Prime clings to him, afraid that Peter will take off at alpha speed and there will be no catching up to him then. "There's only one of you. Don't go out to be riddled with bullets."

Peter sends some annoyance through their bond but doesn't shake Prime off.

"Will you keep coddling me until one of us is dead?" He asks.

"Is it coddling, or is it telling you to be smart?" Stiles snaps back. He might be feeling a little overprotective, unable to forget that Peter only has the one, single, precious, irreplaceable body, but he's not coddling. Peter is an alpha werewolf, for God's sake. There are very few things out there he can't snap in half like a twig. "He might not even be alone here. Instead of charging at him with a war cry, maybe think a bit? He doesn't look like he's about to leave right this second, and even if he did, I could tail him."

Peter yanks Prime closer and kisses him, harsh, demanding, dominating. Stiles responds in kind; he can feel Prime's lips getting all puffy and overly sensitive again, barely soothed during what little sleep they got before being so rudely awakened. Prime is hard enough he could chip at a rock with that boner by the time Peter lets go. If he had pupils, they'd be blown by now; Stiles doesn't know how his eyes actually look but they seem to look good enough to make Peter stare at them, mesmerized and predatory.

The plan to be very not-smart and let Peter fuck Prime's mouth as hard as he likes right here and now solidifies some more. Stiles blinks, trying to make it go away. No, bad Stiles. Deal with the mortal peril first, sex Peter up later. There, that's the rational order.

Christ, is this what normal teenagers always feel like? It's a wonder they don't all drop out of school just to have more time to have sex with each other. That's probably why there are

parents who are obliged by law to make sure their child gets an education, no matter how horny said child is.

"Uhm, what were we talking about?" He asks. Something about coddling or not coddling? He's not really sure. He's also doing an abysmal job with keeping his arousal only to Prime; something about this moment unravels what control he has already managed to learn.

Peter chuckles, evidently put in a good mood by the kiss, his ability to render Stiles' cognitive abilities into mush or both.

"How best to approach Argent," he reminds indulgently. "Where exactly is he? Out in the open or hiding somewhere? Do you know if he's alone?"

"Right," Stiles says and licks Prime's lips. Peter's eyes flicker towards the movement, dark and hungry. "Out in the open in the middle of the driveway, there's no catching him by stealth. I'm having Boba-me check the grounds, and she hasn't seen anyone else so far. I'm thinking, maybe a similar thing to what I did with Ennis? Send in a distraction or two and get him from a distance from the direction he's not looking? If it ain't broke, don't fix it, and all that, you know."

"Sounds good," Peter nods. "And we'll need to talk to him, so make sure not to kill him accidentally. You've got his daughter's body coming here already, haven't you? That's the best leverage we've got, assuming he doesn't know what happened at last night's game."

"Yep. She's driving over."

"I love how smart you are, cielo," Peter says. "I'd kiss you again, but then we might stay right here for a while."

"Would that be such a bad thing?" Prime pouts, then laughs. "Alright, if we're not having unhygienic sex on the ground, then let's go. I want more bodies to be close when I start."

"Unhygienic? So that's a no to future sex on a beach?" Peter wonders as they start walking. Stiles leaves Leo-Stiles behind under the watch of Chewbacca-Stiles and Logan-Stiles, trying to coax the mountain ash from the line into his hands. It seems like a waste to leave it here to be carried away by the wind.

"I never tried having sand in unmentionable places before but it doesn't seem like a thing I'd enjoy," Stiles shrugs Prime's shoulders. "If you're really set on beaches, let's maybe bring a blanket, at least?"

They argue in whispers over whether or not sex on the beach without a blanket is romantic or just asking for a gross infection as they get closer. Stiles is of the opinion that it's only romantic when one has enhanced healing which Prime doesn't, and Peter is of the opinion that a bit of creativity can eliminate the threat of sand germs, for example, if Peter is the one on the sand and Prime rides him or fucks him. Stiles has a retort ready but has to table it because they are just around the corner from the front yard. Chris Argent is still there, standing immovable and imposing like a granite statue. Stiles sends Kate-Stiles out first.

"Hi there, big bro!" She beams at him, strolling into his view. "A nice night for a bonfire, isn't it?"

Chris lifts his rifle and shoots. Kate-Stiles manages to drop to the ground at the last moment, and the bullet shears off a lock of her hair.

"Whoa, a little trigger happy there!?" She rolls away before another bullet hits the ground where she just was.

"I know it's not my sister in there," Chris says, voice heavy and hateful. Actually, Stiles thinks he can smell that hate via Deucalion-Stiles nose. Trippy. "I know what you are."

"You do?" Troy-Stiles asks, coming from the other corner. "And what am I?"

"A monster," Chris says. It sounds like a judgment and a sentence all rolled into one.

Old memories of being called that come to mind. They no longer hurt, though; it's a fact, proven empirically, after all. Stiles likes science. He's good at accepting facts as they are and building off of them.

"And you're not?" Troy-Stiles asks while Kate-Stiles scrambles away into the safety behind the corner. Chris seems a bit more disposed to being distracted by talking when it's not personal. "You're burning down a quiet little religious commune. Is this a hate crime? Is that what this is?"

"It's extermination, that's what this is," Chris says and raises his rifle again.

Before he can fire, three scales shot out by Han-Stiles hit him and bury themselves half-length inside his body. Stiles shot at the torso to make sure he wouldn't hit anything so vital that Chris would die at once, and his aim is not that bad: the scales, razor-sharp, have embedded themselves between Chris' lower left ribs, next to his liver and right under his navel.

Chris is slowed down by pain as he turns and points the rifle at Han-Stiles, giving Deucalion-Stiles the perfect opportunity to leap behind him (this body is so freakishly strong and fast, Stiles will not get over that any time soon), pull the rifle from his hands and push Chris face down on the ground.

Well, Stiles tried to go for a push. He's still not used to this level of strength, so he ends up slamming Chris down like a basketball through the hoop; as Chris lands, the driveway gravel flies in every direction from the impact. Chris cries out and heaves himself over on his back, one arm pressed awkwardly across his abdomen. The scales have gone almost fully in, only their end tips glinting in the moonlight. Oops?

Troy-Stiles and Deucalion-Stiles step over to Chris, pull his arms to the sides and step on his palms to make sure he doesn't fish out some weapon secreted in a hidden pocket. Stiles is very aware that the Argent family is fond of going around with more knives than an average Christmas tree has ornaments.

Together, Prime and Peter leave the safety of the corner and walk over. Chris' eyes land on Prime's face with its glowing eyes and burn with hatred anew.

"It's you, isn't it?" He spits out.

"It's me what?" Stiles wonders through Prime. "I don't actually think we've ever met, Mr. Big Menacing Rifle."

"Oh, I've heard about you," Chris says, and there's this barest odd stress on the word "heard".

Stiles narrows Prime's eyes.

"Did you bug your own sister?" He demands, indignant. Kate-Stiles looks over her jacket and sure enough, there's a mightily suspicious pin hidden under the turned-down collar. "What kind of perv are you? She went to the toilet several times since she last saw you, you know! Were you listening? Ew!"

"You will not provoke me into talking," Chris says flatly. "By all means, do your worst."

"Is that what you really want us to do?" Peter gives him a slow smile. "Our worst is really quite bad."

"Ah, the guy with his dick swinging free." Chris raises a critical eyebrow that somehow manages to look sardonic and superior even while he's lying on the ground and slowly bleeding out. "Doesn't that creature look a little young for you? Although, I suppose, a mongrel like you wouldn't care."

"Interesting," Peter says slowly. "A hunter wasting his last breaths on clumsy insults and criticizing my sex life? Darling, doesn't this sound like he very much hopes to provoke me into talking instead?"

"Indeed it does, sweetcheeks," Prime agrees and gets a glare for the chosen pet name. "He wouldn't happen to repeat his best move again and bug himself in the hopes that whoever he might happen to meet would compromise themselves by saying God knows what, would he?"

He can hear Chris' heart give an odd lurch at those words via Deucalion-Stiles' ears.

Peter crouches by Chris and searches him until he finds the bug behind a big brass button on his jacket. Then he searches some more and finds another one in the back on his jacket collar and a third one tucked into the left sleeve.

"How many more of these does he even have?" Stiles wonders. Just in case, he has Kate-Stiles throw her jacket into the fire. The spring night is a little cold for just a thin blouse but he'd rather not risk her walking around with possibly ten more of those tiny things broadcasting anything anyone says around her who knows for whose ears. Too much has already been said, in fact. He'd have her change all her clothes but, well, all the spares he has are currently on fire.

In the distance, sirens are wailing. Stiles can only hear them through werewolf ears for now but soon the firefighters will be here, and they shouldn't be treated to the view of Chris lying

here.

Deucalion-Stiles jerks Chris to his feet and half-carries, half-leads him around the house and then into the Preserve. Peter directs him away from where a typical Hale patrol would go, to a secluded clearing.

"Is this where you're going to kill me?" Chris asks. He looks very stoic for someone assuming he's about to die. Stiles doesn't think it's because there's a secret threat around that the combined senses of Peter, Deucalion-Stiles and Boba-Stiles cannot discern. Chris might just be that kind of person, dignified to the last.

It makes Stiles want to hurt him until he loses that dignity. He holds back from getting physical, though. Not only can a careless blow just kill Chris outright, there's also the fact that in a few minutes Stiles will hurt Chris more than he ever could with fists.

"This is where we're going to talk," Stiles says with Prime's lips. "What kind of savages do you think we are?"

He doesn't say that Chris is, in fact, probably dying already. Those scales have gone in too deep, and Stiles suspects that if anyone but a surgeon in an operating room tries removing them, Chris' bleeding would skyrocket to the point where he won't last five minutes. Chris himself might or might not know this, but either way Stiles isn't going to say it for the benefit of whoever's listening to any remaining bugs.

"Oh?" Chris smiles. "What is it you'd like to discuss? The weather? Your evil plans? How many of you are here?"

"Evil plans?" Peter acts very surprised. Stiles doesn't think they've ever actually said anything about world domination where Kate-Stiles' bug or bugs could pick up, so Chris is just fishing. "This coming from a man who wanted to burn almost fifty people alive?"

"Come now, Hale," Chris says. "There were only two people in the house. You know that, and I know that. Admit it. You're not going to let me leave here alive, so you might as well tell me."

"What a strange delusion," Prime says. His eyes are glowing brightly, sending strange highlights and shadows around the clearing. "I suppose a man must be delusional to try to kill a bunch of harmless devotees of religion in their sleep."

"On the contrary, I see very clearly." Chris has gotten paler over the course of the conversation but no less staunch. "A creature of nightmares, snatching bodies, going unseen under everyone's nose. You have to be eradicated."

"A body-snatcher?" Peter's voice is full of effortless mockery. "Have you been watching too much bad sci-fi before bed, Argent? What's next, little green men coming for you with an anal probe at the ready?"

"You have already admitted it on tape." Chris regards Prime and Peter solemnly. Stiles tries to remember every conversation he and Peter have had around Kate-Stiles and what exactly was

said. "You're doomed. You don't know it yet, but it would have been better for you to burn. Others will come and finish you off. Your entire existence rested on secrecy, and now it's blown open."

"Open to whom?" Prime raises his eyebrows. Masking how sick Stiles feels with fear is easy; he's been doing it most of his life. "You managed to convince others of your crazy ideas?"

This doesn't feel quite right. Stiles sends some doubt to Peter through the pack bond, and Peter nods minutely. If Chris has told other hunters about Stiles, why aren't they here to help pick off whoever doesn't burn? Could he really have put that much faith in mountain ash? Or is this a less clever plan and a more desperate one, executed by a single man who knew his sister was not his sister but didn't know how to explain that to anyone else?

No, no, there has to be someone on the other end of those bugs. Someone listening. Someone trusted. But why not tell everyone? Hunters must have their ways of contacting each other, and in the era of the Internet Chris could have surely alerted the whole country's hunter network.

Something here doesn't quite add up, and Chris is hardly inclined to talk.

There's still some time to pass. Allison-Stiles is almost here, and when she arrives, Stiles will need to prepare her to look the part of a hostage: a split lip, a torn shirt, dirt on her face, hair all tangled.

Prime puts Peter's bag he's still carrying on the ground and settles next to Chris, crossing his legs. He's cold, seeing as he's shirtless outside at night; Prime's nipples are painfully taut in the gusts of chilly night breeze, and the cold ground doesn't help much. But it's a storyteller pose, and Stiles does like to exhibit some dramatic flair now and then.

"Let me tell you a story about a man," he says. Peter looks at him curiously, and Chris with contempt. "An old, corrupt, cruel man. We'll call him Shmerard to preserve the anonymity, you see, but I assure you that all events in the story are true, and not coincidentally. Quite intentionally so, in fact."

He smiles at Chris. He's light years away from the little boy who cried, and hit walls, and screamed when he was lost and afraid. This Stiles might still be lost and afraid, but he smiles.

"Shmerard was a hunter of great renown. Well, it was renown among his own kind, and infamy among those he killed and captured, finding them an appropriate release for his cruelty. He grew up hearing that all who weren't human didn't deserve to be treated the same as humans, that they were a plague to be rid of so that ordinary people could live without being afraid of the shadows. It was a beautiful doctrine, in a way. It let any budding hunter feel so righteous whenever they killed a werewolf, or a fae, or a kitsune, feel that warm glow of being the good guy and doing the right thing. But our Shmerard was special in his own way. He didn't believe that supernatural beings were beneath him, you see. He believed that everyone was, simply by virtue of them not being Shmerard." Prime reaches out and pats Chris' cheek. Chris flinches away as if Stiles is a disease communicable through touch. "It must not have been fun to be Shmerard's son, I bet. Always striving to gain the approval of

someone who had none to give from the start. Sad fate, that. But this story is about Shmerard, not his son."

Peter sits down next to Prime, an arm wrapping around Prime's shoulders. The warmth of Peter's body is almost shocking to Prime's chilled skin, a great scalding splash of blessed heat. Stiles doesn't sense any jealousy over touching Chris through the bond; this must be simply Peter wanting to keep Stiles warm and be close to him.

Prime sighs happily and snuggles a little bit closer. He would have preferred to be in his bed with Peter now, sleeping while holding each other, not out here freezing his ass off and playing mind games with a hunter. But, as always, he will work with what he has.

"A man like Shmerard has expensive tastes. He needs a lot of money to buy whatever strikes his fancy, including better killing tools. One of the ways Shmerard supplemented his wallet was to capture supernatural beings and bring them over to a nasty place that called itself a psychiatric hospital in the day, a covert supernatural prison in the night, and was, in fact, nothing more or less than a home for people wishing to experiment on supernatural beings unreservedly. It was a very lucrative thing to do, you know. Those beings that regenerate can provide a lot of things to sell on the black market before they die, and those who don't regenerate still give knowledge of how their bodies work to sell to hunters, as well as fetch a nice price as magical ingredients for any druid smart enough not to ask where things come from. By the way, did you know that incinerated and specially treated werewolf bones are a great supplement to mountain ash? It's a bit like cutting your cocaine with baking soda before selling it." Prime winks at Chris who looks vaguely sick. "Magically undetectable, if useless, greatly increases the volume of the product and rather cheap to produce when men like Shmerard sell you a new werewolf or two to torture and kill on regular basis. So that was what Shmerard expected one day when he visited the nasty place with a captured wendigo, to be paid a quick buck for the new test subject and go on his merry way. But that day a disappointment waited for him: he was met by a former orderly who said they were no longer interested because they had all found God and turned over a new leaf and would he please leave them alone."

Prime stretches, arching his spine. Peter supports him so he won't lose his balance and fall over.

"Shmerard wasn't happy about being told to go away. He shared the unhappiness around by taking out his gun and holding the former orderly at gunpoint, so naturally, the former orderly had to bring Shmerard inside in order to avoid getting murdered there and then. Shmerard demanded a meeting with the head of the nasty place, Dr. Shmemmett Shmentin, so as to negotiate his deal. He got the meeting, of course, scaring everyone in the process, but the results of the meeting didn't make him any happier. Dr. Shmentin steadfastly refused to participate in the ghastly trade again, citing that he had seen the light of Father, Son and the Holy Spirit and would not permit abominations brought under his roof again. Shmerard took out a knife, and held it to Dr. Shmentin's throat, and even cut the skin that would heal into a scar later. Dr. Shmentin refused to change his mind—he really could never go back to the way things were—and Shmerard, despite his rage, maintained enough faculties to know that even if he killed everyone here, it would be difficult to hush this sort of thing up. He left,

which was really for his own good, because he would not have survived had he decided to use his weapons for more than just intimidation."

Prime gives Chris a slow smile.

"Because, you see, there was someone watching over the nasty place. Not any kind of god, of course, but a peculiar monster who now knew Shmerard and hated his very guts. It was also very fortunate for Shmerard that he didn't choose to settle down in the same town as the monster, for he would have surely perished rather quickly if he kept showing his face where the monster could see him. For several long years Shmerard conducted his business elsewhere, and probably successfully too, but then his luck ran out. He became deathly ill, and he decided to return to the same town where the monster lived, and he had the gall to try and take what was the monster's," Prime turns his head to land a brief kiss on Peter's bare shoulder, "as if his previous sins weren't quite enough. He wanted to be a werewolf, see, so that he would no longer be ill. That's how I know he despised everyone equally. Surely, if he thought a supernatural creature was less than human, he wouldn't have tried to become one. But since he'd stay Shmerard no matter if he howled at the moon or not, I don't think it made any real difference to him. It's safe to say that his son will never, ever find his father's body to bury... although, considering the things the son might have heard, he may not even want to."

Chris doesn't say anything to that, even though he must have heard the conversation with Gerard in the distillery and there weren't many ways to interpret that one except the correct way. His face is a blank mask.

"That was how Shmerard ended," Prime says. "His greed, and his cruelty, and his very life faded from his eyes as the monster watched and found it good. Oddly enough, though, the story is not yet over. I happen to know that his son has found out about the monster and decided to become the hero of the story. It has been lacking for heroes so far; it exclusively featured monsters of different flavors, you know. Shmerard's son is a self-righteous prejudiced murderer as well, of course, but he's a step up from his father. A sense of honor, in his own twisted way, and a true hero's foolishness that resulted in the son deciding to confront the monster alone, knowing very little about it. About what it could do. About the lengths it will go to in order to protect itself and what belongs to it. Oh, Shmerard's approval-starved son is strong, of course. He has hatched some sort of plan and he wants to carry it out even if costs him his life. Is it because the monster ate his sister? Or because it took vengeance on his father? Is it all about family?"

Allison-Stiles is ready. She and Darth-Stiles are starting their way over, her screaming and swearing loudly, demanding to be let go, and Darth-Stiles stomping as loudly as he can to make sure every twig on the ground snaps with a loud crunch under his hoofs.

If Stiles thought Chris looked pale before, it was nothing compared to the way his face goes white now that he can hear his daughter's voice. It's like he got bleached.

"I wonder," Prime says thoughtfully. "What does the son value more? The debts of the dead or the love of the living?"

Darth-Stiles pushes Allison-Stiles into the clearing. She stumbles without anything theatrical to it because her eyes are not that good in the dark. Weren't Darth-Stiles holding her wrists

behind her back, she would have tumbled right down.

"Let me go! Now!" She demands hysterically.

"Allison!" Chris tries to get up, forgetting that Troy-Stiles and Deucalion-Stiles are once again pressing his hands into the ground.

"Dad!" She stares at him, eyes huge and wild, fresh blood slowly dripping down her chin. It's one of Stiles' finest performances, if he may say so himself. "Dad, you're hurt!"

She makes an attempt to wrench her wrists out of Darth-Stiles' hold. That was why Stiles chose the towering minotaur for this: Allison-Stiles can be as earnest in her attempt as she needs to be in order to avoid any suspicion from Chris, and, frankly, Stiles is much more used to Darth-Stiles' level of strength. This way he won't accidentally break his own wrists while pretending to hold himself hostage.

"Allison," Chris exhales. "I'm... I'm so sorry..."

"You? What are you sorry for? You weren't the one who..." She fails to free herself again, nearly yanking her shoulder out of its socket. "Argh!"

"Don't," Chris says hastily. "Don't struggle, pumpkin. He's much too strong. I know it all looks scary, people with bull heads and everything, and I will explain—or, well, maybe your mother will."

"Explain what?" Allison-Stiles stares at him with completely genuine confusion. Scary people with bull heads? Wouldn't she know about minotaurs?

The Argents have made sure their daughter is aware of the supernatural, right?

"It's, uhm, a long story," Chris says. "In short, every mythological creature you've ever heard of is real, and we're hunters who ensure that humanity is safe from them."

Oh wow. Stiles wonders if God or a god does exist and has decided they love Stiles. Had he betrayed knowledge of the supernatural, the whole ruse would have shattered.

Incredulity comes from Peter through the bond. Stiles sends some of the same back, careful not to overdo it; through the bond Peter feels small, singular and precious (Stiles could cradle Peter there in his palms if he had any as pure consciousness; would coil all around him like a dragon around his hoard if he could), and sometimes Stiles pushes through overwhelming amounts of emotion without meaning to.

"Is that what these people with crazy masks are telling you to say?" Allison-Stiles demands, then makes a show at glancing back to Darth-Stiles, then at Han-Stiles, Prime and Deucalion-Stiles who has the most fascinating shift face—it's blue for some unfathomable reason.

"Uhm, I mean, yes, of course, fairy tale creatures are real!" She backpedals in a painfully fake way. "Dad, we should go tell everyone, so they would believe too! Right? You and I, we should go!"

She looks at Chris pleadingly. Yes, this definitely hurts Chris so much more than any physical torment Stiles could ever come up with.

"Allie, I..."

"She could still go," Prime interrupts. Chris stares at him with that stony hatred, not believing a single word that comes out of his mouth. "We don't have any quarrel with your daughter." Hard to quarrel with someone who is already dead, after all. "If you tell us all about those bugs of yours, your plan and so on and don't lie, we'll let her go."

"Why should I believe anything you say?"

Prime shrugs.

"She's just a child, and an ignorant one at that."

"Hey!" Allison-Stiles objects. Chris gives her a look that could shut up a bellowing elephant on a rampage.

"The only reason she's here is to make you talk. If you talk, she lives. If you refuse, she dies while you watch." Stiles wouldn't like to die again tonight, especially since he's around his new minimum. He would probably fake it. If he has to actually die, though, in order to convince Chris to talk before the same thing happens to his wife, Stiles will do it. "Nothing I can say will make you believe I'm sincere about this, so you have to decide for yourself if you love her enough to gamble on me telling the truth."

Perhaps if Chris was born to another family, one that didn't consist of hunters, he would have grown up to be a good man—a happy one. There's a trace of that in him tonight as he looks at his daughter's body with soft eyes. He really does love her, even though Stiles doubts he had a good fatherly example growing up.

"There was always a chance the mountain ash wouldn't hold you," he says. His heart is steady. "Ideally, you would've died in the fire, but whoever escaped would be filmed by a night vision camera. I put them all around the place. The bugs and the cameras are recording all of your faces and voices. That way you'd think you were safe but we would be able to hunt you down regardless."

"Where are the recordings transmitted?" Peter leans forward.

"Home," Chris says.

"Your wife is monitoring them, isn't she?" Prime prompts. Boba-Stiles, unseen and unheard by anyone, takes off into town, a gray-white streak high in the dark sky.

"They can be deleted remotely," Chris says urgently without actually answering the question. "I'll give you the password. If you were dead, no one would ever know what my father did. What my sister's body housed."

"Is that why you haven't come here with an army of flunkies?" Prime wonders. "So no one would know how far the mighty Argents have fallen?"

"That's a part of it." Chris closes his eyes briefly. Stiles can't tell if this is shame or if Chris is fading. That lowest scale had to have gone through some bowels and released all sorts of gross lethal stuff into his bloodstream. "And involving others would invite too many unknown variables. What if you took over one or more of them? What if you managed to fool some of them and escape? What if someone tried to capture you instead thinking they could contain you?"

Stiles can get behind the doubts. If he couldn't kill the hypothetical other hunters outright, he would have absolutely tried to take over their bodies, deceive them or present himself as a convenient target for capture. As long as he's alive in sufficient quantities, he can keep trying to worm his way out of pretty much any situation.

There's also the fourth option which Chris doesn't mention but has probably considered. Hunters as a whole tend not to bother with things like moral scruples overly much, and Stiles could probably easily tempt several of them with something. Money, power, information; hell, he could promise to take over a supermodel's body and have sex with them. Not that he would fulfill any of those. He'd kill the hunter in question the moment he could, but that's a risk that anyone succumbing to a temptation automatically takes. After all, the classic stories on the subject all speak about losing one's soul to the tempter.

Peter gets a laptop out of his duffel, pulls up a virtual machine and has Chris guide him through logging in and deleting footage. The website also shows the count for cameras and bugs feeding their input there which is convenient: Stiles sends a few younger bodies to climb trees and take the cameras down as Chris reluctantly describes where he left them. Boba-Stiles reaches the Argents' house just in time to catch Victoria loading some guns into the trunk of a car. It's not quite clear if she's going to go and try killing Stiles herself or is just packing for a strategic retreat, but Stiles doesn't care enough to find out. He has Boba-Stiles drop down from the sky, stopping just in front of Victoria's face and flashing his hive mind eyes at her.

Victoria-Stiles stops loading things into her car, of course, and checks her phone (whoever came up with fingerprint and facial recognition instead of passwords to unlock phones, Stiles can seriously kiss that person. On the mouth. With tongue) to see if there's a second set of cameras transmitting to another cloud storage that Chris managed to omit. There isn't. Well, Chris didn't have that much time to set things up, Stiles supposes. And he was probably concussed to boot, considering that Kate-Stiles had given him a very solid wallop on the head with a rather heavy metal garbage can lid; that couldn't have helped him with making rational, smart decisions.

One by one, the cameras listed on the website wink out. When all counters reach zero, Stiles searches some more, out of pure paranoia, but finds nothing. Well, if there is anything, it's fine, as long as it's not set to be made public within a specific period of time. Stiles will have to rifle through all tech in the Argents' house quite thoroughly to make sure that's not the case.

"Is this it?" Prime asks. "No surprises left? No last attempts to get around me?"

Even if there are any, Stiles supposes he will have to relocate elsewhere immediately anyway instead of the gradual, scheduled move he envisioned. Any hunters who might hear about

him will come here too late to be of any use, and by the time any serious search attempts begin, Stiles will have disappeared into the crowds. Perhaps not all of those crowds will be American ones, and hunters are not nearly so organized as to have their own version of Interpol.

"No," Chris says. He looks tired. Defeated. "Let Allison go now. You said you would."

Darth-Stiles lets Allison-Stiles' wrists go. She rubs them with a scowl.

"Allison, run now," Chris says. "Run straight home, pumpkin, and don't look back, okay?"

"I haven't told you how the story ends," Prime says. "One could argue if it's a good ending or a bad one. It's a weird little story, to be honest. I think it's really fun, though. Do you know why I find it so delightful?"

"Why?" Chris asks with a sigh. He clearly couldn't care less, but Allison-Stiles is still standing here so Stiles is being humored.

Prime grins.

"The hero is late in this one."

Allison-Stiles' big dark eyes blaze up, almost painful to look at in the darkness. Weirdly, this look suits her. She could be a fantasy character, all pretty, and tall, and with inhuman glowing eyes, and even her bloodied lips and bedraggled appearance serve to create an impression that she is fresh from some epic battle.

Strictly speaking, this last bit wasn't necessary. But Chris has just killed Jonathan-Stiles and burned down the one place Stiles has been calling home for the last six and a half years, not to mention all of Stiles' stuff. None of the Children of Unity bodies even have an extra pair of underwear to their names anymore.

Chris stares up at his daughter's body, the smell of his horror, despair and grief filling the clearing. Stiles wrinkles Deucalion-Stiles' nose, crouches that strong werewolf body down and breaks Chris' neck in one clean motion. Logan-Stiles does the same with chickens on the farm all the time.

"You didn't want to take over the body?" Peter asks.

"He was dying anyway." Prime shrugs. "You were right to tell me to mind how I attack him. Those scales got some important spots."

"Well, he had enough life left in him to tell us what we wanted to know." Peter kisses Prime's temple. "We should go ask the paramedics for a blanket for you. You're freezing. As soon as we clean up, that is."

"I'll have Darth-me, Han-me and Leia-me deal with that. It's not like I can show them to the paramedics, they're going to have to stay out of sight anyway."

Prime and Peter walk away from the clearing. Peter slips his hand into Prime's, an oddly childish gesture which shouldn't feel more intimate than sex but does. Peter's hand is warm and firm, and he holds on tight without making it painful.

"I'm self-aware enough to know that a regular person would be retching in the corner at the sight of me by now," Prime says. "How come you don't? I'm not complaining, mind you. I just want to know what make you tick in the same rhythm as me."

"Before Eichen House, you grew up in the human world, cielo," Peter says. "It's a nice world, on the surface. It has morals, government, laws, all that pretty stuff. I was born into the supernatural world where the only thing that rules us all is the urge to survive. By the time I went to human school and learned about all the things that supposedly regulate our society, it was too late for them to become a part of me. Civilization is only skin deep on me, and what I really am is a wolf that doesn't see anything wrong about killing to protect what's mine."

"That sounds like all werewolves should be like that," Prime notes. "At least all born ones. But Talia wasn't like that, was she?"

"No, she wasn't. Maybe she was so complacent and involved with the human world that she forgot she was a wolf too. Or maybe I'm just broken in ways that predispose me towards doing what's best for me, moral or not. Like a serial killer. Although, admittedly, I have never felt an urge to dismember somebody in a dark alley just to relive my childhood trauma or however serial killing works. Does it matter why I adore you, mi lindo, hands drenched in blood and all, as long as I do?"

"Functionally, no." Prime smiles at Peter. Peter's blue eyes shine in the reflected light of Prime's golden ones. Is this what being in love is like? Stiles wouldn't know. "As I said, I just want to know you. You're fascinating. You're beautiful. You're glorious."

Peter's answering smile is soft and sweet. A little shy, too. Stiles thinks it's because he was sincere, and Peter knows it since Prime's heart hasn't missed a beat.

They come to the edge of the woods and stop, watching the enormous fire dance against the sky. Prime doesn't need werewolf ears to hear the crackling and groaning of the building as the flames consume it and send it up to the sky in smoke, one molecule at a time. The firefighters are already here, greeted by Mildred-Stiles in her best harmless grandma mode and the majority of the human bodies, but their efforts don't seem to be making a dent in the fire yet. Chris must have been generous with the accelerants.

"In the morning I'll have to send a couple of bodies down to the basement to deal with my notes on the walls." Prime sighs. At least now he has many houses and apartments in town so they won't have to take the few hotels Beacon Hills possesses by storm in the middle of the night. There will be room enough to sleep. "Can't have anyone finding those and wondering what the hell it all means."

"You might need an excavator," Peter notes. Something explodes to the left of the building, on the ground floor, and the house sags to one side. The cars in the garage? The gas pipes in the kitchen? If it's the garage, then at least they won't have lost Peter's car which is parked out front. "The whole building will have collapsed by then."

"There's a secret tunnel from just outside the grounds into the basement levels. If that doesn't collapse, it'll be easy to get in."

"There's a secret tunnel? Why did we need to break the fence then?"

"It was built by someone at some point, and that means someone out there might know about it. There could be an ambush waiting for us at the exit, and backtracking after getting all the way through would have made retreating into the backyard all the more dangerous. The ground floor would've been much more engulfed by then, and the only other way out are the windows on the floors higher up." Prime grins at Peter. "If there's an opportunity to create our own way out where no one would reasonably expect us, why not take it?"

Peter kisses him. This kiss is slow and lingering, like a silent promise of thousands more to come.

"Tomorrow," Peter says when they part, "we will wake up."

"Have sex in the shower," Prime continues.

"Then breakfast," Peter adds.

"And then we will begin taking over the world," Prime finishes.

"One country at a time," Peter nods.

They smile at each other, helpless to look away, as Eichen House burns so bright that it can surely be seen from space.

Chapter 10: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Prime walks down the white stone steps and stops in the soft grass, content just to absorb the sunshine and distant cries of seagulls. The grass comes well above his ankles, tickling his skin slightly as it sways with the wind coming from the sea. The wind is pretty brisk today, even though it's sunny and hot, and Prime's shirt flaps with each gust. Well, it's not Prime's shirt, strictly speaking, which is why there's so much extra material to flap around Prime's skinny body. It's Peter, and Prime just picked it up off the bedroom floor. Peter never minds Prime wearing his clothes; on the contrary, it seems to be the single biggest turn-on of all, even more so than all those ridiculous prelude-to-sex clothes that Peter buys for Prime.

Stiles doesn't mind, though. It makes Peter happy to dress Prime, and Stiles has more than enough fashion to deal with when dressing each of his hundreds of bodies every single day. Ties. Who the hell came up with ties? Stiles hates those instruments of torture. Maybe when he has taken over the world, he'll just banish them altogether. Between a tie and the skintight short shorts that Prime is currently wearing, he'll pick the latter any time.

It's one of the ways for Peter to entertain himself here—fashion. He has acquired a whole wardrobe of things like the shirt that Prime has got on, light linen and cotton with poetic color names like ivory or eggshell, and cultivated this image of either a dangerously sexy Hollywood drug lord or a hot cynical billionaire from the cover of a romance novel. Stiles supposes that makes Prime either the drug lord's slutty squeeze or the billionaire's plucky secretary with a Clark Kent-like ability to transform from drab to gorgeous simply via taking off the glasses.

The thought amuses Stiles, and he laughs with Prime's lips. Well, Prime would definitely turn heads if he ever took his blind person glasses off in public and actually let people see his eyes.

The grass rustles under his feet as he strides over to the center where a large gazebo stands. It's wooden and also white, with a sturdy table and a behemoth of an armchair inside. These weren't here when they bought the place; Peter had it all built and put in because he wanted Prime to be able to spend his time the way he's used to. Stiles appreciates it anew every time he sinks Prime into the armchair, legs tangled underneath him, and thumbs his new speaker on to put on some music. Everything has changed so quickly and so much, and it's nice to have a little bit of familiarity, even if it's not exactly the same. It's rather an upgrade, really, from the unwieldy, menacing ex-psychiatric hospital to a charming, picture-perfect little villa on the coast of Spain; from a Scooby-Doo guy-in-a-mask to a Bond villain.

Only without Bond, of course. Stiles' Bond, such as he was, is dead.

Stiles chooses the Peter Songs playlist through Prime's phone and sets it to play loud. There are no neighbors to bother with noise, not for miles around. This villa is set into a cliff, and its backyard is surrounded by natural stone formations rather than a man-made fence. The

armchair is facing the narrow passage between two looming slabs of stone; on the other side, there are stone steps leading down to a tiny private beach (where Stiles still firmly refuses to have sex without a blanket). The steps were there before, long before either Peter or Stiles were born, even, but Peter improved them by adding safety railings ("A head cracked in half like a watermelon would not be your best look, mi lindo, I am quite certain").

Stiles wonders if doing all this, making all these decisions about design, wardrobe and whatnot, is too much for Peter to do—or, perhaps, too little. On the one hand, Peter undeniably enjoys making everything just so and with a little flourish on top; on the other hand, there was that weird incident two months ago when Prime woke to a room full of freaking rose petals, a gourmet breakfast in the kitchen and a missing Peter who had gotten up well before dawn and gone to the specialty store in the next, next town over to get Reese's peanut butter cups which are not popular in Spain at all (Stiles so far finds that Spain's only, if very noticeable, flaw).

Stiles hated every part of it. He doesn't care for rose petals, he despises waking up without Peter now that he knows what it's like to wake up with him, and he can order the fucking sweets online whenever he likes.

It was awful, waking up in an empty villa, walking through room after room and finding it devoid of Peter. So deafeningly quiet. So reminiscent of Eichen House where there was no one but Stiles.

(Peter said he'd never leave Stiles but people say things all the time and have them mean less than a fart)

(Stiles never wants Peter to leave never never never never never never)

On the day of rose petals Stiles chose to react by having a flaming row with Peter when the latter returned and they ended up having some rather furious sex instead of actually talking. After that Stiles hasn't left Peter alone again except when Peter went to use the bathroom. One body or more is always nearby and, preferably, always touching Peter in some way, Chewbacca-Stiles piles on top of him at night when Prime can accidentally roll away in his sleep, and Darth-Stiles, Leia-Stiles and Han-Stiles sleep on a complicated schedule so that one of them is always awake, no matter what time it is. If Peter wants to go on fucking spontaneous road trips in the middle of the night, he better take Stiles with him next time.

Stiles has had mixed feelings about doing it because it reminded him a bit too much of how Talia treated Peter. He has been ready to stop, at least overtly, whenever Peter has had enough, but that conversation never happened.

It's been two months since, and there hasn't been a repeat of the incident. Stiles wishes he knew what prompted it so he could relax. Weirdly, Peter seems to have relaxed instead, bit by bit, day by day, and Stiles has no idea what any of it means.

Stiles should open his laptop and get to work—there's always work to be done when one is actively conquering the world—but he sits in the armchair instead and stares at the small bit of the sea visible through the passage between stones. Boba-Stiles soars overhead, screeching periodically at a seagull or two that haven't gotten the memo about an aerial predator living

here yet. Stiles doesn't have her catch and kill one to teach the others a lesson, though. He feels a bit melancholy right now.

It's not a surprise when Peter comes out into the backyard: Nien-Stiles is riding in the front pocket of his shirt, soaking in the warmth of Peter's body through the thin fabric and warbling softly from time to time. What does come as a surprise is Peter heading decisively into the gazebo and plucking Prime off the armchair into a princess carry.

Prime squeaks, startled, as Peter, without breaking stride, jumps off the raised floor of the gazebo and twirls around the backyard to the rhythm of the newest track from the Peter Songs playlist.

"Turn your back on Mother Nature, everybody wants to rule the world," Peter sings along, as Prime giggles helplessly and clings to Peter despite knowing he won't be dropped. Nien-Stiles wriggles out of the pocket and flies off to avoid getting accidentally squished.

When Peter stops, Prime is flushed with laughter and a little dizzy. The melancholy has drowned in a huge, soft, silly, cloudy puff of Peter-related feelings; Stiles has Prime stretch up a little and slowly drag his cheek and nose along the side of Peter's neck. He still doesn't get what's so special about scent-mingling—Deucalion-Stiles never has any big reactions to that—but Peter loves it like an addict loves crack. Must be a cultural werewolf thing, even if it does have some basis in the physiology.

"What was that for?" Prime asks, grinning.

"Can't I just pick up my favorite bird whenever I like and do a little dance?" Peter tilts his head to the side, a silent demand for more scent-mingling. Stiles obliges.

"You can," Prime says, "you just normally don't. It's a change in the pattern, you know."

"Perhaps you haven't discovered the whole pattern of me yet," Peter says. "It's just a new part."

"Well, that's true." Stiles will never discover all of Peter, just as Peter will never discover all of Stiles. Not unless they somehow manage a mind-meld of sorts, and that sounds way too dangerous to ever risk Peter like that. "But what prompted this new part to show up now?"

Peter shrugs.

"I don't know," he says.

"You're lying," Prime frowns and stops rubbing his face against Peter's neck. He doesn't need werewolf ears to know when Peter lies. He's been watching Peter's face all these months, listening to his voice, absorbing his body language like a sponge. Stiles is greedy. He wants all of Peter, never mind that it's impossible. Wanting has nothing to do with limits. "Why are you lying to me?"

"Alright, I do know," Peter amends, unembarrassed by being caught in a lie. "I just don't want to tell you."

"Why not?" Stiles is nothing if not persistent.

Peter looks away.

"You might think less of me," he says reluctantly.

Stiles studies him through Prime's eyes and thinks about what it could possibly be that it made Peter feel this ridiculous fear. He's better at thinking now than ever; every new brain adds to his capabilities, and Stiles is extremely multitudinous these days. It's a pity, though, Stiles is as bad at deciphering complex feelings as ever.

It must be some cultural thing that Peter has been exposed to extensively enough to internalize it, even though Stiles himself might not have been. What is bad, or shameful, or demeaning for a werewolf or a modern American man?

Well, both of those share one thing they dislike: weakness. What kind of weakness could Peter be feeling that would make him display uncharacteristic excessive playfulness and hide the reason for it? It didn't seem to have been there before.

The only thing that changed fairly recently was Stiles stalking Peter relentlessly literally everywhere he went, as a human, or a dog, or a bird, or a minotaur, or an insectoid, or whatever the hell Han-Stiles is (he doesn't have a species, or else he is the whole of his species; the Eichen House doctors made him themselves, a weird fish-porcupine-man combination of several creatures spliced together). Is that it? Does Peter genuinely like having Stiles' eyes on him at all times?

Well, he did like Stiles even when all he really knew about his wrong number correspondent was that the latter stalked him with impunity, unseen and brazen.

Stiles supposes he is not exactly like Talia. Unlike her, whatever he sees Peter doing, Stiles approves. He can never find Peter lacking as he watches, no more than he can find the sky lacking when he flies. It's perfect. Peter is perfect, exactly as broken, devious and immoral as he is.

Does Peter find the stifling attention without subsequent punishment pleasant? Does he like Stiles taking unfair control like that and using it mainly to cuddle up to Peter whenever the fancy strikes him?

Peter has never had much control over his own life, has he? He was a weapon in someone else's hands, he said. An AK-47 that Stiles has picked up now. Does a weapon ever know how to be without hands holding it? Is that it?

Prime lets go and slides down to stand on his own two feet. His hands reach up to cup Peter's cheeks and turn his face towards Prime. Peter allows it, even though with his strength he could resist the movement all day long without any effort. If this is about weaknesses, then Stiles can try to take a stab in that direction.

"Do you think less of me when I wake up from a nightmare?" Prime asks. They can talk about weaknesses if that's what Peter needs.

Every now and then, one body of Stiles' or another will wake up in cold sweat, choking on a scream, dreaming of dying. With how scattered around the time zones he is, Stiles is now always awake and always asleep. Sometimes the dream is just of clean, conscious dying, of the sharp, wet pain of toe claws slicing his throat open or of the paralyzing helplessness of poison swimming through his veins; and sometimes he dreams of choking in his sleep which includes dreaming of choking in his sleep where he dreams of choking in his sleep, and so on, like an infinity mirror. Sometimes it's Prime waking up from those, and Peter is always there, woken up before him by the quickened beat of Prime's heart, ready to draw him back to bed, all soothing kisses, reassuring body heat and the specific heavy vibration of a purring growl that Prime loves shamelessly.

"No," Peter frowns. "Of course not."

"Isn't it weak?" Prime insists. "Pathetic, to be at the whim of my trauma. I'm strong. I span continents. I can kill anyone in the whole world by looking them in the eye. I'm well on my way to taking over America, even though no one but you and I know that. Shouldn't I be above being messed up in ways that made me cry into your shoulder for two hours last week?"

Peter cocks his head. Stiles can almost see the cogs turning in his brain, especially if he takes a peek through the weird not-space of the packbond where they are both pure consciousnesses.

"Speaking of taking over America," he says, "I just compiled all the latest reports, and I think we'll have enough to take over the sitting president around Christmas—"

This is important, of course. The Republicans haven't decided on their nominee for next year's election yet, so Stiles is waiting for the announcement, having infiltrated that party with the Whittemore family bodies, but the Democrats are a no-brainer—of course their candidate will be the one who's already living in the White House. The difficulty in taking him over is in the fact that he's the sitting president which means he knows all the things a president is supposed to know about the daily routines, behind-the-scenes stuff and so forth. Stiles is doing some grueling spywork in the bodies of some low-level personnel, the first children of the US and their beloved dog, and, strangely, the dog is getting the best results, always being allowed anywhere, even in the Oval Office. It's Peter's job to compile all the things that Stiles learns and look at them from the point of view of someone who has experience in holding legitimate authority over others, partaking in subterfuge with purposes other than making others think he's harmless and inconsequential, and actually interacting with all sorts of people from everywhere. Stiles himself, sadly, will probably always be a sociopathic Mowgli, for all that he is a society unto himself. Peter grounds him. Gives him some much-needed, singular perspective.

They will talk about the reports, sure. But not right now. If Peter wants control wrenched from him, Stiles can do that.

"Ah, no, tesoro," Prime presses a finger to Peter's lips. "We're talking about it. I don't mind improvising and wondering around blind but not when it comes to you. You're too important. You're mine."

This close, he can see clearly how Peter's pupils dilate.

"If you want my attention always, everywhere, you can have it," Prime whispers. Stiles is entranced by Peter, drunk on the sharp intake of his breath and the gentle curve of his parted lips. "I will sleep on your feet as a dog, and perch on your shoulder as a finch, and lie with my head in your lap as a human. I will look at you at all times. Wherever you go, I will follow. Whatever you wish to surrender, I will take. Whatever you want to possess, I will give. You belong to me, and I belong to you. Listen to me though the bond. Does it feel like I think less of you?"

The packbond is a fascinating thing. It's the only way for Peter to glimpse the entirety of Stiles and for Stiles to see Peter with eyes that are not limited by flesh. Stiles sends a wave of appreciation—a tiny wavelet, really, but it still makes Peter stagger, eyes dazed. The thin material of his pants does nothing to hide the bulge in the front, and Stiles wants to reach out and touch, play Peter's pleasure like a symphony and revel in it—but not yet. They are still talking.

"It bothers me sometimes," Peter says, looking still not completely recovered from the onslaught of appreciation, "that I only ever get a fraction of you. Even when you're looking at me, I know you're also looking a hundred of other things. Talking to hundreds of other people. Being where I am not. You eat the food I pick, and wear the clothes I buy, and sleep in my bed every night, and still you're not all mine."

Prime is also hard and the skintight shorts are really too tight at moments like this, Stiles finds. Prime's arousal has nowhere to go until the shorts are peeled off, and maybe that's what Peter meant when he bought them, besides the obvious goal of enjoying the view: to try and keep Stiles contained in some way when he seems to be slipping through Peter's fingers in other ways simply by virtue of existing as he is.

The thought hurts. Is his nature so unbearable? Stiles used to be afraid that Peter wouldn't accept him because he was a monster, and when Peter did, Stiles relaxed about that. Turns out, being a hive mind is still grounds for rejection, only not in the way Stiles used to think it was. And the rose petal incident was never about weakness, or having too much or too little to do, or any of the theories Stiles has come up with. It was because Stiles was Stiles.

Peter frowns again.

"Cielo? Why do you smell of hurt?"

Right, a werewolf nose, sniffing out every emotion. Stiles forgets about that because most of the time he doesn't mind Peter smelling what he feels.

"Is that what that... outburst was, with the rose petals and things?" Prime blinks away sudden hot tears. "Were you punishing me for never being fully here? You're smart, and you know me. You knew I'd hate it."

"No!" Peter objects vehemently, then deflates a bit. "Well, I suppose I was, a bit. But not consciously. I was thinking I wanted more of your attention. More. Always more. It... helped when you started following me everywhere."

"Oh," Prime says.

Peter reaches out to touch Prime's shoulder, and Prime steps away, out of reach. Peter freezes, looking stricken.

"I knew it," Prime says, and his voice doesn't tremble, but in the house Chewbacca-Stiles, who has been napping on the couch, whines, covering his snout with his paws, and Nien-Stiles on top of the gazebo chokes on a chirp. "I knew you'd reject me. I just thought at first you'd do it because I'm evil. Then because you'd be disappointed by how I look. I never thought about this reason. I can't do anything about not being all here. And if all of me came here, it'd be fucking pointless—I've got too many bodies for you to even see them all at once. I am what I am, and you... I..."

Fucking tears. Stiles wants to claw Prime's eyes out so they wouldn't leak.

"I love you the way you are, and you don't love me the way I am," Prime whispers.

It's a revelation. By the time he met Peter, he'd forgotten what it was like to love someone else, and now he knows it again, and it hurts so much. It's like there's a dull knife scraping against Stiles' every heart.

Peter's eyes widen. Doubtlessly, he has been paying attention to Prime's heartbeat and knows it's the truth as Stiles sees it.

Now *this*, Stiles discovers, feels a little bit like dying; much more so than having a pillow pressed against his face. He takes another step back, strangely dizzy, numb and hurting at the same time. He doesn't know what he'll do, how he'll get rid of the hurt, how he will banish those knives, but he doesn't think he can do it in front of Peter.

"No!" Peter rocks forward and freezes again, unsure of his welcome. He's never once been unsure before, touching Stiles as he pleased. Stiles knows it's because Prime flinched away a moment ago, and yet it still brings a fresh wave of hurt. "No, tesoro, no, I love you. I do."

"I don't believe you," Prime says.

"I deserve that," Peter agrees. He reaches out, palms up, silently offering Prime to take his hands. Stiles just stands there, feeling like nothing more or less than a wounded animal that is yet to decide if it wants to run or fight. "I'm an idiot. I'm a complete and utter fool. I was too greedy, too stupid, and I hurt you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should never have said that."

"So you'd rather hide it until... what, I'd wake up one day and find you gone for good?" Prime demands. "Some rose petals scattered around the place to placate me into thinking you're off shopping for a few hours, and then I'd feel the bond snap? Is that what it really was? A preparation so you could go find someone who'll be all there with you and live your happily ever after without me objecting?"

"No, that wasn't it!" Peter's eyes shine alpha red. "I told you I'd never leave you. I meant it."

"Maybe you did at the time," Prime says. "Looks like you're regretting that now."

Peter sends a cascade of emotions through the bond. There's lust, and affection, and fury, and possessiveness, and determination, a potent cocktail that is not enough to flood Stiles but is enough to shake him up and stop the stupid tears.

He still doesn't take Peter's hands.

"I'd be the same if you were... singular," Peter says. "It's me. The problem is in my head. I've had as much of you as you could possibly give me, and I wanted more because I'm broken."

He lowers his hands.

"I ruined it, didn't I?" He asks. Stiles has never heard him so dejected. "I hurt you, and I ruined everything. I always do." Suddenly, he laughs without mirth. "Talía was right, wasn't she? I'm poison. I break everything I touch."

Prime blinks at him. The hurt has subsided a bit, overlaid with confusion. Peter talks sometimes about the things Talía did to him... but he never mentions what she used to say.

"I just want you to be happy with me," he says. "It's not your fault if you can't be happy without something I can't give."

"You are giving it," Peter argues. "You're always with me now, aren't you? A part of you, mine at all times. Looking at me. Touching me. It's more than anyone in the world could give, cielo, you're amazing, you're perfect, you're my everything. I love you."

Stiles tilts Prime's head to the side. Just like six months ago, when Jackson-Stiles asked Peter about Mr. Whittemore, Peter is all reassurances but Stiles isn't satisfied with leaving it at those, especially considering that this time he doesn't really believe them. He needs to do something. To fix this.

If Peter is unhappy, he might just leave. He could even do it in a way that wouldn't let Stiles trace him... for a while, at least.

Stiles doesn't think he can allow that. Six months ago he could let Peter go because Peter was still new; it would have torn a piece off of Stiles but it would've been possible. Now that's simply not feasible.

It's strange how in the beginning Peter rejecting him because of what he seemed like it'd be the end of the world. He used to be terrified of it, and yes, now that it has actually happened, it hurts more than Stiles knew anything could hurt while not killing him, but functionally it changes nothing. Stiles can no more leave Peter than he can stop breathing and not die.

And Peter is definitely never, ever leaving Stiles.

"Let me try something," Prime says.

"Try what?"

Instead of answering, Stiles closes Prime's eyes and experiments. Across oceans and borders, his bodies, excluding the ones driving or speaking, zone out, shoulders slumping, eyes glazing over, on the brink of being abandoned. Stiles pulls a big piece of himself tightly together in the not-space of the bond and focuses the bulk of his attention on Peter like sunlight through a lens. He doesn't dare cross over to Peter's mind, not even a little bit because a little bit of Stiles is vastly bigger than all of Peter, but he crowds the boundary, watching Peter without blinking like a predator watches his prey. So fragile. So precious. So loved.

His. His. His.

He has no idea how exactly Peter perceives this through the bond but perceive it he does, because the next thing Stiles knows is a sudden, demanding, bruising kiss. Prime's body feels alight with it as he responds.

"Did you like it?" Prime asks when Peter pulls away, holding Prime's face between his hands ever so gently.

"I don't know what you did, mi amor, but..." Peter trails off. He doesn't seem to be able to find the right words, but his whole face is lit up with joy, and he looks at Prime with what Stiles thinks is reverence. "I felt it. Your attention on me. You were right there with me. Next to me. You *saw* me. I... I don't know how to..."

Stiles gradually returns his awareness to the half-abandoned bodies.

"You say that I'm like an ocean through the bond." Prime kisses the side of Peter's jaw. The hurt is mostly gone, and he feels confident now. He's done the right thing. He's given Peter what he wanted. Now Peter won't try to leave, will he? "Do you know what's underneath the surface of my ocean, mi hermoso? Coral reefs growing in the shape of your face. Whales singing your name. Sharks with teeth as sharp as your smile when you kill. Currents that shift as you breathe. You've been manipulating me into giving you something that you already have more of than, apparently, you know what to do with."

Peter looks a bit sheepish.

Stiles wonders what's underneath the surface of Peter's metaphorical river, on his side of the bond. Does the rush of the foamy current whisper Stiles' name? Do the quick fish swim into the light dispersed in the water to glow for a brief moment like Prime's eyes do?

Stiles wants to believe in that. Maybe. Some day. Possibly.

"We should travel," Prime says. The idea is spontaneous, but the more he thinks about it, the more he likes it. "See some of that world we're taking over."

"Travel?" Peter repeats. "Cielo, you hate going out to have dinner in a local restaurant. Besides, you're currently living in six different countries already."

"I don't hate going out," Prime corrects. "I hate that every restaurant has a shameless hussy among the waitstaff who thinks you'd be up for a fuck on the side since your blind boyfriend

can't see it." He grimaces. "Next time someone winks at you, silently hands you their phone number or drops their pad deliberately so that they can bend over in front of you, I might just stab them with a fork. But it's nice going places with you otherwise."

Peter laughs.

"I'll cover for you if you find yourself suddenly overcome with an urge to stab people," he says. "But are you sure you want to travel in this body? You'd have to wear shoes most of the time, you know."

"Blegh," Prime says with feeling. "Well, I'll live. It doesn't matter much to me where Prime is, you know, here, there or anywhere, and you like him best. But you've been cooped up in here with nothing much to do between reports except pick out curtains. There are only so many curtains you can pick out before you start climbing walls. It feels like maybe you've already started climbing them."

"I wouldn't say that." Peter cards a hand through Prime's hair. "I love sharing a home with you, and curtains are a very serious matter, just for your information. We see them every single day, after all. But I suppose I wouldn't mind traveling some, maybe to places that will be new to both of us. We'll come back here between trips and put up our cheesy souvenirs all over the villa. And we'll take Chewbacca-you with us as your seeing-eye dog, and if you ever feel really miserable about having to wear shoes, I could absolutely carry you around."

Peter sounds more and more excited with each word as he plans out the trip, and Stiles mentally congratulates himself. He doesn't want to have to kill Peter and bury him in the villa's backyard, so he has to make sure Peter is happy, and he thinks he's managed it, at least for now.

The psychology books say that relationships take hard work. Stiles is not afraid of any work... even if it includes having Prime wear shoes.

Blegh.

* * *

They come back to the villa for Christmas. Stiles hasn't celebrated it for many years, and the vague memories of colorful lights and cheery Christmas music don't really do anything for him, so in this, like in most things to do with decorations, Peter takes the lead.

According to Peter, the shiny, bright and loud Christmas is tacky, and the thing to strive for is "understated elegance". Stiles doesn't really know how that concept applies to raucous old men in red coats and reindeer with bulbous glowing noses, but Peter expresses it in fresh pine branches, tastefully arranged on shelves, instead of a tree, a muted documentary on their TV that only seems to contain majestic views of snowy forests and plains, cinnamon and cardamom in tea and coffee, and carefully coordinated outfits. Stiles does admit they look good in all of their respective sweaters—dark brick red with a single prancing deer outlined in white for Prime, deep navy blue with large white snowflakes for Peter, and more brick red with various unoffensive white patterns for Stiles' other bodies in the house. Except Nien-Stiles and Boba-Stiles, that is—those two are sporting the world's tiniest red scarves with

white tassels. He isn't sure, though, that there's a point in dressing up when it's just the two of them. He supposes the point is to satisfy Peter's strict sense of aesthetics.

The closest they come to a messy family Christmas as depicted in movies is baking orange muffins for breakfast. Peter insists it's to create a "complementary fragrance" in the house but Stiles suspects it's just because Peter has a weakness for all thing citrus. They keep more bergamot, yuzu and grapefruits stocked in the house at all times than the supermarket.

Not that Stiles minds; he himself has a weakness for sweets and for Peter's uncomplicated joy at the sight of the tray with baked goods.

After breakfast Peter and Prime curl up on the couch in front of the TV, trading lazy, sugary, cinnamon-y kisses, as some of Peter's classical music plays through Stiles' favorite speakers, accompanying the slow-motion bird's-eye view of taiga on TV. Chewbacca-Stiles, Nien-Stiles, Darth-Stiles, Leia-Stiles, Han-Stiles and Boba-Stiles are a relaxed, drowsy pile on the carpet, stuffed with muffins and other food and let off their normal duties for the morning. All in all, it's the perfect backdrop for Stiles' gift to Peter: two tickets to *The Rite of Spring* in Paris in January.

"Can't wait for us to hear it live together." Peter nuzzles Prime's hair, sighing contentedly. "Thank you, cielo."

They kiss some more, and Prime straddles Peter, rolling his hips forward; their cocks grind against each other through the clothes, both of them half-hard. A slow, leisurely morning fuck sounds like a great Christmas tradition to start, even if it's neither elegant nor understated, and Prime pouts when Peter stops him before he can take off his sweater.

"I still have to give you my gift, mi lindo," Peter reminds him.

"Oh," Prime says. He forgot he's supposed to get a gift too. "Well, I have all I want for Christmas right here, how about that?"

"That's very flattering," Peter says, amused. "But I did get you something, and I want to know if you'll like it."

"Alright," Prime concedes. His hormones will just have to wait a bit. "Have you got it stowed in the bedroom? Or is it down here somewhere?"

"It's outside, at the beach."

Prime groans. Outside is cold and windy, and he's so comfy here.

"Well, come on then." He hops off Peter, straightening his sweater. "Let's see it."

They hold hands as they walk down the worn stone steps, buffeted by the wind that brings with it salty freshness and the unmistakable pungent smell of rotting seaweed. Chewbacca-Stiles bounds down the steps behind them, protected from the elements by his thick coat, and Nien-Stiles is huddled in his favorite spot on Peter's shoulder, between the sweater and Peter's warm skin. Boba-Stiles is soaring high above them, and Stiles makes sure not to look at the

beach through her eyes before Prime gets there because Peter likes things to be a surprise. The rest of Stiles' bodies have stayed behind because Stiles doesn't want to be colder than he has to.

Stiles isn't sure what to expect—has Peter gotten him a boat, maybe?—and he's completely taken aback by the three huge metal mesh cages in the water tied to sturdy-looking poles. None of this was here yesterday, and the shark, the manta ray and the octopus inside the cages also certainly weren't.

He looks at Peter in a mute request for an explanation. Peter takes his cue.

"It has occurred to me, *precioso*," he says in a smooth voice that betrays how many times he has rehearsed this speech in his head, "that you are well on your way to conquering the land and you've already taken to the skies, but you're yet to plumb the depths of the ocean. So I have decided to get you these, so that you might go and spread yourself under the waves as well. That is, if you'd like. If you don't want to, we can just let them go. Or, you know, have seafood for dinner. Whatever you like."

Stiles mulls it over and can't hold back a snicker with Prime's lips.

"On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me... some animals to be sacrificed to me, like I'm some sort of pagan god and you're my priest," he says, grinning.

"Well, it's only fitting, *cielo*." Peter gathers Prime's hands into his own and presses a kiss to Prime's fingers. "I don't just love you. I worship you."

Peter says "I love you" every day. It's a whole thing. Usually, Prime replies with an "I don't believe you", but...

He looks at the animals again. They are swimming restlessly in their mesh cages, as if aware of what's coming.

Taking over humans and land animals is one thing; and even birds, far up as they fly, have to come down eventually. But a sea creature is, well, a whole different kettle of fish. If Stiles takes over these, he will be going where Peter will never be able to follow.

It's a very pointed way to say "I love you as you are and I don't care if I will never be able to have parts of you to myself". It becomes even more pointed when Stiles considers how much scheming and plotting it must have taken to set up a surprise like this with Stiles watching Peter day and night; not to mention, it couldn't have been cheap.

Also, he can't help but think it's very touching that Peter has taken care to pick out animals with gills. As Stiles found out over the summer, he cannot dive at all; mere seconds without being able to breathe freely send him into a spiral of blind panic. A water mammal like a whale or a dolphin (that one would have probably been easier to get than a living and unharmed manta ray) which has to hold its breath to go underwater and can actually drown would have been a cruel joke. These ones, though, have no such problems.

"I don't... *not* believe you," he relents. Just a little, mind you.

Peter's eyes glow triumphant red as he presses his cheek into Prime's folded hands and inhales the scent of his skin deeply. He doesn't say anything but he radiates smug satisfaction and bone-deep contentment through the packbond.

"I have to say," Prime muses as several bodies on another continent stop doing what they were doing and go to study up on sharks, manta rays and octopuses, "I might be taking over the incumbent American president in about eight hours and I did promise you Australia, but that all seems kind of small now. You have just effectively handed me seventy per cent of the planet. I don't know if I can ever match a gift like that."

"Excellent," Peter says. "It will take you the rest of your life to try to come up with something, and until then you're stuck with me. My evil plan has come to fruition."

"It's a bit evil," Prime agrees. "It's mostly very sweet, though. Don't worry," he adds, feeling light and mischievous, "I won't tell anyone how sweet you really are."

"You can shout it from the mountain tops if you want, cielo." Peter kisses Prime's hands again. The touch of his warm lips against Prime's chilled skin is electrifying. "Just as long as you're mine and I'm yours."

"Silly Vine," Prime says. "As if either of those things has ever been in question."

The shark is gnawing at its mesh cage, fluttering up and down close to the surface. Chewbacca-Stiles wades into the waves, huffing at how cold they are, and stares the shark in the face through the clear slate-gray water, eyes flashing gold. Shark-Stiles—who will need a proper separate name picked out—dives deeper, gills expanding and clenching, and looks into the eyes of the manta ray and the octopus.

Peter's claws shred the mesh, and Stiles is off into the depths, disappearing from the view of his bodies on the shore before they can even blink. It's a bit like flying, although not quite. Prime kisses Peter, buoyed by the feeling of effortlessly gliding through water, both heavy and weightless, his new eyes showing him alien sights, his new brains sending signals of senses he's never had. Peter envelopes him in a hug, shielding Prime against the wind with his furnace of a body, and kisses back like he wants to devour Prime whole.

Stiles doesn't know yet what he'll do with the world when he has it. Will he plunge it into the Third World War and leave a barren nuclear wasteland to future generations? Will he establish an unprecedented era of peace and unity? Will he lead the supernatural out of the shadows and make it part of the daylight world? Will he reach for the stars and see if there's an alien civilization out there sapient enough to be taken over? All of the above?

Whatever he will do, though, Stiles thinks Peter and he will choose it and see it through, together forever and ever and ever.

It will be so much fun.

- Peter sings along with [Everybody Wants To Rule The World](#) by Tears for Fears which doesn't contain the word "Peter" anywhere but was released as part of "Peter's Friends: The Album", a soundtrack album to a 1992 movie long forgotten by the popular culture. What? Too tenuous a connection? Well... Consider cutting Stiles a bit of slack. It's hard to find good Peter songs, you know. Stiles did his best.
- Mi amor (sp.) — my love.

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