The last living relative of Bucky Barnes seems to be a normal teenager in a quiet and weird little town in California.

The keyword being 'seems'.
“You’re Captain America!” the boy shouted in disbelief.

Steve smiled and nodded sheepishly. He glanced at the sheriff, whose eyebrows were also going up as he looked Steve over, and then looked back at the boy.

“Yes, I…I am. The original one,” Steve added, focusing on the boy. “Your grand-uncle…Bucky Barnes was my best friend growing up, and his family practically adopted me when my own died. I…I always planned to come back to his family, even after he died. When I…woke up, a few months ago, I looked for his family. And that’s…well, you.”

Stiles’ mouth opened and closed as he gaped in shock.

Notes

This was originally supposed to be a short fic of Bucky and Stiles commiserating over chasing after moral and reckless idiots who went from sickly to super overnight. Somehow, it turned into a trilogy of plot and feels with the Pack and the Avengers all butting in. Whoops.

ETA Dec. 19, 2016:

Nyxie’s Standard Shipping Statement: This fic is focused primarily on family feels, and on friendship. It is not a shipping or ship-focused fic. The romantic/sexual relationships are only really for the purposes of telling various characters' stories - they are not a narrative focus in or of themselves. I apologize if you came here looking for ship fic, but I tend to over-tag so that people with blacklists can easily block my fic for content they do not want.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Get to a Warm Place

~*~

It was mid-afternoon by the time Steve Rogers drove into Beacon Hills, legs stiff from hours on the road and shirt sticking to his skin. He took it slow on the highway into town to admire the beautiful forest surrounding the county, but eventually the midsomer heat became too much for him. He pulled into a small business-looking district, driving through the outer edges of the town until he'd at least given a cursory-glance at all the motels the town had to offer. He wanted to know where to go later tonight.

For now, he found a dive bar to hole up in through the midafternoon heat.

He parked his bike in the barebones shade of a wilting tree, breathing in a sigh of relief as he adjusted the shoulder straps of his backpack for the first time in over a hundred miles.

The bar wasn’t completely empty, but it was empty enough that Steve had no problem ordering a dark beer and some garlic fries as he curled in on himself at a table in a shadowy corner of the bar, keeping the bill of his hat low enough to obscure his face without making it too obvious he was trying to hide.

Half the other patrons were also on their own, most reading something on a smart phone, though there were a few pairs of friends quietly chatting as well. It was the slow hour after lunch but before people got off of work, and Steve made a mental note to leave once rush hour started.

He waited until the beer and fries arrived before pulling out his tablet. A password, a number code, and a fingerprint scan, and he was in, yet again perusing the files on Beacon Hills.

For a small town where nothing happened, a lot sure seemed to happen. It had a long history of unusual crimes and bizarre animal attacks, enough that SHIELD had the town on its radar - even after the deaths of a family full of people who SHIELD suspected of being not quite human.

Steve read through the speculation that perhaps certain myths in human history came from a grain of truth. That maybe humans weren’t the only intelligent or humanoid species on Earth. That maybe various terrorist groups through modern history - dating all the way back to HYDRA - were on to something when they investigated mythology to see where it ran right into history.

One would think humanity would have learned its lesson after the Tesseract.

Still, Steve wasn’t here to investigate. SHIELD didn’t even know he was here, and if they did, Tony and Fury were running interference at his request. Nothing short of a life or death emergency would call Steve back to work.

He was kind of regretting that, right now.

With a frown, he flicked his way through various files and folders, meticulously organized the way he liked it after weeks of work, until he came to civilian background checks.

It had been the only way to learn what had come of his friends - his friends, and the closest thing to family he’d ever had after his own parents died.

Since Bucky had been Steve’s next of kin, both their survivor’s benefits had gone to the Barnes family. The Barnes ladies, really, since Bucky’s own father had died in an accident on an army base
years before the war even started. Mrs. Barnes had lived long enough to see all of Bucky’s sisters to adulthood, a nurse and a teacher and a secretary. Unfortunately, Anna died in a car crash, and the shock of losing her only son and youngest daughter seemed to have led to Mrs. Barnes dying of grief. Sarah and Rebecca both married, only for Sarah’s son to die in Vietnam.

War seemed to kill all the Barnes boys.

It was just as well that Rebecca only had one daughter, Claudia, who escaped any kind of violent ending, only to die of some kind of dementia not too long ago.

Steve had missed Bucky’s niece by just a few years.

Hopefully her young boy - the one whose name Steve could not for the life of him pronounce - would escape the life of war and suffering that seemed to hang over the family like some kind of curse.

Bucky’s only family left - Steve’s only family left - was a teenage boy in Beacon Hills, Bucky’s grand-nephew. There wasn’t much about him. Diagnosed with some kind of attention disorder as a child, but he seemed to get good grades all the same. He had a ‘Facebook’, which didn’t tell Steve much other than the fact no one else could pronounce his name, either, if the nickname was anything to go by.

He was about to start the tenth grade, his sophomore year. Steve barely remembered being fifteen, himself - it felt like so long ago. The kid’s Facebook was full of pictures and posts about him and a friend planning to spend the fall training up so they could make the school’s lacrosse team come winter try-outs. Seeing the picture of two teenagers slurping at smoothies while making faces at a camera - or, in all likelihood, camera-phone, because that was a thing in the twenty-first century…

It just made him miss Bucky, and made him realize how much he couldn’t back down from this, now.

There was nothing in these files to help Steve, nor anything online. Nothing that could tell Steve how he should go up to the last hanging thread of Bucky’s family and introduce himself and…what? There was nothing Steve could give them, nothing to be gained, and would probably just open up some scarred-old wounds to boot.

But Steve couldn’t just forget about him, either.

With a frustrated grunt, Steve shut everything down and off, stuffing the tablet away as he quickly finished the last dregs of his drink and the few fries left. He paid in cash, telling the waitress to keep the change as a tip, and quickly left just as the first of the after-work crowd started pulling into the parking lot.

It took a while to get around town. Steve tried to tell himself he was just enjoying the view, but he knew he was lying to himself.

He was a damn coward.

Eventually, though, he made himself pull up to modest house in a nice part of town, parking his bike carefully and sitting on it for a moment as he glanced at the old but cared-for SUV sitting in the driveway.

“C’mon, punk,” he muttered to himself. Finally, he unhooked the helmet - originally bought for state law compliance and surprisingly useful in hiding in plain sight. He locked it to the bike, shouldered his bag, and pushed himself up the little walkway to the front door, slowing as he heard the sounds
of a movie playing inside.

Some part of him still had trouble getting over the fact most people in America had televisions, now, that movies weren’t just something you went out to see, but also entertainment to enjoy at home.

Steve took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

“Stiles!” he heard a man shouting from inside.

“Got it!” a young boy’s voice answered.

The sounds of the movie suddenly stopped, and a moment later the door opened, revealing a lanky teenage boy in long shorts and a tee-shirt, with short brown hair and Rebecca’s eyes.

“Yes?” the boy asked.

“Um…are you…” Steve swallowed. “Are you, uh, Stiles Stilinski?”

The boy’s eyes immediately narrowed, and even if he had Rebecca’s eyes, that was Bucky’s scrutiny staring Steve back in the face.

God, barely a minute in and Steve felt like he was drowning in memory.

“Who wants to know?” the boy asked.

“Stiles?” the man’s voice from earlier called out. “Who is it?”

A moment later, a man in jeans and a loose shirt appeared behind the boy, expression equally wary. “Can we help you?” the man asked - the boy’s father, and Beacon Hills’ town Sheriff.

Steve swallowed, every single line and plan going out the window.

He’d been spending over a month mentally planning for and dreading this moment, and now that he was finally here, it was like he was shriveled and socially awkward all over again.

He never felt so tiny since he’d become so large.

Before he could try to come up with something, the boy’s eyes widened, and his mouth fell open in shock as recognition filled his eyes. His entire stance grew straighter, and he pointed dumbly at Steve’s face as he said, “You’re- no, no way, why-”

“My name is Steve Rogers,” Steve said finally. “I don’t know if you’ve heard about-”

“You’re Captain America!” the boy shouted in disbelief.

Steve smiled and nodded sheepishly. He glanced at the sheriff, whose eyebrows were also going up as he looked Steve over, and then looked back at the boy.

“Yeah, I…I am. The original one,” Steve added, focusing on the boy. “Your grand-uncle…Bucky Barnes was my best friend growing up, and his family practically adopted me when my own died. I…I always planned to come back to his family, even after he died. When I…woke up, a few months ago, I looked for his family. And that’s…well, you.”

Stiles’ mouth opened and closed as he gaped in shock.

The silence was so awkward, Steve was one step away from apologizing for taking their time and
leaving, before Mr. Stilinski sighed and said, “Come on in, then.”

Mr. Stilinski had to nudge the boy’s shoulder to get him to step back, but after a moment he shook his head and moved, still gaping at Steve as he stepped into the household and, seeing a rack on the floor, toed off his shoes.

“I apologize for dropping in like this,” Steve said, trying to loosen his grip on his bag. “But I didn’t really know how else to do this.”

“Where’s your shield?” the boy blurted out.

Mr. Stilinski’s expression abruptly shifted from wary to exasperated as scolded, “Stiles!”

Steve smiled softly at the sheepish look on Stiles’ face. The innocent curiosity of excited kids was a lot less grating than the probing of adults.

“Kind of hard to carry without drawing attention, so it’s at Stark Tower while I’m traveling.”

Stiles led Steve into the living room, gesturing towards the couch. On the table, there was a half-empty bottle of beer and a glass of what looked like lemonade, and a bowl of chips and a pillow on the floor. Stiles darted over the television to switch it off. Steve caught a glimpse of a rugged man in a fedora before the screen went black. It was a bit flat - though not as flat as a lot of TVs were that Steve had been seeing, so likely a little older - and it sat like a silent, black hole on top of a little cabinet in the corner.

The boy stood up, then glanced awkwardly around himself and at Steve. He glanced over Steve’s shoulder at - presumably - the sheriff, and that seemed to help him a little.

“Um, do you want a drink or something?” he asked. “We have water - but, uh, everyone has water, I guess - and we have orange juice and pomegranate juice and some lemonade and Coke and I think we might have a Sprite or two but I would have to double check, and we can probably make, like, coffee and stuff-“

“The man can’t tell you what he wants if you don’t let him,” Mr. Stilinski chided.

“I’m fine,” Steve said, not bothering to hide his small smile. At least he wasn’t the only awkward one here. Stiles reminded Steve of Bucky, before he really got a grasp of the family’s signature charm. “I don’t want to cause too much trouble or anything.”

“Um, dude, pouring out drink isn’t exactly trouble,” Stiles said, looking at Steve like he was slightly dim.

Rebecca used to do that all the time.

“Stiles…” Mr. Stilinski said warningly.

Steve chuckled. “True, but I try to be polite.” He swallowed. “Seems a little late for coffee or soda, I don’t know if you just have lemonade or orange juice or if you would have to pour it out of something, and I’ve never even had pomegranate juice, so…water is always the safest bet.”

Stiles smiled. “Pomegranate juice it is, since you’ve never tried it.”

“Stiles!” Mr. Stilinski said, sounding so long-suffering Steve couldn’t help but laugh.

“It’s fine, sir,” Steve said, turning to look over his shoulder at Mr. Stilinski. “I can’t knock something
“I’ll bring some water in case you don’t like it,” Stiles said, slipping around the couch and disappearing into the kitchen.

Then it was just the two adult men in the living room, the only sound coming from Stiles rummaging around in the kitchen.

After a moment, the boy’s father sighed and came around the couch, dropping into a sofa and picking up the beer.

“I suppose you’ve probably heard this before,” he said. “But thank you. For New York.”

“No thanks needed, sir,” Steve said, trying not to wince as he slipped into his pre-prepared response. “Anyone else in my position would’ve done the same, and all of us there did our part.”

Mr. Stilinski smirked. “That the party line?”

Steve almost went into press mode again, but then remembered this man was…well, he wasn’t the press, that was for sure.

“Sort of,” Steve said. “I got one hell of a briefing on how modern media works, and…prepared lines seemed like the best option.” He shrugged. “I’m used to it. Did it for the Army, too.”

“I’ll bet,” he said, taking a sip of his beer. “Given how hard they come down on us for talking outside party lines today, I imagine it would’ve been even worse during the war.”

Steve blinked in surprise. “You served?”

He nodded. “Not long - just a few years after college. Couldn’t find a job at the time, and Stiles’ mother still had to finish school, so I enlisted to tide me over.” He snorted. “And while a lot of people slip through the cracks, the Army is just as big on presenting a united front during peacetime as they were during war. Luckily, they support a policy of soldiers not talking to the press at all if they can help it.”

“Wish I had that,” Steve said softly. “Would’ve saved me a lot of trouble.”

Stiles came back in carrying two cups, one of a pinkish-red drink and the other of clear water with ice in it. He handed Steve the juice while setting down the water on the coffee table.

Steve took a sip of the pomegranate juice as Stiles dropped onto the other end of the couch, and hummed in appreciation. “Not bad,” he said, taking another sip to prove his point. And it wasn’t. Steve wasn’t sure if he actively liked it, yet, but he didn’t dislike it, either. More importantly, though, it was nothing he’d ever had to drink before the war and didn’t bring up memories of what it wasn’t or how it was supposed to taste.

That was a pretty big point in its favor.

Stiles grinned. “It’s healthy, too!”

“Thank you,” Steve said, and took another sip because there wasn’t much else to do, now.

He wasn’t even sure what he came here for, let alone what he could or would ask of them.

Thankfully, though, Stiles was willing to fill the silence, saying, “So what do you do when you’re not fighting aliens?”
Mr. Stilinski looked up at the ceiling like he was praying for strength.

“Not much,” Steve said, trying not to laugh at the expression on Mr. Stilinski’s face. “They…they
found me in the ice less than half a year ago. I spent the first few months recovering, trying to catch
up on all the history I’ve missed and…training, honestly. Wasn’t sure what else to do. Then the
Battle of New York happened, and since then I’ve just been traveling around the country…seeing
things.”

“Anything cool?” Stiles asked, leaning forward excitedly.

“Well, I got to see the Grand Canyon-”

“I did a report on it once!” the boy said eagerly. “For geography in fifth grade.”

“Don’t interrupt him, Stiles,” Mr. Stilinski said. He sounded like he didn’t expect the admonishment
to stick at all.

The boy pouted anyway, contrite. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind,” Steve said. “It reminds me of your grandmother.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Steve said with a fond nod. “She always had something to say and was excited to say it.
Bucky was always trying to get her to calm down…it never worked, though.”

Stiles grinned again, sheepish and shy but a little smug, too. “Cool.”

“Grand Canyon?” Mr. Stilinski offered, a bemused smile on his face as he apparently tried to help
Steve.

Steve hesitantly launched into the story of how he and Bucky had always planned to go see the
Grand Canyon when they were kids, and how Steve had gone now in his memory. He’d camped
and hiked there a bit, sketched a fair amount and even started to get back into colored pencils while
there.

That somehow devolved into talking about Steve’s drawing skills in general, his brief career in
comics he’d just been starting before the war hit, how he’d done posters and pamphlets before
Project Rebirth. It careened into a lot of talk about comic books in general, Stiles even running
upstairs to grab some of his own to show Steve what they were like today, explaining digital art and
how it was sometimes mixed with traditional art via scans and mixed-media.

Before Steve knew it, it was dark out. Mr. Stilinski stood, twisting to crack his back slightly and
disappearing into the kitchen with his empty bottle. He came back out a few moments later holding
up a stack of worn-and weathered pamphlets and flyers.

“It’s almost dinner,” Mr. Stilinski said. “And you are absolutely welcome to join us, I mean it - but I
also warn you that we’re going to have to order in. Been kind of a busy week, so we’re a little
behind on the grocery shopping.”

Steve smiled a little wanly. “Sounds good to me, Mr. Stilinski.”

“Please, call me John. Or Sheriff, everyone does.”

“Right, uh, then it sounds good to me, Sheriff,” Steve said. The man smiled approvingly as he
dropped the pamphlets on the coffee table, spreading them out. Steve shook his head as he read the names and taglines of the various restaurants. “I still can’t believe this.”

“Believe what?”

He kept his eyes on the rather daunting pile of pamphlets and fliers. God, how did people manage to hold onto so many, so easily?

What if they wanted him to choose?

“When I was a kid, half this stuff was exotic and the other half was unimaginable,” Steve said. “You would’ve had to go to Chinatown for Chinese food, or a really expensive restaurant. And things like Thai or Vietnamese… I never even knew they existed. And now they’re ordinary stuff.”

Stiles looked hesitantly at his father, and Steve winced. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to unload.”

“It’s cool,” Stiles said immediately. “Do you want…” He bit his lip. “Do you want something you’re used to, or something new?”

Steve blinked at him in surprise.

“…Captain?” Stiles asked.

“Call me Steve,” he responded. “And… you know, you’re the first person to actually ask me that?”

Both Stilinskis’ eyebrows rose in united incredulity. “Really?” the Sheriff asked.

Steve nodded. “Some people just assume I should be trying new things all the time, no matter what. Most just assume I want to stick to stuff I know.”

“Do you usually want something new or something old?” Stiles asked curiously, forgetting the menus spread out in front of him.

“Depends on my mood, I guess, but…it hasn’t really mattered in a while.” He looked down at all the menus. “I’m… somewhat familiar with Chinese food, but not very. I’m honestly not very sure where to start.”

Stiles dug right through all the menus, brandishing three of them and then discarding one. When Steve was still unsure, he handed them both to his father, who glanced at them and handed just one back, muttering about that ginger chicken thing.

Steve fought down the strong urge to sigh in relief as Stiles handed him the lone menu pamphlet. At least he wouldn’t have to choose a restaurant to order from, and Stiles even started talking about the various options this particular place had, advising Steve to stay away from anything with the beef and that the seafood was usually hit or miss and that most of their noodles were delicious. Steve eventually settled on some chicken and noodle dish. It would probably be nothing like any chicken noodles Steve would’ve ever had, but it was close enough to familiarity that he could breathe easy as he dived into the unknown.

Mr. Stilinski went into the kitchen to call them place the order, and Stiles started stacking up the menus again, shuffling and moving them into some system comprehensible only to himself.

“So,” Stiles said, jerking his head towards the TV as he finished gathering up all the papers. “Wanna watch a movie?”
Dinner was a thankfully calm and surprisingly enjoyable affair. Despite the fact Steve was a visiting guest, the Stilinskis seemed to realize how awkward trying to sit at a table and eat might be under the current circumstances.

“Eating dinner in the living room while watching something is pretty common, these days,” the sheriff suggested as he unpacked all the little boxes out of the plastic bag they were delivered in. “Granted, that is incredibly informal, but something tells me you don’t really need formal right now.”

Steve smiled. “I really, really don’t.”

After five minutes of fretting, Stiles finally decided to put on a movie that turned out to be the one the rest of the Avengers wouldn’t shut up about.

“Star Wars is like a cultural icon,” Stiles said, fiddling with the movie player - the DVD player - while the sheriff plated the food in the kitchen. “Nearly everyone has seen it, and even if you haven’t - like my best friend, which is a serious error I need to correct - then most people usually know like the major characters and some plot points and stuff. There were three movies a few decades ago, which are the really famous ones, and then there was a prequel trilogy a few years ago but those sucked so everyone likes to pretend they just never happened…”

It was surprisingly peaceful, despite the fast-paced action of the movie. Steve and the sheriff ate in peace while Stiles alternated between shoveling food into his mouth and explaining things in the movie, various references and how he shouldn’t get hung up on the romance of Luke and Leia and how everyone liked Chewbacca and why Steve just had to know that Han Shot First.

Stiles had definitely inherited the Barnes family gift of gab.

By the end of the night, Steve felt the most relaxed he’d been since leaving the Grand Canyon. Mr. Stilinski had let Steve pay for his portion of the meal, so Steve had ordered and eaten enough to satisfy the supersoldier metabolism in one go without feeling guilty. They watched the whole movie through, and only paused to dump the plates in the sink and fetch some more drinks and chips. Stiles put on the second movie in the trilogy, too.

Steve was a contented drowsy by the end of the second movie, and he smiled when Stiles yawned, large and jaw-cracking, and promptly tried to pretend it hadn’t happened.

The sheriff didn’t let him. “Bed,” he ordered as he sat up from where he’d been slumped over, apparently half-asleep, on the big sofa-chair.

“But it’s summer! And it’s Friday!”

“Which is why you’re staying up late,” the sheriff said, sounding more amused than anything else. “But you’re still not staying up all night.”

Stiles whined but didn’t put up too much of a fight, instead gathering up the cups and bowls together.

“You know where you’re staying, Steve?” the sheriff asked.

“I figure I’ll go stay in one of the motels across town,” Steve said, standing up and holding out his hand to the man. “Thank you so much for letting me spend the evening here. It really meant a lot.”

The sheriff smiled as he shook Steve’s hand. “You going to be in town for a while?”
“I honestly don’t know,” Steve said with a shrug. At the Sheriff’s surprised look, he said, “I’ve just been driving wherever I felt the need to go from New York onwards. I hit the west coast a little faster than I expected. I have to be in Los Angeles in about three weeks, but other than that, I don’t really have anything planned out.”

“Which means you might be staying here for a few weeks, right?” Stiles said, looking hopeful.

“Uh…” Steve rattled his brain. “I…might stay here for a week or so,” he hedged.

“Then you can stay here with us!” Stiles declared.

“He can stay where he wants,” Mr. Stilinski said, though he looked oddly proud of Stiles for making his offer. He caught Steve’s expression and added, “I’m not just making this offer to be polite. We have a guest room, and it’s nothing fancy, but it’s free and probably more comfortable than any of the motels around town.

Steve thought of all the places he’d been staying, when he wasn’t just camping out under the stars. All the cheap motels and fancy hotels and bed after bed after bed that didn’t feel like home.

“Thank you,” Steve said, shy but earnest.

“You won’t be thanking me when this one wakes you up in the morning crashing around the bathroom,” the Sheriff said sardonically, jerking his thumb over his shoulder at his indignant son. “But until then, you’re welcome.”

Steve laughed, unforced and making his cheeks ache as he followed the boy up the stairs.

This wasn’t his home, but it was a home, and that made all the difference.

~*~

A lot more of a difference than Steve expected, in fact.

Steve woke up only once in the middle of the night, jerking awake with little more than a harsh breath and a half-sob, quiet in the pre-dawn chill. He played around with his phone some, grateful that he didn’t wake up either of the Stilinskis, and against all his expectations…

He actually fell back asleep just as the sun started to peek over the horizon.

He fell asleep, and he didn’t wake again until almost noon. He actually stared at the time on the phone, then checked his watch, unable to believe the time.

Shaking his head in bewilderment, he got dressed, brushed his teeth, and made his way downstairs. Stiles was nowhere to be seen, but the Sheriff was sitting on the sofa, a small stack of magazines by his side.

Time Magazine was still at least somewhat familiar after seventy years, and it was disturbing and relieving in equal measures.

“Morning,” the Sheriff said with an easy smile. “Sleep well?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, not hiding his surprise. “Best sleep I’ve had in…a while.”

The Sheriff seemed proud of that. “Good to hear. You got any plans for today?”

“Not really,” Steve said shyly. “I…didn’t really have any plans at all, beyond ‘find my…Bucky’s last
The Sheriff raised an eyebrow at the slip-up, but thankfully didn’t comment. “Stiles and I did some grocery shopping while you were still asleep,” he said, setting aside the magazine and standing up. “I’ll see what I can whip up for you.”

“Thank you,” Steve said earnestly, following the Sheriff into the kitchen. He stopped in the doorway and looked around curiously as the Sheriff opened up some cabinets to peek inside and see what he had.

“Sandwiches sound good?”

Steve nodded, politely offering assistance and taking a seat at the table when the Sheriff declined. While the Sheriff put several sandwiches together, Steve stared at the appliances on the kitchen counter curiously, trying to figure out what they were for.

The Sheriff must’ve seen his confusion, because he followed Steve’s line of sight and said, “That’s a grill.”

“That’s a grill?” Steve asked incredulously.

“A George Foreman grill,” the Sheriff said. “Not as good as the full one outdoors, but when you want grilled food and don’t want the hassle of dealing with the real deal…”

Steve nodded, and then said, “What’s the thing next to it?”

“It’s called a magic bullet, but basically it’s small and really efficient blender,” the Sheriff said. “For making a smoothie or milkshake or whatever.”

“Huh,” Steve said, cocking his head to the side as he studied it. “And next to that…?”

It was a surprisingly enjoyable meal, Steve asking about the different kitchen appliances, which led to a nice half hour spent talking about changes in food in general. The Sheriff was amusingly familiar with health food trends entirely because Stiles kept trying to force them on him, and Steve had plenty of stories about the weird things Tony ate to compare notes. Steve was honestly surprised to find himself smiling through the Sheriff’s rants about all the godawful things Stiles had him trying, but still made a mental note to approach ‘superfoods’ with extreme caution.

But he would probably still approach them, mostly down to Tony and Natasha. They could be… quite determined, when they wanted to be.

Before he even realized it, the Sheriff was checking his watch and saying, “I have to go to a town council meeting soon - why don’t you text Stiles, spend some time with him? Hopefully, you can keep him out of trouble.”

Despite the fact the family relation was through Claudia, Steve couldn’t help but smile at the familiar gruffness in the Sheriff’s voice.

“I used to be the one getting Bucky into trouble,” Steve admitted, pulling out his phone. “But I’ll do my best.”

~*~
Chapter Summary

Steve spends the week with Stiles, Scott, and the Sheriff.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Steve pulled up to some kind of ice-cream place – or rather, a frozen-yogurt place. Steve still wasn’t sure what the difference was.

Stiles stood in front of it, checking his phone and biting his lip as he looked around. He had another boy with him, a Hispanic-looking teenager with shaggy hair and an uneven jaw line, who seemed to be playing a game on his phone.

“Steve!” Stiles greeted as soon as Steve pulled off his helmet. Steve smiled at him while locking the helmet to his bike, adjusting his now-much-lighter bag as he walked up to the boys.

Stiles’ friend squinted at him for a moment in confusion, before his eyes widened and his jaw dropped. “Aren’t you-”

“Yes,” Stiles said immediately, snickering. “Steve, this is my best friend, Scott. Scott, this is Steve, the family friend I was telling you about.”

“Du-u-ude!” Scott said, drawing out the vowel and seeming to be talking to Stiles even as he held his hand out to Steve. “Captain America is your family friend?”

Steve smiled politely as he glanced between their faces, between Scott’s awe and Stiles’ amusement.

“My grandma’s older brother was Bucky Barnes, remember?” Stiles said as Steve shook Scott’s hand.

“The Barnes family practically adopted me after my own died,” Steve explained. Stiles opened the door and herded them inside. “So I went looking for them when I got the chance, and I found Stiles.”

“Dude,” Scott repeated, pausing just inside the doorway. “You know the Black Widow, right?”

Steve smiled again, this time a little more genuine – and a little amused. The kid had hearts in his eyes. “Yup.”

“I don’t think he can get you her autograph, though,” Stiles said, and Steve nodded in apologetic agreement as he glanced around the tables. There were half a dozen other people in here – one family, a small group of college kids, and a pair of kids who might’ve been friends and might’ve been pre-teens on a date, it was hard to tell.

“But still! She’s awesome!” Scott said with a big grin, bounding towards the other end of the shop where a giant bin of disposable…Bowls? Cups?…sat waiting by several machines with handles and
flavors on them. The other wall was full of bins of candy, nuts, and other various elaborate ice cream toppings – and there were so many.

They got their frozen yogurts, both boys unsurprisingly opting for less of the actual ice cream – or ‘froyo’ as they called it – in favor of filling up their cups with as many candy toppings as possible. They meticulously put pieces in their bowls and kept weighing them, trying to get as much candy as possible with the few scrunched up bills and spare change they pulled out of their pockets. Steve watched them with fondness as he tried the different flavors of the frozen yogurt. They reminded him of himself and Bucky, pooling their spare change – back when spare change actually had buying power – to buy themselves a treat or some drinks at the end of the work week.

Steve ended up getting some caramel flavored thing with mixed berries on top. And, okay, maybe a few pieces of candy on the side.

The lone cashier working in the front of the store didn’t pay much attention to Steve, instead monitoring the boys while Steve paid for his own concoction. As they approached their table, Steve smiled apologetically at the boys as he said, "Mind if I take this seat?". He didn't actually wait for an answer as he sat in the chair that put his back to the rest of the ice cream parlor…frozen yogurt parlor?

"Sure!" Stiles said, the boys flopping into their own chairs.

Scott nodded, but asked, "Why that one?"

Before Steve could answer, Stiles did, rolling his eyes as he said, "Because he doesn't want anyone to see him, duh." At Scott's owlish blinking, he added, "Would you want to risk being inundated by paparazzi while you're just trying to eat some froyo?"

Scott snorted, but also nodded, taking a spoonful of his creation that was more candy than cream.

Stiles smiled, and turned to Steve. "So, what are you up to, today?"

Steve took a bite of his frozen treat – it was good, though he still didn't get why Tony was obsessed with it. "I don't really have any plans. Your dad suggested I come out here to keep you out of trouble, but it doesn't look like you're going to get into any. You don't even have anything to get into trouble with."

Scott snorted. "Dude, Stiles can be buck naked and still get into trouble."

The other boy looked down thoughtfully at his frozen yogurt. "Actually, I can think of a few situations where being naked is what gets me into trouble in the first place-"

"That wasn't a suggestion!" Scott yelped.

"I'm just saying," Stiles said, clearly goading Scott, pausing only to wink at Steve. "We could spice up the homecoming game with a bit of streaking-"

"No!" Scott said, looking mortified at the thought.

"C'mon-"

"Stiles, we'd get arrested!" Scott pointed out. "How awkward would it be if your dad had to arrest you for public nudity?"

Stiles' entire face twitched at that mental picture, and Steve snorted into his caramel-slathered berries.
"That would be kind of awkward," Steve agreed.

"…we'd have to wait until Dad wasn't on duty," Stiles said, starting to speculate.

"Dude, the deputies will call him if they arrest you," Scott pointed out.

Steve watched, unobtrusive and entertained, as Stiles came up with increasingly elaborate plans to run wild and naked through the school, while Scott kept poking holes in those plans.

Unobtrusive, entertained, and a little heartbroken. If he thought just the pictures of them on Facebook reminded him of himself and Bucky, that was nothing compared to watching these two bicker and connive in person. Stiles had definitely inherited the Barnes family penchant for elaborate schemes.

"Anyway," Scott eventually said, giving up on trying to talk sense into Stiles. "We were just gonna spend the afternoon doing lacrosse training."

Stiles coughed pointedly, and Scott rolled his eyes. "We're gonna go check on Stiles' obsession, then go train."

"Roscoe isn't an obsession!" Stiles immediately protested.

"…the fact that you named it kind of makes it an obsession by default," Scott said.

"Who's Roscoe?" Steve asked.

Stiles grinned, and Scott groaned.

Twenty minutes later, he stood waiting outside the only car dealership in town. He leaned against his motorbike, parked in the unmarked pavement outside the fence, as the two teenagers pedaled in on their bicycles towards him. The actual dealer who'd been eyeing Steve rolled his eyes when he saw the boys.

A portly man whose hair might've been blonde a few decades ago, he strode out of the gateway and yelled towards the boys, "Your damn jeep is fine!", just as they pulled up.

"I told him that," Scott said, panting and leaning over his handlebars.

"I know, I know," Stiles said, flailing off his bike while trying to kick down the kickstand at the same time. Stiles gesticulated at Steve and said, "I just want to show him my future car. He's a family friend."

The man narrowed his eyes at Stiles, then threw his hands up in exasperation as he turned and went back towards the office. On the way, though, Steve caught a glimpse of his face, and as soon as he turned away from the boys, the man was not nearly as irritated as he was acting.

Scott rolled his eyes as he also slipped off his bike, rolling it over and parking it neatly by Steve's.

Then he glared at Stiles until the other boy sighed in long-suffering and did the same.

Stiles all but ran through the gateway as Scott and Steve followed at a more sedate pace, both walking quietly as Stiles wove them through all the cars. Used and New were mixed together, the lot instead organized by type of car – SUV, minivan, sedan – and then further sorted by color. All the way in the back were a variety of jeeps, trucks, and all-terrain vehicles.

In the absolute back corner, Stiles stopped by a baby-blue jeep. It was most definitely used, but kept in good condition.
"Mr. Keller's holding it off the market until the end of the year, and my dad already promised to cover half. I just have to save up enough for the other half by then and it's mine. I've already got about a third of what I need, too!"

He grinned, actually patting the jeep like a beloved steed.

The jeep didn't have a big price tag sticker on it like most of the other cars, but the price was still listed on the paperwork in the window, which Steve leaned in to look at.

"Why this jeep?" he asked, peering at Stiles over the hood. "It looks like you could get plenty of other cars for a better price."

Scott leaned against the front bumper as Stiles looked towards the driver's seat, his small smile at odds with the sudden sadness in his eyes.

"This was my mom's car," he murmured.

Oh.

Steve took a step back, taking in the jeep and trying to figure out what Bucky's niece would've seen in it. "This was Claudia's?"

Stiles nodded. "Me and Dad had to sell it a while back. But that was years ago. Now, Mr. Keller agreed to hold onto it for as long as he can, even if someone else gives him a better price." Then he snorted, amused and nostalgic in equal measures. "Not that many have, people don't appreciate the classics."

"You must've loved this car," Steve said.

Scott snorted, but Stiles ignored him. "Yup! This was the car that dropped me off to my first day of preschool, and then my first day of elementary school. This was the car wherein I learned how to sing to the radio, where I learned how to tie my shoes, where I first learned how to read by looking at the street signs."

"-where he once peed his pants after too many slushies," Scott continued, smirking. Stiles turned to glare at Scott while Steve snorted. Scott grinned when he caught sight of Stiles' irritation.

"Anyway," Stiles said, drawing out the word syllable by syllable as he turned back to Steve. "I practically grew up in this car. Dad was originally gonna hold onto it for me, but uh – Mom's medical bills were…a lot. So selling the car covered most of them, but no one else wanted the jeep for years. Since Mr. Keller knew my mom – she was one of his first customers when he opened this place – he took it off the market when I got my learner's permit. I'll get my license on my sixteenth birthday and then come here and get my jeep!"

"That's nice of him," Steve said. "When's your birthday?"

"End of November," Stiles said, patting the jeep goodbye and turning back towards the gate. Scott walked alongside Stiles, this time, as Steve followed both the boys. "Just a bit after Thanksgiving."

"It'll always be easy to find in a parking lot," Scott mused, with a sidelong smile at Stiles. That was true – even with the jeep all the way in the back, it's color definitely made it stick out in the car lot. Why everyone's cars were only a few colors, these days, Steve just did not understand.

"My car is going to be the best car in the parking lot," Stiles sniffed, turning to walk backwards for a bit. "Even better than Jackson's."
"And Jackson is…?" Steve asked.

"Getting a Porche on his sixteenth birthday," Stiles grumbled.

Steve's eyebrows rose.

"His family's got a lot of money," Stiles said, bumping into a car and weaving around it. "Because his dad is a prick."

Steve blinked, then looked at Scott.

"Jackson's dad is the District Attorney, and Stiles' dad is the Sheriff," Scott explained. "So obviously, they have to hate each other on principle. Jackson just makes it easy because he's a giant douchebag."

"Ah," Steve said with a sage nod, twisting a little to get between two SUVs. "I see."

"Can you see this?" Scott said, holding out his phone with what looked like a map on it. "This is where we are now, and this is where the school is."

Steve nodded, committing the directions to memory. Outside the gate, he straddled his bike, then looked over to Stiles.

"By the way…"

"Yeah?" Stiles asked.

"…why 'Roscoe'?"

Stiles snickered as he said, "Um, an actor I like."

Scott groaned. "You don't wanna know, Steve, believe me."

"See, that just makes me want to know even more," Steve said, face smoothing out a bit.

"Really, just an actor I like, the jeep needed a name and that was the first thing that popped into my head," Stiles babbled.

"And for some reason," Scott droned. "He isn't bothered that when he needed a name for his car, the first thing he thought of is his favorite porn star."

"Scott!" Stiles yelped, and Steve chuckled at Stiles' indignation. "What if he tells my dad?"

"I think your dad knows you watch porn by now," Scott said.

"No! He does not! And I want to keep it that way!" Stiles said. Then he looked at Steve, and pointed at Scott. "Lies, all lies, all of them."

"Uh-huh," Steve said. "Don't worry, dirty pictures are nothing new for me." At the boys' disconcerted looks, he added, "I was a city-boy, then I was in the army. Kind of hard to miss. Hell, I've drawn a few pin-ups, myself."

"As long as you don't tell my dad," Stiles grumbled, still sending betrayed looks at his best friend. Scott wasn't even trying to hide his amusement at Stiles' expense. "Seriously, he'll take away my computer and life as I know it will end if he found out."
Teenagers hadn't changed much since Steve's day, let alone the Sheriff's – and the Sheriff was a sharp man to boot. He probably already suspected, if not knew, what his son was up to.

But there was no fun in telling Stiles that, so instead he promised his silence on the matter, then pulled on his helmet as the boys pedaled away.

As Steve drove to the field where he was going to meet them, he wondered if he should name his bike.

No one would be surprised if he named it Margaret the Motorcycle, and Peggy would likely even be amused at the dubious honor.

Honestly, though, in this day and age – maybe he could get away with Bucky the Bike. It had a much nicer ring to it, and was just a little bit closer to the truth.

~*~

"These things have been running like crazy since the Battle of New York," Stiles said the next day. Steve cringed good-naturedly at the tune of his old theme song playing from the TV. It was a re-colored film of one of his old shows. It segued into a black-and-white clip of him and the Howling Commandos rolling into a town on top of a stolen Nazi truck, Steve and Dum Dum hanging off the sides. There was no sound of the actual event filmed, though, and with good reason.

"Bucky woulda been pissed if he realized how cheerful he looked," Steve said, pointing to where Bucky had been driving the truck. The film clip switched over to some posed pictures of Steve and his team. He looked over at the boys, who were sprawled against opposite arms of the couch. "He was yelling at me and Dum Dum to stop being hooligans and get back in the truck with the others. Threatened to keep driving and leave us behind if we fell off."

Stiles and Scott both laughed, nearly kicking their popcorn bowls off each other's stomachs. Steve leaned back into the arm chair he'd appropriated, since the Sheriff was off at work.

"Did you?" Scott asked eagerly. "Fall off?"

"Not this time," Steve said.

Stiles grinned, while Scott's eyes went wide. "Does this mean there were other times?"

"Oh, plenty," Steve said, as the credits ended and the documentary began. He sighed at the picture of him lined up with all the other Project Rebirth recruits. Steve was the shortest and skinniest in a line of soldiers whose physiques looked closer to what Steve had now. "I definitely don't miss boot camp."

Scott winced at the project footage of the recruits going through an obstacle course, the narrator describing Erskine's criteria. "I can't imagine doing that with asthma. I would've passed out."

"I did pass out," Steve admitted. "Twice."

It was funny, at first. Steve kept providing commentary on the clips and photos, talking over the historian interviews. He expounded on the funnier parts of being a USO performer, what really happened inside that HYDRA base, and just how excruciating the bureaucratic nightmare of his post-raid hearing was.

He smiled fondly when the documentary started digging into their backgrounds. He burned with familiar frustration when they spent so much time on Steve, but he was used to it – he did tend to
attract attention like that. They tied him close to Bucky, though Steve wondered how they knew about the times Steve had tagged along with the Barnes family to their synagogue.

Scott smiled at that. "I tagged along with Stiles, once, when we were little."

"All the old ladies squeezed his cheeks so hard, he looked like he was blushing by the end," Stiles said, snickering as Scott stuck his tongue out at Stiles.

"And they kept shoving snacks at us," Scott added. "Kept saying we were too skinny."

"They did the same thing to me," Steve consoled.

The documentary segued into Dum Dum's family and history, then Gabe's from there. Steve blinked in surprise when after barely taking long enough to mention that Gabe was the only Howling Commando with a college degree, it shifted to Dernier.

"That's it?"

"Huh?" both boys asked.

"They spent five minutes on Dum Dum!" Steve said, bewildered.

Scott frowned, and Stiles grimaced.

"It is the History channel," he said, like that meant something. When Steve looked at him for explanation, Stiles added, "They have a tendency to white-wash things."

"…white-wash?" Steve asked.

"Uh, down-play racism, contributions of minority historical figures, that sort of thing," Stiles said. Scott pouted a little. "It's…a problem. With history in America in general."

Steve hummed discordantly, but sat back to watch the documentary with a little more attention.

It didn't get better. A cynical part of him wasn't surprised that an American-produced documentary wouldn't devote equal attention to them all, but he still chafed at how little time they spent on Gabe. It got even worse when Steve heard all the fancy words they used to gloss over Jim's family being-

"They were interned!" Steve snapped at the screen when it cut to the commercial break – far too soon. "That – that was wrongful imprisonment, how could they barely mention…"

He looked to the boys, to Stiles, who only waved helplessly at the screen and reiterated, "White-washing."

It got even worse from there. While most of Peggy's actual intelligence history was classified, most of her interactions with the team weren't. Even back then, let alone now. She held a powerful legacy to her name, and people across the world studied her intelligence craft and her skills in espionage.

And all this documentary talked about was her doomed relationship with Steve, the tragic wartime romance.

"That's Agent Carter to you," Steve grumbled under his breath at the next commercial break.

"Huh?" Scott asked, tilting his attention towards Steve.

"They called everyone else by our last names or by a rank and name," Steve said. "But they kept
calling her Peggy. If I'm Captain Rogers, then she's Agent Carter, no two buts about it. She never tolerated anyone's bullshit."

"Not even yours?" Stiles said, eyes eager for a story.

"Especially not mine," Steve said. "The one time I got mad and made a nasty comment to her, she picked up a loaded gun and pulled the trigger four times, right at me. Only reason I didn't get a bullet wound was because Howard had just given me the shield for the first time."

"She sounds like a ball-buster," Stiles said. Steve looked over at him, but to his surprise, Stiles had an admiring look on his face, rather than a disparaging one. "Holy shit, Scott, she sounds like Lydia."

Scott choked on his popcorn, laughing. "Oh my god, this explains so much. And you two aren't even related!"

Steve raised an eyebrow, and Scott said, "You and Stiles have a type."

"Curvy and dangerous and smart," Stiles said proudly. Then he deflated and added, "When they aren't pretending to be dumb because their boyfriend is an insecure bag of dicks who doesn't deserve them."

At that little tangent, Steve yet-again looked to Scott. "She's dating Jackson," he explained.

"The guy getting a Porche?" Both boys nodded, Stiles with the glummest expression Steve had ever seen outside of a war zone.

Steve was going to try and offer some consolation, but then the documentary came back on.

At least now it wasn't going person by person, but focusing on the team as a whole.

The last half hour took a fun turn, again. Steve regaled side-stories and details about the battles, raids, and ridiculous missions they pulled off. As the narrator talked about all their noble battles alongside the French resistance movement, Steve merrily chattered about all the ridiculous ways to smuggle wine past the Germans that the resistance fighters had figured out. The trip to Poland just wasn't complete without explaining how the their plan had nearly been thwarted by cows. And surprisingly, Steve found himself able to reminisce about the last conversation he had with Bucky, their jokes about the zipline and payback for the Cyclone. His eyes stung, but as he told the story to the boys, to Bucky's grand-nephew and the boy Bucky would've taken under his wing as he'd done for Steve so long ago, Steve found no actual desire to cry.

Was this what moving on felt like?

Despite all that, when the documentary finally ended, Steve found himself still smarting about the disparity in attention the team members had gotten.

"Sorry," Stiles said, when Steve mentioned as much. "But yeah, that's a problem everywhere."

"Other history channels?" Steve asked, confused.

"Other history, period," Stiles said, getting that particular kind of wound up and animated that preceded a lot of informative rambling. "It's a big problem in America in general. People constantly try to whitewash history, especially since Texas is a major textbook producer. Like half the country still isn't allowed to teach the Trail of Tears. And no one talks about all the war crimes in Vietnam. And-"
"What's the Trail of Tears?" Steve asked.

The boys stared at him, Scott's jaw actually dropping.

Steve fidgeted in their shocked gazes, looking between them for answers.

Then Stiles sighed.

"One thing I should add," he said, looking at Steve and Scott, this explanation apparently being for both of them. "Is that this whitewashed history was the kind that was taught everywhere up until recently." Then he looked at Steve. "The Trail of Tears happened in the 1830's, and you don't know about it. That's how bad it is."

Steve stared, confused. "What was it?"

"That time the American government killed around six-thousand innocent people," Stiles explained. "And forcibly relocated another ten-thousand…for profit. Specifically, land."

Steve gripped the armchair's upholstery harder and harder as Stiles explained about Indian relocation. That explanation segued into what he mentioned earlier, the Vietnam war crimes. He talked about all the various events that American history never covered up but never talked about, either. And he talked about how much trouble their middle school American history teacher had gotten into for even mentioning these things to her classroom.

After seventy years, he would have expected people to know better. After the war, after the Holocaust, after the Nazis and HYDRA, he would've expected people to know better. He hadn't sacrificed everyone and everything he loved just so people could continue their ignorance and repeat all the worst parts of their history.

He couldn't believe he died for this.

~*~

Steve was out 'lacrosse training' with the boys again for the second time this week. Where last time had mostly been them teaching Steve how to play the game, this time they were doing actual training for the sport.

It had actually been kinda fun, using the lacrosse stick – which they called a 'crosse' – to lob balls at the boys. Stiles was a terrible goalie, but still cheerfully went along with the exercise – to make Scott feel better, according to him.

"He'll never be a better goalie than Danny," Stiles confided when Scott had been jogging his lap around the field. "But it's good for reflexes! Even non-goalie players need to be able to catch the ball."

Now, Steve stood in the middle of the field, using the stick to throw the balls at the boys. He was improving his aim, and the boys were improving their reflexes. Enough that Steve even held back just a little bit less as he went. He smiled at how the boys jostled each other out of the way to catch as many of the balls as they could. At their behest, he started throwing a little farther, and at different angles and directions, giving them more and more of a challenge.

Surprisingly, Scott kept up.

Granted, his breathing hadn't been too great thus far. But not being able to breathe had never stopped Steve before, and he couldn't chide Scott for not letting it stop him, now.
If he were being honest, Steve had actually forgotten that Scott even had asthma…

…right until the boy started wheezing.

It wasn't all that noticeable, at first. Scott was still running and jumping, trying to snatch balls out of the air. When Scott happened to come close, Steve heard the familiar hitch in his breathing that used to mean an imminent break in his own activities, way back before Project Rebirth.

But Scott wasn't slowing down at all. And since trying to ease up or slow things down for him would've been the height of hypocrisy, Steve didn't try. He just kept a closer eye on Scott, and he knew he wasn't the only one. Stiles started trying to keep a closer eye on him, too, only taking his gaze away when trying to make a catch.

Yet somehow, it still caught Steve by surprise when a few minutes later, Scott fell to his knees, breath whistling with the effort it took to get air in and out of his lungs.

Steve dropped his crosse as he ran to Scott's side, heart breaking at the familiar combination of panicked frustration and exasperation in Scott's eyes. He'd seen that look in the mirror for most of his life.

"Hey, hey," he said, crouching down by the boy. It had been years since he last got helped through an asthma attack – three years or seventy, just a few days before he met Dr. Erskine and Bucky shipped out to Europe. But Steve still remembered how it went.

Or at least, he thought he did.

Because just as he was about to place his hands on Scott's chest, sternum and diaphragm like Bucky used to do, Stiles came running from the direction of their bikes and bags. He was clutching… something in his hand. It was some kind of bent tube, with something like another tube or a cannister inside of the long end of it.

As Stiles approached, he pulled a cap off the short end as he fell to his knees beside Scott.

He jammed the thing into Scott's hand. Without even looking, Scott wrapped his lips around the short end and pushed down on the cannister. There was a hissing noise as Scott tried to breathe in-

No, not tried – did.

Steve stared, stunned, as Stiles tapped a steady rhythm against Scott's chest, and Scott breathed.

He breathed in, impossibly deep against the wheezing of just a moment before. He held his breath for a moment, then breathed out, with only the barest hitch in his breath as the precious air escaped. He took another deep breath, and let that one out, too, with that little hitch still there.

Then Stiles said, "C'mon, Scott, just one more." Scott pressed down on the cannister again. There was another hiss, and another deep breath, and another, this time without even the hitch. Two more deep breaths later, Scott pulled the tube away from his mouth.

Less than three minutes from the start of his asthma attack, and it was just…gone.

Steve stared down at the little device as Scott murmured, "Thanks, dude," while taking the other piece of plastic from Stiles and recapping it. The boys stood up, Stiles still keeping a worried hand on Scott's shoulder.

"What is that?" Steve blurted out.
Both boys stared in askance, before Scott followed Steve's line of sight and said, "Oh, this? It's an inhaler." He looked quizically between Steve's face and the inhaler, then handed it to Steve with a congenial shrug. "I guess they didn't have this in your day, huh?"

Steve dumbly shook his head, standing and taking it from Scott.

It was so…small.


Scott frowned as he looked down at his inhaler in Steve's hand. "Wait, you had asthma before you became a supersoldier, right?" Steve nodded. "What did you guys do when you had asthma attacks?"

For a brief moment, Steve couldn't answer. He just stared at the little device that Steve would've paid in limbs for, that Bucky would've killed for. He was blindsided by the realization that these boys didn't know about all the little struggles that plagued Steve's every day for most of his life.

That they didn't have to.

Steve swallowed and finally answered, "Breathing exercises, humidity if we could manage it, asthma cigarettes, that sort of thing-"

"Asthma cigarettes?" Scott asked incredulously. "Is that like, a weird name or a joke or something?"

Steve frowned. "No? Just cigarettes."

Both boys looked horrified, and Scott cried out, "But smoking causes asthma!"

"Or makes it worse," Stiles grumbled, glaring fondly at Scott. Steve could see there was a story there.

He blinked, bewildered. "They…they were prescribed by my doctors."

Scott's eyes bugged wide open at that, while Stiles stared at him like he expected Steve was pulling their legs.

"No wonder you had it so bad, then," Stiles finally said, shaking his head and letting his hand drop from Scott's shoulder.

"…yeah," Steve said, turning his attention back to the inhaler, turning it over and over in his hand.

After a few moments, Steve realized the boys were still standing there with silence that was disconcerting from anyone, let alone two teenagers. He looked up to see their matching expressions of concern.

They glanced sidelong at each other.

"You okay, Steve?" Stiles asked.

Swallowing down a lump in his throat, he handed the little device back to Scott. "Yeah, I'm fine, I just…" He gestured to the inhaler. "I really could've used something like that, before…” He gestured to his own body. "This."

"I'll bet," Scott said, nodding sympathetically.
Stiles made a face. "Especially if they were trying to treat your asthma with cigarettes."

Steve laughed.

To his own ears, it had a wet edge to it, but the boys were either oblivious or polite, as neither of them said a word about it.

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Steve focused on Scott. "How are you feeling? Should we call it a day?"

Unsurprisingly, Scott shook his head. "No, I'm fine – I can handle it. We can finish."

Steve smiled – even more so when he looked at Stiles and saw familiar echoes of worried frustration in his gaze.

"Sure thing," Steve said. He trusted that if Stiles wasn't protesting, then Scott really could handle finishing their planned work out for the day – even if they might have to take it a little easier from here on out.

Apparently, taking care of stubborn asthmatics was a Barnes family trait.

Bucky would've been so proud.

~*~

Ensconced in the Stilinskis' living room the next day, Steve looked at the photo of Sarah's son. Clad in a Navy service uniform, he stood beside a Sarah Barnes much older than Steve remembered her. And she wasn't actually a Barnes, anymore, not by the time her only son was on his way to Vietnam.

Not when she, unbeknownst to her, was seeing her son alive for the last time.

The photo was on the TV, with a song playing, the same song as the last three photos. Apparently, it was the big hit back then.

Steve missed the sensation of a physical album, something he could hold in his hand and turn the pages of. But, he could definitely see the appeal of Stiles' preferred format. He learned more about music from the last two hours of Stiles' slideshow than from the two dozen albums Tony had sent him over the last several months.

It helped to have context, to have memories attached to the songs – even if they weren't his own.

Music to go with the photos, videos from more recent times, and this whole show was backed up online somewhere. According to Stiles, no matter what happened, none of this would ever be lost. If the house burned down with every family photo ever taken inside it, these pictures would still be safe and sound somewhere in the world. Steve could never doubt the appeal of that – no matter how much he missed physical photo albums.

"Mom said that her Aunt Sarah came to live with them a couple years after the end of the war, when her husband left her," Stiles said, continuing on with his stories about the Barnes family. "She worked as a teacher, but she had to retire when it turned out she had cancer. She didn't want to die all sick and bed-ridden, so she used up all her money traveling and stuff, and then…"

Steve nodded in understanding. "I can sympathize."

Stiles blew out a nervous breath, and a moment later, the song ended. A new one began, and with it
came a new photo – this time of Claudia and the Sheriff's wedding. The song was easy-paced, but not slow, a strumming guitar that sounded almost ukelele-like, with a gentle drumbeat in the background. It made Steve want to lean back and relax, especially after the more upbeat Beatles song that had come before it.

"This was a favorite of ours," the Sheriff said. His pile of paperwork sat long forgotten on a side table as he leaned back in his armchair, looking at the picture of himself and his wife posing in front of an elaborate altar. "At least one that we could both agree on." His smile took on a dopey turn that made Steve's heart try to hide deep in his gut. "This was our first dance as husband as wife."

As if on cue, the next photo came up. It was Claudia and John, alone on a dance floor, surrounded by a crowd of people watching them as they only watched each other. Claudia's dress was swirling around her calves, with John laughing as he leaned into her. Glancing to his side, Steve looked at the Sheriff and would bet his shield that twenty years later, John still remembered what Claudia said that was so funny.

Steve stared, and did his resolute best not to be envious of this man, not to run away from this house and this town and this entire, goddamn century.

He tried not to wonder if this is what he and Peggy could have looked like. What song would they have chosen for their first dance?

"Their next dance was to an AC/DC song," Stiles said with a snicker. "You'll see that video in a few minutes. It's hilarious, Dad has this most constipated look on his face—"

"Your mother had many, many wonderful traits," the Sheriff said, with the comfortable voice of an old argument. "But good taste in music was not one of them."

Would Steve and Peggy have fought about music? Who is he kidding, of course they would've. They would've fought, and settled on something perfectly in the middle. Then the Commandos would've found a way to hijack the music and play something completely ridiculous anyway, and Bucky would've been warning Steve not to step on Peggy's toes while they danced and—

Well.

It was never going to happen, now. Peggy was an old woman, wed and widowed twice over with no room in her life for a long-lost lover returned from the dead. And Bucky and the Commandos all were dead.

Sometimes, Steve wished he still was, too.

(Maybe a bit more than sometimes.)

"I've heard a lot of that kind of music," Steve said, because now was not the time to start crying. "I'm not sure how you dance to it."

"You don't," the Sheriff drawled.

"You've heard a lot of classic rock?" Stiles asked, emphasizing the adjective while looking at his father, even though his question was directed at Steve.

"Tony likes it," Steve said.

"See!" Stiles cried out, flailing in Steve's general direction. On the TV, the photo changed again, and again, several shots of John and Claudia dancing to whatever this song was. "Even Iron Man likes
"Tony Stark isn't exactly known for having good taste," the Sheriff retorted. He finally looked away from all the photos of his wedding to focus on his son. "Have you watched his Expos?"

"Have I watched them," Stiles scoffed, shaking his head at the ridiculousness of the question. The Sheriff rolled his eyes.

Steve smiled sadly. The next photo of Stiles' fancy slideshow was a picture of a massive wedding cake, Claudia and John both poised with cake knives and ready to slice into it.

"Tony plays it in his lab, a lot," Steve said. "At least when it's just him. Bruce probably would've liked this song more. I'll have to ask."

The gentle song came to an end.

It was followed by the kind of noise that Tony adored and Bruce fondly complained about in every other text message he sent Steve. On screen, a young John groaned as Claudia laughed, waving her friends over from where the bridal party stood. Steve watched as several other couples and groups flooded the dance floor. Claudia kept poking and tugging John into dancing – though it looked more like jumping around than anything else. She was undeterred by the unholy combination of lead limbs and two left feet that her new husband was displaying. Instead, after a minute of unsuccessful goading, she kicked off her shoes, tossing them towards the couple's private table. The bride stood on the groom's feet, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and leaning into his chest as he held her close. Swaying in tune with the rock music, they were a spot of serenity in the middle of the ecstatic chaos of their friends leaping around to racket masquerading as music.

"The music was terrible," John said, voice soft against the hard edges of the song. "But sometimes I think I liked this dance the most."

Steve heard a sniff from Stiles' direction, and pointedly didn't look. Instead, he watched the young Claudia and John 'dance', trying desperately not to wonder if Bucky would've liked this music, what he would've done at his niece's wedding.

Probably try to make Steve dance, too.

~*~

Steve had to leave.

The Sheriff sighed, Stiles protested, and even Scott asked if Steve was sure, but eventually they all accepted it when Steve said he had to leave.

(He had to leave now before he never wanted to again.)

Steve still needed to go check-in on Jim's family. Jim's granddaughter had already offered a tour of the vineyard, as well as some old photos that no museum had come asking for yet.

He wanted to get those photos before some school or museum did. He wanted to see the west coast as a tourist, as he would've done before the ice. He wanted to dry up all his tears before he had to go back to doing SHIELD's network.

He needed to pack up Steve Rogers before he had to go back to being Captain America.

So here he was, getting ready to leave, cleaning up after himself and packing for the last stretch of
"Hey, Steve?"

Steve looked up from where he was trying to stuff his sketch book under his sweatpants in his duffel bag.

Stiles fidgeted in the doorway to the guestroom, holding his hands behind his back.

"Yeah?" Steve asked, setting the sketchbook down. He was probably going to unpack and repack half the bag, anyway – like he always did. He still wasn't sure if he believed Bruce's claim that he could pack things right the first time.

"Uh, I, um. I know it's weird, but I wanted to give you something, y'know, a gift, or...a souvenir, I guess? Except I couldn't think of anything. Well, I couldn't think of anything that I could actually afford. And it's not like we have much going on here for there to be souvenirs of. Unless you wanted a fancy leaf from the preserve or something, I didn't...Um, anyway-"

His hands came around, revealing that one was holding something out to Steve.

An inhaler.

Steve took it with a heavy grain of confusion. "What...doesn't Scott need this?"

Stiles shook his head. "It's a really old one, a dead one. Scott lost it, got another one, then found it again, and used it dry and never remember to take it back for disposal. I asked him for it."

"I suppose I'll definitely remember playing lacrosse with you guys," Steve said. Was this a weird 21st century thing he was missing part of?

Stiles was shaking his head.

"It's not about that," Stiles said. "I couldn't think of a good 'something to remember us by' gift. So I thought of what other kinds of gifts there are, and I thought of welcome gifts. This is more of a...welcome to the 21st century gift."

Steve tilted his head, hoping Stiles would elaborate. Because out of everything that could exemplify modernity...why an inhaler?

"Just – you had this look on your face when we were watching the history channel and talking about the war and stuff," Stiles said, waving towards Steve's face apologetically. "Like...you were sad."

Steve swallowed. "Stiles-"

"Not like that!" Stiles blurted out. What did that even mean? Not like what? "I mean – you..." Stiles took a deep breath. "You pretty much died to stop one genocide, and then another one happened anyway. Several happened, just in other places and times."

Way to remind him.

"And – I know you're disappointed," Stiles said. Steve opened his mouth to protest out of habit, but then closed it before he could insult Stiles' intelligence. "I would be, too. But that's not everything, you know? The last few decades hasn't just been everyone forgetting their history and doing all the stuff you were trying to stop. It's been awesome things, too. And not just music and comic books and stuff – awesome as they are. The technology behind rocket missiles is also behind rocket ships, and
we use those to go into space. Diseases and medical conditions and all this other bad stuff that gutted your generation doesn't even appear in mine. I mean, when you were growing up, people were terrified of polio. Now, me and everyone else my age just got a few shots when we were little and we never have to think about it again."

Steve looked at Stiles, then stared down at the inhaler.

"I just…I think you don't need help remembering places you've been or people you've been with. But…it must be hard. To remember all the good things that have happened over the last few decades, when your job is to deal with all the bad stuff."

Stiles waved his hand towards the inhaler. "So this isn't to remind you about me or Beacon Hills, because I think you've got that covered. This is to remind you that however bad things got over the last seventy years, they got good, too. We couldn't beat politics, but we could beat polio. The rocket technology that brought cities down into craters also brought humanity up to the moon. Terrorist attacks and asthma attacks are always going to be a problem, but at least one of them can be stopped in its tracks with practically the push of a button. And maybe that'll make stopping the other one just a little bit easier."

Steve wrapped his fingers around the tiny medical device that would've changed his whole world growing up. His eyes were burning as he stepped forward to wrap Stiles in a tight hug.

"Thank you," he barely-didn't-sob into Stiles' ear.

Stiles froze up in surprise, then wrapped his arms awkwardly around Steve's shoulders, patting his back. Steve sniffed, his humor equal to his amazement. Because this kid understood Steve's frustration within a week better than anyone else had in months. How did a hyperactive teenager see what dozens of adults and professional psychologists had missed?

"No problem," Stiles said, sounding a little unsure but genuine nonetheless.

Steve stepped back. He looked down at the little piece of plastic and metal in his hands, the one that helped millions of people, millions of kids, breathe just a little bit better – and do everything else just a little bit easier. And he knew how much it changed not just the lives of those with tricky lungs, but their friends, too.

Bucky and Stiles alone were proof of that.

It didn't come in time to change Steve's world, but it did come in time to change Scott's.

All the fancy gadgets this new millenium had to offer, and this was the first one that made Steve feel like his sacrifice had been worth it.

~*~

Chapter End Notes

I've gotta say, I was absolutely blown away by the popularity of this fic! Thank you all so much - every comment, kudos, and bookmark made my day. ♥

I'm sorry for taking so long to update - real life has kind of kicked me in the ass, lately. But, it's here now! Please let me know what you think. If there's anything you liked,
disliked, think I need to include more of, need to improve, anything at all, drop a line and let me know. Concrit is ♥.

If you're interested, you can find me on Tumblr, where I gripe about my writing, chat about my inspirations, or even post snippets a little early. Come say hi! :)}
Gently Restore Warmth

Happy Thanksgiving, everyone!

Thank you all so much for your comments and kudos. ♥

I would like to make a correction to the last chapter - the Trail of Tears actually happened in the 1830's, not the 1860's. Thank you to Norwich36 for pointing that out!

Also, credit for the knock-off shirt thing (you'll know what I mean when you get there) goes to Vanessa. Thanks for the idea! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~*~

Steve had honestly feared that his phone number would end up publicized when he gave it to Stiles. Nothing against the kid, but Steve remembered being a teenager desperate to impress everyone.

It never happened.

Instead, Stiles texted him all the time - more than Tony, even, which was not really that surprising once Steve thought about it.

It was mostly little things. Pictures of his daily life - usually him and Scott goofing off - and pictures of food or drinks that Steve just had to try it's amazing omg. Just before his school started for him, Steve often came back from missions to find long strings of text messages about how much school sucked and teachers sucked more and homework sucked the most.

The first time Steve happened to check his personal messages in SHIELD was just after a review meeting. He ended up chuckling to himself at the picture of a stack of textbooks accompanied by horrified-looking 'smiley faces'. Emoticons, that's what they were called.

"What's so funny?" Natasha asked, peeking over Steve's shoulder to his phone. Steve tilted the phone to show her, trying to keep the screen away from the sunlight coming through the glass walls of the Triskelion's fancy elevator. From Steve's other side, Clint also leaned in. "Oh, your kid in California?"

"He's not my kid," Steve said. "He's just..." He paused, trying to figure out how to describe Stiles in relation to himself. "A friend."

"Poor kid," Clint said, shaking his head while looking at the picture. "Makes me kinda glad I never went to high school."
Steve snorted, and started composing a text back. He had to remind himself to forgo greetings, to act as if this was a chat.

Which it was. It took Steve ages to understand that texting wasn't meant to be correspondence, but conversation.

And in this one, his first response was exactly what he'd say if he'd been with Stiles right now.

*Wait until you get to college.*

By the time Steve got down to the garage and was about to get on his bike, his phone vibrated with a new message.

Instead of any words, Stiles' response was a series of crying emoticons. Steve couldn't help but smile, and decided to wait before scaring Stiles with the kinds of documents he had to read on a daily basis for work.

It wasn't just day-to-day life, either. Stiles turned out to be a valuable wellspring of information. His explanation of memes made so much more sense than Tony's - by virtue of making sense at all. He sent Steve entire websites full of them, and picture after picture of the most popular ones.

Steve sent back the picture of the Grumpy Cat, telling Stiles that it woulda been Bucky's favorite.

The childish part of Steve enjoyed the sensation of trying not to laugh the first time he asked if he could 'has' an MRE while waiting to go to Damascus with a joint operations team. Tony looked ready to cry.

"No," Tony said, shaking his head woefully, standing in front of the jet. Then he narrowed his eyes when he noticed Steve's mirth. "That's not - Steve, you can't be a troll, you can't."

Steve frowned. "How am I a troll?"

Tony threw his hands up in the air in frustration and stalked to the pilot's seat. Tony couldn't take the Iron Man suit all the way to Syria, so he was flying the jet, instead.

With a sigh, Steve texted Stiles, *What's a troll?*

A few minutes later, his phone chimed and he read, *Mythological troll or Internet troll?*

*Well, I know what the mythological one is.*

He paused, then added, *I just got called a troll.*

Then they were up in the air, where they couldn't use cell data. By the time Steve landed, he got his explanation.

*Online, a troll is someone who posts or says aggravating stuff just to start an argument, piss people off, etc etc. Gets used in other places to mean someone who is messing things up just for the sake of messing things up. In real life, it's what you call someone who makes a joke or whatever just to see a funny reaction or make someone uncomfortable. It's a pretty broad spectrum.*

And then another message right after:

*So basically, a troll is someone who likes to mess with people. Can mean the funny way when used in real life (as in it can be funny for the troll and everyone else). But mostly means the annoying sense online (so only the troll and some fellow trolls think they're funny, everyone else just hates*
And finally:

Also gets used as a verb, like "to troll someone", and this is more likely to mean funny than annoying.

As everyone disembarked, Steve looked at Tony and said, "I didn't mean to troll you, you know."

He looked at Steve dubiously. "Really?"

"Really," Steve said, clapping a hand on Tony's shoulder. Hoping he was remembering the phrasing right, he added, "Ain't nobody got time for that."

Tony was still twitching by the time they got to the meeting room.

Along with sending Steve useful notes - in one case literally - about the modern world, he was also an excellent background researcher for Steve...and an excellent sounding board for his tough decisions.

Just before Halloween, the Smithsonian asked Steve to consult on an exhibit they were developing. Steve, in turn, asked Stiles for any help with understanding all the problems with history education in America.

Blogs, books, articles - Steve was still reading through a website on his way to the meeting with the museum director, the curators, and some of the more influential fat cats financing the new exhibit.

Steve sat through some stupid, inspirational speech about how people could benefit from learning the true impact Captain America and the Howling Commandos had in WWII. After that was a more useful meeting about how much public demand there was for learning about all the Heroes of New York. With Captain America and Iron Man being at the top of the list, the exhibit could generate a lot of revenue for the Smithsonian.

Then, they asked him for his thoughts.

"Rule number one," he said. "No whitewashing."

The director twitched, puzzled. The curators, historians all of them, actually smiled and seemed relieved when he said that.

"What exactly do you mean, Captain?" one of the donors asked, eyes narrowing.

"I've seen a lot of books and documentaries about me and my team, how history has remembered us," Steve said. "And most of them downplay the contributions of my teammates who weren't white and gloss over their unique challenges." He pursed his lips. "They deserve better than that. A lot better. So don't whitewash - and prioritize me over them as little as possible."

Half the people at the table started to protest, so Steve held up a hand, quieting them instantly.

"My advanced abilities are helpful in a war, but that's not why I was able to accomplish so much," Steve said. "I was nothing without my team, then and now. History has forgotten that. Generations have grown up not understanding the extent of the challenges we faced and real sacrifices we made. It's your job as historians to remind them, and to teach them."

It would be a lie to say the meeting went smoothly after that, but it went a lot smoother than if Steve
hadn't made that little aside. The curators and historians themselves were in Steve's boat, well aware of the problems with history education and more than eager to fix it.

He could see some hesitance on the part of the financial backers. But by the end of the meeting, none of them were able to stand up to Captain America and tell him that his teammates should get less attention than him.

Sometimes, being a historical icon had its perks.

Unfortunately, it also had a tendency to lead to people to underestimate his humanity.

"...your dog tags?"

Steve stared at the director. "What?"

The director smiled congenially.

"Your dog tags, Captain - they would make an invaluable addition. They are an excellent example of how the Army conducted its business, and say so much about a soldier in such a little space. I understand you don't need them today, as their regulations are so different."

Steve swallowed, and said, "Let me get back to you on that."

The director seemed surprised, but nodded. The curators were all glaring at their boss where he couldn't see them. So was one of the backers, an old man whose eyeroll at the request made Steve wonder if he'd ever served in the military.

Steve never asked.

Instead, he told everyone he knew about the request.

Half of them said to give them over - to let his past go and move on with his life. The other half told him to keep them, to not let the museum take away one of the few pieces of his past he still had left.

Stiles asked, "What do you want to do?"

Steve stared at the counter where he was assembling the ingredients to make pad thai. He fiddled with the bluetooth earpiece in his ear, the actual phone itself sitting on the opposite counter behind Steve. "That's just it - I don't know."

"Okay," Stiles said. There was a clacking of keys in the background, which Stiles had insisted was homework and which Steve guessed was anything but. "So why do you keep them?"

Steve swallowed, reaching into his shirt to pull out the dog tags in question. He had to wear regulation identifiers in the field, but otherwise he wore these all the time - 24/7, as the phrase was today.

"I've had these dog tags with me from the beginning," Steve said. "When I got them, it was a farce, but - I even had them in my pocket when I first stormed that HYDRA base to go rescue Bucky, you know? I'd forgotten about them. I was doing a show and sometimes little kids asked to see them so I got used to keeping them on me and-" He swallowed. "They've been with me through every battle, every mission, every moment, and even in the ice. I went down wearing these, and came back up wearing these."

"Right," Stiles said. "So, opposite question: what would you gain if you gave them away?"
Steve sighed.

"...moving on," Steve said. "Closing that chapter of my life for good." He took a deep breath. "And - from a sentimental standpoint and an educational one, I can see the value of them having it."

"But aren't you already giving them your old uniform?" Stiles asked.

Steve huffed humorlessly. "True." He poked at the chicken he still had to slice for his latest cooking experiment. "But dog tags do mean a lot - both to how the army functions, and in what they meant to the people wearing them. Kids could learn a lot, and maybe some of their parents, too. Me and Bucky used to joke about our dog tags matching each other, you know? We'd both listed his Ma as our next of kin, and I'd lived with them before joining Project Rebirth, so apart from our names and blood types, they were exactly the same. We both even had left our religions off."

"How come?" Stiles asked.

"The USO kept mine off because it would've looked bad for an American icon to be Catholic," Steve said. "It's not such a big deal, today, but back then - well, people had opinions about Catholics. And a lot of Jews didn't say what their religions were on their dog tags, to protect themselves in case they were captured by Nazis."

"Steve," Stiles said. Steve realized the clacking of computer keys in the background had stopped. "Is trying to 'close that chapter of your life' really a good idea?"

"It's...not like I'm going back," Steve pointed out.

"Exactly," Stiles said. "I'm probably stretching this metaphor a bit too far, but even if I can only read something for the first time once, I can reread it as much as I want. I go back to old books all the time."

"You think I shouldn't?"

"I think that you shouldn't let go of your past because it's what you 'should' do or what everyone wants you to do," Stiles said. He paused, then said, "You know, most of the movies in the living room were my mom's?"

Steve shook his head, then remembered to say, "I didn't."

"Right," Stiles said. "Well, she was a big movie buff, especially sci-fi. Dad used to say she had the good movies and he had the good music." Steve laughed, and Stiles continued. "My mom is gone, now - but the stuff she loved is still here. It's a bit like having a little bit of her back every time I watch one of her movies." There was a pause.

"Stiles?"

"But sometimes," Stiles admitted. "It's a little too much. I still cry sometimes when I watch Star Wars because it - it was our thing, y'know? So I don't really watch it with other people-"

"You watched it with me," Steve cut in, confused.

"I did say sometimes," Stiles pointed out. "And I mean - if you'd lived, you basically would've been Mom's uncle, right?"

"I would like to think so," Steve said softly, giving up on the noodle experiment for now and reaching into the fridge for a soda.
"So, y'know, that was different. But most of the time, there is a really high likelihood of leaking from the face to happen, so I'm - cautious. But back to the point I was trying to make: I still have all of Mom's movies. I've seen them all before, but that doesn't mean I don't like to sometimes watch them again."

He paused again, then added, "And I can share them with other people."

"There aren't copies of my dog tags," Steve said dryly, then froze. "But that is an idea..."

"What?"

Steve swallowed. "Let them borrow my dog tags to make replicas."

"Huh." Silence, then the sound of a word being typed into Stiles' computer. "That could actually work. It's not like it matters whether it's actually the real thing or not, when no one is touching it or anything. It would stay behind glass, right?"

"Yeah," Steve said with a smile. "Thanks. I think I'll do that."

"Happy to help," Stiles said proudly. "And I think Mom would've been happy to help, too."

"I'm sure she would," Steve said. He had a thought, then laughed as he said, "And out of all the things for you two to inherit from Bucky, I'm somehow not surprised it's this."

"Bucky?" Stiles asked, surprised.

"He loved this stuff," Steve said. "Science fiction, speculative fiction, comics, everything. Last night before he shipped out to Europe, and out of everything there was to do in town, where did he take us? The World of Tomorrow fair." Steve smiled wryly at his fridge, cracking open the soda. "Hell, once he got over all the danger I put myself in for it, he even thought Project Rebirth was swell. He wouldn't admit it where anyone else could hear - especially Howard - but he did."

Stiles laughed. "Good to know I'm keeping the family tradition alive, then."

"You will be once you make Scott watch the Star Wars movie," Steve teased. Stiles groaned, and Steve laughed. "Hey, Stiles?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "For listening to me whine about this."

"No problem," Stiles said. "Good luck with the Smithsonian. If those guys are anything like my history teacher, you'll need it."

He didn't, in the end. While there were some disappointed looks, ultimately everyone acquiesced when Steve said it was a replica or nothing.

It was a good compromise, and it was mostly thanks to Stiles.

The sheer amount of help Steve got from Stiles made him tremendously grateful when he was able to return the favor.

It had been by accident. Stiles was bemoaning his decision to tackle an advanced English course that was meant for students a year older than him. He'd sent Steve a picture of his copy of King Lear, groaning about how dense and nonsensical it was and how "even Sparknotes isn't helping".
Smiling, Steve sent back a long text explaining it.

King Lear plans to split his kingdom between 3 daughters, giving them land based on how much they love him. Two oldest ones are liars, giving him lots of bullshit about how much they adore him. Youngest one just says she loves him like a father, which is "not enough". King Lear banishes her and gives his kingdom to the other two. They later turn on him, while the youngest is there for him when he needs her. There's a war between Lear & his youngest vs the other two, and everyone is dead by the end while someone else ends up King.

Then Steve put away his phone to go have his meeting with Fury about the latest snafu in Latveria. It devolved into Steve and the other tactical officers sitting there twiddling their thumbs as Fury and the Eastern Europe Chair went back and forth about Victor Von Doom's latest antics and their implications for global security. For the first time, Steve understood why people were so blasé about checking their phones during long, boring meetings. Steve could have pulled out his tablet and played Tony's favorite music and Fury wouldn't have noticed.

But he didn't. Instead, Steve checked his phone under the table to see Stiles' text. OMG THANK YOU. Makes more sense, now. Well, as much sense as Shakespeare ever makes.

No problem, Steve texted back. Then, remembering Stiles' earlier message, he added, What's Sparknotes?

Stiles send Steve a link, that turned out to be some kind of summary of King Lear. Except no, not just a summary - there were also analyses of the chapters, notes on symbolism, the meanings...

Intrigued, Steve explored. It didn't take him long to find notes for most of the books people had recommended to him and Steve hadn't ever felt the desire to read.

For the next few weeks, Steve always went through this website in his dead time. Waiting in line, commuting, and yet more meetings where he was more prop than participant. He "read" nearly three dozen books in less than a month, all the stuff that had become common reading in Steve's time in the ice and that he had missed. A few of them even sounded good enough for him to go, get, and read the actual books.

Then he'd started poking around the other sections, learning more new math and science in a few days online than in weeks of SHIELD briefings.

It compounded when Stiles, upon hearing this, pointed Steve towards other websites, YouTube channels, and even a few books that were far more helpful than the textbooks and learning programs SHIELD had gotten him. Steve had never felt more lied to and educated than when he finished A People's History of the United States. He learned more about the Bible from an Don't Know Much About book than years of church. The combined sadness and exasperation of that fact was subsumed by all the hours he lost exploring Khan Academy. Medieval POC almost made him want to go back to art school. Then he remembered why this blog existed in the first place, and felt almost glad he'd never finished.

Somewhere in there, he ended up finding all sorts of drawing tutorials on his own. Soon, he found himself burning up a ridiculous amount of his salary on art supplies that would've made his old art teachers weep with joy.

He'd spent a week using every new art technique he learned on a portrait of his best friend as Steve remembered him. Not as Captain America's sidekick, or even the war hero Sergeant Barnes, but as Bucky, the overprotective trouble-maker who took Steve under his wing and kept him there no matter how many times the world tried to tear them apart. Steve even made his own craft frame, and
the portrait of Bucky in his old work clothes took pride of place in Steve's living room.

Steve sent Stiles a picture of it, and Stiles sent back a string of thumbs-up symbols.

Eventually, Steve filled his walls with other things, as well. His own memories of his mother (and a whole lotta nothing about his father), the Howling Commandos as they'd never been filmed, Howard when the cameras were gone, Peggy as the agent she was instead of the woman people wanted her to be...

She'd chided him when Steve had given her a picture he'd drawn of her shooting at him. The bottom quarter of the page was taken up by the inside of the shield as the rest of it showed Peggy lowering her gun, eyes fierce and form perfect.

"Did I ever apologize for that?" Peggy asked him softly, tracing the edge of her hair in the drawing.

"No need," Steve said. "I completely deserved it. I should never have said that about you and Howard."

Peggy smiled, reaching over to grab Steve's hand in her own.

"It's a shame we never got some fondue, ourselves."

"I hear they sell kits, these days," Steve said, wrapping his large hands around her withered ones. "If I can sneak it past your nurses, we can have some in here."

Peggy scoffed. "Better to just break me out of here. I still haven't seen your apartment, you know."

"I can hook up a, uh, webcam? Give you a video tour?"

"Virtual tour, Steve, virtual tour..." Peggy shook her head. "No. I want to see it in person."

She didn't even look like she could make it to the restroom on her own, let alone survive a jailbreak, but Steve nodded along anyway.

Probably the most valuable thing Steve learned from Stiles, though, was how to find things himself. A simple tutorial on how to use Boolean logic in Google searches led to various pages on how most people actually used search engines, how websites structured their own "discoverability" to that, and what SEO even meant.

While a little ridiculous, Steve felt incredibly accomplished once he realized the best way to figure out that song Clint kept singing was to just look up a few of the lyrics. Steve ended up learning more music history just from the background of American Pie than the books Tony had recommended.

The next time Clint started singing along to the song when it came up on the radio, Steve chimed in on the chorus. Clint's grin could've blinded the whole jet. Despite still being covered in mud and blood from their mission, eyes dark with nearly three days of sleep loss, Steve had never seen Clint so happy since the day Phil Coulson died.

Thanks to his new search skills, Steve also stumbled across gay history.

He'd just been trying to get an inkling of what might've happened to some old friends of his, clubs he'd gone to back in his day. He'd ended up drawn into page after page of history and politics and new understanding. Stiles called it a "wiki walk" or "research wormhole".

From the days of Dorothy to Stonewall to the AIDS crisis, and all the political debates today from
"coming out" to conversion therapy, he read about it all. He kept abreast of the gay marriage movement, the occasional person of Steve's interest either coming out, or having come out ages ago and no longer being remarkable for it.

Yet somehow, none of it really hammered into Steve how lackadaisical about homosexuality the 21st century could be. Instead, that understanding came due to a text from Stiles.

*Achilles and Patroclus were totes gay for each other, no wonder everyone thinks me and Scott are dating.*

It was hard to forget how casual Scott and Stiles had been about admitting that Stiles' personal fantasy figure was a man. Biting his lip in the privacy of his own apartment, Steve tested the waters by texting back, *Well, at least you two would make a cute couple.*

*WE WOULD BE THE CUTEST. But Scott is basically my brother, so also the grossest.*

Steve grinned and tried not to cry as he wondered if everyone today would have assumed he and Bucky were dating, the way they acted together.

They wouldn't have been right...but they wouldn't have been wrong, either. Facebook even had an option for this, though Steve wasn't sure how the terminology worked. were you in an "it's complicated" with someone, or were you someone's "it's complicated"? Even in its simplicity, Steve's relationship with Bucky had been the most complicated in his life.

But both Bucky and the man Steve used to be were dead, so now it was also the most irrelevant.

He tried not to think about it. He tried not to wonder if he and Bucky could've been a force for good after the Stonewall Riots. Or if they could've been one of those old couples on the news who'd been together for decades and only just got married when it was legalized. Would they have just gone to a courthouse or held a full wedding?

Steve thought of those videos of Claudia's ceremony. Would she have gone to her Uncle Bucky's wedding? Maybe she would've been a flower-girl if she were young, or a bridesmaid if she were older.

He wondered what song he and Bucky would've danced to, and lost the evening to his own grief again.

But unlike before, it was only the evening. He had a nightmare that night, but was able to spend some time drawing and reminiscing. Eventually, he was able to get back to sleep, and the next morning woke up to lots of turkey.

Both in the figurative sense of Thanksgiving fervor having taken over the radio, television, and newsfeed seemingly overnight, as well as a literal sense, in the form of a mission in Ankara, Turkey.

The briefing officer looked ready to eat his own tablet due to all the terrible puns people kept making for the entire meeting. Some of them were even funny.

The humor went away as soon as the new STRIKE team sergeant asked him if he had any plans for Thanksgiving.

"...I don't really have any family to make plans with," Steve pointed out.

Agent Rumlow blinked in surprise, then said, "Well hey, plenty of loners in SHIELD. Training
division throws a party every Thanksgiving for everyone who can't or doesn't want to go home." He leaned into Steve conspiratorially. "If you go, find the research division's table. They spike their punch with something most of us are pretty sure isn't even legal in most countries."

Steve smiled. Seventy years and the best secret was still who had the best booze. "I'll keep that in mind."

That was going to be the end of that, right up until Fury had asked off-handedly if Steve was going to be busy that week, and ended up surprised that Steve was planning on going to the party.

"What else would I do?" Steve had asked in the face of Fury's confusion.

"I thought you would've seen that kid you're texting all the time," Fury said.

Steve pursed his lips. "Thanksgiving is a family event, sir, and I - I don't know them that well."

"So?" Fury asked. "You've talked more with that kid in the last few months than I have with my mother in the last few years, I still see her when I can on the holidays."

"...how do you know how much I'm talking to him?" Steve asked, narrowing his eyes at his superior officer.

"Do you really want me to answer that?" Fury asked. Then he shook his head wryly. "Just call the kid, Cap, invite them over to your place for Thanksgiving dinner. It would do you some good."

"I'm not going to intrude on a family I don't have!" Steve snapped.

Fury raised an eyebrow over the eyepatch, and pointedly turned their attention back to the latest reports on the Ten Rings.

For almost a week, Steve tried to put the suggestion out of his mind. The problem was that the more you tried not to think about something, the more you ended up thinking about it.

Thinking about the difference between a work party and a family dinner. Thinking about how his last two Thanksgivings had been in Europe seventy years ago, surrounded by people who didn't really celebrate it but were always happy to throw a party at even the flimsiest of excuses. Thinking about the mystery poultry they'd roasted over low fires, sharing with the French resistance fighters who'd decided that America was onto something with a holiday dedicated to stuffing themselves silly.

Finally, Steve called Stiles and asked him what he usually did for Thanksgiving dinner.

"Lunch," Stiles deadpanned.

"...huh?"

Stiles laughed. "Unfortunately, crime and medical problems don't really stop for the holidays. There always needs to be at least a few cops on duty and a few nurses on call. So me, Dad, Melissa, and Scott make a sort of Thanksgiving lunch, then me and Scott take the leftovers to our parents for dinner at the hospital and the Sheriff's station. Me and Scott never minded, and this means one more cop and one more nurse that can go home to their families. Why? Wanna come?"

Steve clutched the phone and stared at his bedroom ceiling at the flippant invitation.

"...I don't want to intrude," he said. He didn't want to face a family that wasn't his...but it's not like
the four of them were a family, either, at least in anything other than choice. Then again, that was sometimes the most powerful kind of family of all.

Steve still remembered the day some young rabbi-in-training had nearly gotten his head beaten in by a pack of little old ladies when he'd tried to kick Steve out of a Passover Seder because he wasn't officially the Barnes' family. The actual rabbi had welcomed Steve without a second thought, and with far more grace than the Father at Steve's church had accepted Bucky when he tagged along with Steve and Ma on Christmas.

"Dude, no worries, Melissa probably won't mind, Scott would dig it, and..." There was some noise, some footsteps in the distance, then the phone being muffled as Stiles shouted (presumably down the stairs), "Hey Dad? Can Steve come over for Thanksgiving?"

Steve couldn't hear the Sheriff's response, but then Stiles said, "See? Dad says you can come!"

Steve swallowed, and tried not to let the stinging in his eyes spill down his cheeks.

The next day, Fury looked smug when Steve told him he was taking leave during the Thanksgiving holidays.

He was going to need it to go to California.

~*~

Ten days and one successful mission later, Steve stood in the grocery store closest to the Stilinskis' home. He shook his head in amusement, staring at all the options for a simple gravy.

"That's American consumerism for you," Stiles said, comparing the two jars of gravy he was holding.

Steve snorted as he peered over the teenager's shoulder. Stiles wasn't just comparing the jars, but comparing the nutritional labels.

"What's the verdict?"

"Either salt overload or fat overload," Stiles said with a sigh.

"It's Thanksgiving," Steve said. "Let your dad live a little."

"I'm trying to make sure my dad lives a lot!" Stiles cried out, holding up the jars like they were personally attacking his father.

"Stiles," Steve said, rolling his eyes. Instead of continuing, he just reached over and grabbed both jars, saying, "Pick one before I take them both."

Stiles pouted, but Steve stared him down. The boy relented, pointing towards one jar and putting the other one back on the shelf. Steve put Stiles' choice into the basket, then started heading down the aisle.

"One day of intense salt won't do as much damage as a day of intense fat," Stiles grumbled. He was still glaring down at the jar as he followed Steve.

They wove their way through the flood of last-minute grocery shoppers, Steve doing his best to remember to keep his head down. His hat should ensure that no one saw his face long enough to make the connection to Captain America as he and Stiles filled up on Thanksgiving staples.
“Everyone has so much food,” Steve commented, feeling slightly out of place as one of the only grocery shoppers with a basket instead of a cart. Even accounting for how much having grown up in the Great Depression skewed his perspective, it seemed like everyone had too much for one family.

“All the best to stuff yourself oblivion with,” Stiles drawled. “Part of the great American tradition of celebrating the beginning of the Native American genocide.”

Steve honestly felt guilty for snorting at that.

“Now we just need the cranberries,” Stiles continued. “And some more seasoning for the turkey.”

The turkey was already in the oven at the Stilinskis’ house. Stiles and Steve were taking a half-hour between bastings to get all the things Stiles forgot yesterday, as well as grab some groceries for the next week or so that was expected to be busy for the police department.

Apparently, the first week of Christmas shopping was a Really Big Deal.

They picked up the seasoning, then had to swing by the last few turkeys on the way to the cranberries. Steve bust his gut laughing when Stiles picked up one of the bagged turkeys and started handling it like a doll, mock-karate-chopping Steve's arm with a wing and making ridiculous noises from all the wonderfully terrible kung-fu movies Nat and Clint liked to watch and make fun of. He took a picture of Stiles posing with the turkey - he was starting to get the appeal of taking pictures of everything. Then he directed Stiles towards the check-out before he could get distracted by trying to build a turkey army.

Steve should thank Fury for pushing him to come out here. He probably wouldn’t, but he should.

Stiles spent the drive home poking at the fancy radio controls of Steve's car and quizzing Steve about what he did during his work-outs, planning on trying to get his dad back into shape. The way Stiles described Thanksgiving, one would believe the Sheriff was about to inject a barrel of salt and fat into his bloodstream. The more Stiles bemoaned his father's cholesterol levels, the more he reminded Steve of Bucky's mother-henning.

He wondered if Scott and John got as fed up with it as Steve had, and smiled to himself at the thought.

When they got home, Steve did his assigned duty of re-basting the turkey. With all of Stiles' banging around in the kitchen, Steve was a bit surprised the Sheriff didn't come downstairs. He supposed the man was used to sleeping through his son's noise. Stiles texted Scott about the mashed potatoes he was being entrusted with while his mother also slept, then started putting everything out for the gravy. According to him, the store-bought stuff was just a base for how the final product would be.

"The store's stuff is bland as cardboard,” Stiles said. Then he snorted and added, "But trust me, this is gonna be nothing. Once you have Mexican mashed potatoes, you'll never go back to the normal kind.”

They spent a cheerful half hour making the gravy, re-seasoning the turkey, and and digging out some fancy plates from the top shelves of the cabinets, all while talking about their holiday experiences. They started at Thanksgiving, which lead to Steve telling his favorite wartime Christmas stories, which led to Stiles recounting some of his family's Hanukkah traditions - half of which were exactly the things Steve remembered the Barnes doing. That led to some fun stories about Steve being invited to their holiday celebrations. Stiles smiled as Steve told him about Bucky coming over to have Christmas dinner with Steve and his Ma. He grinned outright at Bucky walking them to the church for midnight mass when the streets weren't so safe for a woman and a sickly boy to be
walking on their own.

That devolved into talking about birthdays - and led to Steve remembering how his leave request had gone down.

"I tried to stay until your birthday," Steve admitted to Stiles. "But there's an important mission I have to prepare for."

"No, it's fine," Stiles said. "Dude, your job has a lot of life-and-death situations in it, it's more important than my birthday."

"I wish it weren't," Steve said. "Or at least that the mission could be pushed back a few more days, but, well...there's some delicate timing involved. A terrorist group has been ramping up its activity and a lot of people are getting nervous about it."

"Will you be okay?" Stiles asked. He looked up at Steve, and for a brief moment, Steve could read every ounce of fear in Stiles' eyes.

But Stiles was still a teenager, so he quickly caught himself, saying with forced nonchalance, "Because seriously, hearing that you got gunned down by a terrorist would be like the worst birthday ever." Steve wasn't sure whether to be grateful or heartbroken that Stiles wasn't particularly good at lying.

"Right now, it's just information gathering," Steve said, opening the oven to baste the turkey again. Picking up the turkey baster, he sucked up the seasoning and oil from the bottom of the tray and started dousing the meat with it. "Probably not even going to turn into a fight - it's just some rough terrain that they need the extra force for, that's all."

That and a request from Tony, who wanted to see just how many of his weapons the Ten Rings were hoarding but was banned from going, himself. In all honesty, Steve was most likely on this mission just to ensure Tony wasn't.

"I won't say it's nothing, because we wouldn't be going if it were," Steve said, closing the oven door again and setting the baster on its plate. "But I think it's nothing to worry about. I'm just there as a safety precaution."

"If you say so," Stiles said, still worried, but accepting Steve's reassurances for now. He went back to fussing over the amount of cranberries he needed to put into the bowl, checking repeatedly between the bag of berries and something on his phone.

"I'll try to call," Steve said. "And you have to tell me where you go when you drive the jeep for the first time."

Silence. Silence, and Stiles paying way more attention to the cranberries than they actually needed.

"...Stiles?"

The teenager mumbled something.

"What?"

"I said," Stiles said, sighing and setting down the bag of cranberries. "I'm not getting the jeep."

Steve stared, stunned. "What the- Why?"
Stiles pursed his lips.

"I'm short on the money," Stiles said. "By almost a third of what I need. My dad is already stretching himself thin for his part, but... I don't have enough, and even if I worked my hardest, I won't have enough by New Year's."

Stiles was still staring down at the cranberries, but now he wasn't even trying to actually make the sauce.

"Stiles-"

"It's fine," Stiles said. "It's like you said, there were a lot of other cars that cost a lot less, anyway. I can just get one of those, instead."

He could, but it wouldn't be Claudia's car, and Steve could see how much losing it was hurting Stiles in every tear the boy was refusing to shed.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"It's okay," Stiles said. "To be honest, it was kind of a long-shot, anyway. An' who knows, maybe if no one wants it, it'll buy me a few months' time and I can still get it."

It was clear Stiles didn't believe that, but he was trying to put on a strong face for Steve, and Steve knew all about faking it til you made it.

"Yeah," Steve supported. "Hell, one of the things that surprised me about the future was how everyone only wanted cars of a few colors, and that shade of blue really isn't one of them. I'm sure you'll get time."

Stiles smiled, scrubbing at his eyes.

"Yeah, I should get a less recognizable car," he said. "Something a little less easy for my dad and his deputies to spot around town."

"Why would you need to hide from them?"

"I have reasons," Stiles said, forcing a smirk.

His humor was half front, half genuine, so Steve merely shoulder-bumped Stiles - though with their current height difference, it was more like elbow-bumped. "What are you gonna be up to, huh?" he asked with a smile.

"That's for me to know and my dad to hopefully never find out," Stiles joked.

He grinned at Steve, before turning his attention back to the counter.

Except possibly not all of it. Stiles was still looking at Steve when he bumped into the cranberry bag, which knocked into the sauce bowl, which then spilled all over Stiles, running down his hoodie and splatterng across the floor.

It looked-

It looked like-

Steve stared. At the rivulets of bright red and dark clumps of what he knew, he knew were just fruit but which his eyes and memories insisted was burnt flesh.
Stiles didn't notice Steve's distress. On the contrary, Stiles grimaced at the mess, grumbling, "Great - my favorite hoodie. And now I look like I came out of a horror movie."

The worst kind of horror movie, if Steve were being honest.

The one that was no movie, but his own memories.

Stiles was saying something, but Steve didn't hear, too busy remembering all the times he saw real blood and guts splattered across real people. The old fisherman who'd joined the French resistance and took a machine gun to the chest less than a yard from Steve's side. The German soldier who'd taken a grenade to the chest and turned out to be a kid that died crying for his grandmother. The countless men and boys Steve watched shot to pieces and blasted apart. The times he had to slit someone's throat or break someone's neck to infiltrate a German base. The day Bucky and Dum Dum had been literally splattered with the pieces of a Russian soldier who may not have even been the enemy - they never found out for sure, and it didn't matter when the guy's brains were in Dum Dum's hat and Jim's hair and across Steve's shield.

He could see Stiles' wide eyes as realization dawned. He ripped the hoodie from his body, but Steve didn't notice. He was too busy falling to the floor, scrambling back against something hard that felt an awful lot, in that moment, like the walls of the burnt out orphanage the Howling Commandos had hidden in when spying on a HYDRA battalion.

There had been over a dozen little bodies still inside the room, and it was one of the only times his team had disobeyed Steve to keep him from trying to tackle the entire HYDRA battalion on his own. After two weeks out in the field, with no ammunition and cutting their rations in half, Steve would've died. But in that moment he wouldn't have even cared, not when his boots were getting crusted with the dried blood of children.

For a moment, Steve could swear that there was a Nazi coming around the corner, ready to kill, ready to end someone's world or rip it in half or worse, and Steve reached for his sidearm.

He didn't find it.

Instead, Steve dug into his pocket and yanked out the little device that has been staving off insanity and keeping him grounded ever since Stiles gave it to him. Wrapping his fingers around the little chunk of medical plastic was already helping. It was nothing like anything he ever had back during the war, and more importantly, it wasn't a gun. Pulling off the cap, bringing it up to his mouth, the motions helped.

But what helped the most was the godawful taste that filled his mouth and snapped him back into the present faster than a broken rubber band.

He breathed and breathed and breathed in, until his lungs might've exploded from the amount of air in them, then let it all back out in a single stream. He recapped the inhaler as he breathed again, and pocketed it with his last meditative breath, before glancing up at Stiles.

"...what," the boy said - not even asking, just saying - while staring at Steve's pocket.

Steve smiled wanly, taking a moment to lean his head back against the cabinet.

"It...helps," he said.

"But it's empty!" Stiles cried out. "That's why I gave it to you in the first place."

Steve nodded, letting his head and eyes stray towards the mess of cranberries.
"I...just holding it helped me a little," Steve said. "It's so far away from anything I ever had before I died." He took a deep, bracing breath. "Sometimes in my flashbacks, I reach for a sidearm. Running into this instead was helpful, so I just started carrying it around with me everywhere. Then I asked Bruce about how inhalers work, poked around with some doctors in SHIELD, that sort of thing. I got the inhaler refilled without anyone knowing really about it."

"But you don't have asthma anymore...?"

"I still have trouble breathing, sometimes," Steve said, looking away from the cranberry puddle to the toes of his socks. "Just - I remember. I remember being out of breath, not being able to breathe, all of that. And it's only a double dose of the strongest bronchodillator commercially available. It's already wearing off. Just - the taste of it, the moment of an extra deep breath, even the motion of pulling it out and using it in the first place. It...interrupts my flashback, I guess." He swallowed. "Granted, it may be in my head rather than the medicine actually affecting my lungs in any capacity. But I don't care if it is, it still helps."

"Wow," Stiles said. "Now I'm really glad I gave it to you...or, did you get like a new one or something?"

"No," Steve said. "It's the same one you gave me..." He paused. "I know it might be a little presumptuous, but you...you're the closest thing to a family I have, right now. Having something you gave me helps, too."

"Dude, no, presume away," Stiles said, voice thick like he was speaking around a lump in his throat. "I mean, honestly, I was worried about you getting pissed off when I told you that I called you Uncle Steve when telling people about my summer so no one would find out you were Captain America."

Steve smiled. "I kind of like the sound of that, actually." He paused. "Honestly, if I hadn't gone down in the ice, there's a good chance your mother would've grown up calling me Uncle Steve, anyway, so...it fits."

"I've always wanted an uncle," Stiles mused, shifting his weight. At the edge of Steve's vision, Stiles' heel nearly brushed against the edge of the mess. "Or any kind of extended family, really. My other grandma died when Dad was little, and he hates his dad for some reason, and Mom's parents both died before I really remember them, and neither of my parents had any siblings, so..." Stiles shrugged. "Me and Scott were always a little isolated, I guess."

"Scott?" Steve asked in surprise.

"Yeah, um. His dad was never close to the rest of his family to begin with, and all connections were lost when Melissa kicked his dad out of the house. And then her own family are, well, kind of conservative. They got mad at her for leaving such a great husband and thought she should just suck it up and take his abusive behavior because that's what good wives do or something, so Melissa stopped talking to them, too."

Steve swallowed, forcing his brain away from one memory lane and down another instead - one whose only saving grace was 'better than the war'. At least he had a little more emotional control over it. "People used to say the same kind of bullshit to my ma, too."

"...what?" Stiles asked. This time, he was asking, but he sounded like he already knew the answer.

"That's the way it was done, back then," Steve said. "Your husband comes home, you appease him, and it's your fault if you don't. Even if your husband is a drunken bastard who you only married because he knocked you up and isn't worth his weight in the bullshit he spouts on a daily basis." He
laughed humorlessly in the bubble of Stiles' silence. "There's a reason why I draw so many pictures of my mom and my grandfather, but nothing about my dad."

"I...I'm sorry," Stiles said.

"Don't be," Steve said, frowning as a drip of water came out of nowhere to land in the tiny puddle of red sauce by Stiles' heel.

He looked up, tracing the trajectory of the drop, to see an ice-cube tray dangling from Stiles' limp fingers, a tiny rivulet of water inching down the side. He blinked at the tray, then raised an eyebrow at Stiles.

Stiles sheepishly put the tray back into the freezer. He paused for a moment in front of it after he closed the door, then looked over his shoulder at Steve.

"It's what I use for panic attacks," Stiles explained.

...Stiles had panic attacks?

Looking at the boy's face, Steve thought his heart might have shriveled up and sunk into his stomach.

"Why ice-cubes?" he asked, pushing himself up off the floor.

"The shock of the cold helps me snap out of it," Stiles said. "And if you use it on your face afterwards, you don't look so splotchy, so no one can tell you were crying. It's a two-for-one deal: stop the panic attacks, then hide them."

Stiles carefully didn't look at Steve as he went to grab some paper towels and start cleaning up the cranberry sauce.

"...hide them?" Steve asked. He had a bad feeling that he knew where this was going.

Stiles nodded, still keeping his gaze on the mess. "If you rub it on the part of your nose between your eyes, you sound less stuffed up. Your eyes - less red and puffy. If it's small enough to swallow or you can bite part of it off, it makes your throat hurt less and you can talk normally a lot faster than without it. Or drinking cold water, that also does the trick."

He'd put a lot of thought into this - and it sounded like he had a lot of experience with this, too.

"Stiles," Steve asked, drawing out the name. "Who knows about your panic attacks?"

Stiles shrugged, leaning back on his heels and clutching cranberry-soaked paper towels in shaking hands. "Me. You."


Stiles glared up at him. "Who knows about yours?"

Goddammit.

"No one," Steve admitted. "But just because I hide mine doesn't mean you should hide yours."

Stiles snorted. "The military has the highest concentration of PTSD out of every profession in the world. You go to work every day surrounded by people who have the same mental problems you do, and you want to call me out on not saying anything?"
He glared up at Steve with genuine anger.

With a deep breath, Steve said, "Yes, because you are a kid, and I'm-

"So grown up?" Stiles said. "I mean, take out all the time in the ice, and you're like a decade older than me."

Technically over twelve years, making him nearly twice Stiles' age. But that wasn't Stiles' point, and Steve knew it.

Stiles didn't keep staring at Steve, instead turning his attention back to the mess he was cleaning up. Both of them were silent as Stiles finished wiping everything down, and Steve took the paper-towels and wipes from Stiles to throw them away.

Stiles finished disinfecting half the kitchen, then reassembled the ingredients for the cranberry sauce. Before he could start making it again, though, he stopped, just staring at the counter. Then he turned to look at Steve, crossing his arms defensively.

"Look," Stiles said. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. But my dad worries about too many things as it is and Scott has his own problems and I - I can handle it. If I couldn't, someone else would've found out by now. I've spent over half a decade taking care of it without worrying anyone else. I think after all this time and effort, I have a right to keep this to myself. And I'm not sure why you aren't telling anyone, but I can take a few guesses and I'm not about to force you to do something I wouldn't, either. So how about we both agree not to say anything to anyone else?"

The way Stiles could swing from rampant childishness to shocking maturity never failed to give Steve mental whiplash. Half the time, Stiles sounded like he needed to go back to preschool, and the other half, he sounded like he could fit right in with the kind of people Steve worked with on a daily basis, both before and after the ice.

Steve wasn't sure if that said more about how mature Stiles was in his own right, or how young Steve was.

Maybe both.

"Stiles," Steve started, only for the boy to cut him off.

"I can't..." Stiles stopped, swallowed, then started again. "I have to take care of my dad and Scott and - it's easier, this way."

"Are you sure about that?" Steve said. He turned and started fiddling with the nearly-empty bag of cranberries. "Me and Bucky took care of each other in our own ways. I didn't always like it - I actually hated it, most of the time, the way Bucky worked himself to the bone to take care of me, his ma, and his sisters." He paused. "But we helped him, too. Sarah and Mrs. Barnes both worked. Your grandmother and Anna were too young to work but they always had dinner ready for everyone so they could rest when they came home. I helped when I could. My kind of work was bordering on white-collar work, so I couldn't work much, but when I did I often got paid more than any of them did, and gave them as much as I could. When people wanted to say nasty stuff to them because Mrs. Barnes came from Romania or because they were Jewish, I took the hits so they wouldn't have to - and they patched me up when I got home."

"So you're saying that I shouldn't do this on my own, but you should?" Stiles challenged.

Steve sighed.
"Fine," he said. "I promise not to rat you out to your dad or Scott or anyone else. But how about this - if one of us ever tells anyone, the other has to tell someone, too." He held out his hand. "Deal?"

Stiles stared warily between Steve's face and his hand, but after several moments, unfolded his arms and shook on it. "Deal."

The turkey was slightly undercooked, and the cornbread muffins a little singed, but all in all, Thanksgiving Lunch was a success.

Melissa McCall was a lovely lady, and from the sounds of it a damn good nurse. Steve must've spent the first half of the lunch chatting with her about differences and similarities in the profession between today and his day - at least as best as he understood them through his own mother, and his own experiences in and out of hospitals in his youth.

They ate the main course at the table, but then ate dessert in the living room while watching WarGames. After, Steve, Melissa, and John chatted in the kitchen while filling having some coffee while the boys went upstairs to Stiles' room.

Melissa and John eventually went off for their shifts at work, while Steve 'kept the boys out of trouble' by watching all but the first of the Indiana Jones movies with them.

He still didn't get why Tony insisted the fourth one didn't exist.

They put the first one on after, and ended up dozing off halfway through it. The loud DVD menu woke them up. One look at the time had the boys scrambling to put together 'lunch' break dinners for their parents.

"No wonder you made such big portions," Steve said, watching the boys assemble Tupperware meals for dinner and refrigerate the rest. He'd known it from the beginning - Stiles had also spent this morning getting ingredients for his 'leftover soup' - but it was still amusing to see it in progress.

It was a quick drive to the station, where it turned out John wasn't the only cop whose family joined them there for Thanksgiving. A much older cop had someone who Steve assumed to be his wife, and a younger officer was eating with a preteen-looking girl who Steve figured was her sister.

The Sheriff grinned when they walked into his office, bearing tupperware full of Thanksgiving leftovers.

"Just in time, Johnson and Gable came back from their Thanksgiving lunch breaks," he said. He cleared out paperwork from his desk in a meticulous system. Stiles set down the boxes and fished out a bunch of wrapped utensils from the pocket of his hoodie.

The turkey was still undercooked, the cornbread was still singed, and the chairs were uncomfortable to sit in for too long, but Steve had one of the best dinners since waking up from the ice. He stuffed himself silly as he listened to the Sheriff recount the funniest stories from Thanksgivings past.

"...and by the end, the poor kid tried to claim he wasn't stealing the turkey, but that the turkey was the designated driver!" John said. The Sheriff smirked as Steve and Stiles' laughter filled his office.

"How drunk was he?" Steve asked incredulously.

"We still aren't sure how he was conscious after we made him take a breathalyzer test," John said. "Let's leave it at that."
"Did you arrest him?" Stiles asked between laughs.

John shook his head. "Nah. I didn't need to deal with any quotas at the time, and his father's a friend of mine - my old partner, actually, before he got paralyzed on the job. The kid had gotten into a motorcycle crash trying to get to a hospital the day his father was shot, and they've had a rough few years. Arresting or fining him wasn't going to do anyone any good."

"Sounds like a tough family," Steve said. "Able to go through all that and still try to celebrate Thanksgiving."

"They did celebrate it, actually," Stiles said, having apparently already heard this story. "Dad made Donovan give the turkey back, bought another one, and then drove him back home. His dad dragged him around by the ear from his wheelchair for that stunt."

"It was the least I owed them," John said. "Besides, the kid was just trying to make up for burning their first turkey."

"Sounds like a good kid," Steve said, before tackling a particularly big bite of his turkey.

"He is, though he has a bit of a temper," John said with a shrug. "I'm sure he'll get in under control eventually."

"Hopefully before he starts police training," Stiles drawled.

"He wants to take after his father?" Steve asked, heart warming at the story. Or maybe that was just heartburn, who knew. Stiles hadn't been kidding about those Mexican mashed potatos.

"Yup," John said, sounding proud of the idea. "And until then, he's doing his best to take care of his dad. Not always succeeding, exactly, but he has his heart in the right place. I try to cut him some slack - he's doing his best, and family's important."

"I know," Steve said softly. "Even my legal department's been harassing me about it."

"How come?" Stiles asked around a mouthful of cornbread. John facepalmed at his son's temporary abandonment of table manners.

"Pension and power of attorney," Steve said with a shrug. "Which is stupid, because if I don't have an beneficiaries then SHIELD keeps the money. It saves someone the trouble of trying to plan my funeral if it's a state function, anyway. And it's not like power of attorney matters when SHIELD can override medical decisions, anyway."

"Wait," John asked, bewildered. "They can do that?!!"

Steve nodded, chasing a bit of stuffing around with his fork. "I'm - not exactly a normal human. I'm literally a walking, talking biological weapon. Parts of my physiology are technically state secrets, even if no one has been bothering to keep them classified in the last few decades. I haven't been unable to make medical decisions since waking up in this century in the first place, but if I were...I'm pretty sure someone at SHIELD would take over no matter what."

"But who would they have to override in the first place?" Stiles asked.

Steve shrugged. "That's just it - there isn't anyone. Most of the people at SHIELD are fine with that. It gives them more leeway, but a few people have been insistent about my lack of next of kin."

"You really don't have anyone?" Stiles asked, looking heartbroken at that thought.
Steve smiled wanly. "Technically speaking, you might be the closest thing I have - I named Bucky my next of kin way back in my day, so since you're his only living relative..."

Both Stilinskis stared at Steve, dumbfounded. He hastily added, "But don't worry, I doubt anyone will try to bother you about this."

John leaned back in his seat, and Stiles bit his lip, looked at his father, then looked back at Steve.

"What if I want them to?"

Steve frowned, not sure what Stiles meant. Judging by the look on his face, though, John did.

"What do you mean?" Steve asked.

Stiles swallowed, glancing sidelong at his father again before looking back at Steve.

"You should have someone to make sure you're okay," Stiles said. "It sounds like SHIELD would only do what's good for them, not what's good for you."

Steve stared, stunned, as he realized what Stiles was offering. "Stiles, you don't have to-"

"What if I want to?" Stiles challenged again. "I'm serious. I don't even care about the pension or benefits or anything." He paused. "Um, I don't know what Catholic funerals look like, though, so I'll probably ask Scott for help with that, even if he's the wrong kind of Catholic."

Steve snorted wetly at that, morbidly amused, while John looked deeply troubled - though whether it was at the thought of Steve dying, or Stiles trying to plan a funeral with Scott, Steve couldn't fathom.

"I'm pretty sure I still qualify for an Army funeral, anyway," Steve said. He took another gulp of soda, but it didn't wash the lump in his throat away. "I just need to make sure it's only an Army funeral and nothing else fancy because I'm Captain America."

"We can do that!" Stiles pointed out. "Look, even if SHIELD overrides medical decisions or whatever - at least they can't just treat you like a lab rat. They'd still have to explain themselves, right?"

Steve looked to John who - who looked like he was actually considering it.

"John?" he probed. He wasn't even sure what he was asking for.

The Sheriff took a deep breath. "We can't and won't force you into anything," he said, giving Stiles a pointed look. "But it sounds like you could use someone to look out for you. And we don't mind being that someone."

Steve swallowed, and stared down at his plate, the food that was a little badly cooked and the best things he'd eaten in this new millennium.

He shouldn't. He'd dropped into their lives without warning and without asking and they'd been nothing but kind to him. They took him in and let him sleep in their home and eat their food and showered Steve with the kind of generosity and rough affection that he was now convinced was a part of the Barnes family DNA. Listening to them would only bring more hardship into their lives that they'd never asked for, that Steve had no right to inflict on them.


But they were asking now, weren't they?
Don't be stupid, Steve, Bucky had said a thousand times - including all the times Steve had tried to refuse the Barnes' help, had tried to be less of a burden on them. They never obliged his martyrdom back then, and Steve rather doubted they would, now.

Finally, he looked up and nodded. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Stiles grinned, holding out a fist. Steve made one, too, bumping it.

And just like that, he had a family again.

~*~

The day after Thanksgiving, Steve wanted to see what all the fuss about Black Friday was.

"Your loss," Stiles said, shaking his head as he gave Steve directions to the mall.

"Are you giving me the long way around?" Steve asked, raising an eyebrow. "You seem to enjoy me driving you around a lot."

"I enjoy you driving me around in this car a lot," Stiles said with a grin. "Seriously, where did you rent this?"

"I didn't," Steve said with a shrug, making a turn where Stiles indicated. "I'm borrowing this car from a friend."

"You're borrowing a 1967 Shelby Cobra from a friend?" Stiles asked incredulously. "Steve, I looked this car up last night and - who the hell would lend this baby out?"

"Tony Stark," Steve drawled. "He has a dozen other cars, he can spare this one for a week."

Stiles gaped at him.

"When he heard I was going to be in California, he told me to swing by Malibu and take this one on a road trip," Steve explained. "Something about a long-distance road test to make sure it's still running okay. Not sure why 'this baby' would need that, but I wasn't going to pass up borrowing a car this nice for free."

For some reason, that made Stiles burst out into laughter.

"Just when I forget your day job, you say you're borrowing Iron Man's car."

Steve grinned at the thought. "You forget that I'm Captain America?"

"Well, I mean - most of the time you're just 'Steve' to me," Stiles said. Steve saw him shrug in the corner of his eye. "I'm sorry-"

"Don't be," Steve cut in. He swallowed. "I'm - I'm Captain America to everyone else, or Cap at best. It's nice to have someone who sees me as 'Steve first, Captain America second'."

Stiles laughed as he pointed out the entrance to the parking lot of Beacon Hills' one mall.

"Awesome! Because I meant to track a news alert on you but I never remember to check it. Now I won't feel bad."

Steve snorted and parked the car. With Stiles at his side, he walked into the mall.

Ten minutes later, he walked back out.
"Jesus fucking Christ," Steve said in bewilderment.

Stiles was unabashedly laughing at Steve. "That was five minutes longer than I thought you'd last!"

Steve scowled, and Stiles just doubled over in laughter.

After the worst of the giggles finally subsided, he said, "Wanna try again?"

Steve just shook his head. "C'mon, let's go back home."

Wait, no, not home - the house. Stiles' house. The Stilinskis' house.

Not Steve's.

"Are you suuure?" Stiles said, grinning with that same ridiculous spark in his eye Bucky'd had right before Steve agreed to go on the Cyclone.

"I'm sure," Steve said dryly.

"I dunno, man, I might need to check out some of them sales," Stiles started.

"Do you have your learner's permit on you?" Steve asked.

Stiles blinked in surprise. "Yes...?" he answered, patting the pocket with his wallet in it.

"We leave right now and you can drive the car home."

Steve had to jog to keep up with Stiles when he literally ran to the car.

~*~

"Scott's helping Deaton with some emergency, something about a cat with birth complications," Stiles said. He stared in bewilderment at the screen of his phone before shaking his head. "So he'll be here around three-ish."

"Any plans until then?" Steve said, leaning against the back of the armchair, but not sitting down just yet. He'd spent nearly two hours sitting in the passenger seat as Stiles kept 'getting lost' and insisting Steve just had to see this store and that landmark on opposite sides of town.

Stiles looked down at his phone and bit his lip in thought. "Um, actually...there is something I need to talk to you about. Wasn't sure how to bring it up, though."

Steve knew that tone of voice and that posture. It'd been the same ones Stiles had when he'd given Steve the old inhaler.

Stiles led Steve upstairs to his bedroom, then knelt down to fish something out from under his bed.

There was a lot of things Steve might've expected, but the triangle of cloth that Stiles actually pulled out and held up to Steve wasn't it.

"A flag?" Steve asked, reaching out for the folded American flag. It was old, a bit faded, and Steve could smell the dust from two feet away. But it was still crisp, like it was freshly folded from a funeral.

Stiles nodded, standing up again without dropping it. "Bucky's funeral flag."
Steve's breath stalled in his lungs, hands frozen in midair. Stiles kept it held out as he started explaining.

"So, like, both your flag and Bucky's went to my grandma's mom - um, Bucky's mom. She died, the flags got passed around between my great-aunts for a while, then ended up with my grandma. She sold your flag to the National WWII Museum just before she died so Mom - my mom - wouldn't have to deal with her medical debts. And it even helped with the house or something?" He winced. "Sorry about that, I guess-"

"Don't be," Steve cut in. "I - this is..." He swallowed. "I'm glad I could still help her even after I was dead for more than half a century."

Stiles seemed to scrutinize him for a moment, before shaking his head and pushing on. "So, that's what happened to your flag. But she kept Bucky's - one of the last relics of her brother, I guess, or maybe just not enough money offered for it. She died, Mom got it, and then stuffed it up in the attic and forgot about it until I needed something to bring to show-and-tell in 4th grade. Then she died, I got it, then I forgot about it until you had that problem with the dog tags."

Steve looked hesitantly at the boy, then reached out and took the flag in his hands. It felt like he would tear right through it if he didn't hold it delicately. He fell into Stiles' chair, setting the flag on his lap.

Steve heard Stiles fall onto his bed. "I got it because I figured - these flags are supposed to go to your closest family member, and that was kind of you. Or at least you know Bucky more than I do. So...do you want it?"

Steve looked up where Stiles was sitting on the edge of his bed, hands clasped between his knees as he leaned forward to look intently at Steve.

"Want it?" he asked dumbly.

Stiles jerked his chin towards the flag. "The way I see it, that flag should be yours."

With a hard swallow, Steve said, "I...I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," Stiles said with a shrug.

Thank God. What would he have said if Stiles had sat with that expectant look on his face everyone else got when Steve was speechless?

Steve stared back down at the flag, and in edge of his vision, Stiles stood up.

"I'll, uh, let you...yeah. I'll be downstairs."

Stiles patted Steve's shoulder and went. Steve lost almost twenty minutes staring down at the flag, trying and failing not to imagine what Mrs. Barnes must've looked like when she got this flag, how she and the girls must've taken the news of the deaths, of Bucky's death.

Steve had promised to bring Bucky back to them, and instead he got him killed.

With a hard sigh, he finally shook himself out of his stupor and carried the flag downstairs, to his room. He set it on his pillow for now. Then he scrubbed at his face before he could start crying, and joined Stiles in the living room.

It was an enjoyable and relaxing day. He and Stiles watched a Star Trek movie, and once Scott
came, the boys introduced him to video games, wiling away hours playing Mario Kart. Steve was horrible at it, but the boys sportingly let him win a few races anyway. His thumbs were a little sore by the time Mrs. McCall called Scott to come pick her up from work.

Dinner with the Stilinskis was Thanksgiving leftover wraps, with some Turkey soup thrown in. They finished off the pumpkin pie for dessert. Steve knew he was somewhat subdued compared to yesterday, and that John noticed it. But either Stiles had talked to him or John just knew better, because he didn't say a word.

That night, Steve pulled Bucky's flag to his chest as he went to bed, and finally stopped holding back the tears.

~*~

The next day, Steve washed his face twice before facing the Stilinskis. Then he spent the morning helping Scott and Stiles improve their lacrosse throws over in the park.

If it were up to him, Steve would've spent the rest of the weekend like this. Unfortunately the Ten Rings waited for no holidays, so neither could SHIELD. Steve was already receiving report alerts on his phone as he packed up his overnight bag.

Steve chucked the bag into the passenger seat of the car, taking a moment to glance at his watch and try to plan out his surprise for Stiles' birthday.

The boy in question came out of the house with some post-Thanksgiving leftover sandwiches all wrapped up and ready to go.

"I really am sorry," Steve said again - for once not out of sincerity, but to throw Stiles off. "For not being here for your birthday."

Hopefully, Steve's idea would make up for it.

"No problem," Stiles said, handing off the sandwiches and rocking on his heels as Steve set them on top of his bag in the car. "Just give me a call when you can, okay?"

"I will," Steve said, shutting the door and heading back inside. He went to his room to pick up the one thing he hadn't packed before, and came out to meet the Stilinskis in the living room.

"Listen," Steve said, knowing both John and Stiles were staring at the folded flag. He held it out to Stiles. "I...I appreciate this, I do. But I think there's a difference between holding onto the past and drowning in it - so you should keep it." Stiles opened his mouth, protest already in his eyes, and Steve added, "Or at least keep it safe for me."

Stiles tilted his head. "You want me to keep it safe?" he asked dubiously.

Steve nodded. "Bucky woulda hit me upside the head, anyway, if I kept it."

Stiles snorted. But despite his cavalier countenance, he took the flag back in both hands with utmost gravity. Steve wondered if Stiles had looked up the flag code at some point. Actually, who's Steve kidding, of course he did.

"I'll keep this safe if you keep yourself safe," Stiles said. He bit his lip, glanced sidelong in his father's direction, then murmured, "Deal?"

Oh, the sneaky little jerk. He was definitely a Barnes boy, all right. Steve could feel his heart bursting
at the thought.

With a nod, he agreed. "Deal."

As John gave Steve a goodbye handshake, Stiles set the flag on the coffee table to follow him outside.

Despite all of Stiles' Californian shivering, it was warm for late November. Steve was going to spend the next few weeks desperately missing this kind of weather. He stood by the car for a moment, trying to think of what to say, then realized there was nothing else to say.

So without a word, he pulled Stiles into a hug, who returned it eagerly. After a solid minute, Stiles stepped back to let Steve get into the car.

"You'll bring this car back when you visit for the Winter holidays, right?" Stiles asked.

"I dunno," Steve said, revving up the engine before speaking again. "Tony has an awful lot of cars to choose from..."

Stiles was still laughing as Steve pulled out of the driveway.

Steve smiled over his shoulder one last time. He turned and drove out of the neighborhood, turning on the music from his iPod as he went.

Then, instead of turning right towards the interstate out of town, he turned left to go deeper into Beacon Hills.

He needed to take care of something he's sure Bucky would've done if he'd had the chance.

~*~

Steve had a long and somewhat emotional phonecall with the Sheriff after calling him and telling him what he did. Ultimately John came around, agreeing to Steve's idea. They promised to keep their silence until Stiles' birthday. If he didn't find out himself - unlikely, but possible - Steve would call to tell him.

He was going into the Triskelion the day after that, for a briefing on the Ten Rings no less. Same route as always - probably on his way to the same exact briefing as always - but this time, when Steve stepped out of the elevator on his way over, Fury was waiting for him.

"How was your Thanksgiving?"

"...did you really wait by the elevator just to ask me that?" Steve asked, striding towards the briefing room. Fury fell into step beside him.

"This is a biometric building, Rogers, I don't need to wait," Fury said, handing Steve a file he was holding. "I don't have time to wait."

"Do we have time to do anything?" Steve said, flipping through the pages. Apparently, they lost track of a black market shipment of Stark weapons. Tony might've been right, after all. "Everyone seems panicked, but no one knows what they're panicking about."

Fury tapped in his code to get into the high-security corridor, Steve doing the same behind him. "That's the problem. We know something big is coming, but no idea what."

Steve snorted. "So we're at 'hurry up and wait'?"
"Yup."

"And now we have to sit through a two-hour meeting explaining why we have to hurry up and wait?"

"Pretty much."

Steve sighed. "Well, I guess some things never change. Pointless meetings today are just like the pointless meetings in my day." He started to open the door, only for Fury to stop him.

"You still haven't answered my question, by the way," Fury said, hand on the door.

Steve tilted his head.

"How was your Thanksgiving?" Fury repeated, raising an eyebrow.

Steve pursed his lip in thought - not about the holiday itself, but how much he was willing to let Fury know.

Finally, he fished his wallet from his pocket, pulled out $10, and wordlessly handed it over.

~*~

Steve was doing his final equipment checks with the STRIKE team when he got a call from Stiles on his birthday. Steve took a look at the Caller ID and the time, and grinned. All around the gigantic table where their weapons and kits were all spread out, his team stared at him in surprise.

"Something funny, Rogers?" Rollins asked. Right across from Steve, Rumlow looked up, equally curious.

Smiling, Steve put his phone on speaker, then answered the call.

"GRAND UNCLE BUCKY?!" Stiles yelled. His tinny voice filled the prep room with such teenage indignation that Steve burst out laughing, much to the shock of his team. "GRAND UNCLE BUCKY?!"

In the background, Steve could hear more laughter from two other men - one definitely the Sheriff, and the other most likely being Mr. Keller.

"I take it," Steve drawled. "You got my birthday gift?"

"You bought me a car!" Stiles said, sounding like he still wasn't sure if it was real. "Steve, I - that's so much- I can't-"

"Yes you can," Steve said. "As I'm sure you can tell, your father already agreed to it."

"Yeah," Stiles ground out. "And then didn't tell me a damn thing-"

"It was supposed to be a surprise," Steve defended.

"Oh, I was surprised, all right," Stiles declared. There was a beeping noise, and suddenly the half-suppressed laughter from the background was a lot clearer. Stiles must've put Steve on speaker, too. "Dad said we were gonna go and get a car today and I nearly cried, except when I got here, Mr. Keller was all 'oh, I was wondering when you were gonna come and pick up your jeep'. What the fuck, Steve?!!"
Stiles sounded like he was smiling by the end, so Steve wasn't too worried. Especially since John's admonishment of, "Language!" sounded more cheerful than anything else. The half-dozen agents standing around the table were staring at Steve's phone with confused amusement. Rumlow even tilted his head for explanation.

"Happy Birthday, Stiles," Steve said, which alleviated some of their confusion.

"Steve!" He couldn't see Stiles' flailing, but he could just imagine it. "At least let me pay you back what I have, and then-"

"No," Steve said. "It's a gift, not a loan."

"But-

"I can afford it, Stiles," Steve said. Rumlow snorted, turning his attention back to his radio, but still keeping an ear on Steve's conversation. "Really, it's no problem."

"...I have most of the money," Stiles began.

"So treat yourself," Steve said. "Not every day you turn sixteen."

"Steve," Stiles said, drawing out his name.

"If nothing else," Steve continued. "Gas is pretty expensive, these days."

At that, most of the table snorted in unison amusement, and Stiles yelped in surprise, then asked, "Uh, did I call you in the middle of something?"

Steve opened his mouth, but then Martinez and Rollins both shouted, "Happy Birthday!" Most of the table started snickering again.

"Um, sorry," Stiles started.

"Don't be," Steve said, glaring at the team. They grinned back, unrepentant, and Steve rolled his eyes. "It's nothing, I'm just babysitting for a bunch of five-year-olds masquerading as combat veterans."

"Five-and-a-half," Rumlow said without looking up, deep voice at such odds with the petulant phrasing that it sent them all into peels of badly-suppressed laughter.

"Oh my god," Stiles said, also laughing. "I can't believe we trust you to protect our national security."

As the laughter subsided, Steve said, "I'm serious, Stiles. Your father's going to put his half of the money into your college fund, so have fun with your half. Get yourself a new computer. Do something fun with Scott. Or hell, go buy something nice for that girl you like."

"But...it's a lot!" Stiles cried out.

"Then treat yourself a lot," Steve deadpanned. Rumlow snorted again.

"But not too much," John's voice cut in. "Because with that much money, it's time Stiles learned financial responsibility."

Stiles groaned. Meanwhile, the agents grinned as everyone glanced sidelong at Thompson, who was the epitome of financial irresponsibility. Thompson glared back, making punching motions towards
Martinez. Rollins leaned over the table in quiet laughter and Rumlow rolled his eyes towards the heavens, sharing his exasperation with Steve.

"Happy Birthday, Stiles," Steve repeated. "Have fun, and tell me where you go first, okay?"

"Are you kidding?" Stiles cried out. "I'mma pick Scott up from work and we're going straight to Big Five!"

"Big Five?" Steve asked.

"Sporting goods," John drawled from the background.

"Um, sorry for calling you in the middle of work," Stiles said. Before Steve could tell him not to be, he added, "And thank you. For not letting me lose my mom's car."

Steve smiled sadly at his agents as he un-speakered the phone and brought it up to his ear.

"You're welcome," Steve said. "Now go. Have fun. Wrack up a big gas bill. Make your mom proud, okay?"

"That'll take at least three speeding tickets," Stiles said.

Just before the phone beeped End Call at him, the last thing Steve heard was John's, "Don't you even dare!"

Steve foresaw many traffic safety reiterations in Stiles' future.

He pocketed the phone, and turned his attention back to his team.

"What the hell was that about?" Rumlow asked.

"Do you know about my sergeant from the war?" Steve asked. "Bucky Barnes?" Rollins made a choking noise beside him, and Rumlow shot him a warning glare. Rollins must've been a Bucky Barnes fan, then. Possibly Rumlow, too, if his subtle twitching was anything to go by. "His niece died a few years ago, and the family had to sell her car, but no one else bought it yet. Her kid earned most of the money to buy it back, but not enough. Last week, I paid for it, and told the dealer that when he asked, to tell him it was a gift from his Grand Uncle Bucky. Today's his sixteenth birthday."

The agents all laughed at that. When their youngest teammate, Zhang, reached over to hold out a hand for a high-five, Steve returned it. Rumlow shook his head ruefully.

"You're a good guy, Cap," he said, smiling in amusement and turning his attention towards his kit.

A little while after the pre-combat checks were done, Steve got a text from John saying, I just doubled Stiles' college fund with one deposit. With financial aid, we might not even need a loan. Glad to hear it, Steve texted back.

For the rest of the day, Steve was bombarded with texts of what Stiles was up to. It started with a picture of a shocked Scott (I told Scott last week I wouldn't be able to afford the jeep.). Then a picture of Stiles sitting on the hood of his jeep, likely taken by Scott (New profile picture!). Then a selfie of him and Scott holding a bunch of brand new lacrosse gear (You told me to treat myself!). Then there were several pictures of cake, ice-cream, and shakes that Stiles indulged in, ending with a picture of Stiles laying on a couch, clutching his stomach and looking like he was in pain.

I REGRET NOTHING! Stiles texted with that picture, and Steve laughed.
Steve's favorite message of the day, though, was from John in the evening, just before that last one of Stiles on the couch. It was a picture taken from halfway across a small parking lot. Stiles and Scott were sitting in the front seats of the jeep, both drinking smoothies and laughing together.

*It's been over six years since I got picked up from work in this jeep,* John said. Steve could almost hear the tears.

*Are you okay?* Steve asked. *With Stiles having your wife's car back?*

*I wouldn't have tried to help him get it if I weren't,* John answered. *I'll be okay. Just a little bittersweet. It's a bit like having a piece of her back, again.*

Steve's breath caught in his throat, remembering when Stiles said almost exactly the same thing just a few months before.

When he got John's next text, saying, *Hopefully he doesn't try to make his mother TOO proud, though,* Steve's laughter came with tears.

The day after, Steve and the team were flying out to a remote Ten Rings base just outside of Mosul for their first mission as a STRIKE team.

It was a tough mission, predominantly because no one was ever supposed to find out they were here - least of all Al-Qaeda, though they didn't want the Kurds to know, either.

Steve actually had to use his advanced strength several times, and still broke a leg anyway. By the end of the mission, the only good news they were able to come back with was that the Ten Rings had definitely been there. Unfortunately, that hadn't been in much doubt beforehand, and the actual weapons receipts they'd been looking for there were nowhere to be found.

Steve swung by Stark Tower to give Tony the bad news, himself.

"Did you find out how recently they'd been there?" Tony asked when Steve was done, pulling up an entire wall of holographic files. "Because I have a hard time believing this was a coincidence. They're always one step ahead-"

"SHIELD is investigating a potential leak," Steve said. "But so far, we haven't found anything."

Tony sighed as he stabbed his finger through the wall. "Right when they're speeding up activity, too."

"There's a hypothesis in SHIELD that they aren't actually speeding up activity, just trying to look like it to disrupt the upcoming holidays," Steve said. "And even then - you've been out of the weapons business for a while-"

"Not compared to how long I was in it," Tony said. He abandoned his wall to go over to the bar and grab a bottle of expensive-looking whiskey. He also grabbed two crystal glasses and brought them back, now standing on the other side of the wall and looking at it backwards. He poured himself a glass, then held up the empty one in an offer.

"Doesn't work on me, remember?"

"No, it just works less on you," Tony sniffed, pouring Steve a finger and handing him the glass. He sipped at his own as he glared at the visual representation of his investigation.

Steve shrugged and sipped at the whiskey. Until Bruce finally managed to get his metabolism-
slowing drugs working, it wouldn't get him drunk, but it was still good whiskey.

He watched as Tony moved files around, made two phone calls, sent out several e-mail inquiries, and messaged Pepper and Happy at least half a dozen times with ideas. Eventually, though, Tony wiped the whole wall away and flopped onto his couch.

"At least I'm going back to Malibu, tomorrow," Tony said. He looked out the window, out over New York. "And staying there for winter," he added.

Steve laughed. "You've gone native, haven't you?"

"Native?"

"You've turned into a Californian," Steve concluded. "Anything less than perfect weather and you bundle up."

"Damn straight," Tony said shamelessly. "There is a reason I base my business out of SoCal, now."

Steve snorted. "Not much better in Northern California, either. It was still in the 50s when I went and my nephew was shivering."

Tony gave him a speculative look. "Your nephew?"

God, he wished he could still get drunk. He hoped Bruce got his experiment working, soon.

"I'm naming him my next of kin," Steve admitted. "And - his family did take me in back in my day, so..."

Tony smiled. "Glad to hear it, Cap." He paused. "I never saw you smile until after you spent time with them."

Steve nodded, staring down into his glass as he leaned against the back of Tony's couch. "You know, when he told people about me visiting, he never told anyone I'm Captain America. Time of his life when you care most about all the stupid things your peers think of you and he didn't say a word. Told everyone I'm his 'Uncle Steve'."

"Too bad your name isn't Sam," Tony quipped. Steve glared, and Tony laughed. "What? It would've been fitting!"

Steve rolled his eyes. "I'm calling them tomorrow, actually - a SHIELD lawyer is gonna go over and finalize the paperwork."

"Yay for the dead tree floods," Tony said, holding up his glass in a toast. "And may the bureaucratic gods have mercy on their souls."

Thankfully, they did.

Steve video-called the Stilinskis from his guest suite the next day. Sitting on a couch so soft that it was slowly driving Steve insane, he had JARVIS start the call for him. The TV screen filled with Stiles fiddling with a camera.

"Steve!" Stiles greeted with a grin.

"How're things going?"

"I think I might die of bloodloss from all the papercuts, but otherwise I'm fine," Stiles said. He held
up his hand to show that he did, indeed, actually have a tiny papercut on the side of his palm, just under his little finger.

Steve smiled, shaking his head.

"Stiles," Johns said with exasperation. Stiles pulled away from the camera enough that Steve could see John waving a band-aid at his son, sitting opposite from a woman in what was the West Coast's idea of professional attire.

"Captain," she greeted. "I'm Ms. Mariana Lopez, the HR lawyer for SHIELD's West Coast Division. We've already gone through most of the paperwork, so I'm sure we can finish the rest before Stiles, here, bleeds out from his war wounds."

Stiles pouted at the humor being taken at his expense, while John snorted, and Steve grinned. California was always less formal than New York or D.C., and the longer he lived in the 21st century, the more he could see the appeal.

He doubted any of the lawyers out of the Triskelion would've been willing to call him "Stiles" instead of his legal first name.

"I think I've signed more things in the last two hours than I have in my entire life," Stiles moaned, fiddling with the band-aid.

"At least all this stuff is only in one language and one legal system," Ms. Lopez said, smiling at Stiles' martyrdom. "SHIELD works in global security. This is a break compared to what I'm usually dealing with."

Stiles looked suitably horrified, and John looked even more amused at Stiles' horror.

"Anything we have to worry about?" Steve said.

"Mostly just the paperwork untangling the age issue," Lopez said, picking up a paperclipped sheaf of legal documents and holding it up so Steve could see it. "It'll mean all of you need to sign a few more papers so that Mr. Stilinski has Power of Attorney as your next-of-kin's legal guardian, without being your actual immediate relative. Apart from the legalistic versions of 'hurry up and wait', I don't think that will be a problem. We might need to send this via courier for security reasons, but that's about it."

Steve shrugged. "If worst comes to worst, I'll just sign it when I visit for Christmas."

Visiting for Christmas never happened.

They'd planned for it, extensively so. Christmas fell right in the middle of Hanukkah, this year. Stiles was already planning on getting a decorated cactus just for Steve's visit. Scott and Melissa had invited him to attend Christmas Mass with them, and Steve had gotten presents and everything.

Then Tony had to go antagonize a terrorist on international television, get himself blown up, and uncover the biggest military-industrial corruption scandal in American history.

"So I don't think I'll be able to make it," Steve concluded when he called John and Stiles to let them know.

"Wait, Iron Man's alive?!" Stiles cried out.

Steve sighed, shifting the earpiece and pushing his phone around the smooth tabletop. "Yes. Tony's
alive, so's Pepper Potts, and the President has been returned safely. The Vice President is getting arrested for conspiring with Aldrich Killian."

"Holy shit," Stiles said. It was a testament to how ridiculous this entire situation was that John didn't even chastise his son for the language.

"I'm really sorry," Steve began. "I wish I could come, but-"

"You're needed over there," John cut in. "Don't ever apologize for that. There are lives at stake in what you do, Steve, we can handle waiting a few more months before seeing you again." A pause, and Steve was sure the Sheriff was shaking his head. "Jesus Christ, the President getting kidnapped, that alone..."

Steve sighed in relief. He leaned back in the comfy chair of Tony's hotel room, taking care to tilt his eyes away from the bright sunset. His gaze drifted over the half-dozen devices spread across the table, Pepper's detritus from trying to wrangle Stark Industries in the wake of the week of insanity. The woman herself was cuddled up with Tony on the bed, both of them passed out from exhaustion.

"How about you?" John asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Steve said. "Tony and Pepper are sleeping, and reinforcements are coming in soon."

"Reinforcements?" Stiles asked.

"Natasha's been sending Tony all the information on the Mandarin that SHIELD has ever since Happy - uh, Tony's driver and head of security - was hit by the bomb," Steve explained. "So she's coming in to help clean things up. Bruce is coming in because Tony doesn't trust doctors. And Pepper may actually need his expertise."

"How come?" Stiles asked. Steve could just imagine Stiles leaning forward in curiosity.

"That's not my place to say," Steve said. "But - everything will be fine, just things are kind of messy right now. SHIELD sent me here as security, we're all that worried."

"We understand," Stiles said. "Keep in touch, okay?"

"Will do," Steve promised.

"Good luck," John called out.

"And good night!" Stiles cried out.

The phone beeped at him as the call ended.

He set it aside and looked up to see Pepper gently extricating herself from Tony's hold. She smoothed down his pillow-fluffed hair, then pulled on her night robe and joined Steve at the table.

"We don't actually need a babysitter, you know," Pepper said, prodding her digital artillery awake.

"But you do need your friends," Steve said, pushing towards her the tablet she was reaching for.

"And you need help."

"I don't want to be responsible for keeping you away from your family," she began, Steve shook his head.

"What about you?" he asked. "Where's your family?"
"Currently fighting about whose house me and Tony should spend the holidays with," she said, lips almost curling towards a smile. "And I'm one step away from settling this by flying everyone in to New York for Christmas."

Steve laughed. "How will that go?"

"As long as we get them out by New Years, it'll be fine," Pepper said.

"Why New Years?"

"Because our New Years parties are not of the family friendly variety," she drawled. "But to be honest, bringing everyone in is a last resort. Tony's not going to rest if he's at the Tower. Too many resources available. I'm trying to talk everyone into going to my sister's home. Biggest house, kids there to play with, and when her husband and our mother can stop fighting over recipes for long enough to cooperate, they make a fantastic cooking team." Pepper paused to look over at Tony. "He could use a few home-cooked meals, right about now."

Steve thought of undercooked turkey, singed cornbread, and uncomfortable office chairs.

"I know the feeling," he agreed.

With Pepper's help, he packed up the Hanukkah gifts and sent them to the Stilinskis. John got serious gifts like shirts, ties, and books...all of which contained gift cards to various "junk food" stores - donut joints, pastry stores, a diner chain, and even a chocolate shop - hidden inside them, well away from anywhere Stiles would find them. Stiles got a bunch of Avengers merchandise - ones not set to be released for a few more months. The first six days were one for each teammate. Then a laptop case featuring all of them - one of the only ones, since most had a tendency to cut out Nat, with many also cutting out Clint. On the last day, Stiles called Steve, cackling over his knock-off Captain America shirt, which had been nestled inside a dozen layers of wrapping paper. Each layer had a note with another quote from the street vendor's hilarious speech about why this shirt was Absolutely Not A Knock-Off as soon as he'd realized who Steve was.

"I'm wearing this thing on my first day of school," Stiles declared, still breathless from laughing. "And I gave Scott the tee-shirts you sent for him. I'll try to make us match for the first day back."

"Only 'try'?'" Steve asked, leaning back on his own couch. He'd been swinging by to pick up a few things for spending a week at the Tower with Tony and Pepper, but then he'd found out he had a package waiting for him, plain cardboard with MERRY CHRISTMAS STEVE scrawled all over it in glitter-glue.

"He'll agree to it, then forget, oversleep, and throw on the nearest clean shirt he finds," Stiles said dismissively. "Did you get your gift from us?"

"Yeah," Steve said, stroking his finger tip over the wide edge of the phonograph horn. "Just this morning. I...thank you."

"All the outward appearances of music-players from your day, all the functionality of music-players from now," Stiles proclaimed. "That thing will play vinyl records, CDs, and cassettes, and you can hook up your smartphone or your computer to it, too. Do you like it?"

"Yeah," Steve admitted. "It's perfect."

"Merry Christmas, Steve," Stiles said.

"Happy Hanukkah," Steve replied, already digging out the instruction manual. "Now help me set
this thing up."

Steve spent winter holidays with Tony and Pepper, as well as Bruce for a few days, and Nat on and off. She came, left, came again, left again, then came back just in time to give Steve a friendly kiss for New Years.

The party was as outrageous as Pepper predicted. Tony kicked off the new year with a speech about how the terrorists only won when the people let them, inviting his nine-dozen guests to party on in defiance. Even Steve raised his drink and cheered to that.

"He puts on a good show," Steve told Tony's friend, Col. Rhodes.

"This is no show, man," Rhodes said, shaking his head in amusement. "This is the real deal. Tony honestly believes the best way to say 'fuck you' to his enemies is to throw a party showing off how great he's doing."

Tony certainly knew how to throw a party - and one everyone could partake in. Nat was enjoying herself behind the bar, rising up to meet every challenging drink requested of her and tossing bottles into the air as smoothly as she threw knives in the field. Some young scientist was holding court in the quiet circle of couches at the edge of the main party, where Bruce and half a dozen other party-goers were hanging on her every word. Steve nearly considered going over, but then he saw them drawing complicated diagrams on napkins and decided to stay where he was by the snack table.

"He sure does," Steve said, and held up his drink. Rhodes clinked his margarita against Steve's beer. "Here's to good company..." He smiled at Rhodes after he took a sip. "Even if they are from the Chair Force."

"You sure those words aren't too long for you, Ground Pounder?" Rhodes challenged with a grin.

They spent a solid hour ribbing each other out and chatting about their military experiences, before Tony whisked Rhodes away to "teach those interns what it means to be a beaver". Steve didn't know what that meant beyond the fact it involved commandeering every plastic cup and paper plate Pepper let them get their hands on.

"Hey, soldier," Nat greeted him when he eventually wandered over to the bar. "Come here often?"

"More often than is probably good for me," Steve said. Natasha laughed, making him a drink that looked better than it tasted and which Steve loved all the same.

The next morning, Tony stumbled into the kitchen, promising his first born to whoever made him coffee.

"You already promised your first born to six other people last night," Pepper gently reminded him, sipping at her tea at the counter.

"Then my seventh-born to whoever makes me coffee," Tony grumbled, taking a seat next to Pepper and burying his face in her shoulder. Pepper turned her head to kiss his forehead, and Tony preened without opening his eyes.

Silently laughing at Tony's expense, Steve started the coffee maker. He was just getting together the ingredients for his 'lazy crepes' when his phone alerted him to an incoming video chat. At Tony's flinch, he hurried out to the living room and answered the call.

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!" two teenage boys shouted over the phone, making Steve doubly glad he'd taken the phone out of Tony's earshot.
Steve laughed, watching the boys crowd Stiles' laptop's camera. "Scott, Stiles," he greeted. They backed up a little so he could actually see their faces. "Happy New Year, boys. How's your year going so far?"

"It was good until Stiles got an idea," Scott said.

"Isn't that how most days go?" Steve asked, sitting on the couch to look out the glass walls as he talked to the boys.

"Hey!" Stiles protested.

Steve laughed, spending five minutes listening to the boys' very different versions of their midnight experiment with Dite Coke and Mentos, then their cake-off, and finally their taco-making competition with each other. John and Melissa were getting a good night's rest after the New Years night shift, and the boys themselves were already making big plans for the upcoming school year.

Halfway through an increasingly ridiculous story about a packet of Glow Sticks, Natasha swanned into the communal area, already dressed for another day. Or rather, Natalie Rushman, temporary liaison between the CEO of Stark Industries and SHIELD.

Steve got an idea.

He silently gestured her over out of the line of sight of the camera, pointing towards his phone. She understood immediately, nodding in amusement.

"Hey, boys, a friend of mine wants to say hi," Steve said, and tilted his phone slightly as Nat came up behind him.

Scott's eyes sprung wide open in shock, and behind him, Stiles doubled over laughing as he realized who she was.

"This is Stiles' friend, Scott," Steve said, glancing up at Nat. She smirked, recognizing puppy love when she saw it. "Scott, this is my friend, Ms. Romanoff. I believe you know her as the Black Widow?"

"Hello, Scott," she said, and probably just made Scott's entire year if the look on his face was anything to go by. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, ma'am," Scott said shyly. Stiles wasn't even trying to hide his laughter, but Scott didn't notice him at all. "You're my favorite Avenger."

"Oh, really?" she asked. "How come?"

Steve was honestly expecting an answer about her beauty. Maybe something about how pretty she was, given this was Scott.

It was neither.

"You're like the most badass Avenger and you don't even have fancy weapons or superpowers!"

The boy promptly flushed as he looked at Steve as he added. "Not that fancy weapons or superpowers are a bad thing."

Nat's laughter was both genuine and surprised. "Well, thank you - that's not something I hear often."

"That's because people are stupid, especially other guys..." Scott spared a moment to look pointedly
at Stiles, who snickered unabashedly. "I think I might be single-handedly responsible for most of the hits on that video if you flipping an alien over you with your legs."

Steve knew the video. Hundreds of hours' worth of video footage had flooded the Internet after the less-than-hour-long battle had ended. Tony had made sure the whole team knew about the most popular ones - especially Steve, being the main 'face' of the Avengers alongside Tony.

"I tried to do that weird back-flip-punch thing you did when you knocked that alien off the bus," Scott continued. "It, uh, didn't work - I broke my nose."

"Did you you remember to keep your arms straight?" Nat said. "And your knees tucked in?"

"Uh..."

Steve and Stiles shared a look over the video-chat as Nat gave Scott some advice to help him do flips, hand-springs, and other gymnastics moves Scott had apparently been trying to imitate since he first went on a Black Widow video spree after the Battle of New York. Scott actually started taking notes halfway through.

"When in doubt, look up ballet and gymnastics videos," Nat concluded. "You can figure out the martial arts side of it after. Most of it is about learning how to control your body, and gymnasts and ballerinas do that best."

"Thank you so much," Scott said. Nat smiled, and Steve got the feeling it wasn't even as fake as it usually was.

"Good luck, Scott," she said, waving at Steve's phone before wandering over to the kitchen to steal some of Tony's coffee.

For a moment, there was starstruck silence. Then Stiles pushed his dazed friend out of the way and said to Steve in a low voice, "Seriously, thank you for that."

"No problem," Steve said. "I'll let you two get to work on Scott's moves."

"It's a good thing I already have his mom on speed dial," Stiles snarked.

"Hey!" Scott immediately protested.

Stiles rolled his eyes. "Bye, Steve."

"Bye, boys."

Ending the chat, Steve spared a moment to admire the view of his hometown, before going back to the kitchen, where it turned out Bruce had also come in. He was fishing around for some tea as Steve went to the counter with all the ingredients still where he left them.

Bruce found his tea, and put some water to boil in an electric kettle as Steve started mixing things, humming Auld Lang Syne quietly enough to spare Tony a worsening headache.

Ever since coming out of the ice, Steve had longed to be with his friends and those he’d considered family - either back in the right time with them, or dead just like them.

But the last few months gave him new friends and adoptive family to be with, to want to be with. While some part of Steve felt a little guilty about it, most of him wondered what his old friends and family would think of his new one.
A few days later, Steve had to run into the Triskelion in the middle of the night for an emergency situation that thankfully turned out to be nothing. He came back out to a text from John bemoaning stupid teenagers sneaking around the woods in the dark. He laughed at John's musings about hiring a babysitter again, and thought that Bucky would probably be proud of how much their own "little shit" streaks had passed on to the boys.

The next day, Tony and Pepper dived into rebuilding their company. Steve and Nat had their hands full trying to figure out the terrorist landscape in the aftermath of the Ten Rings and Mandarin fiasco. Even Bruce was happily busy, some new discovery earning him notoriety for his big brain instead of his big alter ego. Clint was finally cleared for active duty again, and the celebratory dinner was the Avengers' first reunion - minus Thor - ever since they parted ways after the Battle of New York.

Despite all the fancy restaurants available up and down the East Coast, Clint insisted on taking them to a small diner in Bed-Stuy, run by someone who lived in the apartment building he "accidentally owned".

"How do you accidentally own something?" Steve asked, bewildered, as they drove to the diner in one of Tony's only cars that could actually seat five people. "Especially an entire apartment building?"

"I got kind of bored over the last few months out of commission," Clint said. "See, I found this dog after it got hit by a car, and around the same time my old intern came to visit me. Well, she was just a SHIELD intern but we got along and she does archery almost as well as I do so I call her my intern. Anyway, the dog, the intern, and then some douche-bro mafia wannabes who think shutter shades and tracksuits make a good combination..."

As Clint recounted the increasingly ridiculous tale, they made it to the diner, and Steve could see why Clint liked it. Retro without being vintage, and a staff that didn't blink an eye at the Heroes of New York in their establishment. They gave the team a quiet booth in the back and a menu that promised portions which would could satisfy even Steve, let alone everyone else.

Halfway through their dinner, Steve got a text from Stiles saying, Scott's fallen in love with the cute new girl at school, and she seems to like him back.

"You may no longer be the love of Scott's life," Steve gravely informed Natasha, showing her the text.

She smiled as Steve started explaining the New Years video chat to an increasingly amused Clint.

"Tell him not to try Nat's moves until after she's gone on a date with him," Clint said around a mouthful of food. "Take my word for it, broken noses do not make a good impression on a first date."

Steve obliged, much to the entire table's laughter.

Against all odds, Steve was still smiling when he went into the Triskelion the next day for another post-Mandarin briefing.

"You look like you're in a good mood," Rumlow greeted, pushing maps around the table.

Before Steve could answer, his phone chimed with a new message.

SCOTT MADE FIRST LINE!!! Stiles' text read.

"I am," Steve said aloud, sending back a congratulatory text.
All in all, Steve's first new year in the twenty-first century was looking up.

~*~

Chapter End Notes

Well, that's all the build-up done. PHEW. Now I can finally get started on the plot and feels.

I have a Tumblr. Come say hi and flail around about the new Civil War trailer with me! I talk about this fic/series a lot in my winter wolves tag. And if you would like to share this story, you can Like or Reblog my notice for it here. :)

Please let me know what you think. Good or bad, I'd like to know, and don't ever worry about how I'll take it. Concrit is ♥. :)

Annotations (Reference Explanations) can or will be found in my Author Commentary for Frost Bite.

You can read the Sheriff's POV of the Jeep incident here.
Drink Warm Fluids

Chapter Notes

No, you're not crazy. My chapters were getting too long, so this has been expanded from 6 chapters to 8. This chapter alone was originally just the first half of a chapter - which I split because I was trying to make this update shorter than the last one. Most of this chapter is people talking on the phone, how the fuck did it get so long.

Warning: no homophobia, but some language that would be considered homophobic today. There is also a reference to child abuse that was implied in Season 5A.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

So what's this I'm hearing about a dead body you and Scott found in the woods?

Steve sent that text just before going into yet another meeting about the latest wave of intelligence. It involved coordinating locations based on where they found various dead bodies, and what conditions those bodies were in. Many of them were American soldiers, and two of them even SHIELD agents.

The end result being he was already quite maudlin when he came out to a message from Stiles saying, We practically caught her killer red handed!

How do you know he killed her? Steve texted just before straddling his bike.

He'd just finished strapping on his helmet when Stiles chimed back, Why else would he bury her in their backyard?

That was a little strange. He actually leaned back a moment to type his response. "Their"?

The killer's sister was the body, Stiles said. He didn't report it to the police or anything like he should've. Just buried her in their backyard, right by their old house. Or what's left of it, anyway.

Weirder and weirder. What do you mean by "what's left of it"?

It burned down years ago, most of their family died, Stiles texted back. And they'd been there for a long time before that. Generations, I think. So you'd think a guy would want justice if someone or something killed his last relative. The only reason he wouldn't try to get it is because he already knows who it was. HIM.

Even over text, Stiles sounded so smug and sure. Steve wasn't sure why it rubbed him the wrong way so much, but he was self-aware enough to realize it probably had to do with the meeting he just came out of. After spending three hours explaining why no one's death's meant anything for sure, Stiles' certainty was almost galling. Enough so that he put the phone away to get on the road, the early evening wind chill a welcome respite from the stuffiness of the conference room.

It reminded him of when he first learned to ride a motorcycle. Howard was muttering under his breath about his modifications, Bucky was grumbling not-so-under his breath about how it was a deathtrap, and everyone else was laughing and cheering as Steve got the hang of it. Steve remembered it because later that day, they'd gotten reports of a burned out signals outpost. His ears still rang from the furious debates about whether it was actually the accident it looked like or some
form of Nazi sabotage.

Steve was no stranger to grief, either, and the insane things it could drive one to do. He supposed Stiles wasn't as familiar with the mix of anger and grief, since his mother died of a disease. There was no justice needed, no vengeance to be had - or to be denied, as the case may be. When there was, or when it was there and just out of reach, survivors did crazy things. Steve had done a crazy thing, one which catapulted him seventy years into the future, alive and well, instead of to Bucky’s side where he belonged.

He parked his bike outside his apartment complex and made it indoors. He was pulling out the phone and ready to dial Stiles' number, prepared to talk to him about it. Then he realized it would involve talking about it and froze for a second, wondering. Could he keep his voice calm through an explanation like this, when just thinking about it made his throat tighten up?

Well, this was the 21st century. When one avenue of communication was too daunting, there was always another one available.

He pulled up the text messages, instead.

*When Bucky died, Steve began. I was ready to burn HYDRA to the ground. Not because of their wrong-doing, not for the war, not for justice. Just for my friend. Grief alone makes you do weird things. But grief combined with vengeance, anger, terror? I invaded a fortified mountain base, jumped onto a moving plane loaded down with missiles meant to destroy every major American city on the eastern seaboard, and flew it straight into the ice...all for Bucky. People call it my greatest mission for justice, but I was just there for vengeance. I wasn't being brave for my country, I was being stupid so I could kill the bastard responsible for me losing the most important man in my life. And putting my plane down in the ice wasn't some noble sacrifice, because in that moment, I wasn't thinking about protecting people at all. I just wanted to see Bucky again.*

Steve sent the message, then realized he'd forgotten how it was relevant to Stiles.

*I did all that for my best friend in the middle of a war, he typed out. So honestly? Burying the remains of one of his last family members on ancestral land by their childhood home...that doesn’t seem weird to me at all. After playing fast and loose with a plane full of weapons of mass destruction, that’s almost tame by comparison.*

Stiles didn't respond right away. That was fair - it was a lot to take in. Steve took a deep breath, then broke out the moonshine Clint had gotten him in the hopes that it could get Steve drunk. Steve was certainly willing to try.

It...almost worked.

For Steve, there was little difference between being drunk and alcohol poisoning.

Still, at least it kept his mind off of Bucky and his own suicidal last stand against the Red Skull.

The next morning, Stiles' response said only, *The girl's death was ruled an animal attack, so they let her brother go.*

Stiles made no mention of what Steve had said, and Steve wasn't sure if he was relieved or not.

He didn't get any messages after that, so Steve had no compunctions about focusing on work.

For the most part, this meant running ass-first into a series of raids on budding terrorist cells. Everyone was trying to fill the power-vacuum in the wake of the Ten Rings collapse.
Between missions, he sat through more meetings with the curators for the Smithsonian exhibit. It was a combination of hilarious education about parts of history he'd never known about before, long arguments with historians who kept forgetting Steve was there for the things they only ever read about, and long meetings in which Steve ended up zoning out when they were talking about things that had nothing to do with him or the Howling Commandos.

It had been a big war, after all.

As it turned out, Steve should've watched his mouth a little more during those meetings.

He found that out the hard way a few nights after one of the last rounds of meetings he actually had to be there for.

"They asked for what?!" Steve asked, the broth of his experimental Thai soup splashing all over the stove as he dropped the stirring spoon in bewilderment.

"Bucky's funeral flag," Stiles said, enunciating every syllable over the phone. "Some representative from the Smithsonian called asking about it."

Steve swore, viciously enough to get Stiles snickering even as Steve leaned back against the fridge. "I'm sorry, Stiles," he said finally. "They asked me if I knew about it, and I said it was with the last descendant of the family. I thought that would be the end of it."

"Nope," Stiles said, popping the 'p' a little. "So - what do you want to do with it?"

"Me?" Steve asked.

"It's your flag," Stiles said. Steve heard some pencil-scratching in the background, and wondered what homework Stiles was multi-tasking this conversation with. "I'm just keeping it safe for you."

"I meant for you to actually have it," Steve said. "Not - I was just..."

"Saying that?" Stiles said in good humor. "I kinda figured. But I still call it yours. Dad says the decision is between us."

"Where is it now?" Steve asked.

"I got one of those flag-display cases," Stiles said. "So it's in the living room, now, on top of one of the bookshelves. Can't see it much, though. Just as well - we don't have many people over, anyway." He paused. "And, uh, don't get mad, but I found some of Bucky's other stuff, too. Well, to be more exact, I guess one of my mom's aunts saved the medals and forgot to tell anyone about it? I've been going through a bunch of my mom's old stuff, after remembering the flag, and found a little box with them. So the case I got has a little section for medals, too. But I didn't tell the Smithsonian rep about it, so we only talked about the flag. I wanted to wait until you and I were actually talking, and not just texting, to tell you about them."

Steve smiled. While it may not have been as much as the revered Captain America, Sergeant Barnes was still a war hero.

"Do you want to keep them?" Steve asked.

Stiles sighed. "Is it going to sound bad if I say I don't really care? I don't mind keeping it safe for you here, not at all. But...I never knew Bucky. I barely knew his sister, my grandma died when I was a toddler. I get that he's my family and all - but you're kind of more important to me than him."
Steve stared at the fridge, stunned.

"...Steve?" Stiles said, sounding worried. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"It's okay," Steve said, scrubbing at his eyes in a way that had nothing to do with the spices laid out around him. "I - it's okay. I just - it's been a long time since I've had someone who...even when the Barnes took me in, I was still Bucky's - Bucky's friend, you know? Bucky was always more important to them than me. So it's...it's been a long time since I was more important to a family member than Bucky." He fiddled with the stirring spoon. "Not since my mom, really."

Stiles took in a sharp breath. "I'm sor-"

"It's okay," Steve said, using his calmest voice possible before Stiles got a panic attack. "It's not bad. Just weird, that's all." Part of him felt like he should be offended on Bucky's behalf. The rest of him pointed out there was merit in Stiles' words. Even Stiles' mother had never met Bucky. Stiles' grandmother had died before he was old enough to know her, let alone know her enough to feel kinship to a man seventy years dead.

"The parts of Bucky I cared about," Steve said, twining his fingers in the chain of the dogtags and peering around the doorway to look at his giant sketch of Bucky. "I have. That flag, those medals - that's not for or about Bucky. That's about Bucky's death, and for his family. So if you don't want to keep it..."

Stiles huffed humorlessly. The pencil-scratching resumed while Steve went back to stirring his soup.

"Are they paying for it?" Steve asked after a while of comfortable silence, filled only with the sound of sloshing broth and Stiles' writing.

"It would depend," Stiles said. "Mostly, they were asking for it as a kind of permanent loan thing? So, like, they'd have it, but if we ever asked for it back for whatever reason, they'd give it back. And as long as it's there, if it's on loan, we might be able to get a charitable tax write-off or something. Not a big one, but it might be more helpful in the long run because it would be recurring every year it's there, and not a one-time write off for donating it permanently. Or a one-time profit for them buying it. Which they also offered, but they're not offering too much for it. Either way, they'll give us an all-expenses paid trip to D.C. to, and I quote, 'escort' the flag there."

Steve laughed. "Makes sense. If you two come over here, you can finally see my place."

"Sounds good," Stiles said. "But on the topic of old crap - I also found a comic book which I think you might've signed?"

Steve burst out laughing. "I remember that!"

"Is there a story behind it?" Stiles asked.

"Somewhat," Steve said. "Long story short, I told Bucky not to antagonize the USO spin-doctors, and he didn't listen to me."

"Is that why he's always a kid in tights?" Stiles asked, already laughing.

"Yup," Steve said, nodding as he picked up the ladle to start working on his soup again. "He was fucking pissed when we got the first complimentary copy. This was right around the time I was getting famous for being a war hero, not just as a character. So I signed a copy and sent it back to his sisters as a joke." Steve paused. "I'm actually surprised that wasn't sold."
"I think they just forgot about it," Stiles said, with a tone of second-hand apology. "I didn't even know this stuff was there until I went looking for anything of Bucky's. I found those medals, the comic book, and some old newsboy hats."

"I definitely remember those," Steve said quietly. Just the mention of them made Steve feel the ghost of a familiar, gentle pressure on his head. "Let me guess, one tan-ish and one dark brown? But otherwise identical?"

"Yup," Stiles said. "Were they his or yours?"

"The lighter, tan one was his, the dark-brown one was mine," Steve said. "His ma found them in some two-for-one sale, so she got one for each of us. We wore them all the time. The first time Bucky shipped out, he gave his sisters his hat and told them to take care of it for him until he came back. I did the same after becoming Captain America."

"...so giving them the hats was the last time you ever saw them?" Stiles asked.

Steve paused in his stirring, realizing the painful truth of that.

"Yes," Steve admitted.

"Then I'm definitely not giving those away," Stiles said. Steve heard what sounded like Stiles leaning back in his chair, creaking in finality with his pronouncement. "They're just newsboy hats, I doubt the Smithsonian will care, anyway. I'll send them to you."

"If you want to wear them, keep them," Steve said. "But otherwise, let the museum have it. They're not exactly fashionable, today, and..." Steve sighed. "I don't think I could bring myself to wear either of those, again, now that Bucky's dead."

"I'll..." Stiles paused. "I don't even know, dude. Like, if I were visiting this museum and seeing this about someone else's family, I would be full of feels, so I get why it could be important. I'm just not sure if I want to share those feels with the whole world or if we should keep it to ourselves."

"...feels?" Steve asked, knowing he was deflecting and not caring.

"Tumblr slang," Stiles answered immediately. "For a strong burst of emotion. Often compared to a gut-punch."

"What's Tumblr?" Steve asked.

The conversation trailed off to lighter topics after that. Stiles recounted Scott's latest antics over that girl he's obsessed with, and Steve told him about Clint's latest rant about how disgusting infancy could get.

It was a quiet few days, after that.

Steve and Stiles ended up deciding to just give everything to the Smithsonian on a permanent loan. The Stilinskis would get a tax write-off for it, and now the museum was not only including the flag in their exhibit, but creating an entire new section just for families of soldiers in WWII, using Bucky's family - and the objects given to them - as an example.

The Stilinskis would be coming over with the flag, medals, comic book, and hats in about two months. It was originally going to be one month, but Steve asked to have it pushed back by another so that the Stilinskis could be here during the fancy dinner being held by the Mayor of New York to commemorate the non-Avengers heroes of New York - the national guardsmen, city servicemen, and
civilians who died in the Chitauri invasion. The "actual" Heroes of the New York were of course invited, along with their families.

Steve had planned on going by himself, but Tony - who was helping the mayor hold this dinner - pestered Steve until he caved and invited the Stilinskis.

"I was just going to go with Nat," Steve said over the phone. "She...doesn't really have any family."

"She has Clint's family, apparently," Tony said. "There's a reason I call them the Assassin Twins, not Mr. and Mrs. Smith."

"Who?"

That turned into a remote movie night. They would stream the same movie on different TVs several hundred miles away from each other, video call in front of them to heckle each other about the film. Half an hour into the film, Nat broke into Steve's apartment - for a given value of breaking and entering when he opened the window for her - and joined them. Everyone insulted how impossible some parts of the movie were and how understated the rest was. They kept doing so for another movie about sorta-supersoldiers, which got ten times funnier when they all realized the main character looked like Clint.

After that, Steve had a wholly unremarkable week and a half. He didn't have to do any field work. He just confirmed things in meetings, trained in new combat styles, and tried a few more recipes that Bruce sent him. The last few days were turning into a good week. He was starting to feel confident enough to take Tony's suggestion of going out to a bar or a club and socialize, more.

Granted, Tony had no idea just what kinds of bars Steve was interested in, but still. Steve was starting to feel good, feel settled, feel like he could really enjoy the future-

One article in his daily newsfeed changed all that.

It wasn't anything ground-breaking, not for anyone at work or anywhere else he knew. It wasn't even news, so much as an opinion article on a slow news day about something most people had known about for a long time.

Only Steve hadn't known about it.

He read with sheer bewilderment, then clicked the Related Links and researched the names and nearly crushed his laptop in fury as he read and watched and listened-

He texted Stiles the link and said, *I am seriously reconsidering my policy of never calling a woman a bitch.*

Pocketing his phone, he did his best not to think about it on his drive to the Triskelion. He went through the entire meeting with the CIA - complete with jurisdictional slapfighting and a few cracks about their building having two more sides than SHIELD's - without even pulling out his phone to check the time.

He came out of the meeting, went to the quietest breakroom on this floor for lunch, and saw Stiles' response - a simple, *The anti-vaxxer lady???*

Pursing his lips, Steve said, *I HAD half the diseases you can vaccinate against, these days. It's like these people WANT children to suffer.*

Stiles actually called him and said, "What if Captain America made a statement telling people to
vaccinate their kids?"

Steve sighed. "I want to. But there are lots of rules about how I can get involved in politics and political issues - which mostly boils down to 'don't'. Because preventing children from getting horrible diseases is considered a political issue, now."

"Yeah," Stiles said, sounding apologetic. He got that way when he felt like he had to apologize for the 21st century. "That's kind of literally all it is. It originally had a legit standing but even after it didn't, the political machine took over and kept it going."

"There's a legitimate reason for making children vulnerable to diseases?" Steve said, unwrapping the sandwich he brought for lunch.

"It started back when there was a panic where people thought vaccines caused autism," Stiles said. Steve realized he could hear voices in the background. Double-checking the clock, he realized Stiles just got out of class.

"Do they?" Steve asked. Because if people were choosing between polio and autism, then maybe there would be at least some sense-

"No," Stiles said. "There was a grand total of one study correlating autism and vaccination, and it was later retracted because it turned out to be kind of a crappy study. But by then, it was too late. A lot of people first protested against vaccines because they didn't want their kids getting autism, said measles was easier to recover from than autism, blah blah blah. It took a while for people to realize the autism thing was bullshit, and then they just turned into other excuses - like saying there's mercury in vaccines, saying preservatives are bad, and various general opposition to chemicals and things that aren't 'natural'."

Steve grunted in disgust as he swallowed a bite of his sandwich.

"Yeah," Stiles said. "Right now I think it's a government protest type thing? Like, people don't like vaccines because they're state-mandated. If you want to send your kid to school, they have to get vaccines, and that's government overreach."

"Because sending your kid to a state-funded school for free isn't?" Steve asked sardonically, and Stiles burst out laughing.

"Yeah," he agreed. "It'll turn into something else eventually."

Steve sighed, and reached into his pocket to palm the inhaler. "You know, I used to read science fiction about futures where people were free of disease. Then I woke up in the future, and we're so many steps closer to that world...and then it turns out people are fighting against it."

"People are stupid," Stiles said. "A person is smart, people are stupid."

Steve smiled. "That's a good way of describing humanity."

"Full disclosure, that's not mine," Stiles said. "It's a paraphrased quote from a sci-fi comedy, called Men in Black. It's a good movie, you'd like it."

"I'll look into it," Steve said, checking the clock and trying to remember when he was supposed to be back at the meeting room. "What are you going to be up to for the day?"

"Teaching Scott how to bowl," Stiles deadpanned.
"Bowl?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Stiles said. "The dumbass got stuck going on a double-date, him and Allison with Lydia and Jackson. And he told them he's good at bowling."

"Is he?"

"Not at all."

Steve laughed. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Stiles said. "I think I'll need it."

Wishing him one final goodbye, Steve hung up and turned back to his sandwich. He tried to forget that some people in the world thought making kids suffer through innumerable infectious diseases was a good idea.

That night, he distracted himself by watching the movie Stiles was talking about, which turned out to be a whole trilogy. Steve called Nat, and she came halfway into the second movie. When Steve told her how much Agent K reminded him of Col. Phillips, she stole half his cheddar puffs to distract him from his memories.

For the next few days, Steve focused on avoiding some bureaucratic squabble as he chimed in on his reports about the last incursion into Latveria. Fury looked one step away from throwing the visiting CIA agents off the rooftop, he was that pissed.

There were, thankfully, other distractions to be had.

Despite how much everyone seemed to hate the idea, SHIELD was switching over to some new computer system for 'gathering, processing, and managing audiovisual information', which was just brass talk for a new program to handle pictures and videos. Steve was almost relieved to have to attend a training seminar for it, mostly because it would be a reprieve from the shitstorm. The jurisdiction slapfight barely touched the Manhattan office, and that alone made the trip worth it.

Even the bad memories of first waking up there in this new century weren't enough to keep him away.

As an unexpected bonus, he even got to meet Clint's kids.

Clint's...wife? Ex-wife? Girlfriend? Whatever, Laura was in New York for some internal biology conference SHIELD was hosting. When she and Clint were both caught up with whatever SHIELD saddled them with, Bruce watched the kids at Stark Tower.

"Birdbrain does this on purpose," Tony confided to Steve in a low voice. In Bruce's apartment, just below Tony's various housing floors, they both leaned back against the counter-top of the kitchen, sipping at marshmallow-laden hot-chocolate. In the living room, Bruce talked Clint's oldest kid, Cooper, through a chapter book the boy had to read for school.

"What do you mean?" Steve asked. His gaze drifted over to where the girl, Lila, was playing something on one of those hand-held video-game consoles.

"Bruce wants kids, and can't have 'em," Tony said. "And Clint knows this. So he gets Bruce to babysit his kids as often as possible. Bruce can't have children, but until he can, this is the next best thing."
"Huh," Steve said, blinking. "I thought..."

"Thought what?" Tony asked.

Steve took a sip of his hot-chocolate. Since Bruce had made it for the kids, it had a bit more milk than any of them would prefer, but it was wonderfully off-set by the marshmallows.

"Clint may be cleared for duty," Steve said. "But doesn't always...he still doubts himself. That's what I thought it was about."

Tony huffed, looking down at his chest. The blue glow wasn't there anymore. Tony kept it hidden with a special, skin-toned cover, these days. But if even Steve still occasionally expected to see it, he couldn't imagine how Tony was adjusting.

"I know the feeling," he murmured.

Steve opened his mouth, but right then the baby started crying. Bruce immediately stood up, weaving around the coffee table and going to the blanketed area on the floor where Nathaniel was bawling at the top of his tiny little lungs.

Bruce picked him up, sniffing at his diaper and then, apparently not smelling anything amiss, gathered the baby close to his chest and tried to soothe it.

Over his shoulder, he told Cooper to take a break as he meandered over to Steve and Tony, gently bouncing the baby in his arms.

"Clean diaper," Bruce said, the baby's cries already starting to trail off. "Just fed him and burped him - not sure what's wrong."

Steve smiled, amused. "I think the little guy just wanted someone to hold him."

"Those tears were alligator tears," Tony agreed, smirking as the baby grew quieter and quieter, burbling in Bruce's arms.

"Is that what you were doing?" Bruce cooed at the baby in his arms. "Manipulating me into picking you up?"

"They can do that," Tony said, and Steve nodded in agreement. He remembered Bucky's youngest sister, Anna, in her infancy.

Bruce snorted. "Not even half a year old and you're already taking after your namesake," he murmured, sounding more amused than anything else. "Clint chose well."

"Nat'll be gratified to hear that," Steve said. He pulled out his phone to tell her just how much of a bad influence she already was on her godson. Bruce went and sat back down next to Cooper, resuming the homework help with Nathaniel in his lap.

"I wonder how he does it," Steve asked, after a while.

"Hm?" Tony asked, looking up from his phone. "How who does what?"

Steve jerked his chin over at Bruce. "I don't...if I had a little taste of something I wanted so badly...it hurts."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience," Tony said.
Steve swallowed.

"I went to see Peggy, just before coming up here," he said. "We sit and talk, rib each other and watch stupid movies and...and then it'll be something. She'll start coughing, or she'll fall asleep mid-sentence, or she'll be surprised to see me. And- it hurts. It's like every time, I almost have her again, and then I lose her."

"And yet," Tony pointed out. "You still keep going back."

Steve blinked, looking down at the marshmallows melting into his hot-chocolate.

He hadn't thought of it that way.

The rest of Steve's trip was largely uneventful. He learned the new system with ease, in between shooting the breeze with Bruce, Tony, and Pepper. The latter two were conniving to get Bruce back in touch with his girlfriend and with his cousin, a lawyer who he'd once been close to. Steve promised to lend his assistance as a potential Hulk wrangler when they got the ball rolling.

The day after Steve got back to D.C., he got a picture texted to him with a message saying, *So how's your day been?*

Steve opened the picture, and frowned when he saw it was a picture Stiles took of himself in a mirror, focusing on a nasty bruise on his arm.

*Are you okay?* Steve asked on his way to the Triskelion.

*Yeah,* Stiles texted back a few hours later. *But your self-defense instructors are MEAN.*

"*My* self-defense instructors?* Steve asked.

*The ones from SHIELD,* Stiles texted back, and despite the fact Stiles couldn't see him, Steve nodded in understanding. No one really expected him to need it - or that it would help if he did - but Stiles had started self-defense lessons, being vulnerable just by virtue of being important to Steve. Stiles drove for a little under an hour to a small SHIELD office in San Francisco to learn what to do if someone ever tried to kidnap or hurt him. It was a standard offer for family and close associates of certain agents, if they were at risk for use as leverage. There were few at greater risk than the adoptive family of Captain America.

It was supposed to be only on weekends. Stiles, however, had struck it off with the instructor, a retired Marine, and finagled his way into crashing some weekday lessons normally only meant as precautionary measures for non-combative field agents. Given that Stiles was now under threat of kidnapping as leverage from two directions, instead of just one, the Sheriff was more than happy to foot the gas bill if it meant his son would be just that little bit safer.

Steve decided never to mention his quiet and polite request to the instructor to let Stiles learn from him more often. It was the least he could do for the last of Bucky's family.

~*~

A week later, Steve got a picture of a page of some kind of worksheet and a text saying, *Piget animam meam electiones.*

Before Steve could ask what that even meant, Stiles sent, *Translation: I regret my life choices.*

Steve squinted at the worksheet. *Is that Latin?*
He got back a picture of a Latin textbook in response.

*Why Latin?* Steve asked.

*Lydia was taking it*, Stiles said. *Also, it's supposed to be a major boost in SATs, APs, and a lot of grad-school and professional school entrance exams.*

Steve shook his head at the list of life-changing tests Stiles was looking at in his life for the next decade or so. Clint had...strong opinions, to say the least, about the education system in America as it stood today. Steve had been caught between more than one ranting conversation about it between him and Bruce, who also had strong opinions about modern education.

*Need some help?* Steve asked.

*Do you know Latin?* Stiles sent back.

*No, but I know someone who does.*

Steve called Nat, and started out by asking her if she knew of any good books or websites or anything that could help his nephew learn Latin. She gave him a few suggestions, then added, "You can also just give him my phone number. The best way to learn a language is to practice using it."

"Really?" Steve asked, surprised. She was usually so protective of her private information.

"Really," she said. "I mean, I'm going to give you one of the shell-numbers I use that forwards things to me, but yeah. If he abuses it, I can just cancel that number, but from the way you talk about him, I don't think it'll happen."

"To be fair, it is *me* talking about him," Steve said, somewhat bitterly.

"People confuse 'looking for the best in everyone' with 'only seeing the best in everyone'," Nat said. Then, softer, "Believe me, Steve, I know the difference."

Steve swallowed around a lump in his throat, staring down at the apple he was eating in the SHIELD breakroom as he adjusted his grip on the phone.

"Thanks," he said finally. "I'll send him whatever shell-number you send. And thank you for helping him."

"No problem," Nat said. "Besides, my Latin's been getting rusty, anyway, so it'll be good for me to get some practice."

By the end of the day, Steve was able to send Stiles a number to contact Natasha.

He didn't actually tell Stiles who Nat was, only saying "a friend of mine who knows Latin, did some legal work once". However, Nat herself told him. He got a text from Stiles saying, *Did you seriously give me the Black Widow's phone number just so I could practice my Latin???

Smiling and still making his way to the training room, Steve said, *No, I gave you the phone number to my friend who knows Latin. She just also happens to be the Black Widow, sometimes.*

Stiles' stunned, *OH MY GOD*, made his day.

He was still grinning as he strode into the large training room, a small but challenging obstacle course set-up in it already.
"You ready for this, Cap?" Rumlow asked.

Steve nodded, putting the phone away and peeling off his jacket, getting down to just his PT kit.

The training day was surprisingly productive. As much as Rumlow often rubbed him the wrong way, the man was a damn good soldier, which was a relief in an organization full of scientists and spies.

Steve had a solid week full of training. Fury was taking advantage of the current lull in new terrorist activity and the inter-agency slapfight to get Steve even more up to date on all of today's combat certs.

It was also a week of relatively little contact between him and his friends and family. He wasn't avoiding anyone, exactly, so much as just getting so caught up in things that he didn't bother reaching out or responding much to anything not work-related.

If he were being honest with himself, that was a big part of the reason why he accepted Nat's invitation to come try some new sushi place with her.

"Is this a date?" he asked as they sat down.

Nat rolled her eyes. "No," she said. "Trust me, Steve, if I were trying to seduce you, you'd know."

"Oh, I dunno," Steve said, picking up the small menu and smiling at the family in the booth across from them. It looked like the father was giving some kind of history lesson, while a teenage girl groaned in theatrical exasperation and the mother smiled at her daughter's misery. "People have told me I'm rather dim about these things."

Nat chuckled. "No, Steve. This isn't a date, and I'm not trying to seduce you. There are far more efficient ways of manipulating you than seduction."

Steve laughed, and she continued, saying, "I just needed someone to come out with me. Besides, Tony tells me you were surprisingly receptive to sushi."

"I don't know why people are so convinced I'd hate sushi," Steve said.

"Because it's Japanese, and so foreign," Nat quipped. "You were at war with them."

Steve rolled his eyes. "The man who was like a father figure for me was German," Steve said. "He's the guy who literally made Captain America."

Slowly, Natasha smiled. "I understand," she said. "I'm pretty sure my first mentor I had was actually American, at a time when I was raised to believe America was the incarnation of evil on Earth."

Steve snorted. "Who was he?"

Here, Nat's face dimmed a little. "I'm not actually sure. They...brainwashed us, a lot. I don't remember most of my life."

"How would you even know that?" Steve asked.

Here, Nat shrugged. "My earliest childhood memories are from the early 1960's," she said. "Yet I don't exactly look like I'm over half a century old, do I?" Mutely, Steve shook his head, and she continued, saying, "I get flashes of memory. Impressions. My mentor was nicknamed the American. I think he may actually have been American, either a defector or a prisoner of war." She swallowed.
"I'm pretty sure he was killed around the fall of the Soviet Union. Or at least, I never saw or heard of him again. And a man as skilled as he was - I can't imagine what else could've happened to him."

Steve pursed his lips. "I'm sorry."

Nat shrugged again. "It is what it is."

They turned their attention to the sushi. It honestly baffled Steve that everyone kept assuming he would hate it. He got yet another lesson on how to use chopsticks - he wasn't as smooth as the rest of his teammates were, but he was getting there - and went through an entire plate of mochi ice-cream with Nat.

Twice, he saw the woman from the other booth looking at him oddly. After the second time, Steve sighed and told Nat, "We may have company, soon."

Since her mouth was full of inari, she tilted her head in confusion.

"I think we may have been recognized," he said. "By fans, probably," he added at the look on her face.

She swallowed her bite. "Full honesty, or 'we get that a lot'?"

Now it was Steve's turn to frown in confusion.

"Hm?"

"It's what I do to deal with fans," she said. Smiling, her eyes widened and something about the shape of her mouth and angle of how she held up her head changed. Despite the complete lack of changed clothing, make-up, or posture, she was a different person. "Oh, no, I'm not the Black Widow, but thank you! I get that a lot, actually. If another person comes up to me like this, I might start working as a professional impersonator."

Steve burst out laughing, and even she let out a few inelegant snorts. "That actually works?" he asked.

Nat nodded. "Every time, at least when it's just random bystanders or fans. It's easier for people to believe they've just run into an uncanny look-alike than to believe they've run into the actual Black Widow by accident."

In the end, either the woman also believed there was just an uncanny resemblance, or she didn't care, because she ultimately turned her attention back to her family and her meal, paying them no mind.

Only a few minutes later, as Steve and Nat were leaving, she laughed at something on her phone and tugged at Steve's sleeve to show him.

"Is that Scott?" he asked in surprise, seeing the video of the teenager doing two backflips in a row.

"Yup," she said. "He was actually serious about trying to learn the kind of stuff he saw me doing. It's...impressive dedication, to say the least." Here, Nat smirked. "He says I helped him finally get onto the lacrosse team."

"What does gymnastics have to do with lacrosse?"

"I have no idea," she said, while typing away at her phone.

"Wait," Steve asked. "'He' said?"
Nat smiled. "Stiles got sick of playing middle-man and gave me Scott's number to help him directly. And since Scott's girlfriend turned out to be a former gymnast, he's even more dedicated to learning some good moves." Her smile took on a sly edge as she added, "Really dedicated."

Shaking his head, Steve lead them both to where Nat had parked her current car. She finished typing up her message with a muttered watch that ankle and a cheerful tap to the screen.

Sometimes, Nat could be wise and capable far beyond her years - which made sense, now. Other times, she was just as much of a kid as Stiles and Scott were.

If Steve were being honest, sometimes he felt that way, too.

~*~

Steve's eyebrows rose when he got a text from Stiles asking, How do you treat your bullet wounds?

Since he was at home, and it was late enough that Stiles was, too, he just called instead of texting back.

"What do you mean," Steve asked as soon as Stiles answered. "How do I treat my bullet wounds?"

"You heal fast," Stiles said. "So, like - how do you take care of it? And how do you anesthetize for it?"

Steve sat down his pencil on his sketch pad, staring out the window of his living room.

"What brought this on?" Steve asked, trying to keep the mild suspicion out of his voice.

"Stuff."

"Stiles," Steve demanded.

"I was looking stuff up," Stiles began, which Steve mentally translated to 'research wormhole'. "And I'm looking at this page about how metabolism rates affect painkillers and GSW treatments, and...you heal fast and you have an advanced metabolism, so I just started thinking that if you ever got shot..."

Steve sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "You don't have to worry about me."

"Why?" Stiles demanded. "What do you do? How do you know it's nothing to worry about?"

Steve snorted.

"Steve!" Stiles cried out, sounding genuinely distressed.

"Sorry," Steve said. He supposed he shouldn't be so cavalier about these things. In all honesty, Stiles' reaction to the thought of him getting shot was a lot saner than his own. "Just - for a second there, you sounded like your grandmother, and Bucky."

"...seriously?" Stiles asked, side-tracked.

"Yup," Steve said, leaning back into the couch. "They were always the mother hens of the family, usually even more than Mrs. Barnes. Either one of them could nag more than Mrs. Barnes, Sarah, and Anna combined."

"No wonder, if they had to deal with asthmatics getting prescribed cigarettes by their doctors," Stiles grumbled. Steve would never stop being amused at the teenager's horror at the idea of asthma
cigarettes. "But I won't be distracted! How do you take care of them?"

Steve took a deep breath. It was probably violating one official secrecy act or another. But hell, Steve had the legal right to disclose his own medical information to whoever he wanted, especially his next of kin. This would be the fastest way to calm Stiles down.

"Continuous double-dosing," Steve said. "It's a very strong drip, and there are supposed to be multiple IV bags involved. One paralytic, one sedative, and ethanol to help slow down my liver function and give them a better chance to work."

"So that keeps you unconscious during surgery?" Stiles asked.

"I haven't had surgery, yet," Steve said, taking his sketchbook and setting it on the coffee table. "At least, not in this time-period. I haven't been hurt that bad. That's the modern version of what the doctors had to do back in the war, once. By the time they got me back to the army hospital, I was already unconscious from bloodloss. And it wasn't just bullet-wounds - I was literally impaled, I had some rebar going through my gut. Thus far, in the 21st century, I've been...hurt. A few times. But it's easier to just use a local anesthetic or some kind of topical painkiller. Those are less affected by my metabolism, so the doctors have longer to work and I feel less of it."

"But there is a way for you to be treated without, like, trying to have surgery while conscious with no painkillers?" Stiles clarified.

"Yes, Stiles," Steve said, drawing out the answer and doing his best not to let it sound like a long-suffering sigh. "Why the sudden worry?"

"Nothing!" Stiles cried out.

So he was a little surprised when Stiles flippantly said, "In case Scott ever gets shot."

Steve frowned. "Why would Scott get shot?"

"Um..." A pause. "The Argents - his girlfriend is Allison Argent - sell firearms for a living. And there may have been some form of threatening speech at his dinner with them that Allison's Aunt Kate kind of shanghaied him into."

Steve laughed. "Wouldn't you just take him to the hospital, then?"

"Depends on how much he's willing to tell his mom," Stiles said.

Steve rolled his eyes, well aware of all the kinds of things a teenage boy would want to keep from his mother - especially if it were about a girl.
"I take it," Steve said. "That things are going well with the girl, then, if her father started threatening him?"

Stiles snorted. "Her Aunt Kate thought Scott stole something from her bags. Allison stopped them from strip-searching him by showing off a condom. Scott said her dad looked like he was going to murder him on the spot."

Steve burst out laughing. "I'm surprised he made it out of there without getting pumped full of bullets, anyway."


"Arrows?"

"Allison does archery," Stiles clarified. "And there may or may not be some family tendencies towards crossbows."

Steve chuckled again, idly drumming his fingers against the edge of the couch. "A Hawkeye fan and a Black Widow fan, dating each other. The team is going to love this."

"Actually," Stiles said, sounding amused. "She's an Iron Man fan. Or, well - her family are Tony Stark fans? Apparently, they happen to have a stockpile of his old weapons somewhere. Now that he's stopped making new ones, the ones left make a lot of bank. They've gotten rich from that or something. So, because they like Tony Stark so much, they're Iron Man fans by proxy."

Steve snorted. "They're going to love that even more. Or, well, Tony will." At least as long as Steve didn't tell him his old weapons were involved.

"Do you guys get competitive about fans, a lot?" Stiles asked curiously.

"Not seriously," Steve said. He didn't want to admit just how complicated the matter actually was. The interaction between Nat and Tony's playful bantering, against Clint's guilt and Bruce's self-loathing. The way Thor was so disturbed when he learned about Norse Paganism in the month between the Battle of New York and getting Loki off the damn planet. The slew of people who loved the legend of Captain America instead of anything about Steve's actual work and achievements...

"But sometimes," Steve continued. "If it's all in good fun." Stiles didn't need to know that it rarely was.

Stiles chuckled. "Well, I'm your fan, obviously."

"You don't have to say that--"

"I know," Stiles said. "Thor is a close second, and entirely for vain and selfish reasons. But you are my fave Avenger, and you were even before you first came to my house."

Steve stared at the coffee table, and decided not to let the conversation get too deep.

"How are your reasons for liking Thor 'vain and selfish'?" Steve asked, in lieu of actually pursuing whether or not Stiles meant it.

"...um..."

A smile spread across Steve's face as he recognized that particular flavor of deflection.
"Would I be correct in assuming that it's for the reason most people would typically assume Scott is Nat's fan?"

Stiles spluttered a bit, then sighed.

"His arms, Steve!" Stiles whined.

Steve laughed. "If he ever comes back to Earth, I'll let him know."

"Oh my god," Stiles said with total indignation, before the sound of his flailing came to an abrupt halt. "Wait, 'back to Earth' - you mean he's actually from another planet?"

"That depends on which scientist you ask," Steve said. "For whatever reason, no one can figure out if he's 'just' from another planet, or if he's from another dimension entirely."

"...Jesus," Stiles muttered. "Just when I think my friends are weird."

Steve laughed. "For most of my life, I was always the weirdest thing in the room. First because I was the sickest person on the block and shouldn't have even been alive. Then because I was the healthiest person in a hundred miles and should have been alive even less. Now, with the Avengers, I'm almost one of the most normal ones on the team. But we're still the weirdest people in any city we're in."

"You need to come back to Beacon Hills," Stiles said. "Then you'd definitely be one of the most normal people in town."

Steve chuckled, then looked at the time. "I've gotta go, and you've gotta finish your homework."

Stiles snorted. "Yeah, I know," Steve continued. "But it's good practice for when you have to do stupid bullshit for work in the adult world."

"You sound like my dad," Stiles whined.

"Good night."

"Fine!" Stiles sighed dramatically. "Good night."

After he hung up, Steve just clutched the phone to his chest and stared at the sketchbook on the coffee table, not seeing it. He tried not to remember the agony of being impaled and how sweet the relief of unconsciousness was. He tried not to remember how hard it was not to scream when he had to be awake for whatever the doctor or their medic was doing to him. And most of all, he tried not to remember what Bucky's face looked like every time Steve had been hurt in their shared life, together. Asthma or artillery, coughing up a lung or cutting out a bullet, Bucky had always been helpless and terrified.

Steve also did his absolute best not to imagine what Stiles would look like in the exact same position.

~#~

Steve was no stranger to Stiles' ranting about his father's health. Diet, sleep, stress, even exercise. Anything that affected John's health (which was everything) came under Stiles' scrutiny. However, it was usually only a handful of texts a week, rarely even once a day.

After the fifth text from Stiles in two days about how his father was going to kill himself with cholesterol and stress, Steve called John and asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," John said, voice a little staticky. Steve took a moment to berate himself for that thought - he
was getting spoiled. Barely a year into the future and he was already getting irritated by the low quality of a phone call that would've been impossible in his day. For most of his life, the fastest communication one could hope for between Czechoslovakia and California would be a very expensive telegram. He wouldn't have been able to physically hear John add, "Why do you ask?"

Steve shook himself out of his mental castigation and said, "Stiles has been more worried about your health than usual. I wanted to know if there was a genuine cause or if you just looked bad in front of a doctor again."

Across the table from Steve, Clint snorted while Natasha looked up curiously from her work tablet. On the other end of the SHIELD safe-house, two Russian SHIELD agents glanced at Steve, but otherwise seemed uninterested in his conversation, turning their attention to what looked like some soap opera on the TV.

"Oh, not you too," John grumbled. Then he sighed. "I've had a lot of stress, lately, and Stiles sees it. That's all."

"Stress?" Steve said, frowning at his MRE chicken...thing. Whatever it was he was eating. "Everything okay?"

Clint deemed this conversation not gossip worthy, as he got up and went over to the box of MRE's to make his own meal. Military rations were better now than they were in Steve's day, but they were still pretty terrible.

"No," John said. Steve heard the sound of a familiar chair creaking, and realized John was in his office at the station. "We've got a serial killer on our hands."

"A serial killer?!" Steve asked, bewildered. Natasha stopped in the middle of unwrapping her protein bar to watch him. Even Clint glanced over, but otherwise focused on throwing away the heating pouch to open his...was that chili?

"Yeah," John said. "And we have no leads, and nothing connecting the victims."

Steve swallowed. "Anything I can do to help?" he offered helplessly.

"Doubt it," John said. "We've got a state detective coming in, and I'm pretty sure half a dozen other agencies are keeping an eye on it, too." John sighed. "And to think, I thought it was over."

"What was over?" Steve asked.

"...this," John said. Steve couldn't see the man, but he could picture the helpless waving meant to indicate 'everything'. "This town's always been kind of weird, lots of weird crimes, but lately they've been weirder than normal. The last few years have been...I wouldn't say quiet, but at least not violent. Violence levels dropped a bit after I came into office, and I guess I was just..." John sighed. "Well, I guess I can see why my office has one of the highest turnover rates in California."

"The Sheriff's office?" Steve questioned, confused.

"Beacon County Sheriff's Office," John specified. "We have the highest turnover rate after the 'big cities'. I'm starting to see why. Most counties, you predict how long they'll be in office based on terms, or the Sheriff gets elected late in their police career and just keeps working until retirement. Here? Well, we get weird spikes in crime with long periods of low-violence and low-crime in between. Pretty much guaranteed that you're out after two spikes, and more of my predecessors than not have left after one. Looks bad come election time, and..." John sighed. "It's incredibly stressful."
"Can you find the last Sheriff?" Steve asked. "Maybe he can help."

"She still works here," John said with good humor. "Part-time officer, mostly desk duties, but she helps where she can within the limits of age regulations for the job." Another sigh, another creak of the office chair. "We've just got to work on this as fast as possible to catch the person doing this."

"I'm sorry," Steve said. "I hope you catch him, soon."

"We all do," John said. The sound of a door opening, a voice, and then John saying, "But we still have to attend to all the usual bullshit in the meantime. Including drunk teenage vandals."

Steve chuckled. "Go get 'em, Sheriff."

"You too," John said.

The phone made the end-call beep. Steve pocketed it with a frown as he mentally went over everything he'd read about the town before even setting foot in there. He pulled his own work tablet across the table from where he'd left it charging and started tapping at it.

Finally, he looked up to Natasha, who was peering over Steve's shoulder. "Do you know anything about Beacon Hills?"

"What's Beacon Hills?" Clint asked, plopping down with his bag of MRE chili between the two of them.

"It's that town that keeps driving geo-phys MASINT nuts," Natasha said, frowning at Steve's screen.

"Geophysical measurement intelligence?" Steve asked, confused. "What are they involved for?"

"Currents," Nat deadpanned. Steve raised an eyebrow, asking her to elaborate. "Geoelectric progressions, telluric currents, ley lines, whatever you want to call them," she said. Steve took another reluctant bite of his possibly-bisque. She read over Steve's shoulder, and managed to pick out the important things in seconds, relevance that Steve was still trying to parse through. "They're like currents of electricity running on certain frequencies, through the Earth. But Earth isn't exactly conducive to electricity. There's a ridiculously high concentration of these in the nature preserve just off of town. But whenever anyone actually goes there, they can't seem to find what's causing it. It's just a random clearing in the forest."

"Huh," Steve said, swallowing his bite and frowning at the newsfeed. "I was just chatting with the town Sheriff, and crime has taken a turn for the 'weirder than normal'."

"Weirder than normal?" Clint asked, raising an eyebrow and merrily munching his way through the dubious chili. "What the hell does that mean?"

"This town's always had a lot of weird crimes," Steve said. "Generally very low on crime, but when they do happen, they're in spikes and are just...downright bizarre." He shook his head. "And apparently SHIELD keeps track of things in the town?"

"All of SHIELD or just MASINT?" Clint asked. "Because MASINT has eyes on all sorts of-"

"That's just it," Steve said. "If it were just MASINT or GEOINT, I wouldn't think twice on it. But OSINT is on it, too - except they don't seem to have a reason to be. A bit after SHIELD scientists started monitoring the town - I guess to try and figure out whatever's going on with that geoelectric energy - they also started monitoring pretty much every legal and law-enforcement channel in the area." He looked at Nat. "Any idea why?"
Nat was already tapping at her own tablet. "No," she said after a while, sounding as intrigued as Steve was bewildered. "There's almost no threatening activity there for SHIELD to care about."

"'Almost'?" Steve asked.

Nat skimmed some reports, then rolled her eyes. "Cyber traced some Rising Tide activity to Beacon Hills when it was still getting set up. But it got traced to some middle-school kid."

"One of the Rising Tide founders was a kid?" Steve asked incredulously.

She shrugged. "Hard to tell. Even after he destroyed everything on his computer, it showed evidence of involvement. But the investigating agents decided that he was way too young to actually do anything himself and was just conned into taking the fall for someone else. They dropped the charges, let the local police deal with it. They were big on youth rehabilitation, so the kid just had some community service, with restrictions and monitoring on his computer usage. Not very thorough ones, either." She huffed, looking at the screen. "Those guys are idiots who just didn't want to admit they got outsmarted by a teenager."

Steve snorted. "Don't kids usually know computers better than adults, anyway?"

Nat nodded with a grin, while Clint rolled his eyes.

"So no idea?" Steve said.

"Sounds like SHIELD's just watching because it's weird," Clint said. "Normally we're the weird ones. Higher-ups don't like it when someone is weirder than us. We have the monopoly on weirdness."

"Are you just trying to see how many times you can say 'weird'?" Nat asked, lips almost quirking up into a smile.

"Cut me some slack, I got shafted onto this mission just after Nate's cold cleared up," Clint grumbled, hiding his face in his chili. "I haven't had more than four hours of sleep a day in three weeks."

Steve snorted, then turned back to the website of the Beacon Bugle, the county's major newspaper.

"So there's a serial killer and nothing connecting the victims?" Nat asked.

"Nada," Clint said, leaning over to peer at Steve's tablet while talking to her over his shoulder. "Or at least they're not publicizing it. Right now, they're not even publishing any of the victims' names, to protect the security of an on-going investigation."

"Want me to see if I can sweettalk some local SHIELD agents into trying to pick-up the case?" Nat asked. "They probably would, just by virtue of the fact the county is already under SHIELD monitoring. Even if it's passive monitoring."

Steve thought about how John would react to that, and shook his head. "Nah. This doesn't look like it's a SHIELD problem. Just...a problem."

"We don't handle 'just' problems," Clint agreed, sighing into his bag of chili. "Only the worst ones..."

Here, he smirked at Natasha. "And only if they're weird."

~*~

Stars and Stripes knew how to cater to their demographic. Instead of any elaborate living room set-
up, it was just two arm-chairs in a small and utilitarian room of neutral tones, a flag in the
background between the two chairs that faced the camera in a triangle formation. The interviewer,
Ms. Garcia, knew how to talk to soldiers, even if she never was one, herself. He supposed that was
understandable - she was a retired war correspondent, after all.

He wasn't exactly enjoying this interview, or even relaxed in it. But compared to most of the
publicity bullshit he had to deal with - god, sometimes it made him miss his USO days - this
interview was a lot nicer and a lot less likely to result in Steve destroying gym equipment. Again.

Surprisingly, he even liked answering some of the questions. Things like how the military has
changed since his day, but also how it's remained the same. There were some jokes about how
military food was still awful. There was a lot of discussion about the differences in soldiers'
perspectives of their army, their war, and their government.

And there were some more personal questions, too. Nothing invasive, but thoughts on today's pop
culture, the public perception of the military, and even Steve's own perceptions about today's youth
and entertainment.

"It's not nearly as bad as people expect me to find it," Steve answered honestly.

"Oh?" Ms. Garcia asked.

Steve smiled. "Well, it's like this. People are recommending a lot of music to me - everyone has their
favorites, and they want me to like it. I listen to the recent stuff, pop music and rap and all the
generations of rock music. I do form on-the-spot opinions."

He took a deep breath, and put on his most Captain America posture and voice he could manage
while remaining seated. "I'm wary about the quality of music being played on the instruments - and
sometimes the instruments themselves. I can't help but wonder what it is people can see - or rather,
what they can hear - in this music. I think a lot of it just sounds like racket, the singing could use
work, the lyrics seem either unoriginal or completely nonsensical."

He straightened his shoulders. "I worry about the state of the current generation, how their art will
develop, how this music reflects their values. I worry about what they get up to with this music when
people aren't looking. I worry about what kind of adults they'll grow into..."

Then Steve deflated, leaning back - almost flopping back - in his seat. "And then I remember my
mother used to say the exact same things about the kind of music I liked when I was a kid."

Ms. Garcia burst out laughing, as did some of the production staff around them. Steve smiled, and
then continued.

"In all honesty, I'm not worried," Steve said. "My parents' generation had a low opinion of our music
and we turned out just fine. You guys call us the greatest generation. And near as I can tell, we didn't
learn. A lot of my early introduction to rock music was how counter-culture it was, how the youth
who listened to it were clearly destined for ruin. And then I heard about how some of those bands are
now modern politicians' favorite musicians. Some rock band even had to ask one to stop playing
their music at political conventions. Near as I can tell, every generation is told they are degrading art
and culture because of what they like, and they turn out just fine."

He grinned. "Give it a couple decades. All the kids whose music you're insulting today are going to
be turning around and doing the exact same thing to their kids."

Ms. Garcia was chuckling again. "My kids are about to become teenagers, so that's definitely
"People always have such low opinions of teenagers," Steve said, shaking his head ruefully. "But we do them a great disservice every time."

"Oh?" Ms. Garcia asked, seeming surprised. "Even today's teenagers?"

"Yes," Steve said. "Granted, every generation has a low opinion of the next generation's youth, but we don't look any less like fools every time."

"How does that apply to the youth of today?"

Steve parsed his answer in his head for a moment.

"What today's youth may or may not lack in doing physical work, they more than make up for it with the mental legwork," Steve said. "Half the people I knew, growing up, didn't even finish high school, and now more kids than not are going to college. I feel pretty confident in saying today's kids are going to be a lot smarter than their ancestors, individually and as a whole. And it's not just schoolwork, either."

"What else is there?" Ms. Garcia asked, doubtful but open. She was a damn-shrewd interviewer.

"Well..." Steve took a deep breath, trying to put his thoughts into words - what it was about Stiles that made him seem so old to Steve, when he wasn't acting so young. "I think, in many ways, it boils down to perception, and putting that perception into action."

Steve spared a moment, wondering how best to describe his sentiments without saying Stiles' name or pointing too directly at him.

"For the first half a year or so after I was defrosted," Steve said, measuring his words out in a slow and steady stream. "People would - assume things. Mostly, they assumed that when it came to things like food or music, I would only want to stick to older things, stuff I knew. Some assumed I either would want something new, or that I should try something new whether I wanted to or not. Dozens upon dozens of people - some of them even psychologists or veterans, themselves - and everyone kept assuming. People rarely asked me if I wanted something new or something I was used to. Out of all the people I met in the months before and after the Battle of New York, you want to know who was the first person to actually ask me?"

"Of course," Ms. Garcia said.

"A teenager," he said. She didn't try to hide her surprise, and Steve couldn't tell if it was acted or not. "My best friend and sergeant, Bucky Barnes - his family had practically adopted me after my own died. I'd always planned to come back to them after the war. When I went looking, the last living Barnes was Bucky's sister's grandson. He and his father - the relation was through his mother, who died a few years ago - invited me to stay for dinner, and they were ordering in." Steve took as deep a breath as he could manage without being obvious about it. "I remember that they had this big stack of take-out menus, most of which were to restaurants that would've been beyond my imagining as a kid. I said as much, and without even thinking about it, the teenager asked me if I wanted something new or something I was used to. Half a year in the 21st century and he was the first person to actually ask me that."

"Really?" she asked. "No one else asked you?"

"Not one," Steve said, shaking his head before continuing. "He's also the first one to show me how to learn things on my own, if that makes sense? I mean things like how to use Google to answer my
questions about everything from history to technology to culture, how to tell apart reliable from unreliable sources, how to find new books and movies and music based on what I already liked, that sort of thing. Everyone was willing to tell me any answers I wanted, but he was the first one to show me how I could get those answers, myself."

"Sounds like a bright kid," she said.

"He is," Steve said, recognizing a leading statement when he saw one and choosing to ignore it. "And it's not just him. I see so many people complaining about how kids online gripe about getting offended by everything and how they talk without ever doing anything. But when I actually read this stuff, they don't look like whiny kids to me."

He gave her and the camera his most disarming smile he could muster. Tony called it his Apple Pie Smile.

"They look like they're carrying on a long-standing tradition of sorting out your perceptions and priorities before actually taking them into the political field," Steve said. "And they do, if the amount of young people in every political protest I've seen are anything to go by. The only difference is the dialogue which used to only happen behind closed doors of college classrooms is now being done by a wider-variety of people, and is available for public consumption. Otherwise, it's the same thing."

"That's a very progressive way of looking at it, Captain," Ms. Garcia said neutrally, still trying to get him to do most of the talking.

Steve nodded. "I like to think I'm a progressive person."

The interview wound down less than half an hour after that.

The day after, Steve went with a team down to Iraq to rescue a bunch of SAS soldiers who weren't supposed to be in the area in the first place. It took a solid three days to extract them, and by the time Steve came back, cleaned up, and rested, the interview had gone viral.

"Your down-to-earth attitude here is popular," Ms. Biswas, his PR manager, informed him over the phone. "Maybe you should pull out this particular mask more often."

Steve looked down at his tablet, taking in the incomprehensible statistics and the all-too-comprehensible comments from viewers. "I'll think about it."

Despite knowing this interview was dominating the media's consciousness during a slow news week, Steve was still surprised to see how deeply-reaching it was.

_Did you mention me in that interview with the military news-site?_ Stiles asked. Steve received the message just a bit before boarding the jet headed back home. _Because some reporters have started stalking me to ask for a comment._

He felt his blood go cold at the thought, and asked, _Are you okay?_

_Yeah!_ Stiles immediately responded. _I don't mean creepy stalking, I just mean shit like waiting for me outside of school or following me and Scott through the woods. They're not like, harassing me yet, and my dad's made sure I know how to handle it if they do._

_As long as you're okay, Steve sent back. I'm sorry, I didn't say your name and hoped that would be enough._
It was a long flight back home, especially since it actually landed in Virginia. By the time he landed, he got the response.

*I saw the interview, and dude, no, don't be sorry, mention away, I'm kind of...flattered? Honored? Whatever, it was an awesome way you mentioned me.*

Steve smiled, and sent back a picture of himself standing in front of the Army base that SHIELD was landing the jet in.

*I'm almost home,* he sent, and grinned at all the thumbs-up symbols Stiles sent. *Go to bed,* he added, because it was the middle of the night.

Stiles sent back a :P, but nothing else, so hopefully he obliged.

Steve had nothing to do at the Triskelion for two days, and then it was more computer training. He was never going to be as smooth or easy with computers as anyone born in this generation, but Steve was getting the hang of himself, learning the basics of hacking and how to interpret instructions on digital intelligence.

The least boring part of the week was also the most infuriating. Steve passed by a bunch of protesters on his way back home, and felt his blood boiling when he saw what they were chanting and demonstrating about.

Steve texted Stiles the picture of the protesters, especially the stupid 'Send Them Back!' signs.

*I can't believe this is still happening,* he added.

"Still"? Stiles texted back around Steve's coffee break.

Steve pursed his lips and texted back, *They said that shit to ME back in my day. People had a low opinion of the Irish, back then.*

He finished up his reports and the entirely redundant post-mission equipment review, and by then he got his response from Stiles.

*I second-hand feel you, it said. Scott's like the most white-washed Chicano ever and he still gets that kind of crap said to his face.*

Humanity never learned.

Steve, unfortunately, ruminated too long. One of the reporters covering the protest spotted him, and tried to get Captain America's attention. Steve turned away, as if he wasn't the person she was looking for. Hopefully this wouldn't end up all over social media networks or on the front page of anything important.

Still, he told Stiles about it, who asked, *Do you know any Irish?*

*Irish what?* Steve asked while making his way through town to get to the bodega where he tried to do as much of his grocery shopping as possible.

*Irish language,* Stiles said. *You're supposed to give some kind of neutral, 'no comment' like answer when they ask you political questions, right? Well, you should do it in Irish! You would be complying with the rules, but I guarantee the Internet will spell out the protest for you.*

*I'm pretty sure that's still very obviously taking a side in a political issue, which I'm not supposed to*
do as a serving officer, Steve said.

I'm sorry, Stiles said, and Steve smiled. That SUCKS.

No worries. I'll see if I can get away with it, he texted. Then, as an afterthought, he added, And English is actually my second language. Irish was my first.

Holy shit, you should tell someone that, Stiles said. Preferably while on national television.

Steve smiled. Ms. Biswas would kill him, but for as little political involvement he was supposed to have...well, he couldn't be held at fault for revealing some facts about his childhood, could he?

And hell, it's not like Steve hasn't disobeyed orders before. Legal technicalities have always been an American specialty, and Steve was supposed to be America personified. He wasn't above abusing them as much as possible.

He could probably sue someone for discrimination if anyone at SHIELD tried to stop him from answering questions in Irish or admitting what his first language actually was. He didn't know who or how, but Tony would be happy to help, he was sure of it.

Still, he wasn't allowed to approach any of the protesters or news reporters about this, so he'd have to wait.

I'll try to do that, Steve said. Without being obvious about it.

I will admit, Stiles texted back while Steve was deciding how much milk he should buy for the week. Even knowing you, I didn't exactly expect you to be bilingual. You'll blow a bunch of nationalists' minds when they find out.

Technically trilingual, Steve said, standing in the little coffee aisle. I'm fluent in French. And Nat, Clint, and Tony are teaching me Russian, Arabic, and Japanese respectively. Bruce isn't actively teaching me anything, but I always seem to know another Bengali phrase every time I talk to him.

Steve made the rest of his little grocery run quickly - or at least the dry goods, saving the meat, produce, and bread for later. He knew that most people got all this stuff in one grocery store, these days. Most of the time, he could, too. But when he was already in a sour mood, the small bodegas were a surprising comfort, even if half the labels were in another language entirely (usually Spanish, which was almost its own language learning experience).

He paid for his wares, and as he carefully packed them into the bag, he asked the cashier, "How do you say 'have a good day' in Spanish?"

Alex - "Only my parents call me Alejandro" - seemed amused. He knew damn well who Steve was, but after the first two trips here, he didn't care. The boy had only seemed to notice once, when he asked Steve to autograph some old Captain America poster. For decades, it had hung up in the corner of the front wall of the store, halfway hidden. Even after Steve signed it, the poster stayed right where it had been for years, and the boy always greeted him as 'Steve' thereafter. Or Señor Steve, when he was being cheeky.

"If it's to someone like a boss or who you're trying to impress," the boy said. "It's 'Que pase un buen día'. To everyone else, that's pretty stuffy, so you'd just say 'Pase buen día.'"

Steve smiled. And after stuffing the receipt in his bag and hefting it to his side, he waved at the boy and said, "Pase buen día, Alex!"
"Igualmente, Señor Steve!" the boy snapped back, and Steve smiled as he left the store.

Even more so when he saw Stiles' response.

Well now I feel inadequate, Stiles said. Steve could hear the grumbling over the text. I know English and Latin. And a little bit of Spanish from Scott, but not much.

Steve laughed. You're not working in global operations like I am. Don't worry about it. Worry about boosting your test scores and getting through school.

Stiles sent back another :P, which Steve took to mean as either Stiles obliging him, or Stiles very politely telling him to fuck off.

Probably both.

Stiles texted him again less than a week later. Steve was sitting in one of the SHIELD cafeterias, pretending he wasn't hiding from Hill and reading a practice passage in Russian. He finished up his passage, opened the message, and wished he hadn't.

Remember our deal? From Thanksgiving?

How could Steve forget?

Before Steve could say anything, he got another message from Stiles saying, I told Scott about my panic attacks.

...well. Steve had hoped Stiles would tell someone, but he hadn't expected for it to happen this fast, not without a push from Steve. Still, more pressing was what this would mean for Steve.

He most definitely hadn't forgotten, but even if he had, Stiles reminded him, his last text reading a simple yet ominous, Your turn.

With a distracted Rgr to let Stiles know he saw it, Steve pocketed his phone and tried to figure out who he would tell about his shell shock - or, as the modern parlance put it, PTSD.

SHIELD psychiatrists were one thing - Steve was...relatively honest in his evaluations. They didn't know the details, but Steve told them whatever would be relevant to his work in the field. He sat on some border territory where he wasn't disqualified from field work yet, but he wouldn't need much to do so.

Would telling someone personally, a friend or a teammate, make things better or worse?

It weighed down on his mind, and people noticed. Even Rumlow noticed when they were training on the new comm. system.

"You okay, Cap?" he asked, lowering his voice a little even as the room filled with the upset beeping of multiple devices.

Steve looked down at his own earpiece he was trying to connect to the actual radio, one which could spread the channel over greater distances with much less loss of clarity.

"Yeah," Steve said, fiddling with the little devices. "Just - trying to figure out how to say something important."

"What is it?" Rumlow asked, his own radio and earpiece already working the way they were supposed to.
Steve sighed. "Nothing major, just..."

On the one hand, even if they weren't in the army, anymore, Steve and Rumlow were military enough that their ranks mattered. On the other hand, most of Steve's experience with having a sergeant for his team was with Bucky, which was a whole different ballgame altogether.

Rumlow wasn't Bucky.

"Me and my nephew made a deal," Steve said. "He kept up his end of the deal, now I'm trying to keep up mine, that's all."

Rumlow recognized deflection when he saw it, shrugging it off and reaching over to help Steve with his earpiece.

Somehow, Steve wasn't surprised when he told Tony of all people.

It was somewhat by accident. Steve had been thinking about it while chatting with Tony over Skype. Steve had his laptop up while eating Sunday brunch, and Tony was fiddling with something small at his work-table, splitting his attention between Steve and what was supposed to be some tele-comm revolution.

Steve thought it about it a little too much, as he realized when Tony's voice cut into his thoughts.

"You've been quiet for a solid five minutes, Cap," Tony said. He glanced up from his work. "And you've got your thinking face on."

Steve swallowed. "Just - trying to figure out how to say something that's hard for me to talk about."

"Something tells me you wouldn't be having so much trouble if this were good news," Tony said. Tony's eyes and hands were on his work, but Steve had no doubt that he had the bulk of Tony's actual attention.

"It's not exactly news," Steve said. "Kind of old, actually."

"So what's making you say something, now?" Tony asked, squinting at whatever he was poking with his screwdriver. That Tony was listening without staring Steve down and waiting for an answer was surprisingly helpful.

"I made a deal with my nephew," Steve said. "If he told someone about his panic attacks, I had to tell someone about my flashbacks."

There. He said it.

Tony froze, but didn't look up from his device.

That sudden stillness would be disconcerting on anyone, but on someone as animated as Tony, it was almost terrifying.

"...Tony?" Steve asked. Maybe this hadn't been a good idea, after all.

The man let out of a breath and slumped forward a little, setting down his work and clasping his hands under his chin, elbows propped on the edge of his table.

"PTSD?" he asked finally. Steve nodded, even as Tony unnecessarily clarified, "The modern term for shell shock."
"I know," Steve said. "I don't lie on my psych evals, so I've heard this before. I just...don't give
details."

"You have flashbacks?" Tony asked, raising an eyebrow. "Because that's not just a little detail-
"

"I know," Steve said. "Look, it doesn't affect my work. I'm fine when I'm in the field, and even most
of the time otherwise. They rarely happen, and when they do, it's only..." Steve trailed off, trying to
figure out how to explain this.

"When you feel safe."

His head snapped up at Tony's quiet pronouncement.

Tony took a deep breath and continued.

"When you've let your guard down, when you're relaxed, when you're not expecting nasty
reminders...that's when the littlest things blindside you."

Steve stared for a long, long moment.

"You sound like you're speaking from experience," he said finally.

Tony smiled, a wavering expression that did nothing to hide how forced and insincere it was.

"Anxiety attacks," Tony said, gesturing towards his own head. "Different flavor of panic attack, and
a little closer to what you have."

Steve blew out a long, thin breath as he wrapped his head around that.

"I've been stupid in keeping silent about this, haven't I?" Steve asked.

Tony shook his head.

"No," he said. "Even today, it's difficult for people to talk about. And your generation was a hell of a
lot more repressed."

"I know people talk about it a lot more, these days," Steve said. "Just..." He waved at nothing with
his fork. "It's private.

Tony snorted. "And the 21st century is all about privacy." Steve nodded in genuine understanding,
even in the face of Tony's sarcasm.

"How's Clint?" Steve asked. Because Clint was the other person Steve had considered talking to
about this.

Tony understood.

"He's okay now," Tony said. Then he pointed out, "But he wasn't taking a six-month vacation
between Loki and active duty clearance. And the Hulk isn't the only reason why Bruce keeps such a
tight lid on his feelings. I don't know much about Nat, but I only know a fraction of her life story and
I'm horrified, so I imagine she's got her own issues, too, even if we don't see them."

"The fact that we barely know anything about her is part of it," Steve speculated. "That's how she
copes and protects herself."

Tony nodded, pointing to Steve with a gesture that said *there you go.*
They talked a lot longer than Steve would ever have expected. Tony's reluctance to come back to New York after the Mandarin made a lot more sense when Tony revealed that for a while, even mentions of New York sent him into anxiety attacks. This new perspective army of Iron Men was a bit of a surprise, but explained a few things, and by the time Tony finished detailing his own history with anxiety attacks and PTSD, Steve felt almost like a fool for never saying anything.

Almost.

Tony could be a good listener when he wanted to be. He worked on his...whatever his invention was...so that Steve wasn't under a spotlight, but never actually lost track of what Steve said. Steve laughed when Tony described Bruce falling asleep in the middle of a story, and Tony's bottomless well of sarcasm kept Steve from descending into a spiral of latent fear and irrational panic.

By the end, Tony smiled at him and said, "Now you can tell your nephew that you kept up your end of the bargain." Here, he smirked. "Need me to sign a doctor's note for you?"

"You need to be a doctor for that," Steve drawled.

"I have an honorary Ph.D!" Tony protested.

Steve laughed, and said, "Don't worry, I won't mention you to him."

Tony pursed his lips in consideration.

"...if it helps him," Tony said finally. "You said he has panic attacks? And he doesn't tell people about them?"

"His own father doesn't know," Steve said. "I'm trying to get him to tell John - his dad - but it's...slow-going."

"Slow-going or no-going?" Tony asked. Steve just looked at him. "Yeah, I figured."

With a wry chuckle, Steve bid Tony a goodnight and ended the call.

After finishing up his homemade pho, Steve pulled out his phone and started texting Stiles.

I kept my end of the deal, Steve said. I told Tony about my flashbacks. Turns out he has anxiety attacks of his own.

He paused, then added, How did Scott take your panic attacks?

When he finished washing up the dishes, Stiles' answer said, I told him in the first place because he was having one.

Huh.

After putting everything onto the drying rack, Steve texted back, You really should tell your dad.

The NO! was predictable, but Steve still sighed a little sadly at that.

Steve pondered how to convince Stiles to tell his dad, and was still pondering this the next morning when John called and said, "I am seriously considering retiring. Let someone else deal with this bullshit."

John had called at the tail end of Steve's morning run - which meant it was still practically nighttime over in California. Slowing down, Steve asked, "What bullshit?"
"Last night, Scott, Stiles, and three other kids - Allison Argent, Lydia Martin, and Jackson Whittemore - got trapped in the school with either a wild animal or the serial killer," John said. "Or both. Or neither! Who knows, because I sure as hell don't."

"What?!" Steve cried out, actually stopping for a minute to stare at the Mall in bewilderment.

John sighed, sounding exhausted. He must be working over his shift - again.

"Exactly what it sounds like," John said. "It looks like a wild animal - there are some claw-marks around the school, and the body has tooth marks."

"Body?!" Steve cried out.

"None of the kids!" John immediately reassured him. "A janitor was found dead. He looked like he'd been mauled by an animal, and combined with the claw marks and the kids' own reports of some kind of monster dog thing, it looks like an animal. Except someone called the police station earlier in the nights to tip us off that some kids could be 'prank calling' us to the high-school. So we ignored their phone calls until we got other people calling us about it."

"Wild animals don't do that," Steve muttered, turning sharply on his heel and making his way back towards his apartment.

"No," John said. "And some of the other bodies looked the same."

"Could the serial killer be using a murderous animal as its weapon?"

"It's starting to look like it," John said, and groaned. "And god, if we could get the animal, it would be an instant conviction for the owner. But until then, this is the hardest kind of weapon to track or trace without a lead. The claw and bite marks are so bizarre no one can even agree what the hell it is. I've heard everything from wolves to bears, neither of which even exist around here, anymore."

As Steve waited at a stoplight, he said, "And the kids? How are they?"

"Rattled, but okay," John said. "They'll all probably still be at school come Monday."

"Kids are resilient like that," Steve said, meandering down the street. "And how are you?"

"Wondering if I should retire and quit while I'm ahead," John drawled, then sighed. "We traced the tip. It seemed to come from the hospital, but from a phone that's pretty publicly accessible and not monitored by any cameras."

"So almost definitely pre-planned?"

"Unfortunately," John said darkly.

"Want me to check in on Stiles?" Steve asked.

"Yes, please," John said gratefully. "When you can, at least."

"I don't have to be anywhere for a while," Steve said, as he turned onto his street. "Are you going to be able to head home, soon?"

"I just have to deal with a few more reports and I can go," John said. "I might just faceplant on the couch and not even bother with the bed."

"I'll be sure to mention that to Stiles," Steve said.
"Don't you dare!" John said. "God, he'd-

"Help you to bed," Steve said cheekily, and hung up in the middle of John's protests.

Shaking his head, Steve pulled the phone away from his head. He made his way to the apartment, started up some instant oatmeal, and dialed Stiles.

After a few rings, Stiles answered with a surprised, "Steve?"

"Hey," Steve said. "Your dad told me about last night. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," Stiles said. "But the cool janitor is dead and Scott was dumped."

Steve blinked. "Cool janitor?" he asked, because a dead body was just a little bit more important than a teenager's love life.

"Yeah," Stiles said. "He's really nice, he knows half of us by name and sometimes turns a blind eye to, uh, things."

"Sounds nice," Steve agreed, pulling his oatmeal out of the microwave. "And Scott was dumped?"

"Sort of?" Stiles said. "She says it's a break. But Scott was...he may have gone haring off against the killer on his own and she took it the wrong way and, um, yeah."

"He was showing off?" Steve asked, stirring his breakfast idly with his spoon.

"I wouldn't call it that," Stiles hedged. "Just...he was trying, let's leave it at that."

Trying to impress her, Steve thought, and said out loud, "But you're okay?"

"Yeah," Stiles said. "Dad's guys are already investigating."

"He told me," Steve said. "Might want to check in on him when he gets home, he sounded tired."

"Roger that, Rogers," Stiles said, and Steve rolled his eyes, even as he smiled at the terrible pun. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go find a way to cheer up Scott. And see if I can figure out anything about the thing that attacked us last night. And make sure my dad doesn't keel over as soon as he gets home."

"Good luck," Steve deadpanned, and stared down at his phone in quiet speculation as he ate his breakfast.

He recognized deflection when he saw it. But what was Stiles deflecting him from?

~*~

Steve was never more grateful for having a private room at Sabalauski than when the piercing ringtone of his phone woke him up in the middle of the night.

"Hello?" Steve answered, frowning at the time.

"Captain Rogers?" an official voice asked.

"Yes," Steve said. "Who is this?"

"This is Agent Marie Kale, from the Security Department of Human Resources."
Steve stiffened and started to push himself up. HR's Security department wasn't for security of actual SHIELD agents, but their at-risk family members.

"I don't want to alarm you," she continued. "So I'll start by stating your nephew is fine. However, we believe there may have been a kidnapping attempt."

"What happened?" Steve demanded, wincing as he switched on the lamp by his bed. "Where is he?"

"He is safe and at home with his father," Agent Kale said. "But earlier tonight, he was accompanying a friend of his to visit someone at a long-term care facility."

"Scott?" Steve asked, confused, because he couldn't think of someone the boys would want to visit.

"No," she said. "Give me a moment and I can-"

"Nevermind," Steve said, because he could ask Stiles about it later. 'Later' meaning as soon as he was done with Agent Kale. "Please, continue."

"There's not much to say," she said. "There was some kind of violent conflict, and someone else called the police. By the time they got there, Mr. Stilinski was fine, but half the reception area was trashed. The security cameras were disabled, and had been since at least the night before. He says their assailant was a Caucasian man with brown hair and wearing a long, black coat, but he couldn't get a closer look than that. The friend he was accompanying there in the first place fought the assailant off. LEOs got there, and since it's..." She paused. "Stiles?"

"Stiles," Steve confirmed. Apparently, someone wrote down the nickname in his security profile.

"Well, since it involved him, we were alerted by default. Especially since it didn't look related to any of Sheriff Stilinski's cases, meaning the attack on him was probably related to you," she said.

Steve took in a sharp breath. "But he's fine?"

"Just a bruise on his forehead, nothing more," she said, voice softening a little. "We don't have more information, yet. Unless you have any more questions, I'll hang up so you can call and check on him, yourself."

"Thank you," Steve said.

"No problem, Captain," she said, and ended the call.

Steve took a few deep, bracing breaths, then went to his Contacts and jabbed down on Stiles' picture. Less than two rings later, Stiles answered the phone with, "Steve, I'm fine."

Steve let out a breath at the sound of exasperation. "Are you sure?"

"Ugh, here," Stiles whined.

A moment later, he heard John's voice saying, "Yeah, he's fine. Mostly."

"I am fine!" Stiles cried out from the background.

"Just has a bruise on his forehead," John continued. Steve smiled at Stiles' grumbling. "I took off the rest of my shift and brought Stiles home as soon as one of the orderlies from the long-term care center called."
"Seriously, I'm fine," Stiles said. There was some scuffling, and then Stiles' voice was much clearer as he added, "I'm pretty sure the guy wasn't even there for me, I think he was there for Derek."

"...the guy you accused of murder?" Steve asked dubiously.

"Oh my god," Stiles protested. Steve could hear the eyeroll from all the way over in Kentucky. "It's not like that, Jesus! I told you, I'm helping him with something, we just swung by to see his uncle and the guy in the coat was there."

"Stiles, this is serious-"

"I know!" Stiles said. "I'm not an idiot. I'm just saying you don't have to worry, because I'm pretty sure this wasn't about Captain America."

"It was about someone trying to hurt you," Steve said. "So I don't really care who, how, or why - I'm still going to worry."

"Okay, you know what? Video time!"

Indeed, within a moment of Steve pulling the phone away from his ear and looking at the screen, the phone was prompting him to accept a video call.

Stiles' face filled the little screen, smiling despite the already-reddening bruise on his forehead.

"See?" Stiles said. "Fine! And as I was just trying to tell my dad-" Here, Stiles pointed to this forehead. "This wasn't even from the fight. I just wasn't paying attention earlier in the night and hit my head on the steering wheel. Seriously, I'm fine."

With a swallow and a smile, Steve nodded. "I believe you," he said.

Stiles pursed his lips. "You both need'a chill, you know that?"

Steve huffed in amusement, sitting up and leaning back against the wall. "Are you sure you don't know anything else about who attacked you? Or any-"

"I already went over all this with the cops once, Steve," Stiles grumped. "And then again with the SHIELD lady. Seriously, I'm fine. Chill." A pause. "Both of you."

Steve could imagine the face John would be making, right now.

"I'll 'chill' when you stay out of trouble long enough for my head to cool down," John said sardonically. Steve laughed at the indignation on Stiles' face.

"Ugh!" The screen blurred as Stiles handed the phone over, and Steve found himself looking 'up' at a bewildered John. "Tell him I'm fine, 'cause I'm out. I never got the chance to shower after lacrosse and I'm still hella gross."

With that particular California-ism, Stiles waved at Steve, hand flitting between the phone camera and John's chin. Steve listened as the sound of Stiles storming off faded away.

The camera moved again, so John was holding Stiles' phone level with his face.

"How is he, really?" Steve asked.

"Amazingly, fine," John said. Then he slumped back in his seat, the phone image shuttering a bit. "And no closer to explaining what the hell is going on with him and Scott and why they're staying
out late, all the time."

Steve nodded in understanding. "And how are you?"

"A few hairs grayer, but otherwise also fine," John said, smiling wryly. But he had a pensive look on his face.

In silence, Steve waited. There was something on the other man's mind, and his troubled countenance troubled Steve.

John was a cop through and through, so it took a while. The man probably knew what Steve was doing.

Yet after a minute, John looked up and said, "How much danger is Stiles in, really? As your next-of-kin?"

Steve froze. He was grateful that most of his body was out of the line of sight of the camera, but his face was enough to make John look full of regret.

"I didn't mean it like that," he started.

"Yes, you did," Steve said. "And I don't blame you one bit. I was worried about it, too - it's why I resisted, at first. You have every right to be mad at me."

"I'm not mad," John said. He sounded honest enough. "It would be the height of hypocrisy if I were."

Steve tilted his head, silently asking John to elaborate.

"I'm a cop," John pointed out. "A sheriff, to boot. This isn't the first time Stiles has been threatened because of someone hoping to use him as leverage. It's just the first time he's been attacked for it."

"What happened?" Steve asked, for the second time that night.

John blew out an exhausted breath, reaching up to rub at his face with his free hand. There was some scuffling sounds and the picture blurring again as John set the phone down on something. Then the picture was still again - a little lower, but much steadier. Behind John, the Stilinski's kitchen was dimly lit.

"Just after I first got into office," John said, gesturing towards his Sheriff's badge. "Someone we'd arrested still had connections we couldn't get warrants on. It was nothing overt. He just started chatting all about the middle school lacrosse team, completely out of nowhere. He didn't have kids, and Stiles was on the team at the time. This guy was talking about the team's game calendars and practice schedules and..." John perched his elbows on the table as he wrapped his hands over his face for a moment. Then he dropped and crossed his arms. "I've had guys I arrested say all sorts of crap to me. How they'd find me and kill me, kill the people I loved, find and murder my wife and kids, all of that. But it was just shit they'd say in the heat of the moment. Most of them didn't even know my first name at the time, let alone have any capacity to find my family or figure out where I lived. But this guy...just talking like that. Telling me how easy it would be for him or his associates to find my son, to hurt him - I'd never been so terrified."

"God," Steve breathed out, trying to imagine that.

"It was just so-" John took another deep breath. "Jesus, Steve, even the local Yakuza head never did that, and me and Silverfinger actually have some nasty history with each other. This guy - it's been a
quarter decade, he's been convicted, and half his friends are behind bars now, too. But I still have nightmares about it."

"I'll bet," Steve admitted. He still had all sorts of nightmares from nearly a century ago, he could imagine John would still be scared for Stiles. "But Stiles was fine, right? He was never attacked before tonight?"

"Well," John said darkly. "He wasn't attacked for anything related to him being important to someone else important."

Steve frowned. "So you're saying he's been attacked for other reasons?" Steve narrowed his eyes at John, at his face. "You wouldn't look like this if you were just talking about bullies or fights at school."

John swallowed. "You know how his mother died?"

"Frontotemporal dementia," Steve recited. He remembered reading that file for the first time, memory ringing with dozens of Mrs. Barnes' jokes about how many of her family members had gone senile in Romania. "What happened?" he asked. Again.

He regretted it as John's eyes started to shine. However, they remained dry as the man scrubbed at his face again.

"I won't go into details," John said. "But the dementia gave her delusions, and she...didn't always remember who or what Stiles was. I guess that's why I tend not to worry about Stiles staying out too late or anything. The worst assault he ever experienced in his life was from his own mother and in his own home. Fretting about anything else paled in comparison."

Steve honestly gasped. The sharp breath scraped his nostrils and burned down his throat as he tried to imagine that. He couldn't imagine being attacked by the person you loved most, being attacked by the center of your world when they didn't even recognize you. "Oh my god," he said. "He...she...?"

John pursed his lips.

"Stiles is a lot better now than he was that day, let's leave it at that," John said. Then he took a deep breath, pushing himself away from the edge of the table and sitting up a little straighter. "Look, the point I was trying to make is that I'm not mad you for tonight, and I don't blame you for being a danger to Stiles. Me and his mother were a danger to him long before you were ever in the picture. I just want to know, honestly and sincerely, how much danger he's in from your enemies, so I can protect him. I already know how to protect him from my enemies, but terrorists are a completely different ball-game from street gangs, domestic abusers, and corporate sharks."

Steve thumped his head back against the wall, trying not to think of how exhausted he was going to be while jumping out of helicopters tomorrow. There was no way he would get any decent amount of rest, tonight.

"I don't know," Steve said, finally. "For the most part, Stiles is safe just by virtue of the fact most people have little to gain from kidnapping him. SHIELD doesn't negotiate with terrorists anymore than anyone else does, and the moment Stiles was taken hostage, I would lose access to most security-sensitive documents and locations until either he was rescued or killed. Most people left who want to kidnap him, they would only do so to hurt me or to make a statement, and most of them aren't even on this side of the planet." Then Steve brought his head back up to look at John. "But that doesn't mean there aren't some people who slip between the cracks, or crazies just acting on their own."
John nodded. "I just want my son safe."

Steve scrubbed at his face. Was John implying...? "I understand-"

"But it won't come by cutting him off from you," John continued. "I'm a cop, Steve. I know too much about the crazy stuff that can happen to people even when they don't have connections to anyone powerful, let alone when they do." John smiled at him. "I still expect you to come visit us soon. Maybe you can keep Stiles occupied during his spring break."

Steve laughed, a little wet but a lot genuine. "I'll do my best," he promised.

After a few more goodbyes, they ended the call. Steve put the phone back on his charger, and for a moment just stared at the wall opposite to him.

He swung his legs over the edge of the thin bed, intending to get up and start making his way through some of the air assault safety material. It was late enough in the morning that he could just get an early start on his day. That was good, since he was going to spend most of the day learning how to properly jump out of helicopters.

He meant to, but instead he fell back on his ass and had to drop his head between his knees, trying not to think of just how close he might've come to losing Stiles, tonight.

His ma's death had been the first time he lost his family. His own death had been the second.

Steve wasn't sure if he'd be able to survive a third time.

It took almost ten minutes of the deep breathing exercises Bruce had taught him before Steve could calm down and sit-up straight. He ended up going for a nice, long jog - not a full run, saving some energy for later today, but it was a meditative and calming run in the cool morning air.

He may not have run fast, but he ran for a damn long time, doing his best to let his frustrations out with the pounding of his feet and let the cool air sluice the panic away. Steve came back just in time to see some morning formations fall-in. He went to the showers just to rinse off the worst of his sweat so he didn't stink up the canteen at breakfast.

Just as Steve was finishing up his morning meal, John called again.

"I apologize," Steve said to the lieutenant he was chatting with. "Urgent family matter." The young woman nodded, turning back to some materials brief, while Steve scooted his butt down the bench a little for some semblance of privacy.

"So it looks like last night's attack might've been about me instead of you, after all," John said as soon as Steve answered the phone.

Steve frowned down at his poor excuse for scrambled eggs and said, "What do you mean?"

"One of the patients is missing from the long-term care center, and a nurse," John said. "So it looks like Stiles was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And...you know the dead body Stiles and Scott found in the woods?" Steve hummed affirmatively. "Well, the missing patient was her uncle. And Stiles was only there in the first place because he was there with her brother, the missing patient's nephew."

"What was he doing there?" Steve asked, setting down his fork and reaching for the coffee.

"Stiles says moral support," John said. "My best guess? Neither of them buy the animal killing - to be
honest, I don't either - and Stiles is trying to play detective and help the guy find out who killed her." John sighed. "And if someone just kidnapped her uncle, I'm guessing that means they were close, even if no one is going to admit anything."

Steve took a bracing sip of his mud-masquerading-as-coffee. "Does this have anything to do with the serial killer you're investigating?"

"God, I hope not," John said. "Which means it probably is."

Steve swallowed, giving up on his eggs and focusing on his coffee. "Do you need to get him out of town for a while?" Steve said. "I know it's kind of far, but if you want him out of town for a bit, he's always welcome at my apartment."

"Thanks," John said. "But this is Stiles we're talking about. If we even managed to get him to D.C. in the first place, he'd stage a jailbreak and be right back here pestering me about my breakfast choices before we could blink."

Steve nodded, despite the fact John couldn't see it. "I know. But still, offer's open."

"Thanks, Steve," John said. "Hopefully, your day will be better than mine."

"I'm getting shoved out of helicopters today," he pointed out sardonically. He'd told them about Air Assault School over a week ago.

"Good luck," John said with a light laugh. "Word of advice? Chewing gum. Or at least pretend you're chewing gum, make your jaw go through the motions. It'll help with the air-pressure changes."

Steve smiled. Maybe he could swing by the commissary on his way out. "I'll keep that in mind."

John ended the call, and Steve pocketed the phone, looking up to see the young lieutenant - fresh out of college - watching him curiously.

"Everything okay, sir?" she asked, setting down the packet of papers she was reading.

"For now," Steve said, picking up his fork again.

She nodded in understanding. "'For now' is the best we can ever really ask for."

Truer words had never been spoken.

~*~

It's official. My type is 'hot but would eat me alive'.

Despite the fact there was no one around to see Steve, he raised an amused eyebrow at Stiles' text. Well, no one paying attention, anyway, since right now he was just another person standing in line at Starbucks.

What brought this on? he asked.

MY LIFE.

Steve set the phone aside to order his coffee - well, mocha, since Starbucks' actual coffee made the Marines' taste good - before going over to the little waiting section. He skimmed the front page of the newspaper on a newsstand that he was pretty sure was there just for show. Within a few minutes, his
phone vibrated again.

*Do you know how hard it is to hate someone whose bones you wanna climb like a tree?*

Steve could just imagine Stiles' indignant flailing. *Who is this about?*

*Derek!*

What the...?

*The guy you accused of murder?*

They called for a two mochas for Grant and Marge. Steve picked up his drinks and went outside, meandering his way towards Peggy's nursing home but not trying to be speedy about it.

*That was a mistake I'm trying to fix, Stiles texted back. I'm helping him figure out some family stuff to try and make up for accusing him of murder. BUT. I made the mistake of looking at him while he was changing shirts. HE HAS ABS.*

Steve was still laughing when the next text came in, saying simply, *And HIS ARMS. They might give Thor a run for his money.*

If anyone ever asked - not that anyone ever would, but if they did - Steve would admit wholeheartedly just how much he couldn't stop himself from his response.

*You must be serious if you're comparing his arms to Thor's.*

The response was on his phone by the time Steve crossed the street.

*HE HAS A TATTOO ON HIS BACK.*

Then in rapid succession, even as Steve was looking down at the phone:

*I hate him.*

*I hate my life.*

*I hate everything.*

Being a teenager really hadn't changed much over the eighty years or so since he was one, himself.

Then he frowned, as the thought of ages made him think of another thing. Because he remembered them talking about this 'Derek' fella, and Steve always got the impression that man was, well, a man. An adult, at the very least.

*How old is he?* Steve asked.

It took a few minutes, but he got what was probably a reluctant answer.

23

Oh, good lord. Well, Steve could admit it was slightly hypocritical on his part, but still. If that sort of age difference would've had him looking twice back in his time, he could just imagine the kind of reactions it would cause, today.

*Are you sure this is a good idea?*
Relax, Stiles texted back. *I'm like 95% sure he's straight, anyway, and even if he weren't, you've seen me. I'm not even getting any luck with someone my age, let alone his.*

Well.

He supposed if this was just Stiles ranting, it was probably harmless. Steve doubted Stiles would’ve even mentioned Derek by name if the boy had thought he’d had a chance to take a tumble in the hay with him.

So instead of anything more serious, he searched on the Internet a little. He found an archive of Captain America posters he’d posed or were made of his character from back in his USO days.

He found the pamphlet reminding soldiers to use condoms while on leave, and sent that to Stiles.

It took barely a minute to get back a woeful, *I wish.*

As long as you use one when it happens, Steve said. Then he added, just in case, *But I'd hold off on the older guy if I were you. Stick to boys and girls your own age.*

He was rather unsurprised when, a few minutes later - only a few blocks away from the nursing home - he got a response. He honestly smiled in bemusement when he read it.

*Weren't big age differences normal in your day?*

Steve rolled his eyes and answered, *They were more common, but that doesn't mean they were perfectly accepted. I felt bad being an 18-year-old girl's first kiss as Captain America. You should definitely hold off on anything more than admiring this guy from a distance.*

Unsurprisingly, as Steve approached the nursing home, Stiles responded with what was probably meant to be a rhetorical question.

*Was the girl okay?*

Smirking, Steve responded, *Well, she's the Queen of England, now, so I guess it wasn't too hard on her.*

By the time he approached the doors of the nursing home, Stiles had texted back *WHAT?!?!*

There were several more messages, but at this point, Steve ignored them, letting Stiles marinate in his own shock as he went to Peggy’s room.

"What's so funny?" she asked as he settled into the chair at her bedside, setting her preferred caramel mocha within easy reach for her.

"Not much," Steve said, and held up his still-vibrating phone. "Just telling my nephew about that time I kissed Lizzie."

Peggy immediately swatted at his arm, and Steve laughed as she rolled her eyes. "For heaven's sake, Steve - that nickname was bad enough when she was the princess, but it's even worse now that she's the queen!"

Steve smiled at her mostly-mock indignation.

"Why were you telling him about it in the first place?" she asked. She reached for her drink with shaking hands, but she still managed to pick it up and bring the straw to her lips.
Steve ached to help, but he knew how well she'd take it. Instead, he said, "He has a crush on a twenty-three-year-old. He's sixteen. I was telling him to hold off."

"You were convincing your nephew not to pursue an older partner by telling him about the time you were the older partner?" she asked, raising an unimpressed eyebrow after a small sip of her mocha.

"I was telling him how I felt bad about it!" Steve said defensively.

She rolled her eyes. "I've actually been awake for the last seventy years and I still remember adolescence better than you."

"I also sent him that pamphlet of Captain America reminding soldiers to use prophylactics when on leave," Steve added. Peggy burst out laughing, which quickly descended into coughing.

Before Steve could even help, though, she was already waving at him to sit down.

"That seems..." one final cough. "A bit much."

"Eh," Steve said with a shrug. "I hope he makes wise choices, but I want him to be safe even if he doesn't."

She smiled. "Well, at least if it's an older woman, they can be responsible for him."

Steve took a deep breath, then said carefully, "Older man, actually."

Peggy was about to say something, when she caught sight of his face, paused, then groaned and rolled her eyes with exasperation. "Steve, what on earth were you expecting me to say?"

"I wasn't-"

"Your face, Steve!" she snapped.

Steve sighed. "Just - I know some people's attitudes towards two fellas, today are...more accepting. But you're-

"Your age," Peggy reminded him. "You may have thought you were being subtle with Sergeant Barnes, but you were not."

Steve frowned. "Peggy-"

She held up a hand, stopping the words in his lungs.

"I don't know what, exactly, the relationship between you two was, but I know it was more than friends, even if it was less than lovers," she said. "I always knew."

Steve sighed. "It's Complicated."

"I suppose that's why the Internet considers that a relationship status, now," Peggy drawled, and Steve laughed. She continued, "Well, hopefully you and Barnes remembered to use-

"We never got that far," Steve said. "We never... I had with some other guys, before the serum, and with some girls after. But never with Bucky."

Peggy gave Steve a once-over, her gaze as piercing now as when she'd been evaluating him for Project Rebirth. Feeling a little self-conscious, Steve took another sip of his own mint mocha.
"That's a shame," she said, finally. "You two would've made for a lovely image together."

Steve choked on his drink. He was coughing from inhaling his stupid mocha in shock and Peggy was coughing from laughing at him too hard. It was a solid five minutes of them being pathetic and their cardiovascular systems trying to right themselves, and it was the best five minutes of his entire month.

Eventually, they calmed down, spending several companionable minutes sitting in silence and holding hands.

Then Steve broke that silence with a soft, "You were always the most beautiful person in the room."

"I was the most beautiful woman in the room," she said. "But while you certainly looked at me when you thought I couldn't see, you also looked at Barnes when you thought he couldn't see." She tilted her head and squeezed his hand as tightly as she could. "Sweetheart, no one missed the cow eyes you two made at each other."

"We never made cow eyes!" Steve said, with a voice that even to his ears was reminiscent of Stiles' indignation.

"Close enough," she drawled. "Your nephew has a good man to model his relationship after."

"...I never even kissed Bucky," Steve pointed out. "I kissed you."

"And yet it was Bucky for whom you risked your life several times, not me," Peggy said, releasing his hand to pat it. "You died for him, Steve."

"I should've lived for you," Steve muttered, not trying to hide his guilt.

She had no tolerance for nonsense, and said as much. "You didn't. And I've accepted that, and the entire American Eastern Seaboard thanks you for that. She twined her fingers through his, again. "But you're alive. Bucky isn't, and I won't be for much longer."

Steve's eyes widened at that. "What- Has there been any new-"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Just an incredible awareness of my age. I'm not Romanova, Steve. I had never been frozen or experimented on - and I never will be, not now."

Steve swallowed, bringing her hand up to his face, pressing his lips to her knuckles. "Please don't remind me, Peggy, please."

She smiled wetly and him and made no promises.

Instead, she said, "You should ask Tony to take you out on the town, sometime. He's as much of a party boy as his father was."

"I've noticed," Steve said, obliging her change of topic and lowering their hands a little. "He's offered, believe me."

Here, she gave him a sly smile. "And in this day and age - you could go to a queer club, too." Here, she gently tugged her hand away from his grip to pat at his shoulder. "You would have no trouble finding someone to pass the night with there, Steve. Believe me."

Steve laughed, and felt like he was choking on it.

Peggy moved on to pestering Steve about what was going on in Latveria, quizzesing him on 'what
Nick and Alex aren't telling me now’. Director Fury and Secretary Pierce still came to her for advice, which amused Steve to no end. Despite that, her suggestion stuck on Steve.

So he tried.

He waited until he was back in New York to let Bruce and his interns run some MRIs on him. The night after they were done, Steve researched a little and went out towards one of the more packed gay clubs of New York. Crowded enough that Steve could disappear into a sea of faces, but not filled with so many people that he was likely to be recognized.

It was a club that catered to both gay men and lesbians, so it wasn’t all men, not like the gay clubs from back in Steve's day. The queers back then had been a lot more reclusive - obviously, since it was completely illegal back then. Still, while there was no shortage of leather dykes and fairies, most of the people here were...normal, actually. Perfectly normal looking, which wasn't as common in Steve's day as it was here and now, but hey, that just meant he blended in even more.

Steve took one look at the dance floor and parked himself by the bar, ordering the strongest drink they had and checking out the scene, without trying to be too creepy. God, he felt so old being here, and yet so young. He looked the same age as most of the people here, was younger than many of them...but it was just so different from the kinds of bars he grew up in. And this as an honest to god bar, not even one of the dance clubs he'd seen videos of while researching. Jesus, if he'd gone to one of those, he'd have been back out the door in five minutes.

Peggy was right about one thing. In no time, he had men eyeing him up and nudging at each other, probably goading each other into coming over and talking to the shy guy in the corner.

Steve retreated to the pool tables. There, he could keep his head down to keep an eye on the game. He felt a lot better doing something instead of just sitting in a corner and trying to work up the balls to say 'hi' to someone.

Unsurprisingly, someone did eventually recognize him, and Steve tried Natasha's weird reverse-psychology trick.

Surprisingly, it worked. Steve just made a joke about impersonating, a crack about getting free stuff when people thought he was Captain America, and boom, the half dozen people surrounding the current game all thought he was just a normal guy with an uncanny resemblance to a superhero.

If only self-delusion weren't the theme of the night.

Because one of the guys was a little more interested than the rest. Granted, all of them were - even some of the women were, which Steve tried not to think about too much, not tonight. But Steve found himself gravitated to one of them.

The man lost the pool game to Steve with a smile on his face that made Steve wonder if he'd thrown the game. They let someone else take the pool table as the man took his hand and pulled him to a quieter, dimmer corner, ostensibly to chat and get to know each other more.

It was no surprise to Steve when it turned out the guy meant it biblically, two minutes of chatter as their mouths got closer and closer leading into Steve's first kiss since 1945. The guy was passionate, but gentle, with dark hair and built chest to complement his gentlemanly nature and un-gentlemanly kiss. It was everything Steve imagined Bucky would be like-

Everything he imagined a dead man would be like.

With a sigh, Steve pushed away.
"Everything okay, babe?" the guy asked. God, Steve didn't even know his name. To be fair, the guy didn't know Steve's and hadn't asked, but still.

"Yeah, just...this is..." How honest could he be, really? "My first time coming out ever since..."

The man nodded in understanding. "Bad break-up?"

Steve shook his head. He tried to come up with a tactful way of saying it, and ended up blurring out, "He died."

The man went wide-eyed. "Aw, shit." Before Steve could even blink, the man had pulled Steve in for a hug. Despite their moment of tonsil hockey, earlier, this somehow felt more intimate. "I'm so sorry, darling."

"...thank you," Steve said, for lack of a better answer. He leaned into the embrace, drawing genuine comfort from the man's genuine sympathy.

The man pulled away. "Well, look - you've done great for your first night out since then. But don't push yourself, okay?"

Steve mustered up a smile. "Thank you," he repeated.

The man gripped Steve's hand in his own, much like Peggy had done earlier in the week. "Need someone to stay with you for a bit?"

Steve shook his head, and released his hand from the man's grip. "No, but thank you. You go have fun, someone who can spend the whole night with you."

After checking one more time, the man pressed a kiss to Steve's temple and sauntered off.

He should've asked the man for his name.

But Steve didn't bother worrying about it, or trying to chase the man down.

Instead, he went back home. Or, well, Tony's tower, at least.

Technically, it was still Stark Tower, but Tony never really bothered replacing the rest of his name, leaving only the theatrical A up there. Overnight, after the Battle of New York, it had become a symbol of the Avengers and of resilience. It was how New Yorkers proclaimed that even an alien invasion couldn't stop them now, and it was how the rest of the world defined themselves against a whole new universe out there that this world was only just now becoming a part of.

Steve stopped in the street to just stare up at the symbol for a moment. The letter once had only been a small part of Tony's ego, and has since became about something so much bigger than one man could ever hope to be.

This was once supposed to be a monument to Tony's ingenuity, one which literally had his name on it. But now, he never corrected anyone who called it 'Avengers' Tower'.

With a soft sigh, Steve finished his way back inside, to the private elevators, and up all the way to the residential floors.

"Welcome back, Captain," JARVIS greeted him as he reached the guest apartment. "How was your night out?"

Steve paused, a hand on the wall as he toed off his shoes.
"...informative," he said finally.

"Sometimes," the digital butler said. "That is the best we can ask for."

Steve smiled sadly down at his plaid socks, and nodded, knowing that even in the dim light, JARVIS would see it.

"Truer words had rarely been spoken," he said. And then, "And you won't tell anyone about this, right?"

"Your privacy will be of utmost priority to me," JARVIS said. It amazed Steve that a computer could be capable of not just indignance, but mock-indignance. "As long as it causes no harm to Sir or his immediate associates, or the rest of the Avengers, I will never divulge any information you wish for me to keep private.

Swallowing, Steve looked up towards the corner where JARVIS' cameras and sensors were.

"Thank you," he said, and went to bed.

It may not have changed his life, his perspective, or his being. But tonight at least taught him one thing:

He was still just as hopeless with guys as he was with girls.

And he was surprisingly okay with that.

~*~

You know Bruce Banner, right?

Steve stared at the text in bewilderment, actually pausing mid-step in the hallway between SHIELD combat training rooms. He talked about his friends to Stiles all the time, and made no attempt to hide who they were. Stiles knew who his friends were - so why was he actually asking?

Yes, he texted back. Why?

Can I ask you a favor?

Steve couldn't help the shiver down his spine that had nothing to do with SHIELD skimping on heating and everything to do with how much Stiles hated asking for things.

Steve poked through several conference rooms, offices, and breakrooms, until finally he gave up and went into one of the remote bathrooms that no one used because it was so far out of everyone's way. After checking that no one was in there right now, he dialed.

"Steve?" Stiles answered.

"Is everything okay?" Steve asked immediately.

"...not exactly," Stiles said. That alone made Steve grip the sink counter hard as he remembered Stiles' futile attempts to convince Steve that his panic attacks were okay.

"What's going on?" Steve asked. "And what does it have to do with Bruce?"

"There was-" Stiles paused, took a deep breath, and said, "Lydia was attacked at our Winter Formal. She's recovering, now, but...it's going to be hard on her. And she's kind of a Bruce Banner fan, so I
guess I just..." Steve could hear Stiles swallowing nervously from three thousand miles away. "Maybe you could get an autograph or something? Not for me, but just to cheer her up."

Steve stared into the mirror, his own struggle with relief and worry staring back at him - relief that Stiles wasn't hurt, but worry that someone Stiles cared about was. The girl he was pining over, no less - and genuinely cared about outside of his crush on her. "I'll ask him," Steve said. In all honesty, he doubted Bruce would mind signing something for a hurt kid, but Steve didn't want to make promises on someone else's behalf. "Is she okay?"

"She will be," Stiles said. Then under his breath, he added, "Hopefully."

Steve sighed, then looked up when someone else came into the bathroom.

"I've gotta go," he said quietly. "But I'm sure she'll be fine, okay? I've seen people recover from some pretty terrible things."

"Doesn't make it suck any less," Stiles pointed out.

Steve huffed in saddened humor. After a few more meaningless reassurances, he ended the call. He stared at the screen of his phone, wondering how best to ask Bruce to sign something for an injured Hulk fan.

He texted Stiles back, in the end, while walking out and towards his next training session.

*Any particular reason she likes the Hulk?* Steve asked him. It would be easier to ask Bruce to autograph something if he can give the man a good idea of what to say. Or at least if there was a certain kind of merchandise she liked.

The response was almost immediate. Steve had to smile when Stiles described in detail how his friend wasn't a fan of the Hulk, but of Dr. Banner and his scientific work (and, apparently, his work against a particular scientist).

Bruce had a lot of issues about the Hulk - namely the dichotomy of how the world viewed the Hulk against what the Hulk actually was, at least in Bruce's mind. He would love to hear someone - especially a kid - value him for his intellectual side, something all too few people did.

After he got home, he had another phone call with another Stilinski.

"We caught the serial killer," John said. "And it was a woman."

Steve swallowed. "Does it have anything to do with whatever the hell happened at the dance last night?"

"Possibly, but we don't know for sure," John said. Steve heard some noise in the background, and recognized the sounds of a bustling police station. John must be calling Steve on his break. "Just - did Stiles ever tell you about Scott's girlfriend?"

"Allison?" Steve asked, trying to remember the name.

"The serial killer was her aunt," John said. "And she murdered people several years ago, and now came back to kill off all the loose ends. Most likely, if she was using some kind of rabid dog or whatever to kill them, it turned on her, if the claw marks on her throat are anything to go by."

Steve breathed out slow and long. "Jesus fucking Christ," he muttered.
"Yeah," John said. "And-" There was the sound of another phone ringing, and what sounded like some people arguing.

"Go," Steve said. "We can talk later, and I can talk to Stiles. He already told me about his friend."

"Keep an ear on him for me?" John asked.

"Roger," Steve said, and with a distracted 'thank you', John ended the call.

The next day, Steve video-called Bruce over lunch while trying some delicious noodle soup from a new Vietnamese place down the street whose name he always tried to avoid saying in public. They spent an enjoyable half-hour catching up, not having talked much in a few weeks. Bruce recounted his latest day baby-sitting Clint's kids at the tower - Tony apparently got into a very heated debate with the eight-year-old about some cartoon - and Steve returned that with the story of how Natasha went "undercover" at a SHIELD combat lesson for new agents. Veteran marines learned a hard lesson about how deceiving appearances could be when they all got beaten up by a "little girl".

"Hey, Bruce?" Steve added at the end of their video chat and remembering Stiles' request. "Any chance I could get you to autograph something?"

"Sure," Bruce said with amicable surprise. "For a Hulk fan?"

"A Dr. Banner fan," Steve said. "A friend of my nephew's, actually. Something about liking some article of yours that smacked down a sexist who-" Steve checked the text message on his phone. "'Can't tell apart a reticulum from his rectum'."

Bruce burst out laughing, just as Tony's voice cut into the conversation with a gleeful, "I remember that one!"

A moment later, the man himself popped up, hooking his chin over Bruce's shoulder and waving at Steve. "Your nephew's friend has good taste."

"Well, she was attacked at their school dance," Steve said, smiling as Bruce drank some tea and Tony cringed at the smell of it. "She's recovering now, and Stiles wants to give her something to cheer her up."

"Beacon Hills, right?" Tony asked, cocking his head with a look of speculation on his face.

"Yeah," Steve confirmed.

Tony pulled away from Bruce, but Steve could still see half his body in the shot of Bruce's camera as he appeared to start poking away at a tablet.

"I wouldn't normally ask for something like this, Bruce," Steve said. "But he wouldn't, either, so-

"No problem," Bruce cut in, smiling reassuringly. He took a sip of his tea. "We've got some spare merchandise somewhere around here I can sign. Maybe one of those limited edition-"

"Oh, shit."

Tony's quiet, heartbroken invective had Steve's gaze snapping towards the side of the screen Tony was on. Bruce looked over to Tony's tablet, only for his tea-mug to freeze halfway to his mouth in a white-knuckled grip.

"Oh my god," he breathed out in horror.
"What?" Steve demanded.

"I was looking up the attack," Tony said. "And-

Tony brought up his tablet to Bruce's camera, and Steve's gut fell right through the floor at the picture on the screen.

Lydia Martin was probably a beautiful young lady - but covered in so much blood, it was impossible to tell. She was strapped into a gurney being lifted into an ambulance. The low quality of the picture did nothing to hide the tears in her dress, the blood all over her body, and the paleness of her skin.

She looked a fraying thread away from death.

Behind her was a boy, his tuxedo also covered in blood. His handsome features were lost to the terror on his face as two police officers held him back from running to her side.

*Cell-phone photo taken by a fellow student and shared online*, the caption read. *Of Lydia Martin being loaded into the ambulance. Also pictured is classmate Jackson Whittemore, who found her and called 911.*

Both names were achingly familiar to him.

"That's Jackson?" Steve blurted out.

The tablet disappeared from view as Tony pulled it away, leaning his head back towards Bruce's shoulders. The two ashen men looked at Steve in askance.

"The girl is the one Stiles has a crush on," Steve said, leaning forward over the table as latent shock coursed through his veins. "And the boy, Jackson - he's the fella the boys never get along with." Steve shook his head as the enormity of Stiles' understatements started to hit him. "Holy shit."

"I don't think 'holy' is right word, here," Tony said, frowning at the tablet. Bruce set down his tea, looking deep in the mug as he tried to avoid looking at Tony's screen. "They weren't the only ones with a rough night."

"I know," Steve said, rubbing at his head. He looked to Tony. "Remember when I mentioned a fan of yours does archery? Allison Argent?"

Tony pursed his lips, and gestured towards his screen. "Would I be safe in assuming she's related to Kate Argent?"

"Kate Argent is her aunt," Steve said.

"Who's Kate Argent?" Bruce asked, despite looking like he didn't want to know the answer.

"The serial killer my nephew's father has been trying to hunt down for months," Steve said.

Tony elaborated. "She's been found responsible for a recent string of murders, most likely committed to..." He swallowed, like he couldn't believe what he was reading - which was saying a lot, given their line of work. "To cover up the fact she murdered almost an entire family and their close friends, several years ago, by burning down their house."

Bruce shut his eyes. "Does...does it say why she...?"

"Doesn't look like there's a reason," Tony said. "Just pure psychopathy."
"Pure evil," Bruce growled. Tony's head snapped up, looking as alarmed as Steve felt. But when Bruce opened his eyes, they were brown, not green. He was the kind of upset that made your heart skip beats, not double them.

It was strange, sometimes, having a friend whose eye color could change on the spot.

"Yeah," Tony said, reaching out to wrap an arm around Bruce's shoulders, anchoring him and keeping the monster inside at bay. While Steve could empathize with what might very well be the Hulk's desire to destroy a rare embodiment of evil in the world, the target of his anger was already dead and he was three-thousand miles away from what was left of her.

Bruce took several deep, Hulk-controlling breaths, and looked at Steve.

"If it makes the girl feel better, I'll autograph every piece of Hulk merchandise we have," Bruce said.

"Forget the Hulk merch," Tony said. "I have a better idea."

Steve and Bruce both looked at him in surprise.

"Let's print out that article," Tony said. "Get it bound up nice and pretty and everything."

Bruce smiled at the thought. "I remember a lot of the stuff we ultimately left out of it. I can make some marginal commentary-"

"Like a director's cut!" Tony said.

Steve's shoulders fell in relief, trying to get the bloody pictures out of his head. At this point, it wasn't about Stiles, anymore, but for the girl's own sake.

"Thanks, fellas," Steve said, smiling gratefully at them.

They responded with smiles full of determination.

The shared investment in the gift was probably what made Steve's heart freeze over in genuine fear when he got a message from Stiles saying Lydia was missing. It didn't help that the message came less than an hour after Tony texted him a picture of the article. He'd ordered one of those fancy leather portfolios for it.

Steve's gut grew heavier with every day she wasn't found. But just as he was considering taking some leave to go over there and help look for her, she was found, safe and sound. Well, 'sound' might be a bit strong a word for wandering around naked in the woods for three days straight. But she wasn't hurt anymore than what put her in the hospital in the first place.

Small mercies.

The gift, thankfully, turned out to be a success.

It was hard to miss. Stiles texted him a picture of Lydia Martin, looking healthy and like she was never attacked, as she stood in front of a locker at school, paging through the article. She was grinning down at whatever she was reading, all but glowing in the picture.

Thank you.

That simple text message somehow said so much more than any amount of creative punctuation or strings of emoticons ever could.
Steve made sure to forward the picture to Bruce during their next video-call. He watched Bruce open the picture on the little video screen.

The Hulk left so much destruction in his wake that Bruce rarely saw anything positive about himself, any worth in his life. Even little Hulk fans left him reeling, feeling like they loved a lie, a fairy-tale version of the Hulk that belied what the green rage monster was actually capable of.

Bringing some joy into someone's life, free of the baggage of the Hulk...

Steve wondered if Bruce got more than he gave, and said as much to Stiles.

We could all use some more smiles, Stiles texted back wisely. Steve glanced at look of disbelief on Bruce's face, how hard it was for him to understand that his words alone could make a kid happy.

He could do nothing but agree.

~*~

Thank god it's winter, Stiles texted Steve a few weeks later. It came in the middle of the night, late enough that it was really more like morning. I don't think I'm going to go swimming again any time soon.

Why are you still up? Steve asked, tugging the blanket up a little. And why were you swimming in the first place in winter?

Why are YOU still up to ask me why I'm up? Stiles responded. Steve rolled his eyes, even as he got another message adding, I wasn't going swimming, I was just trying to save someone from drowning.

Steve blinked in surprise, leaning back on his couch and putting the old Superman movie he was watching on mute.

Instead of texting back, Steve called, since Stiles was up anyway.

"Drowning?" Steve asked as soon as Stiles answered the phone.

Stiles sighed. "Long story, and not one I feel like telling. But yeah, just spent two hours keeping someone from drowning and I do not want to go swimming again any time soon."

"Two hours?" Steve asked, bewildered.

Stiles' sigh sounded even more long-suffering this time. "Um, we couldn't leave the pool and Derek...wasn't exactly...um, he was unconscious."

The last part was definitely a lie, and Steve questioned the honesty of the rest of Stiles' explanation.

"Stiles," Steve started warningly.

"Please don't tell my dad."

It took him a second to parse through Stiles' outburst.

"...why don't you want your dad to know?" Steve asked, twisting the edge of his blanket.

"Um...it may have involved some slight...bending of certain rules?"

Steve frowned, rubbing at his eyes a little. "How much bending are we talking?"
"Only school rules!" Stiles immediately protested.

"And why were you with Derek?"

"I wasn't, exactly," Stiles said. "It was more that we both happened to be in the same place to..."

"To what?" Steve said, trying not to give Stiles time to come up with a 'good' answer.

"...there might be another serial killer," Stiles said.

Steve stared into nothingness as he wrapped his mind around that.

"Another serial killer," Steve said, drawing it out word by word.

"Maybe," Stiles said. "Or at least there have been a few more murders even though the last serial killer this town had is dead."

Steve sighed, sinking even deeper into his couch. "I heard," he said, and he had. He followed ABC 7 almost as much as Fox 5 and News 12. "Will you two still be able to come here?" he asked. "If you can't, I can come pick up Bucky's stuff, or the Smithsonian can have it couriered."

It was Stiles' turn to sigh. "Nah, dude, I'm already packed and everything. I'm not going to lie, I thought about it, but..." Another pause. "Scott and Allison said I can't put my life on hold forever, since as soon as one storm blows over, another one appears."

He'd never admit it, but he was relieved to hear that. A little pathetic, maybe, but he really did miss them, no matter how much he talked to John and Stiles over the phone...and video...and e-mail...and Skype...

"Good," Steve said, admitting to that much. "I got the guest bed ready for your dad and everything."

"Got a comfy couch?" Stiles asked.

"Yes," Steve said, shifting the blanket over himself a bit. "Which is good because I'm taking it. My place is a two-bedroom, Stiles, you're getting my bed."

"But Steve-"

"No buts," Steve said. He paused, then added, "Besides, half the time I sleep on the couch, anyway."

"Really?" Stiles asked, predictably derailed.

"Yeah," Steve said, nodding at no one. "I spent a long time sleeping on the ground or in much...rougher conditions. So when my bed drives me nuts, I take the couch. You're not kicking me out of anything when I don't even use my bed, anyway."

"You should get a sleep number bed," Stiles said. "You can adjust how soft or hard those things are, so you can get one and make it as hard as possible."

"Stiles," Steve protested, but he could already hear the sound of the teenager clacking away at a keyboard in the background. Steve would bet his shield that by morning, there would be an e-mail in his inbox about sleep number beds, detailed enough to put some army acquisition reports to shame. "I'll let you think about it for me."

"They're better for your back," Stiles said. "I was thinking of getting my dad one, a while back. Maybe they do 2-for-1 sales, so I can get one for each of you..."
Steve smiled as Stiles continued muttering to himself about mattresses and back injuries which somehow drifted into the history of spinal medicine. "Remember to get some sleep, okay?"

"I'll sleep on the plane," Stiles dismissed, and Steve rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Mattresses first."

"You can show me what you've got when you get here," Steve promised.

"Damn straight."

"Now go to bed," Steve said. "You shouldn't be up at this time of night."

"Neither should you!" Stiles protested. "What are you doing up this late, anyway?"

"Watching Superman," Steve said. "I'm not sure which one, though, it was just on."

"Yeah, but why?" Stiles asked.

Steve shrugged, despite the fact Stiles couldn't see it. " Didn't sleep," he admitted. "Bad dreams."

The keyboard clacking paused, then slowly resumed.

"I know that feeling," Stiles murmured.

"Is that why you're up?" Steve asked.

"...possibly," Stiles admitted.

"You've had a rough few months," Steve said. The boy snorted. "Stiles, I'm serious. Between getting trapped with a murderer at the school, Lydia's attack, and seeing the mechanic die-"

"You know about that?" Stiles asked, his bewilderment punctuated by another pause in typing.

"Yes," Steve said. "Your father told me about it. I'm wondering why you didn't."

"It was-" Stiles took a deep breath. "I'm not saying it was nothing, but it wasn't like I saw it or anything, I just found him that way."

"After you were paralyzed?" Steve asked. "Your father also mentioned the toxin on your hand and the doorknob. They're still struggling to identify it."

Stiles sighed. "It was nothing," Stiles insisted.

"Are you sure?" Steve asked. "He wouldn't tell me details about an on-going investigation, but the way your father described it, it wasn't nothing."

There was a lot of silence, without even the sound of typing to break it up.

"...I heard him," Stiles said quietly, and Steve shut his eyes at Stiles' wavering tone. "I heard him die."

Hearing Stiles say that, Steve could understand why John had been so precariously close to outright drunk when he'd called Steve to tell him.

"Does it ever go away?" Stiles asked.

Steve sighed. "If it does, I'll let you know," he said. "Do you want to talk about it?"
"Not really," Stiles said.

He knew the feeling.

"In that case," Steve said. "Want to talk about those unnecessarily fancy mattresses?"

"They're not unnecessary!" Stiles protested. The boy knew damn well that Steve was trying to distract him, but was willing to go along with it. "Humans spend around a third of their lives asleep, Steve, that's the most of your life you spend on any one, single activity. It doesn't exactly take much for it to start affecting your back. For all ages, but especially as you get older. Your spine starts to react more and more to the positioning of the rest of your body..."

As Stiles continued on with the nature of spinal medicine, the history of mattresses, and sleeping behavior of other mammals, Steve smiled up at the ceiling. He never put the movie's sound back on, instead guessing at what Christopher Reeves and Phyllis Coates were saying to each other.

After a while, as Stiles started trailing off more and more, Steve was finally able to convince him to go to bed, with the intent of monitoring his spinal condition both before and after sleeping on his current mattress. Having to manipulate Stiles into taking care of himself via science reminded him of Howard and even Tony, both of whom often could only be made to sleep with careful application of booze and implying that sleep deprivation was making them "less smart".

Steve spent a day taking a dip into some more obscure Soviet history written in very simple Russian, double-checking some meeting times with the Smithsonian, and cleaning up the apartment - not that there was much to clean up. Ma and Mrs. Barnes had all but beaten sloppiness out of Steve and Bucky, and what they missed, the army got rid of for good. The only time Steve had ever utilized his guest room was when Nat came over for dinner and stayed to go to the Triskelion with Steve the next morning. She was a slob who Steve didn't mind cleaning up after, not when he realized it was her way of rebelling against the rigidity the Red Room had raised her with.

That night, as Steve was warming up leftover Chinese for dinner, he got a picture message from Stiles.

The picture was a selfie of Stiles and John, taken from their first class seats on the airplane. Judging by the sight of people milling around in the background, the plane hadn't taken off, yet. John was smiling wryly at the camera, hand up in a half-hearted wave. Stiles was grinning, the flag-and-medal display case in his lap. A moment later, a text message came with it, and Steve grinned as he read it.

On our way!

Chapter End Notes

If you haven't already, check out and subscribe to the series this fic is a part of. I've already posted up another story (what will be a collection of alternate POV scenes), and there will be more coming down the road.

You can read about Bruce's gift to Lydia here.

I am developing way too many notes and references to just put in the A/N. Would any of you be interested in a kind of "author's/director's commentary" on the fic? Also, is anyone interested in deleted scenes?
Come check me out on Tumblr! Especially my winter wolves tag, where I post meta relating to this series, sneak-previews, and some expansions on this universe.
Skin Will Blister As It Thaws

Chapter Summary

The dark side of family feels come out to play.

Chapter Notes

*looks at 31k chapter wordcount* Okay, the next one will be shorter. *cries*

I'm afraid I'm going to have to rescind my A/N from the last update. This fic is no longer going to have 8 chapters.

It's 10, now. *sobs*

**Hold your cursor over non-English text** to see a translation of it. If you are on a mobile device, see the translations [here](#).

**New Warnings:** historical racism, alcohol abuse, discussions of domestic violence, and suicidal ideation.

I am so sorry this chapter took so long. I meant to have this out by June 13th since that's my birthday (I'm exactly 12 years younger than Chris Evans!), but that week was a hard week for me, and then the weeks after were a lot of real life getting in the way.

*Other Kind of Warning:* I'm writing Jennifer Walters as a combination of her character at different points in her history, and from multiple summaries. But I have not actually read her comics, and I firmly believe that deserves a disclaimer/warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Steve picked up John and Stiles from the DCA in the morning. Though 'picked up' was a relative term when Nat was the one driving her latest leased car to pick them up with him.

After parking, they made their way to baggage claim, where Stiles' text said he and John were.

Steve scanned the area, making sure to keep the bill of his hat down. Nat pulled up her hood, wearing one of those outfits that made it look natural rather than suspicious. After a moment, she asked, "Is that them?"

He followed her line and sight, and smiled. "Yup." He raised his arm, and didn't even have to raise his voice because Stiles spotted him right away. He ran right over and barreled into Steve, wrapping him in a tight hug. Steve returned the embrace. Behind Stiles, an exasperated John was dragging over all the luggage Stiles had abandoned him with.

After another tight squeeze, Stiles finally pulled back. "Hi, Steve!" he greeted, rocking on his heels
and wrapping his hands around the straps of his backpack. He looked strangely tired, so Steve assumed the flight hadn't been a restful one.

"Hey, Stiles," Steve greeted. He turned to meet John with a more sedate, one-armed hug. "John."

"Good to see you," John said. He let go of the handles of the two small suitcases and carefully set down a duffel bag to return the half-hug, the strap of his laptop bag almost tangling in their arms.


"Et quoque mihi," Stiles said. Steve and John both blinked in surprise.

"Quid agis?" Nat continued, ignoring them.

Stiles shifted his weight under his dad's confused look, but answered, "Bene mihi, gratias."

"Bonum volatum habuisti?" Nat asked - or at least Steve assumed it was a question, based on her tone.

"Comosum volatum habui," Stiles answered with a shrug.

Nat raised her eyebrow. "Your flight was leafy?"

Stiles scowled and grumbled, "Vero, lingua stultissima Latina est."

Nat laughed. "Oh, that you get right," she said. "You're the one who decided to take a class in it."

Stiles stuck out his tongue, which immediately got swallowed by a yawn.

Steve saw John looking at him, completely bewildered, and answered his unspoken question. "A while back, Stiles was griping about his Latin classes, so I put him in touch with Nat since she knows it."

John blinked, then snorted. "Should I try asking them if that helped at all?"

"No," Stiles said, while at the same time Nat said, "Yes."

Stiles looked at her, surprised. With a smile, she said, "You are doing better. Really." With that, she turned to face John, hand out. "Pleasure to meet you, Sheriff Stilinski."

"I'm not here as an officer of the law, so call me John," he said easily.

"Well in that case, I'm Nat," she said. "Though you may know me as Agent Romanoff."

John raised an eyebrow. "The Black Widow?" She nodded. "Well, in that case, honor to meet you. I'm sure you've heard this before, but thank you for New York." He tilted his head between Steve and the luggage. "How'd you get dragged into this?"

"He needed my car," Nat drawled, dropping the Sheriff's hand to stuff her own into her pocket, fishing out her keys. "And I wanted to meet you, anyway. I've already met everyone else's families, it was high time I met Steve's in person."

Both Stilinskis smiled. Before this could descend into anything sappy, Steve reached for the slightly bigger suitcase. "Let's get out of here, before traffic hits."

Stiles picked up the duffel bag, also treating it carefully, while John snagged the smaller suitcase.
Everyone followed Steve as he headed to the door that would take them to Nat's car. John strode by his side while Stiles hung back to continue chatting with Nat in halting Latin.

Throughout the walk to the car, getting their stuff in it, and the drive to Steve's apartment, he and John didn't say another word, but they didn't have to. They just enjoyed each other's silent company - and Stiles' continued grumbling about whatever it was he and Nat were talking about.

The day was looking up already.

They beat the traffic by a hair. As soon as they got through Steve's front door, Stiles dropped his bags by the kitchen corner and started poking around the entire apartment.

"I swear to god, I raised him with manners," John said, shaking his head at his son's nosiness. As if sticking his nose into other people's business wasn't literally his job. Steve laughed.

"It's okay," he said, picking up the bags and taking them to his room, where Stiles would be staying. He came back out to see Stiles sticking his head into the fridge. "I figured we could just eat out."

"Don't let him fool you," Nat said. "His fridge is always either completely packed or as empty as it is right now. Never anything in-between."

Steve opened his mouth to protest, then closed it when he realized she was right.

"Oh my god!" Stiles cried out. Steve looked over to see Stiles' hands hovering over the shield, which was propped up in its usual corner. "Is this...?"

"Yup," Steve said. "Go ahead."

"You just had to tell him that," John grumbled, as immediately Stiles hefted up the shield, grunting under the weight.

"Jesus," he grumbled. "This thing's heavier than it looks."

"No kidding," Nat said, wandering over. "I nearly dislocated my shoulders when Steve tried to teach me how to throw it."

Given how much Stiles was struggling to hold it, Steve doubted anyone was going to suggest throwing lessons. But Stiles did ask Nat to take a picture of him holding up the shield to send to Scott.

As soon as the photo was taken, Stiles dropped the shield on its front. Thank god the walls in this building were nearly sound-proofed. Instead of trying to prop it back up, he sat down in the shield, grinning as he rocked around in a circle. Nat took another picture, as John face-palmed.

"Last I checked, you were sixteen, not six," he said, but he was smiling behind his hands.

Stiles blew a raspberry at his father, then reclaimed his phone to start texting pictures to Scott. "And Allison," Stiles added.

"You two told her?" Steve asked in surprise.

"I think that's my fault, actually," Nat said with a shrug. "I face-timed Scott to help him with a tough move and she saw me. Kind of hard to miss after that."

"A tough move?" John asked.
"Scott has his heart set on learning how to be a ninja," Nat said.

"Is this why he's had two broken bones in the last year alone?" John asked, looking over at Stiles, who looked up from his phone sheepishly.

"Well, technically, a broken nose-"

"Stiles."

"Maybe?"

Nat laughed, and Steve rolled his eyes. "He's actually pretty good, now that he's getting the details down better. He must've been putting in a lot of work into this beforehand, to improve so much in such a short period of time."

Stiles seemed nervous, but nodded along.

Lunch was at a Persian place Tony had recommended and Nat vouched for, and conversation remained easy and light throughout the meal. John regaled them with some of the funnier incidents he and his department had to deal with, Stiles recounted various goings-on from school, and Steve and Nat shared the few unclassified bits from their last mission. Stiles even showed them two of the videos of Scott's various "ninja training trials".

Nat went home soon after. John, Steve, and Stiles spent the afternoon seeing all the typical, tourist-y sites around D.C.

Steve didn't even have to play tour-guide, with Stiles all but attached to his phone and rattling off facts and figures and history as they went. He only stopped when they posed for pictures by the Jefferson memorial, the Washington memorial, and - of course - in front of the White House. Steve even pulled off his ballcap a few times, but since he wasn't with another Avenger, no one else noticed him.

One upside to people enshrining him and memorializing him so much. People paid so little attention to Captain America's face that Steve was rarely recognized outside of the suit.

Dinner was burgers at Five Guys, which Stiles proclaimed, "Good, but still not as good as In-n-Out."

"You and Tony are going to get along just fine," Steve muttered. Stiles didn't hear him, but John did, and groaned.

Sleeping arrangements ended up sorting themselves out. John went to bed soon after they got home, tired after their day of sight-seeing. Steve and Stiles stayed up powering their way through Star Trek episodes. It wasn't until Captain Kirk was drowning in Tribbles that Steve noticed Stiles had fallen asleep.

Leaving the TV on, Steve slipped one arm under Stiles' shoulders and the other under his knees, lifting him up and carrying him to the bedroom without him waking. After laying Stiles down, Steve had to sit for a moment on the edge of the bed, blindsided by the memory of years of helping Bucky tuck his sisters in. None of them had been particularly cooperative when it came to bedtime - no one in the family was, really - and either had to be all tuckered out to even consider bed, or had to be told a story to go to sleep.

Bucky always told the best stories. Steve would sit back and listen right alongside the girls. When he could afford the sketchpad, sometimes he'd even draw out what Bucky was describing, the vivid imagery that Bucky planted in his mind demanding a way out. He used to keep drawing even after
the girls had gone to sleep, and would give them the finished pieces the next morning.

He wondered if any of them went on to tell their own children bedtime stories to get them to sleep.

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Steve tucked Stiles in, then went back out to the living room. He switched off the TV, but instead of curling up on the couch, he pulled out his tablet and his sketchpad and sat down at the kitchen table. He didn't bother with a lamp - between the ambient street light and the full moon shining down through the windows, he had plenty of illumination.

From his phone, he e-mailed himself the picture of Stiles sitting in the shield. Stiles was tilted to the side, laughing even as he looked like he was about to fall over. The exhaustion Steve had noticed at the airport faded away in the midday sunlight coming in through the windows. Despite his lean figure, he seemed barely half his age, in a way that made Steve ache in a good way.

With a soft smile, Steve put his pencil to the paper and started to draw.

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The next morning, Steve frowned at all the coffee Stiles was drinking - and all the yawning he was still doing. Stiles refused to comment on his sleep, despite the clear lack of it during the night, so Steve instead turned his attention to the artifacts they were bringing to the Smithsonian, today. He asked Stiles where they were, and Stiles pointed at which piece of luggage to look at.

When Steve realized Stiles had carried the flag over in his carry-on luggage instead of checking it, Stiles took one look at his face and quipped, "Do you know how many bags airlines lose every year?"

Steve was impressed it fit in the duffel bag, but otherwise didn't comment. While Stiles and John were getting ready for the day, Steve went through all the things Stiles was giving over. He even opened the display case to run his fingers over the stitches of Bucky's funeral flag, to feel the medals that didn't come close to representing everything Bucky accomplished.

He closed the case before John came out of the guest-room. As the man helped himself to coffee and muffins, Steve started flipping through the binder Stiles had used to organize all the papers he'd found.

Steve wasn't all that surprised to know everything was still present. The Barnes family had always been packrats. He snorted at some of the dry descriptions on the medal citations. Then his heart thumped all the way up into his throat when he saw the comic book with his signature on it. His and Bucky's idea of a joke, coming back to haunt him almost seventy years later.

The hats were still soft, even after seventy years. He wished he could remember the day Mrs. Barnes brought them home, but he didn't. There hadn't been anything memorable, no birthday or holiday or particular reason. Just that his and Bucky's own hats, hand-me-downs from their fathers, had been wearing thin, and there had been a sale, so she got them one each. Steve and Bucky just figured they would share both hats, but the sisters always insisted they wear the one that complemented their hair. It didn't take long for the tan hat to become Bucky's hat, and the brown one to become Steve's.

Their colors had faded a little, but they were still soft. With a sharp puff of breath, he donned his old hat one last time. In the mirror, the leathery brown felt, while faded, still contrasted against his shining hair.

He wore it all the way to the museum.

They actually ended up keeping the case and the binder. The curators had their own case for the flag,
individual cases for each medal, and some kind of preservative document holder for all the citations and the comic-book. Half the museum staff looked scandalized to realize Steve was wearing one of their new acquisitions. The other half seemed amused. Steve took it off gently, setting it on top of the foam 'head' - ball for now - in one of the cases. He did the same for Bucky's old hat, which they'd brought in the dozen layers of newspaper Stiles had wrapped it in - almost two days' worth of the The Beacon Bugle.

Later, the museum staff would use some fancy software and old photographs to make little busts of Bucky and Steve in their teen years, which would wear the hats in the exhibit. That sounded rather cheesy to Steve, but Stiles seemed to like the idea, so he supposed they knew what they were doing.

Steve would eventually sit down for interviews about the various 'artifacts' - because he was so old that his life was now museum-worthy - but for today, there wasn't really anything for him to do. The newspaper Stiles had wrapped the hats in was still littered across the table, so Steve entertained himself by reading them.

He frowned when he realized the nice-looking woman pictured on what looked like a front page was the serial killer John had hunted down. A serial killer, and Scott's girlfriend's aunt. He remembered Stiles' amused report of that family dinner, and tried to reconcile the friendly woman who encouraged the budding young love with the psychopath who murdered an entire family and half a dozen 'loose ends' for no apparent reason.

Impossible. So he moved on to read about everything else going on in the county. Bookstore closures, restaurant openings, and municipal zoning conflicts stopped for no one, not even serial killers.

There was a lot of paperwork signed - by John, by Stiles, and by the museum staff - but in the end, the meeting went by a lot faster than Steve expected.

The staff carried it all away, handling everything with care, and Steve wondered if he'd ever get to touch them again.

He doubted it.

They spent the next few hours strolling through the Air and Space Museum, then the Mall. Stiles spent a solid ten-minutes positioning his father on the steps so that in the picture he took, it looked like Steve and Stiles were reaching up to pick President Lincoln's nose.

Lunch was deli sandwiches from one of Nat's holes-in-the-wall that never looked like much but had great food. Tony was sending a car - literally. He was paying someone to drive a car to Steve's apartment and then walk away so they could drive it back. So they met Nat at the deli but took the sandwiches to go, the scent filling up the taxi on the way back.

As they were settling down around Steve's little dining table, he got a text from Tony confirming what car they were getting.

Frowning, Steve opened the picture, sighed, and called Tony.

"That thing is way too fancy," Steve said as soon as Tony answered. "Send something more reasonable."

"Or what?" Tony challenged, already sounding way too smug.

"Or..." Steve looked around himself, and his eyes landed on Stiles. "Or I'm letting the teenager drive."
Stiles perked up at that, even whilst Steve shook his head, adding for both Tony's benefit and for Stiles', "So you better send something else to avoid that."

Now, Stiles pouted, while Tony was silent.

"I accept your terms," he said.

It wasn't until two hours later, when Steve was staring at the ridiculous car on the curb by his building, that he realized what Tony meant.

"Is that a Lambo?!" Stiles choked out in awe, looking one step away from drooling.

"Yup," Nat said, sounding impressed despite herself. Stiles reached out to pat the hood of the car, which was exactly the same shade of red as the Iron Man suit. "This is the car Tony said he'd send?"

"No," Steve said. "This one is even worse than what he originally told me he'd send."

Nat and Stiles both broke out in hysterical laughing, heedless of all the passers-by staring at the car and at them.

"God-fucking-damnit, Tony," Steve hissed through his teeth. The red car was so shiny, it almost hurt to look at.

"Not that I'm complaining," Stiles said, peering inside the car. "But why...?"

"Because Tony is an ass," Steve said. Nat laughed, the traitor.

"Well I'm complaining," John said, staring at the car in bewilderment. "Is that really a Lambo?"


"He repainted it," Steve said flatly. "That's it. He painted it to match the damn suit." The body of the car was red, but the hubcaps, and many of the car's edges, were brushed in deep gold.

Of course, Stiles was even more gleeful at that.

"He timed it to be a pain in my ass," Steve continued explaining.

"I think we're supposed to be the test drive," Nat said.

"And you told him you'd let Stiles drive?" John asked incredulously.

"Tony can afford whatever damage Stiles could do to it," Nat said, waving away John's concerns.

"So, you know, feel free to just drive it into the Potomac," Steve added.

John sighed.

"Stiles is driving?" he whined.

Steve nodded. "Stiles is driving."

"Aww, yeah," Stiles cheered, fist pumping in the air. He took a selfie of himself by the car (which Nat photobombed), then another selfie of himself in the driver's seat, then the Sheriff demanded he put the phone away to make sure Stiles focused on the road.

Nat actually ended up taking the front seat, having a slightly better grasp of the directions than Steve
"We're all gonna die," the Sheriff drawled, once they made it onto one of the less packed parts of the highway. Stiles started picking up speed at Nat's behest.

"Are not!" Stiles cried out, slowing down smoothly as Nat coached him through the movements.

"Damnit, Steve, I said not to encourage him," John muttered as he eyed the dashboard.

Steve snorted. "I told you, it's hereditary. Nothing we can do about it."

"What is?" Nat asked, turning in her seat to look at them.

"Driving," John grumbled from Steve's left.

"Bucky was a...creative driver," Steve said with a grin. "I got it from him, actually. It passed on in the family, down through Claudia and straight to Stiles."

Stiles laughed, and said, "I betcha I can beat them."

"Oh, god," John said, hiding his face in his hands. "We're all gonna die," he repeated, shaking his head. "I barely survived my wife's crazy driving and now this!"

Natasha was grinning as she turned back to face the road. "Well, I do know a thing or two about defensive driving..."

Stiles spent the next two hours gleefully caught between Natasha and John, the Black Widow encouraging him to be the best driver on the road while the Sheriff tried to make him the safest driver on the road. Steve refused to get in the middle of it, leaving Stiles to his fate, and instead sat back and enjoyed the ride. Despite the fact it was a teenager driving a sports car under the direction of a special operations agent, it actually was a nice drive.

Until they got pulled over, anyway.

"I'm not going to say I told you so," John started, but didn't finish as Stiles started rolling down the window.

Before Stiles or the cop could say a word, Nat leaned forward, her hair pinned back behind her ear a certain way that always seemed to remind people who she was, even out of uniform.

"Hello, Officer DeLaney," she said, having caught sight of his nametag.

"Hey, there," the cop said. He looked befuddled to see a teenager at the wheel of such a nice car, and seemed to realize that Nat was a familiar face. "Do you know how fast you were going?"

"Well," Stiles said, dragging out the word nervously.

"Eighty-seven," Steve answered, also leaning forward.

The cop caught sight of his face, and started to look back and forth between him and Nat.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You two look an awful lot like-"

"Steve Rogers," Steve said, holding out his hand to the cop, who looked dazed as he shook it. Nat also introduced herself, and the Sheriff was facepalming beside him. He turned up the awkward charm that once made him a darling of the USO. "Pleasure to meet you, officer."
"We're sorry about this," Nat said, her voice perfectly pitched to evoke sympathy and lenience. It was moments like these that Steve remembered why she was the best spy in the world. "We were teaching him about defensive driving and got a little carried away."

"'We'?" John demanded. "What 'we'?"

The other cop didn't seem to hear him.

"We understand that you have a tough job, keeping these highways safe," Steve continued, smiling as bright as he could without it looking fake.

"But you're doing it so well," Nat continued, picking up on Steve's train of thought. Damnit, she seemed to be rubbing off on him. Or was it the other way around? Who knew, anymore. "We'll keep a better eye on the speedometer from now on."

"In a car like this," Steve said, remembering some of the ridiculous car debates he's had to mediate between Nat and Tony. He tilted his chin down and to the side, slightly, in that way that made him look so innocent. Seventy years and people still fell for it. "It's just so hard to feel how fast you are going, so it's easy to get a little carried away."

"It won't happen again," Nat finished off.

"Well," he said, his own awe starting to work against him. "If you-"

"No if's," John cut in, digging into his jacket pocket and pulling out his Sheriff's badge. The cop's eyes widened. "This may not be my jurisdiction, but I am still an officer of the law. The kid was speeding, so you will give him a ticket, which he will pay with his birthday money-"

"Dad!" Stiles cried out.

"Really, sir," the cop started.

"Please, for the love of god, tell me your beat partner is someone who actually remembers police procedure," John cut him off. "Because this isn't it. The East Coast might be different from California, but it's not that different."

The cop - who did look quite young - nodded so hard Steve was amazed his neck didn't snap. "Wait here," he directed. As soon as he walked away, the Sheriff sighed.

"No wonder you had such an easy time bossing them around during the Battle," he grumbled at Steve. He narrowed his eyes at the rearview mirror. Turning around, Steve saw the cop talking quite excitedly to his partner. He wasn't surprised to see another cop, an older-looking woman, come out of the car and trail behind Delaney.

"Well whaddya know," she said when she peered inside the car, as Stiles reluctantly handed over some insurance card and his ID. "Captain America and the Black Widow. It's an honor to meet you." She looked between the two non-celebrities in the car, and focused on the Sheriff as her partner took a step back to start scribbling in his pad. "Sorry about my partner, here - he's fresh out of the academy."

"I understand," John said, leaning forward and speaking with more grace than he had towards the other cop. "It's been a while since I've had a fresh rookie on my force."

"'Your' force?" she questioned.
John held out a hand over his grumbling son's shoulder, almost sticking it through the window. "Sheriff Stilinski, Beacon Hills' Sheriff's Department."

"Pleasure to meet you," she said, shaking it. She looked between Steve and Nat, Stiles, then back at John. "Jean DeWolfe. Do I want to know how any of you know each other?"

"Probably not," Nat said, smiling easily. "We appreciate your partner's intended leniency-"

"No, we don't," John grumbled. DeWolfe burst out laughing as her partner finished writing the ticket.

She then cuffed her partner upside the head when he asked Steve and Nat for their autographs. They gave it to him, of course, much to John's despair.

The two cops went back to their car, and Stiles stared balefully at his dad.

"Really?" he demanded. "Just one time-"

"One time doesn't stay one time, Stiles," John answered, leaning back in his seat.

Stiles sighed, staring down at his ticket, then looking between Nat and Steve, narrowing his eyes at Steve.

"Scott's not even going to believe this," he said.

"Want me to tell him?" Nat asked, sounding far too amused. Stiles snorted.

"That doesn't matter, he won't believe Steve tried to flirt out of a speeding ticket for me."

"That wasn't flirting!" Steve protested. John, Stiles, and Natasha all gave him a disbelieving look, the latter two with raised eyebrows. "I wasn't flirting much," he mumbled.

Nat laughed, and reached into the small bag by her feet. "Hang-on, I have an idea."

Five minutes later, Stiles texted Steve the picture he just sent Scott. Steve and Nat were pouting at the camera, holding up a tablet with 'We tried to flirt our way out of Stiles' speeding ticket' typed out on it, Steve leaning forward so his chin was hooked over the back of Nat's seat. From beside Steve, John was glaring at them, 'I wouldn't let them' scrawled on the back of the deli receipt and held up in clear view of the camera.

Steve smiled and sent it to Tony.

As Stiles was pulling back out onto the road, Pepper sent back a message asking, **Did you have to encourage him? Really??**

Steve laughed and shared the message with the car.

The rest of the trip to Stark Tower was conducted within the speed limit, and with Stiles complaining about his dad ruining all his fun.

And then complaining about the fact he had to pay tolls to get into New York, then about New York's terrible street structure. Tony hadn't been kidding about how different driving on the East Coast was after getting used to California. Stiles was wide-eyed throughout the last half hour of their trip, half because he was trying to keep an eye out in what he described as "a city of people who don't know how to drive" and half in awe of the city he was deriding.
Steve smiled.

He missed New York.

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Unsurprisingly, Tony made a dramatic entrance.

After parking in the garage reserved officially for friends and family of Tony Stark - unofficially, for the Avengers - they made their way to the private elevator. Upon seeing its glass walls, Stiles dropped his luggage in it and pulled out his phone, demanding they not let it start rising until he was recording. John rolled his eyes, but lost his doubts as they rose and rose and rose through the tower's seventy-odd floors. The elevator trip straight from bottom to the top took almost five minutes. Stiles never once moved, desperate to capture the best video possible, but also intent to see the view for himself.

Tony would no doubt be glad to hear that they had to drag Stiles out of the elevator.

They went to the lounge on the top floor, where everyone else already was. Over in the square of couches by the windows, sat Clint - holding Nate - with Laura sitting on one side of him and Bruce on the other. By Bruce's other side sat Betty Ross, who was showing Bruce something on a surprisingly bulky laptop. On the next couch over, facing the windows, sat a woman in a sharp looking suit and admiring the view - most likely Jennifer Walters, Bruce's cousin. She sat next to a much younger, dark-haired girl who was as glued to her phone as Stiles usually was. On the next couch over sat a blonde woman, chatting with Pepper over a tablet those surface Steve couldn't see. In front of the TV by the back wall, the floor was littered with plush blankets and cushions where Cooper and Lila were watching a movie with lions singing and dancing.

Bruce saw them first, and waved. "Steve! Nat!"

"Hey," Steve said, walking past the doorway to the kitchen hidden behind the lounge. "Where's Tony?"

Instead of anyone answering, there was a long-suffering sigh coming from all the speakers. John and Stiles both jumped in surprise.

"Sir would like you all to look outside," JARVIS said. "Again," he added lowly.

Before either Stiles or John could ask about who or what had spoken, there was a brilliant burst of light from outside, and everyone got distracted.

Just the way Tony liked it. He soared in, fast enough to be impressive but slow enough to be appreciated. Iron Man hovered for a moment above them all and just outside the window, before coming down onto his landing-pad.

Stiles watched in awe as Iron Man descended with unexpected grace, then sauntered down the strip while the armor was pulled off piece by piece, until it was just Tony strolling in. Even the Sheriff looked impressed. Steve was starting to be.

Then he caught Pepper's look of exasperation.

"How many times has he already done this?" Steve asked under his breath - loud enough that she heard him, though neither of the Stilinskis did.

She rolled her eyes. "He did the exact same thing when Walters and Ross showed up. And he flew
in...very acrobatically before pulling that landing when Clint and his family came in." Her smile softened. "The kids loved it."

Steve laughed. Tony may be a show-pony, but always knew how to make people smile.

Granted, this also meant knowing the opposite of that, and it was sometimes a toss-up which intuition he would follow. But right now, it was the former, and Steve was grateful.

Mostly.

"Hey, kid," Tony greeted as he walked, in his usual dark jeans and band-tee shirt over a Henley. Well, at least he wasn't covered in motor oil or burns. "Heard you got a speeding ticket. Congratulations!"

"Thanks!" Stiles cried out.

"...goddamnit, you were right," John told Steve with a sigh. Raising his voice, he called out, "Mr. Stark, please don't encourage him." He glared at Stiles. "Birthday money," he reminded him.

"Oh, don't worry, I'll cover it," Tony said, waving it off.

"That would completely defeat the point of Stiles having to suffer the consequences of his actions," John said.

Tony frowned at him. "Shit, you're an honest cop, aren't you?"

"Unfortunately," Stiles said, pouting.

"Consequences," John repeated, crossing his arms.

"I'll talk you around eventually," Tony dismissed. He latched on to Steve's arm and started trying to drag him over to the couch. For lack of a better option, Steve let him. "Now c'mon, lots of introductions to make."

"Hey, everyone," Nat said, sidling up to Stiles' side. How she was so quiet with such a gargantuan duffel bag, Steve would never know. He also would never understand why Nat needed so much stuff for such a short trip, but that particular mystery has been confounding men since before Steve's time.

"Okay, so everyone, meet Steve's family," Tony's voice and arm wavered for a second. "Who, for lack of better terms, can be understood as his brother-in-law and nephew."

"Lack of a better term?" the young girl sitting to Pepper's other side asked.

"Stiles is my adoptive sister's grandson," Steve said, gesturing at the waving teenager. "And John is my adoptive sister's daughter's husband."

"...yeah, nephew and brother-in-law sound good," she said. Waving, she added, "I'm Darcy." Jerking her thumb to the blond woman on Pepper's other side, she added, "That's Jane."

"Foster?" Steve asked, and she nodded shyly. "Huh. I expected you to be..."

"More imposing?" Darcy asked. Steve and Nat nodded. "Yeah, we heard how Thor talked up her yelling at every SHIELD agent she's met."

"I have a slight temper," Dr. Foster said. "Especially when jack-booted thugs steal my life's work."
"Moving on," Tony said, sensing Clint's disapproval. Was it at Jane's characterization of SHIELD agents in general, or Coulson in particular? "They are Stiles Stilinski and John Stilinski. Gentlemen, that surly man in the corner is Clint Barton - sometimes known as Hawkeye. He's not important-"

"Excuse you?" Clint asked without heat, and without raising his voice. Most likely to avoid waking-

"That's Nate," Tony said, pointing at the baby sleeping in Clint's arms. "The lovely lady sitting by them is Laura Barton, who is Clint's partner-of-indeterminate-capacity," Tony said. Laura waved while Clint flipped off Tony without letting go of the baby. "The rugrats watching Disney's version of Hamlet over there are also their kids, Cooper and Lila, though everyone calls her Lila."

"Hi!" Lila shouted over her shoulder, while Cooper waved. Both quickly looked back at the screen, where a bunch of deer-like-animals stampeded down a cliff. Even Stiles seemed distracted for a moment.

"The bum pretending not to sleep next to the unimportant man is Bruce Banner," Tony continued, despite the fact the Avengers themselves didn't need any introductions.

"Hello," Bruce said, actually getting up to come shake their hands.

"Thanks for the gift," Stiles said, dropping his bags again and opening up his backpack. "You really helped Lydia."

Bruce's polite smiled softened into something smaller and more genuine, even as he - and everyone else - looked at Stiles' bent form in confusion as the boy dug through his backpack. "I'm glad to hear it."

Stiles stood up with an envelope, plain white but with To: Dr. Bruce Banner written on the front in floral handwriting.

"From Lydia," Stiles said, handing it over to a surprised Bruce.

Tony grinned, but let Bruce flop back into his seat with little fanfare to continue introducing everyone.

"This is his cousin, Jennifer Walters," Tony said. Ms. Walters - who was sipping at a leafy-looking drink - waved politely, before trying to get a closer look at the letter Bruce was opening. "And the lovely lady trying to break federal law and read other people's mail is Dr. Elizabeth Ross."

"Hello," she said, releasing one hand from a coffee mug to wave. "Just call me Betty." She gave Stiles a particularly warm smile, which made Steve certain Bruce had told her the story about Lydia. Then she also went back to trying to peer at the letter.

"You met Darcy Lewis," Tony continued. Darcy grinned and waved, just energetically enough that Steve wasn't sure if she was actually enthusiastic or just mocking Tony.

"I'm Jane Foster," Dr. Foster introduced herself. "I'm an astrophysicist, here to steal Tony's equipment."

"They were close friends of Thor's," Tony said. "Greeted him the first time he landed on Earth. When Dr. Foster here needed to replace some equipment SHIELD stole, I figured I might as well invite her over when everyone else was going to be here, too. Get everyone's meet-and-greet on."

"You guys greeted Thor?" Stiles asked.
"For lack of a better term," Darcy quipped. "Jane hit him with a truck and I tazed him."

Everyone stared at her.

"It's a long story," Jane mumbled, clutching the tablet she'd been sharing with Pepper.

"It gets funnier every time," Tony promised. "And last but certainly not least, the sun and stars of my life, Pepper."

"Hello," she greeted, also rising to her feet. She shook the Sheriff's hand, then Stiles'.

"So does this make you Khal Pepper or Khaleesi Pepper?" Stiles asked her. Several people snorted around the table as John rolled his eyes.

"Daenerys has nothing on her," Tony declared.

"But I will accept Mother of Dragons," Pepper said with a grin.

"Can someone explain this to me?" Steve asked.

"Game of Thrones," Tony answered. "TV Show-"


"I wasn't sure if today was a 'Natasha' day or a 'Natalie' day," Tony quipped, eyeing her with mock-suspicion.

Nat rolled her eyes, before looking out at everyone. "I'm Natasha," she said, though mostly at Foster, Walters, Ross, and Darcy.

Probably just as well.

"Nice to meet you all," John said. He looked between Tony, Clint, and Bruce. "Thank you for New York." Before anyone could start the mandated-gratitude-and-modesty routine, John turned to Tony and asked, "Anywhere we can drop these?" He tapped at the suitcase down by his thigh.

Each of the residential floors had several suites. Normally, Steve would just share with one of the others or bunk in Tony's guest room. But for once, he actually took a whole floor for himself, with John and Stiles each getting a room while Nat took Steve's usual spot. They reconvened in the lounge to see a pot of coffee and a serving tray of creams and sugars waiting for them, along with ridiculous Avengers mugs.

This was the first time Steve had seen Tony's coffee table actually being used for coffee.

Stiles started to make a bee-line for the drinks, before he noticed something.

"What's this for?" he asked, pointing at the floor. No, wait - he was pointing at the big dents in the floor, the ones that Tony had filled with clear glass so people can stand on them and walk on them, see and admire them.

Like Stiles was doing now.

Tony grinned, and Bruce groaned.

(Steve got déjà vu.)
Tony regaled them how Loki's part in his attempted invasion ended, and how Tony preserved the dents in the floor to honor the Hulk's contributions to the end of the Chitauri invasion.

"And to make Bruce blush," Tony said, gesturing to Bruce who was, indeed, blushing.

"Can I send a picture of this to my friends?" Stiles asked. "Only two of them, and they won't share with anyone else."

Tony grinned and dragged Bruce over to stand by the crystal-filled dent while Stiles took the picture.

John rolled his eyes and took a seat on one of the couches, sitting beside Walters to also take advantage of the view. Steve and Nat dropped into the empty couch that had its back to the view. After only a few ridiculous poses, Bruce, Tony, and Stiles joined them.

"So," Stiles asked, as he was making a coffee for himself. "Is everyone here going to the dinner thing tomorrow?"

"No," Dr. Foster said. She gestured between herself and Darcy, saying, "We're just here for our own thing, thank god."

"You don't want to go?" Stiles asked in surprise.

Dr. Foster immediately shook her head, making a face. Darcy, however, smirked and said, "I would!"

Tony grinned. "Okay." He turned to Pepper. "Think we'll need another car for her?"

"Wait," Darcy said, wide-eyed. "Really?"

Tony nodded. "I bought a bunch of extra seats at the dinner, just in case. My roster of people who usually clamor for this kind of thing are a little quiet, due to all the gag rules. I'm reaching out to the quieter roster, but I figure I can use you guys to fill in a bit, too."

"Gag rules?" Dr. Foster asked.

"Limited and tightly controlled press outside, no press inside," Tony said.

"This is a dinner for the first-responders, their families, and the families of some of the fallen," Pepper explained. "But the cops aren't exactly fans of publicity, and everyone is going to bring their families. Trying to manage press permissions in this case would be a nightmare, and if it was open-press, no one would come. So, no press, except for one spot outside that's well away from the entrance that most of the attendees will actually be using."

"A lot of my usual metaphorical rolodex of rich and generous types are only interested in charity when it doubles as publicity," Tony growled. "Hence the extra seats."

"And people aren't willing to sacrifice the publicity for a chance to meet a 'hero of New York'?" John asked, incredulous.

"If they knew we were coming, but they don't," Bruce said. "If they did, then this dinner would become about us, and not all the first-responders and volunteers who put their lives on the line, or those who died in the Invasion."

"The event planners and some of the higher-level attendees know we're coming, but that's it," Nat said. "To the outside world, it looks like a get-together of the first-responders and their families with
a charitable component. No one will be interested in this until after the fact."

"Hence the extra seats I bought as insurance," Tony said. "I'll get them filled by tonight, don't worry."

Darcy grinned, but then shook her head. 

"I don't have anything to wear to that kind of thing," she sighed.

Pepper got a terrifying gleam in her eye, and Nat grinned.

~*~

Pepper, Nat, and Walters whisked Darcy away to assemble a new outfit for her and buy finishing touches for their own. Bruce, Foster, and Ross absconded to a lab, off to go change the world again before dinner.

Clint and Stiles were both going to the tailor's. The former needed to get his dress blues altered, and the latter didn't have one at all.

Predictably, John balked when Tony said he'd pay for Stiles' suit. Predictably, Tony steamrolled right over him. He dragged the Stilinskis and Clint with him to the elevator, chattering over John's protests about the tailor he was taking them to.

"Think the Sheriff will have any luck?" Laura asked, once the elevator doors closed.

Steve shook his head, look around to see it was just him, her, and the kids left behind. Laura kept the baby in her lap while she read on her laptop, leaving Steve with the two older kids.

A movie, a video game, and a convoluted card game later, and the boys were back sooner than the girls, despite having left later.

Steve took one look at Tony's face, and asked Clint, "He paid for the suits?"

"He paid for the suits," Clint confirmed. He tilted his head at the coffee table, covered with cards with fantasy animals on them. "Lila getting you into her Pokemon kick?"

"I'm trying," Lila said, adjusting some cards Steve had shifted by accident.

"Ooh, which ones?" Stiles asked, leaning down to peer at the cards.

Steve let Stiles take over for him and headed to the kitchen to get started on dinner.

Tony went down to the lab where the rest of the scientists had absconded, taking Laura with him and leaving Clint with the baby. Almost as soon as he was gone - before Clint could even go back to the lounge area - JARVIS alerted them that, "The ladies have also returned from their shopping trip."

"Do we want to know how many bags they have?" Steve asked, rooting through Tony's fridge.

"I would advise against asking for details," JARVIS answered. "Mr. Barton, the ladies request your presence in Ms. Lewis' room. They need your assistance with cosmetic considerations."

Clint groaned, but nodded, looking to Steve and asking, "Nate been fed yet?"

"Laura was about to before Tony kidnapped her," Steve answered, pulling out the chicken from the fridge.
"I can do it," John volunteered. "I'm not much use for cooking, anyway."

Clint glanced at Steve, who nodded. He eased the fussing baby into John's arms before jogging off to the elevator.

"Where's his bottle?" John asked.

"Top shelf of the fridge," JARVIS answered.

John blinked in surprise at the ceiling, but nodded, holding the baby in one arm and opening the fridge with the other hand. He didn't seem to notice the baby attempting to grab everything as he got the bottle ready.

"Who are you, anyway?" John asked, looking up towards the ceiling where the speakers were usually placed. "No one's introduced you or even said where you are."

"I am not a human being," JARVIS answered. John readied the bottle and Steve continued assembling ingredients for dinner. "I am an artificial intelligence. I run every one of Mr. Stark's private homes, as well as many of his laboratories, servers, and other technical environments."

"AI, huh?" John asked, shaking his head. As he warmed up Nate's bottle, he looked to Steve and said, "Claudia would've loved this."

"Or she would've started calling him 'HAL 9000'," Steve pointed out.

"Those aren't mutually exclusive," John said, with a smile.

"HAL 9000 is an idiot," JARVIS seethed, which set John laughing as he took both baby and bottle out to the lounge.

"What about Skynet?" was the last thing Steve heard John asking, before John's voice was subsumed by the Shrek movie Cooper was watching.

"Hey, JARVIS?" Steve asked, as he started to realize just how much he would have to cook. "Can you asked Bruce to come up here and help me, when he's done with whatever he's doing right now? I'm going to need some help with this."

Bruce came up about ten minutes later. Within another ten minutes, they'd drafted Stiles and Nat into the operation, too. There were a dozen adults and four kids. But one of those kids was a teenager; Bruce, Pepper, and Steve needed a tremendous amount of food to keep up with their metabolic needs; and the sheer amount of energy they used in a day meant even Tony, Nat, and Clint ate more than most adults. They were cooking for at least the equivalent of two dozen people.

They had to roast two chickens, make double-batches of most of the dishes, and a triple batch of the soup, but they managed.

Getting everyone seated was a pleasantly chaotic process. Betty herded Tony, Jane, and Laura up from Tony's lab, the three of them muttering at each other in words that sounded like they were supposed to be English. Laura, John, and Clint corralled the kids, while everyone else either set the table or carried the food out.

The table was actually two, pushed together. Bruce made sure to take the seat by the high-chair to be able to feed the baby. Otherwise, everyone basically sat down at random, passing plates and pitchers around as they dug in.
Steve already knew that tomorrow's fancy banquet would pale in comparison to this.

Walters became Jennifer, as it turned out she was a defense attorney. Her conversation devolved into a cheerful argument with John, who she sat across from. Despite a defense attorney and a police officer facing off with each other, it never got too serious. Most likely, according to Bruce, because Jennifer's father had also been a California sheriff.

Sitting by John, Steve just tried to stay out of firing range when he and Jennifer started gesturing with their cutlery.

Bruce divided his attention between his own dinner and feeding Nate, freeing up Clint and Laura to focus on their own plates and their older kids. Jane and Tony had either shelved or settled their earlier discussion. Jane was now explaining something technical sounding to Stiles, while Tony bickered with Betty and Laura about some smart-crops project he was working on.

Chatter, clinking plates, and the sounds of eating filled the room, despite the fact the table(s) took up only a small part of the lounge.

Without either the Depression or war rationing and with much more people, the food on the table now was both bigger and better than in his day - yet somehow, Steve found himself thrown back decades to supper with the Barnes. He remembered the gentle clamor of Bucky and his sisters setting their meager table as Steve and Mrs. Barnes finished cooking.

His heart ached with the reminder, as it always would.

Surrounded by so many friends and something approaching family, he found he didn't mind.

And he wasn't the only one.

Beside him, Pepper tapped at her phone. "JARVIS," she murmured into it. "Can you get some pictures of this from your security feed?"

A few moments later, she opened several photos from her e-mail, all of them a high-angle shot of the dinner table. Steve glanced up to where the camera must have been, then focused down on the pictures on her screen.

"This one," Pepper finally declared, and Steve nodded along, agreeing with her choice. It was a moment when most of the table was looking at John and Jennifer during their evidence scrutiny debate. Their eyes were bright with passion, but they were also smiling. Bruce was feeding Nate, good-humored about all the food landing on him and the baby instead of getting into the baby's mouth, and about Clint's failure to clean them up. Darcy was attempting to explain the argument to Cooper and Lila. Laura and Betty were shaking their heads ruefully at whatever she was saying. Pepper's face was in her palm, but she was laughing more than anything else. Nat was explaining the details of modern criminal investigations to Steve. Stiles was staring rapt at some diagram Jane had started drawing on a napkin. Tony was looking out over it all with a sly but contented look on his face.

"It's a good one," Steve agreed. "Send it to me?"

"Done," Pepper declared, tapping away at the screen. "JARVIS, can you arrange for a large print of this?"

Rather than answering, her browser opened up to a website displaying picture framing options.

"Get something that complements the color scheme of the photo," John suggested from Pepper's
other side, having seen what they were doing.

"You know anything about framing?" Steve asked, raising an eyebrow.

John snorted. "You could say that. I spent two weeks looking for a frame that would match a speeding ticket."

"A speeding ticket?" Pepper asked.

John launched into the story of how he first met Claudia. After a moment's musing, Pepper closed the page on her phone, and set it aside to listen.

~*~

The next day, Steve relearned New York through the eyes of tourists.

In the morning, Steve, John, and Stiles got pastries for breakfast at a famous bakery in Time Square. Stiles took a million and one pictures of himself, his father, and Steve - in various permutations - in the Square.

The original plan had been to take a car to minimize the likelihood of someone getting a picture of the three of them. Steve had even picked out Tony's least flashy car - a Lexus - for this. But between the parking hell that was Battery Park, and the weekday morning FDR traffic that would make even Californians cry, Steve left the car parked on 34th. Instead, they all donned ball-caps and just took the 1 down to the ferry station.

It turned out Stiles had never actually been on a subway, before. According to him, it was a common affliction of California.

"Though not so much in NorCal," Stiles said, as they bought their tickets. "So I'm still an anomaly. But not much of one, coming from the suburbs."

Still, it was a small adventure for the Stilinskis, as was the ferry ride itself to Liberty Island. There, they learned about how the Stilinskis, the Rogers, and the Barneses first entered America. Steve rehashed the stories his ma, Grandpa Ian, and Mrs. Barnes had told him about coming through the immigration center. Even John had one or two stories from his own parents to share.

It was strange, visiting a museum about a place that had been a part of Steve's living memory. He'd never been here, himself, but seeing his mother's experiences immortalized made him feel so old and so young at the same time.

He wondered how Stiles felt about it, or John for that matter.

After a while, they made their way out and back to the car, about half a dozen blocks from Time Square. It took a while, but Steve got them to Little Italy, where he took them to Lombari's.

"One of the few places in this city older than me," Steve declared while parking.

Steve had only been here a couple times back in his day, most notably on one of Bucky's double-dates. As usual, Steve's date had lost interest and they never heard from her again. Bucky and Dolores ended up sticking together for quite a while, though.

"I hated her, honestly," Steve admitted to John and Stiles while they were eating their pizza. "I never told Bucky. But when he told me she dumped him, I blurted out, 'Oh, thank god' and he looked so offended and so unsurprised at the same time." Stiles and John both burst out laughing, Stiles almost
choking on a pepperoni.

They spent some time wandering around Steve's old neighborhood. Vinegar Hill looked nothing like he remembered it save for the occasional, ancient storefront. Still, he pointed out weird places from memory and told stories about himself, Bucky, Rebecca, and their family and friends. The Stilinskis shook their heads sympathetically at Steve’s story of trying to track down his old church, Stiles laughed himself to pieces at the story of his and Bucky's 'recon' mission to figure out who Rebecca was sneaking out to see, and John rolled his eyes at all the fights Steve got himself into - and Bucky got him out of.

Steve told those stories around a growing lump in his throat, knowing everyone was dead and the streets he knew were gone. But being able to make Stiles laugh or tease out that rueful, amused look from John made the ache worth it. Steve wanted someone to know these stories, and however much it hurt, he wanted to tell them.

He tried not to remember when he did the same thing the last time he was in his real body, riding to Rebirth with Peggy.

After, they went to the Brooklyn Bridge Park. They got some fancy, overpriced lemonades from one of the shops by the promenade, then made their way to the actual park area. Steve and John strolled sedately behind Stiles, who ran around poking his nose into everything.

Steve always kept a pen on him. By the actual bridge, he drew his memory of the docks and warehouses - one of which Bucky even worked at - on the back of the lemonade receipt. Stiles took a picture of it to text to Scott, before John pocketed it for safekeeping.

Just a bit before rush hour would hit, they made their way back to the car.

From there, Steve entered in the address Tony gave him, and it took them about an hour to get to a small, brick building by 23rd and 8th. There was one, large window in the front with Leos Tailoring etched in faded letters on it, but it was one-way glass, as all Steve saw was his reflection. There was a tiny parking lot behind it, full of several cars from Tony's garage, but nothing and no one else.

Walking inside the actual store, Steve was hit with the faint, artificial scent of lavender. It turned out that everyone had gotten there before them. The chatter was a little muffled, sound being absorbed by the hundreds of fabrics draped on racks all throughout the storefront. The one-way glass dimmed the sunlight from the window, so there were some old-fashioned lamps in the back.

Tony stumbled out of some kind of back room, already dressed in a form-fitting tuxedo with a red, silk shirt. Bruce was wearing a somewhat more conservative tuxedo, with a purple shirt instead. Clint was fussing with some service ribbons on his service dress jacket, but otherwise was also fully dressed in his old Army uniform.

Nat wore an elegant black gown with red accents that looked like her hour-glass icon out of the corner of your eye before you actually looked at her. When you did, the dress - and the accents - hugged her curves dangerously. Jennifer's gown was something purple and white, Laura's was just purple, and Darcy's was a dark green. The red of Pepper's gown matched Tony's shirt.

Cooper was in a little suit, too, looking distinctly unhappy about it. Lila, however, loved her blue dress, and was twirling around in it while Laura took a picture. Even baby Nate was in a tiny tux.

To Steve's surprise, though, Jane was also there. It was clearly a last-minute decision, as the off-white dress she wore did not fit her form as well as the other ladies' gowns. It still looked nice enough, and the elaborate style Darcy was currently putting her hair up in would more than make up
"Finally!" Tony cried out, spotting them. "We were about to call you." He turned around to poke his head back into the doorway he just came out of. "Leo! Mikey! They're here!"

After a moment, an old man in surprisingly ill-fitting clothes came bustling out. He was followed by a young man, around Stiles' age or even a little younger, and much more fashionably dressed. Both were carrying familiar suit protectors.

"Captain Rogers," the old man greeted, handing him his suit. "It's an honor to meet you." He held out his hand. "Leo Zelinsky."

"Nice to meet you," Steve said, shaking the man's. Beside them, the teenager also handed a suit protector to John. "Thank you for letting us commandeer your store."

The old man smiled. "No worries, Captain." He pointed to one of three little doors off to the side, just off the backroom he'd come out of.

Steve and John each took a dressing room to get changed into their old service uniforms.

His old dressed uniform had, along with many other effects of his, gotten donated to a museum. Unlike many of the other museums, though, this one had no problems just giving it back to Steve. They asked only that he sit down with the historians a few times for interviews. Compared to the legal hassle some of the others were putting up, this had been almost a bargain.

He had a few more ribbons now than before, given a number of posthumous medals he'd been awarded after he died. Otherwise, the process was the same. He remembered the routine from all the times he had to go to an event to gladhandle for war-funding, for meetings with generals and the brass, and for press events with politicians.

It was an oddly soothing routine, even as it brought up so many irritating memories. He was almost blindsided as he looked into the mirror. In the ill-lit changing room and wearing the dress mess from his war, for just a brief moment, he could pretend he was back in his time.

But that moment wasn't long. He gathered up his street clothes and the suit protector, and stepped out of the changing room.

Nat wolf-whistled, which of course drew everyone's attention.

"Looking spiffy!" Tony called out.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Thanks," he said, and looked over to the corner where Stiles was on a stool in front of a triad of mirrors.

It turned out that Stiles had told Tony that everyone told him "plaid can't be sexy", which Tony then told Mr. Zelinsky as a challenge. The tailor more than lived up to it, because Stiles' suit was designer, gray plaid, with a maroon shirt underneath. Leo was fussing about with something on Stiles' pants leg, but otherwise, his suit was done and ready to go. Mikey was standing in front of Stiles, adjusting his shirt and murmuring to him.

"He'll sprout a few inches over the next couple years," Tony said, crossing his arms proudly. "But with another trip to the tailor for alterations, he can wear this baby to prom."

"Can the suit last that long?" Steve asked. He then wanted to hit himself when he remembered how old his current outfit was.
"Hey," Clint said, still fussing with the ribbons on his jacket. "It's working for me, it can work for him."

"Yeah, except he already looks better than you and he's not even done with puberty," Tony said. Clint turned his back to where the kids were posing for Laura, and flipped him off.

The other changing room door opened, and John came out, also in his dress mess. He had also gotten a minor alteration, yesterday. Despite his griping about how out of shape he was now compared to his army days, the uniform still fit him perfectly.

"Looking good," Steve said. Mikey left Stiles to take their suit protectors and street-clothes, taking a set of keys from Tony and going out back.

"Thanks," John said. "You too." He looked between himself, Clint, and Steve, and said, "Thank god we all got out before 2010."

"What happened in 2010?" Steve asked, frowning in confusion.

"You don't wanna know," Clint grumbled, so of course, John told him. There had been an overhaul in the Army's dress uniform in 2010, and neither of them liked it. After Tony pulled up some pictures of the new Class A's on his phone, Steve could see why.

Leo finally declared Stiles' suit a perfect fit and let him step off the little stand.

Spreading his arms wide for his father, he asked, "How do I look?"

John nodded, impressed. "Good. I didn't even know that was possible with plaid."

As Stiles protested this assassination of the value of plaid, John herded him outside. The ladies were going to take a few minutes to put on some last-minute touches, so the guys headed out. Mikey just finished packing up the protectors and spare clothes in one of the cars.

Tossing the keys back to Tony, he headed back into the shop, pausing to smile at Stiles - and only at Stiles.

Stiles blushed, and Steve fought the urge to grin as Mikey disappeared back into the shop.

Luckily for Stiles, no one else had noticed the little moment, too busy working out the logistics of who was going in what car to the banquet.

Of course, it didn't take them long to work it out. Clint was the only one brave enough to go back inside and see what was holding up the girls. John and Bruce chatted about some movie coming out soon, while Tony and Cooper argued about dinosaurs. Stiles leaned back against Tony's car, looking pensive about something.

The setting sun and the back lot provided the perfect lighting. Steve had no doubt that Stiles would later want a picture of himself in the suit - if only to use as evidence against the naysayers of plaid. So he pulled out his phone and took a picture, which drew Stiles' attention.

"You really do look good," Steve promised, pulling up his messages to text Stiles the picture. "You can send the picture to anyone else who tries to assassinate the value of plaid."

Stiles snorted. "It's mostly Lydia."

"Then she'll eat her words," Steve promised, as he sent the picture.
Soon after, everyone else came back out of the shop, Leo waving from the doorway. Steve wondered how much Tony was paying him as everyone got into the right cars. Darcy was going with Jennifer, the pre-law student taking a shine to the lawyer, and they were taking Jane and Bruce with them. The Bartons were all going in another car. Tony and Pepper got into the fancy car - which only seated two, anyway - while Steve, John, and Stiles climbed back into the Lexus.

In the back, Stiles jittered in his seat the entire way to the community center hosting the banquet.

"Even Seder was never this formal," he said, plucking at the buttons of his suit until John reached back to swat his hands away from them. "I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Neither will most of the other people there," Steve soothed.

"I still don't even know why we're going," Stiles continued.

"Equal parts bribe and distraction," Steve answered, checking the map on John's phone and making a turn.

"Bribe?" Stiles asked, confused.

"Like we said, yesterday, no one knows we're coming," Steve said. "The idea is that we're a random appearance. The hope is that next time there's a charity dinner, people will invest whether we're listed as guests or not, in the hope of meeting us."

"But what if you don't show?" Stiles asked.

"Well," Steve said with a smirk. "No one is going to rescind a donation just because we didn't appear, especially at an event we never said we'd go to in the first place. That would be-" He pulled one hand off the steering wheel to make airquotes. "'Bad optics'."

Stiles laughed, John snorted, and Steve pulled into the parking lot two blocks away from the center. There, Happy was waiting with a limo that everyone crammed themselves into. They took an elaborate route to get to some side-entrance to the community center.

Despite the publicity aspect and the charity, the dinner wasn't a red-carpet event. The sheer number of first responders, family members, and other people who don't want their pictures splashed all over the gossip rags meant there was a side entrance that the majority of guests were actually coming through. Only the celebrities - and the occasional guest trying to become a celebrity - took the front entrance. Both Stilinskis breathed a sigh of relief upon finding out they wouldn't be subjected to the media blitz.

Steve found himself jealous of them. Laura, Cooper, Lila, John, Stiles, Betty, Jennifer, Darcy, and even Pepper went through the side entrance.

The Avengers waited five minutes, then let their car pull up to the front.

There weren't many paparazzi up front, less than a dozen photographers and two or three local reporters. Yet a blinding wall of light greeted them as they climbed out of the car.

A barrage of gasps of their names - actual names and field names - rained down on them as they gathered in front of the cameras. As per Tony's instructions, they made sure to shake hands with the few celebrities who'd come despite the limited publicity. Steve, for once, didn't have to do much of the talking. Hell, he never did when Tony was around, and for the most part, Tony seemed fine with that.
They spent a solid fifteen minutes letting every patron and photographer get their shot. But in the end, Tony managed to herd everyone inside, intent to get on to the important part of the evening.

Or maybe he just noticed the tension around Bruce's eyes. Who knew.

Inside, they spared a moment to regroup themselves in the lobby, before heading out into the main dining area.

Of course, they immediately got swallowed up by the crowd.

Over the next half-hour, Steve shook so many hands he lost count and thought his wrist might fall off. Several people - mostly kids - took selfies with him, he signed an autograph or two on some napkins, and someone burst into tears upon seeing him because Steve had saved his daughter's life in the Battle.

He expressed a few congratulations and a lot of condolences to survivors, shared sympathies for the dead, and hid his sigh of relief when the announcer invited everyone to start looking for their seats, as dinner would be starting soon.

Steve didn't quite find his seat so much as find John, and the two of them waved Stiles over.

Their table turned out to be one of the police tables. Steve knew even before everyone introduced themselves during the few minutes before the speech. It was hard to miss that half the people sitting down were in police dress uniforms. John introduced himself as Sheriff Stilinski.

"I'm not NYPD," John clarified, as everyone started chatting about their positions on the force, or which cop they were here in honor of. "And I wasn't at the Battle, I just happen to be a cop."

"Probably why we got seated here," Steve said. As if he didn't know that was exactly why Tony had seated them here.

"Wait," asked the young police officer in front of them, an Officer Mahoney. "Why are you here, then?"

"They're my guests," Steve explained. "I needed some plus-ones. Since John's a first responder and he and his son were in town, anyway, I invited them."

Because Steve didn't want to be here alone.

"How do ya'll know each other, then?" asked Mrs. Mahoney, Officer Mahoney's mother. She smelled faintly of cigars, but she wore an elegant gold dress that complemented her dark skin perfectly.

"I'm the last living descendant of the Barnes family," Stiles answered. They'd decided technical honesty was the best option. After all, none of these people had to know that Stiles and John were Steve's family, that Stiles was Steve's adoptive nephew and that they traveled across the country just to spend time with each other. "Sergeant Bucky Barnes was my grandma's brother. No one would care much about a random war hero's distant relatives, even if that war hero had once been the 'sidekick' of Captain America. "We were in town - well, D.C. Since Steve needed some guests for this dinner, we figured we'd come here, too. But we're from California."

From down the table, a Sergeant Knight raised her eyebrow. "What are you doing all the way out here?"

Stiles grinned. "The Smithsonian is making a new exhibit, soon, and they asked for a bunch of
Bucky's stuff my family saved. A funeral flag, some medals, some hats, a comic book..."

The table got drawn into Stiles' story about finding the various artifacts in his attic, what they all meant, and how they ended up with the Smithsonian. That expanded into conversation about museums in general, with lots of speculation about what various museums would do or were already doing about the Battle of New York.

Before they knew it, the grand hall was dimming, the people were quieting, and Tony was standing on the well-lit stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, voice pitched not in his usual tone, but his showman's voice. "Thank you all so much for being here, tonight. As those of you who attend a lot of these shindigs have probably noticed by now, there is a dearth of the usual wealthy and generous. That's because their generosity is contingent on the publicity it brings them."

His voice lowered in faint, calculated anger, with a faint echo of grumbles throughout the hall at Tony's implication.

"Tonight's dinner is not about the dead, but the living - the heroes who survived to tell us the stories of their fallen brothers and sisters," Tony said. "But unfortunately, honoring the living is not as cool as honoring the dead. With seemingly no Avenger involvement and this thing having to take place during the slowest time in the week to let as many first responders as possible actually attend this dinner?" Tony shook his head to wonderful effect. "Many never even got back to me when I called out to them to 'go'. Forget anyone contacting me in the first place to ask for a ticket in."

More grumbling from the crowd, even some slight boo-ing.

"Well, joke's on them," Tony said, voice shifting from subtle anger to uplifting. "Because everyone here knows a thing or two about survival, about coming home even when our friends and family didn't." Then his expression fell - but not too much. The calculations of his half-smile belied the sincerity in his eyes. "I know a thing or two about survivor's guilt, as do most of you here, tonight. We all know what it is like to wonder, what could I have done, so they could be here today? What could I have done different, done better?"

Steve swallowed. He heard this speech half a dozen times when Tony had been bouncing ideas around with him over Skype, but somehow, it still got him.

Maybe because he knew Tony meant it.

"I'm not going to say there is nothing possible we could've done, because in any situation, the possibilities are endless," Tony answered. "But I wholeheartedly believe that every one of you listening to me right now did the best you could. You helped all you could, supported all you could, and loved all you could. At the end of the day, that's what counts."

Tony took a deep breath, almost squaring his shoulders but not quite. He was a balance of determination and honesty, of affection and pain.

"When someone sacrifices their life for you, it is easy to become angry at them for leaving you, and for leaving you with this grief," Tony said. "It becomes very easy to resent them for doing this, and to wish that it had been you in their place." Here, he glanced to the side - right at Steve - but otherwise kept his focus on the crowd at large, and Steve doubted anyone noticed it. "But a wise woman once told me that when someone gives their life for something they believe in - their country, their family, or just the guy standing right beside them - our duty is to respect the dignity of their choice."
Steve gasped, and he could see Stiles, as well as half his table, glance at him. They all looked right back at Tony, save for Stiles. He reached out to Steve's hand, giving it a solid squeeze as Tony kept speaking.

"It hurts," Tony said. "And the reality is, that hurt will never completely go away. We will carry it around with us forever. But they didn't die for us to spend the rest of our lives in grief, in pain, and in anger. They gave their lives that we may spend ours with happiness, with growth, and with the same love that makes their deaths so painful."

A pause, and Steve squeezed Stiles' hand back.

"It is our duty to respect the dignity of their choice," Tony repeated it. "And it is our obligation to do exactly what they wished of us - to spread joy, to grow, and to share our love as far and wide as we can."

Tony spread his arms wide, as if embracing his entire audience.

"Ladies and gentlemen, friends and families of the fallen, and survivors of the Battle of New York," Tony invited. "That is what we are here for, tonight - to carry out that duty and live up to those obligations, and to do so with compassion, with honor, and with pride."

Here, he gently lowered his arms. "And anyone who thinks that's not cool enough to come for, just because there won't be enough pictures to show for it?" He smirked. "Sucks to be them."

With a light ring of laughter, the entire community center burst out with applause. Tony dipped his head in respectful gratitude to them for listening - without the ostentation of a bow - and stepped off the stage.

The director of the dinner came up to go over the dinner and program of events - which really was the program of speeches.

As Tony made his way over to the table, he looked over at Steve, face still plastered in perfect beneficence but eyes and shoulders tense.

Steve smiled, and tipped his head in gratitude. Tony's entire body relaxed with relief, and he grinned, before taking his seat next to Pepper at their table near the front.

The chatter started to resume as waiters started pouring out of the side doors, all bearing elegant covered plates of food.

Releasing Steve's hand, Stiles leaned in and tilted his head between Steve and where Tony and Pepper sat. "What was all that about?"

"It was about something he said in the speech," Steve answered.

"What about the speech?" Mrs. Mahoney asked.

Steve took a deep breath.

"When...when my best friend Bucky died in the war," Steve said. "I was - to be quite honest, I was pissed at him. It was supposed to be me that took the risks, not him, because I could survive them. I was the one who'd led him into danger - especially well past the point he had to be out there - and so I was the one who got him killed. He would follow me to the end of the world, and I led him to the end of his."
Stiles seemed almost frozen in his seat, rapt and sympathetic in equal measures.

Gesturing to his own body, Steve continued. "One of the side-effects of this is that I can't get drunk, but I sure as hell tried. There was this bombed out bar I planted myself in, and drained two bottles of scotch in about five minutes. Barely made a dent."

Steve took a deep breath. For a moment, he could smell the ashen wood and faint, distant mold of the bombed out pub. He could hear the chair and table creak as they almost crumbled.

"Peggy Carter found me there," Steve said. "And among other things, she told me to respect the dignity of his choice. That Bucky cared enough about me that he would give his life for me. That he made a choice to follow me as much as I made every choice that led us to such a perilous situation in the first place." He shrugged. "No surprise she told Tony about it, and..." He took a deep breath. "All of us Avengers wonder, every day, how we could have saved more lives than we did."

"You saved as many as you could, Captain Rogers," Sergeant Knight said. "We'd all be dead if it weren't for you guys."

"I know that up here," Steve said, tapping his head. Then he tapped his heart. "It's down here that'll take a while to catch on - if it ever does at all."

"Probably won't," said Captain Stacy, the police captain of the 19th precinct. "I still wonder about lives I could've saved twenty years ago, forget last year."

From there, conversation shifted, older cops talking about hard and regret-filled days on the job, younger ones wanting to know more. Steve shared some more rough stories of his own, situations where his decisions had gotten people hurt and killed...including the Battle of New York.

They were hard stories to tell, the hardest.

But judging by the look on Stiles' face, and most of the younger half of the table, these were stories that needed to be told, and that they needed to hear.

~*~

The banquet was a success.

The single pair of approved photographers did what they were supposed to and kept their lenses on the event as a whole, not focusing on the Avengers or any individuals seated at the tables. Everyone talked almost non-stop throughout the dinner, and while there were some tears, there was even more laughter. John even exchanged phone numbers with Captain Stacy. Stiles spent half the dinner chatting with Sergeant Knight's girlfriend, while Steve's conversations meandered around the table.

Dinner and dessert weren't as great as what the Avengers had in the tower last night, but they were still good.

There was a socializing hour - which was really a cocktail hour with lots of non-cocktail drinks available, due to how many guests brought their families with them. Steve talked with firefighters and paramedics and National Guardsmen who'd been in the Battle or helped after it.

While there were not nearly as many celebrities and politicians as most of these charity banquets had, there were still a few. Steve shook each one's hand, and posed for selfies with most of the younger half of them.

He hugged over a dozen children of first responders who'd died in the battle, telling each and every
one of them that their parents were the *real* heroes of New York.

Pepper's closing speech was as good as Tony's, and it took almost half an hour for their group to make their way outside. First Laura and Jennifer took Cooper, Lila, and Nate out the side exit. Next, Betty led an exhausted and half-asleep Jane out. Finally, John herded Stiles and Darcy out.

Pepper and the Avengers took the same, publicized entrance as before, politely dodging the cameras until Happy pulled up with the limo. First Pepper went in, not giving any of the cameras an opportunity to peek in, then the rest of the Avengers climbed in, as well.

"Wow," Stiles said, looking out the one-way windows at the photographers. "This is *light* press for you guys?"

Tony snorted. "Yup - and believe it or not, there's even more now than there were when we first got here." He smirked. "Normally, there wouldn't even be half as many left by the end as there were at the beginning. But the others must've heard *we* were here."

"And there will be even more press for future charity dinners organized by us," Pepper added, looking out the same window as Stiles but with a far more gleeful look in her eye. "Because now, the possibility that we'll be there even if we don't advertise it will never leave anyone's minds."

The original plan had been for the limo to just take them to where the cars were parked. But with Jane, Bruce, Cooper, and Lila falling asleep in their seats - and Nate already asleep - Tony just told Happy to take them straight home, instead.

"I'll come back and get the cars tomorrow," Happy reassured everyone as he took them to the tower. Jennifer frowned. "Aren't you the Head of Security for Stark Industries, now?"

"Yup," Happy answered. "Which is why I'm the only one Tony trusts to do or take care of these things."

They got back to the tower in record time. In the garage, Darcy told everyone to lean in a selfie with the whole limo's occupants behind her. Tony pestered Happy to come to the back for the picture, too. As everyone poured out of the car after, he asked Darcy to send it to him.

"I need to send this to Rhodey so he knows what he's missing out on," Tony proclaimed.

"That seems mean," Jane said, as Darcy started tapping away at her phone-screen.

"That's what he gets for ditching me!" Tony cried out indignantly.

Pepper rolled her eyes. "He's not 'ditching' you just because he's not flying here from Kuwait for a dinner."

Tony stuck his tongue out at her. Most of the others crowded around Darcy, demanding to see the picture. Steve made a mental note to ask one of them to send it to him, too - he wanted a good reference picture to draw the moment.

As everyone was distracted while waiting for the elevators, Steve leaned in to Tony and murmured, "Are we doing the meeting tonight?"

Tony shook his head. "Half of us are exhausted and all of us are in a good mood. Let's not ruin it," he answered quietly. "Tomorrow morning, I'll have JARVIS wake you up early if you're not already up by then."
Steve nodded, and drew away to also try to get in a good look at Darcy's picture.

On their floor, John bid both Steve and Stiles a good night and headed straight to his bedroom, yawning and already tugging off his jacket.

Stiles paused in front of his doorway, though.

"Hey, Steve?" he called. Steve turned around from where he'd been about to his own room.

"Yeah?" he asked.

Stiles swallowed. "You said that Director - uh, Agent - Carter told you to respect Bucky's choice, right?"

Steve nodded.

"Well, my dad can tell you how stubborn I am, I remember how much my mom was, and they've both told me what my grandma was like. Called it a family trait." Here, Stiles smiled. "And if Bucky was even half as stubborn as the rest of us were, you never stood a chance of leaving him behind."

Steve blinked, nonplussed.

"I just wanted you to know that," Stiles said, with an awkward shrug. "Good night."

"Good night," Steve responded hollowly. As Stiles slipped into his room, Steve stared after him. Irrationally, he couldn't help but think, *Bucky you goddamned jerk*, half-convinced Bucky was speaking to him from beyond the grave, through Stiles.

He continued mentally grumbling at Bucky as he went into his room, changed for the night, and went to bed.

He had one of the soundest nights of sleep since waking up in the 21st century.

~*~

Steve grumbled into his pillow when his phone's gently loud and insistent chiming woke him up. Then he blinked in surprise to realize that he was waking up to an alarm, not a nightmare or simple sleeplessness.

It was a novelty to have to be woken up instead of jolting out of bed on his own.

He pushed himself out of bed and tapped at the phone to switch off the alarm.

"Good morning, Captain Rogers," JARVIS said.

"Morning," Steve yawned out, swinging his feet out of bed. He took a moment to squeeze the plush carpet between his toes, and stood up. "The team up in the lounge yet?"

"They are assembling," JARVIS answered.

"And John and Stiles?" Steve asked. "I'd rather not run into them just yet."

"Sheriff Stilinski is asleep in his room. Young Mr. Stilinski is awake, but also in his room."

Steve paused before the bathroom door, surprised. "He's up already?" he asked. "Huh. Teenagers
usually have to be pried out of bed with a crowbar before noon." He snorted. "Hell, most of the
Barnes family needed that even as adults."

"He woke up several hours ago," JARVIS answered.

Steve frowned, trying to understand, before realizing. "He had a nightmare?"

"I cannot comment," JARVIS answered, which basically confirmed it. The AI was ever protective of
people's privacy - moreso than his creator, for sure - but he had his own way of letting people know
what they needed to.

Steve sighed, thumping his forehead against the edge of the door. "He was paralyzed, recently, and
had to listen to someone die. For a kid with no real exposure to death or violence, that's...pretty
traumatizing."

"I believe he has his mental state in practiced hands," JARVIS said, which confused Steve. "He is
currently focused on his laptop and enjoying the view of the sunrise from his room. You will not run
into him."

Steve took his word for it.

He sped through a soldier's ablutions, but didn't bother changing out of the soft pants he slept in. He
just donned a tee-shirt and headed upstairs.

In Tony's common lounge, the Avengers sat in various states of morning zombie. Thankfully, no one
else had changed out of their pajamas, either.

Clint and Nat were stretched out on one couch, Clint gulping at coffee and Nat halfway back to the
land of nod. The former was wearing boxer shorts and a faded tank-top with a hole near the hem, the
latter was clad in sweatpants and an overgrown tee-shirt. On the opposite couch, Bruce and Tony
had spread out a bunch of papers over the part of the coffee table without the coffee tray. They
seemed to be scribbling over each other's notes. Bruce wore actual pajamas - which, to Steve's
understanding, were increasingly rare in this day and age - while Tony wore a tank-top like Clint's
and sleep-pants like Steve's.

"Morning," Steve greeted, scrubbing his face as he dropped onto the couch that faced inward,
putting his back to the windows. He knew Tony had something fancy in the windows that would
turn them into giant sunglasses. But the rising sun still blinded, sometimes. "Let's get this show on
the road."

"No show," Clint whined, sitting upright and swinging his legs out of Nat's lap and onto the floor.

"Would you prefer I said debriefing?" Steve asked. "Or informational meeting?"

Nat snorted and Clint groaned.

The elevator doors chimed open, and out strolled Pepper - her sleep-clothes matching Tony's under a
silk, blue houserobe.

"Come join the pajama party," Steve called. She rolled her eyes as she plopped onto the couch next
to Tony and grabbed a mug from the tray.

"So," she said, pouring herself some coffee. "What's this I'm hearing about Fury and Phil?"

Their collective sleepy amicability dried up in an instant. This was the reason they were assembled
here this morning - and most of the real reason Tony was hosting this little Avengers reunion in the first place.

"Fury is lying," Tony said, picking up his own coffee from where it had been on top of a Post-It note with a molecular diagram of some kind on it. "What's new?"

Steve reached for the packets of fake sugar. "Clint, Phil was your friend - you want to explain this?"

Clint sighed, looking mournfully down at his coffee but setting it aside. He picked up a tablet laying in the middle of the coffee table and tapped at it a few times, before turning it around to show Pepper a picture. It was an office packed with memorabilia and random objects in little glass cases, or tacked up on the walls.

"Phil's the biggest packrat in history," Clint said, voice full of reined-in fondness. "And the biggest history buff and one of the biggest nerds you'd ever meet."

"He also liked to share his...vast knowledge," Natasha said. Her feigned irritation didn't hide the affection underneath. "A lot."

"So in his will, he donated all his crap to the SHIELD Academies," Clint said. "They all have little museums and memorials near their official entrances, and that's where this stuff was supposed to go. Each one got about a third of his stuff, for different reasons."

"Most relevant to this conversation," Tony picked up. "Were his Captain America trading cards."

"Trading cards?" Pepper asked, raising an amused eyebrow.

"Trading cards," Steve confirmed with a nod as he finished putting together his coffee. "Mint-condition."

"Even after I had to chemically wash the fake blood out of them without damaging the cards, themselves," Bruce said.

Clint got a dark look on his face at that.

"Blood?" Pepper asked, surprised enough to stop stirring her coffee.

"That's how we started to figure out Fury was lying to us," Clint said. He tilted his head to gesture at the rest of the assembled team. "They told me that after...after my attack on the Helicarrier-" Nat gave Clint a sharp look for his pronomial claim of responsibility, but he ignored her. "Fury laid out a few of Phil's trading cards on a table, and they looked like they were covered in blood."

"Clint called bullshit on that," Bruce said. "Very...vehemently."

"Phil cared about those cards too much," Clint said. "And he cared about his job even more. Unless he was on his way to get Steve to sign them, there was no way those things would've been anywhere other than his locker."

"And he wasn't," Steve continued. "I'd already promised Coulson that I'd sign them sometime after Loki and the Tesseract were taken care of."

"So Fury had taken them out of Coulson's locker and covered in fake blood to manipulate us," Nat summarized.

"Unfortunately, it worked," Tony growled.
"But those cards were a part of the collection," Clint continued. "And they were supposed to go to the Communications Academy, along with most of his WWII stuff. He said he wanted the old stuff there to remind a building full of techies that computers and technology aren't everything."

Tony snorted, but it was more for show than genuine derision.

"I went to the Academy about a month ago," Steve said. "To give a lecture about field communications back in my day. But on my way out, I swung by the museum. I wanted to take pictures of the cards to send to Stiles, but they weren't there."

"We don't check out memorial when we do demos at the Operations Academy," Nat said, gesturing between herself and Clint. "But when we heard about the cards from Steve, we bullshitted a reason to go back and checked. Nothing."

"Bruce and I finagled an invite to the Science Academy a few days ago," Tony continued. "Same deal."

"And we checked the undergrounds, too," Bruce added. "Nothing."

"Undergrounds?" Pepper asked.

"All the academies watch their cadets aggressively," Nat said.

"So all of them have developed little clubs for the students to relax and get some time away from it," Bruce said.

"Granted, that doesn't mean as much, these days," Tony said with an eyeroll. "Since half the teachers are Academy graduates themselves, everyone knows about them. But S.H.I.E.L.D generally leaves them alone."

"It's a literally underground club in the Science Academy," Bruce said. "Called the Boiler Room - long story - and I asked around. No one had heard that they were ever supposed to get anything. Some people were disappointed to hear that they missed out on some Cold War radiation scanner he had."

"At the Ops training center, it's this bar on a rock in the middle of the woods," Clint said. "Called the Tree House - also a long story - and believe me, they were pissed to find out they weren't gonna get 1950's black ops gear to play with."

"Play with?" Pepper asked. "I thought you said it was supposed to go to a museum?"

"Yeah," Clint said with maudlin amusement. "Which any cadet worth their salt will steal it from, play with, and put back before they get caught."

"Of course," Pepper said, rolling her eyes. She looked at Steve. "And the Communications Academy?"

"It's a hidden cafe in a place called the Cabinet," Steve said. "Something about it starting out life as an old filing cabinet closet or something."

"No bar?"

"Nah, they just come invade the Boiler Room," Tony said. "And everyone invades their cafe."

"No one goes to the Tree House?" Pepper asked.
Clint snorted. "Anyone is welcome if they can get there."

"And get back out," Nat added. "Great way to learn drunk mountaineering.

"And drunk security evasion," Clint continued.

"And drunk museum robbing?" Pepper asked. Nat and Clint both nodded seriously.

"Anyway," Steve said, drawing out the word syllable by syllable like Bucky and Rebecca always used to do (and which Stiles still did). "Back to the topic at hand: we couldn't find the stuff Coulson bequeathed, anywhere that he wanted it sent to."

"We kept looking," Clint added. "Me and Nat, and not only could we not find it, but Fury ordered us to cease and desist."

"And?" Bruce asked, questioning the emphasis.

"Oh, he tells us to 'cease' all the time," Nat said, a small smile on her face. No surprise. From what Steve gathered, Nat and Clint were simultaneously Fury's favorites and the bane of his existence. Steve was on his way to becoming the same thing.

"But 'desist' is reserved for sensitive things only," Clint continued. "So whatever is going on with Phil's stuff? Sensitive."

"Fury said there was some security risk in something from Phil's collection," Nat finished. "So they were holding onto the whole thing to be safe."

Her tone voiced how little she believed this.

Pepper pursed her lips.

"Funeral?" Steve asked, startled. "I was at the SHIELD memorial ceremony-"

"The funeral was for his family," she said. "It was very small and private. I only even know about it because his mother called me to ask if I knew why the casket had to remain closed. I told her that I was only told he was stabbed through the chest, so I had no idea why."

"Did Coulson have any kind of enhancements?" Steve asked. "I know my body's gonna be a piece of lab meat when I die, maybe he-"

"No," Clint said. "Phil would've told me if he was anything other than a normal human."

"Are you sure?" Bruce asked.

Clint glared, and Bruce held up a placating hand. "I'm not trying to say you're lying - but he had a job to do, and he was pretty dedicated to it."

After a tense moment, Clint looked away, worrying the mug in his hands.

"If there were anything about himself that he wasn't allowed to tell me," Clint said. "Then he would never have said 'yes' when I asked him out."

Steve stared, stunned - and he wasn't the only one. Bruce's eyebrows shot up while Tony gawped at him. Pepper and Nat, however, were not surprised at all.
Okay," Steve said slowly. "I hate to pry, Clint, but I have to ask. You and Laura-

"Got married because we wanted a family, not each other," Clint snapped. He seemed to realize his tone, and deflated. "I'd just divorced my first wife when she lost her fiance - for a given value of fiance, since this was back before even Massachusetts legalized gay marriage. We were each other's rebound. Neither of us expected it to go anywhere, but then she got pregnant and wanted to keep the baby. I wanted to be in the baby's life, and we figured we might as well get married for the convenience." He shrugged. "If either of us meet someone else, we'll just divorce. Almost did, back when Laura met someone...but then she turned out to not like kids, so Laura ended it."

"...huh," Steve said.

"What?" Clint demanded, defensive. Steve immediately released one hand from his coffee mug to hold up his hand in surrender.

"It's just something new for me," Steve dismissed. "But I'm glad to hear you weren't cheating on your wife, which is the important part."

Clint looked back down at the coffee table. "She was the one who kept pushing me to ask out Phil. She said it was revenge for me setting her up with that other woman on a 'blind' date when I got sick of them dancing around each other for so long."

Steve had a million and one questions, but most of them weren't relevant. The only one that was, he asked:

"So you know that Coulson isn't enhanced in any way?"

"Positive," Clint said. "He would've told me. Even if he hadn't, I'm pretty sure I would've noticed."

Steve took a deep breath.

"Is there anything else this could be?" Steve asked, looking around. "Because I'm one step away from storming Fury's office to demand answers. Phil cared about legacy, and I have no doubt that includes his own. We owe it to him to make sure SHIELD respects it."

"You don't need to convince us, Steve," Bruce said. "He was the least dishonest SHIELD agent I'd ever met. Didn't try to lie to me or manipulate me." He glanced at Nat, but she was unapologetic.

Bruce didn't seem to mind that, and continued. "He was honest with the fact he was keeping secrets. He made sure to tell me when he was emotionally blackmailing me." At everyone's confused look, he added. "He started telling me the life-stories of Loki's victims whenever I seemed to get...reluctant."

Clint flinched, but they all knew by now to ignore it.

"Look," Natasha said. "We have to be careful with this. If Fury's this squirrely, then he's going to throw everything he's got into covering this up, whatever it is."

"Not the first time," Tony said. "And we found out about the Tesseract weaponry within a day on the Helicarrier."

"Believe me when I say that Fury wasn't trying too hard to hide those things," Nat said. "This, with Coulson? Whatever this is, Fury's working hard to keep it hidden. We're going to have to work even harder to discover whatever it is he's hiding from us. Patience is key, at this point."

Tony scowled. "'Patience' also gives him more opportunity to make things even harder for us."
"Which is why we have to be careful," Nat said. "The best way to keep Fury from taking advantage of that opportunity is to not let him realize that he has one, right now."

"We'll keep an eye out, but under the radar," Steve said. "Now that we all have a decent idea of what to look for."

"I'll try and reach out to Phil's mother," Pepper said.

"No other family?" Steve asked, surprised.

It was Clint who shook his head. "Nope. Phil's an only child, his dad is dead, and he's not that close to his cousins. He...was never much of a family man."

That last part, Clint said with a mournful face and voice. Steve winced. Whatever Clint's relationship with Laura was, there was nothing either of them loved more in this world than their children. Even if neither of them needed a potential partner to be a parent to the kids, valuing family and children were a deal breaker, now.

Bucky had been the same way. He refused to understand why any woman would be uninterested in Steve, but he let it slide. Any woman who ever insulted Steve, though, got an instant and vehement rejection.

Those had been the only times Mrs. Barnes didn't yell at Bucky for insulting a lady. Or swearing in front of one.

"Anything else we need to know about?" Pepper asked. Everyone glanced at each other, then shook their heads. "In that case, JARVIS, is anyone else awake? Tell them to come on up."

"I will alert Young Mr. Stilinski," JARVIS said.

"Tell him there's coffee, he'll come running," Steve said. "He needs it."

"Of course, Captain," JARVIS answered with amusement.

"Why's he gonna need it?" Tony asked, as if he weren't on his third cup. "He's on vacation." With an eyeroll, Pepper took the empty coffee pot to the hidden kitchen.

"I'm pretty sure he's been having nightmares," Steve answered. He pursed his lips. "He was...there, when one of the serial killer's victims died. He was paralyzed and had to hear them die."

The Avengers collectively winced, and Pepper looked sympathetic as she set down a new coffee pot and reclaimed her seat.

"Wait," Tony said, sitting up. "I thought Argent was killed?"

Steve nodded. "There's another one in town."

"A copy-cat?" Nat asked. Across the table, Tony was showing Pepper something on the tablet - most likely a news article about the crazy arsonist.

"That's what John thinks, though this new one's method of killing is different." He shrugged. "Then again, Argent had used two different M.O.'s during her two different killing sprees, so who knows what's going on."

"Jesus," Bruce said, shaking his head. "Two serial killers in one town, in less than half a year?"
"Was the arson only Argent?" Nat speculated. "Maybe she had an accomplice. Some serial killers do."

"Also one of John's current theories," Steve said.

Before anyone could speculate any further, the elevators chimed open and a half-asleep teenager stumbled out. He was still in a tee-shirt and plain sleep-pants, so either JARVIS told him no one else had changed, or Stiles was getting comfortable around the Avengers.

"I was told there's coffee?" he asked. "And, um, good morning everyone?"

"Over here, rugrat," Tony called out, pointing to the seat by Steve. "Grab a mug from the kitchen."

Stiles brought two mugs. He plopped onto the couch by Steve and started putting together his coffee, saying, "My dad'll probably be up in a few minutes."

"We're gonna need a lot of coffee," Tony said, pouring himself another mug of it after Stiles did.

Bruce rolled his eyes and looked at Stiles. His face and voice were gentle as he asked, "How's Lydia?"

Stiles paused.

"She's getting by," Stiles said. He raised an eyebrow at Nat trying to wrestle Clint away from the coffee, and nudged the pot closer to them. "She still has, um, moments. But she's doing better. It helps that she has to help Allison a lot, right now, so it's something to focus on."

"Help who with what?" Bruce asked, slightly confused.

"Um, you know the Arson Argent?" Stiles asked. Bruce - and everyone else - nodded. "Well, Allison - Scott's girlfriend, and Lydia's best friend - was her niece. The whole school hates Allison right now - half of them think she's the new serial killer. So Lydia's got her hands full slapping people down for giving Allison shit over her aunt."

"That's good," Bruce said. "Helping others is always a good way to help yourself."

Steve supposed Bruce would know - the man was a nearly-pro-bono doctor in under-developed countries for people who had no other access to medical care.

Stiles nodded. "Well, Allison needs all the help she can get." He looked at Tony. "Um, actually - this is really awkward, but she's a big fan of yours, so I was hoping maybe you could autograph something for her? Dr. Banner's thing really helped Lydia, so maybe for Allison..." He trailed off at the big smile on Tony's face.

"I've got the perfect thing," Tony said. He turned to Clint. "You mind waiting another week or two on the bow?"

"Uh, sure?" Clint asked.

Tony looked back at Stiles. "I've got a new collapsing bow in the wings. Meant it for Birdbrain, here, but he asked for a bunch of customizations, enough that I was considering making a new one from scratch. Might as well just do it and give the original to Allison."

Stiles was grinning by the end of it. "Really?"

"Really," Tony said, with a beneficent nod.
Clint snorted. "You'll have to lighten up the draw-weight, though," he advised. "Most field operatives can't match my arm strength, let alone a teenage girl."

"Easy," Tony dismissed.

"I'm texting Scott about this," Stiles said. He actually reached for his hip before realizing he had neither pockets nor his phone. "When I can, anyway. We can surprise her with this."

"Surprise who with what?"

Everyone turned to the stairwell entry where the voice had come from. Jennifer stood, holding up a phone like she was taking a picture. Behind her, John stood with his arms crossed, an approving look on his face. Both were still in their sleep clothes, which confirmed for Steve that JARVIS was telling everyone breakfast was a pajama party.

"Sorry," Jennifer added. "But you guys looked cute and the lighting is fantastic, right now, so I thought I'd capture the moment." Her smiled turned sly as she used the phone to point at Bruce. "That way I can send it to this asshole next time I need to kick him off his man-pain high-horse."

Bruce grimaced while everyone else laughed.

"Can you send me the picture?" Pepper asked. Tilting her head towards Tony, she said, "I might need to do the same thing with this one."

"And me," John added, walking over to the couches when Stiles waved an empty mug at him. "I just like the picture."

After Jennifer grabbed a mug from the kitchen, Bruce explained, "A friend of Stiles' is getting bullied a lot at school. She's an archer, but a big fan of Iron Man, so Tony's going to send a bow for Scott - her boyfriend - and Stiles to surprise her with."

"Allison?" John asked, dropping onto the couch by Stiles. Stiles, Bruce, and Tony all nodded. "Huh, that's nice." Then he frowned. "Wait - boyfriend?"

Stiles' eyes widened, then he winced, while everyone else raised an eyebrow, smirked, or otherwise looked bemused.

"...was this supposed to be a secret?" Bruce asked.

Stiles looked sidelong at his father. "Um-

"Given that her parents don't approve of her dating and told her to end it with Scott," John said, turning to glare at Stiles. "Yes."

Steve blinked, then looked at Nat, who looked far too innocent to actually be innocent.

Everyone else caught on, also looking between Stiles and Nat.

"It's not that they don't approve of her dating," Nat said finally. "It's that they don't approve of her dating Scott."

"What?" John asked, surprised. "Why in the hell not? He's a good kid."

"Yeah, but he's, uh-" Stiles frowned. "Not of the right demographic for the Argents' tastes."

John's expression darkened. "Racism?"
"Something like that, yeah," Stiles said, studiously looking down into his mug.

Steve knew that expression.

He remembered that expression. He remembered Bucky making that face whenever anyone called Steve a 'white nigger', or whenever someone made an anti-Semitic joke before they knew what Bucky was. He remembered seeing that face in the army, right before he had to stop Bucky from punching someone in the face for insulting Gabe and Jim.

Steve didn't do that to defend a racist, but because he himself had already punched another captain for the same thing. Another incident would've put the team under scrutiny. The consequences would've been worse than having to let some snide comments go.

The new millennium was better about race than his time - but that didn't mean racism was gone.

"That's a pretty shitty reason to stop someone from dating," Jennifer said. "So really, if there's no good reason for it, then there might as well be no reason at all. If there's no reason for a restriction, then it clearly shouldn't be there. They should keep dating."

The Avengers snorted, Pepper and Stiles grinned, and John rolled his eyes with a smile.

"Well whaddya know," he drawled. "A defense attorney who's actually good for something."

That degenerated into legal and procedural banter, the sheriff and the attorney facing off while everyone else watched in amusement.

A few minutes later, Darcy came in, too. With her political science degree, she also butted in on the debate. Steve took the latest arrival as his cue to start breakfast, and headed to the kitchen, taking Bruce with him.

For twenty minutes, Steve and Bruce worked together in tranquil unison, bacon sizzling, eggs boiling, and fruit getting chopped.

Right around the time there were a lot more voices coming from the couch area, Pepper and John followed them into the kitchen, tablet in her hand and coffee mug in his.

"What are they arguing about, now?" Steve asked curiously.

"Some crack about dog-fighting rings somehow led to a debate on the ethics of Pokemon," Pepper said. She leaned against the counter and started tapping at the tablet.

"I decided to get out of there while I could," John said, carrying his cup of coffee past Pepper, who frowned at whatever she was reading. "Before my age showed too much."

"Wanna help?" Steve asked, gesturing to the box of pancake mix.

"Yeah," John said. "Just let me reheat my coffee."

"Shit." They all looked at Pepper, who was swearing at her tablet. She looked up at them, and winced. "Sorry, ignore that. AIM is causing me grief. Again."

"What is it, now?" Steve asked.

At the same time, John asked, "They're still around?"

"Oh, they're mostly decimated," Pepper answered. "But there are enough remnants still around to
cause grief, especially everything in relation to Extremis. SHIELD's handling most of the actual company and research, but Tony and I made them delegate handling of the surviving Extremis subjects to me."

"There were survivors?" John asked, surprised. "I thought all the Extremis soldiers were killed? That's what they news said."

For a moment, Pepper considered him. Then, after glancing out the door, she reached for John's cup of lukewarm coffee, wrapping her hand around the cup and tugging it out of his grip.

John's eyes widened when her fingers started to glow, first yellow-ish and then orange. They were still stunned wide when she handed the warm mug back to him and he brought it close to his face, eyeing the steam.

"...huh," he said. "You're an Extremis soldier?"

"Forced subject rather than soldier," Pepper said. "Which is how we were able to fast-talk SHIELD into letting me handle them. Most of them have gone into the wind, though. Or I suppose 'underground' is more fitting."

"How come?" John asked, still eyeing his coffee.

"Apparently-" Pepper gestured towards her tablet. "They may have gravitated to yet another 'private research group' called Centipede."

Bruce and Steve shared a sigh.

"Anything I can do to help?" John asked. "Besides making the pancakes?"

Pepper smiled, sad and grateful in equal measures. "Thank you, Sheriff, but no. I'll keep you in mind, though."

"Well, in that case..." John took a big gulp of his coffee, set it down, and reached for the pancakes. "Want anything with your pancakes, on them, or in them?"

She grinned, and for a moment, her eyes literally glowed with delight. "Strawberries."

John raised an eyebrow at her little Extremis display, but nodded. "Strawberries, it is..." Then he grinned at her. "Wait a minute - you really are the Mother of Dragons!"

Pepper and Bruce snorted.

Steve shook his head, muttering, "I have got to watch that show."

John, Bruce, and Pepper laughed so hard that Tony and Stiles came over to see what was so funny. When they didn't get an answer, they grumbled and went back to the couch.

The rest of cooking breakfast was spent with the other three giving Steve a run-down of the show between laughs.

They constantly interrupted each other, they contradicted each other, and kept breaking down snickering at weird references and inside jokes that Steve didn't get.

He wouldn't have traded their explanation for the world.

~*~
The rest of the morning was spent with everyone eating a large breakfast, then lazing around.

Jennifer and Pepper worked together at Tony's fancy holographic desk, some legal thing related to the Hulk. John ended up getting drawn into it, too. Stiles was just fascinated by all the holograms. Steve smiled when Tony showed him how they worked, commandeering a small portion of the desk from Pepper.

After a while, Tony dragged Stiles down to his garage-lab to show him more. Jane and Darcy went with them for whatever it was Jane had come here for in the first place. Betty, Bruce, and Laura - two biochemists and a botanist - also eventually disappeared down to one of the Stark Industries labs, squabbling about something called Pym particles.

Steve and Clint started watching a movie with the kids, but Nat had been successful in keeping Clint away from the coffee. Halfway through Shrek searching the evil Fairy Godmother's cottage for the Happily Ever After potion, Clint dozed off, flopping over on the couch. Steve finished watching the movie with Lila and Cooper, and fed Nate when they watched the third movie in the series.

Predictably, Clint woke up just in time for lunch.

For said meal, Nat, Steve, the Stilinskis, and the Bartons went to some burger joint with the tiniest burgers Steve had ever seen. Nat mediated the White Castle vs In-n-Out debate between Clint and Stiles, John and Laura chatted about the kids' school, and Steve and the kids in question just doodled in Cooper's drawing pad.

After, Nat and the Bartons went to the movies, while Steve took John and Stiles to Coney Island.

It was a bittersweet trip for Steve. All of New York tended to give him double vision, seeing what was there superimposed over what is. But here in Coney Island, it was the worst, because somehow, it hit that perfect balance of just like and nothing like his memories. There was enough similarities that Steve kept seeing Coney Island as he knew it out of the corner of his eye. Yet it was different enough to still jar him when he turned his head and looked.

But, he'd promised Bucky seventy years ago that they'd come back here after the war. Taking Stiles was the next best thing.

They meandered down the boardwalk, the beach almost empty at this time of year. They stopped to take some pictures outside MCU Park, and Steve pondered taking Stiles to a baseball game sometime in the summer. With Steve's own team gone to California, he was stuck supporting either the Nationals or the Mets. (Steve would eat his shield before he threw in with the Yankees.) He supposed going to a game in California could be fun. He could support the Dodgers again, and keep Stiles and John from taking after the Giants.

That would involve getting them into a baseball game to begin with, though. Sadly, neither of them particularly cared about baseball.

Even though basketball was no longer a 'Jewish' sport, interest in it still remained strong in the family. Stiles had even been on his middle school's team before turning all his attention to lacrosse, the main sport of Beacon Hills.

Part of Steve still smarted at the Dodgers abandoning Brooklyn for Los Angeles. Baseball had been one of the many things he'd lost interest in as he started to understand the gravity of his loss and how much time he had missed. He was trying to get back into it, now, but maybe it would be better if he just turned his attention to new sports altogether.
Maybe. The other part of him was still going to try and draw John or Stiles into baseball, anyway. Even while Stiles kept up his crusade to get Steve into lacrosse, ‘the only real American sport’.

They made their way to Luna Park, where they got in line for the Cyclone. Steve regaled them with the story of Bucky making Steve go on it and how Steve threw up after, making sure to aim for Bucky’s shoes. Stiles cackled at the story, and John rolled his eyes. They went on the Cyclone, and on the Disk’O, after. They no longer excited him, being no match for jumping out of planes and off of buildings on a regular basis. The rides didn’t excite him, but they were still fun.

They swung by the Coney Island Museum after that. Steve was yet again hit by how old he was when he saw so many of his memories immortalized as ancient history there. Either John or Stiles - or both - seemed to realize this, because they didn’t stay long, there, heading over to the aquarium, instead.

They ended the day with hotdogs from Nathan’s. They didn’t taste how Steve remembered them from his day, but were still delicious. With their low cost, he got extras without his instinctual price-wincing, so dinner was fulfilling even for him.

When they got back to the tower for their last night there, Tony asked Steve, "How was your day?"

"Good," Steve answered honestly. "Yours?"

Tony got that gleeful look in his eyes, equal parts heart-warming and disconcerting. "Foster's theories for all the weird gravitational shifts around Britain are astounding. SHIELD is going to weep before we're through."

"Uh-huh," Steve said, not wanting to get him started. "Just make sure you don't get into trouble with Pepper, okay?"

"Oh, she knows," Tony said with a grin. "She...does not disapprove." He shrugged. "And he's helping Foster leave Norway and get set-up in London. So she basically approves."

There was a world of difference between Pepper not disapproving of Tony's plans and her approving of them. Steve figured Tony would find that out the hard way.

After Clint and Laura got their kids to sleep, everyone got together in Tony's little private theater to watch some weird, gritty reboot of Hansel and Gretel. It was very violent and gory, but mostly in an outlandish way rather than an accurate one. The movie was almost funny, especially since Clint looked so much like Hansel. That led to everyone making diabetic jokes even after the credits were rolling and they headed to bed.

Or in Steve's case, tried to head to bed. Clint held Steve back as everyone else made their way to the elevators.

"What time are you getting back, tomorrow morning?" Clint asked. "After you drop off the Stilinskis at the airport?"

Steve frowned. "I should be back around...ten? AM?" he estimated. He shrugged. "Why?"

Clint sighed. "This afternoon, Fury put me on stand-by for a potential emergency extraction in Iraq. We just got word that they need help transporting something heavy, but that mobility may also be an issue."

"Which means they might send me in there," Steve concluded. Clint nodded, and Steve sighed.
"I was planning on coming back here before heading back down to D.C.,” he said. "But I can probably start straight from JFK, if they need me at the Triskelion."

Clint shook his head. "If we go, it'll be from here. I'm saying that you might need to spend another day or two, here, instead of going down right away."

Steve's frown deepened, but he nodded. "I'll stick around."

With a bitter grin, Clint headed off to the elevators, Steve right behind him.

On his floor, he bid John a good night. When Stiles came out of the elevator - carrying a shoulder-width box apparently carrying the bow for Allison - Steve gave him a goodnight hug, too, before heading to bed.

He didn't have a nightmare, but he did wake up before his phone woke him up.

Just as well.

Judging by his e-mail, the extraction was moving more and more from 'if' to 'when' territory by the hour. He took his laptop into the living room and got started on reading what little SHIELD would disclose about the operation.

He was already looking up the history of the contested border area in question when Stiles wandered out an hour later.

"Morning," Stiles called, as he got started on the coffee in the kitchen, which was not hidden. At least, not on this floor. He took one look at Steve's face and asked, "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah," Steve said. "Just looks like I might be flying today, too. Tough job waiting for me at SHIELD."

Stiles winced. "That sucks," he declared. "You gonna be okay?"

Steve nodded, closing his laptop and setting it aside, just as John also came out of his room. "Yeah. What do you want for breakfast?"

A pot of coffee, a platter of waffles, and a bowl of fruit later, and everyone was dressed, packed, and ready to go. Steve left his meager luggage here.

Stiles scoured the suite to make sure he and his father had everything, before taking another video of the ride in the glass elevator. Steve didn't blame him. With the sun rising as their elevator descended, it made for a spectacular video. He might have Stiles send him that clip for a color study inspiration, if Steve ever got back into art beyond his basic sketching.

The hugs at the airport were tight and almost tearful. But in the end, Steve watched the Stilinskis disappear into the depths of the airport.

With a forlorn beat to his heart, he returned to the tower.

There, he took one look at Clint's face and groaned.

"We're going to Maysan?" Steve asked, every report he'd read on the region in the morning flashing through his head.

Clint nodded. "Good news is, you're going to have a familiar face waiting for you."
"Who?" Steve asked.

"One of the agents is Antoine Triplett," Clint said.

Slowly nodding, he parsed Clint's tone of voice. "And what's the bad news?"

"This extraction is going to be a tricky one."

Steve narrowed his eyes. "Tricky, how?"

~*~

Steve and Clint ended up spending a week having to bounce in and around Maysan in Iraq. Of course, because this was SHIELD, the team had, indeed, disappeared right on the border, and most likely into Iran.

"Fuck Al-Fakkah," Clint grumbled, as he switched off their communications and made sure to make it look like they were genuinely missing.

Steve frowned, though, when Clint produced maps of the Iranian side of their little AO.

Those looked like copies of maps.

Maps which the SHIELD team they were extracting had used.

Maps which proved they'd always planned to go into a territory they weren't supposed to be in.

Goddamn SHIELD.

"So what," Steve muttered, as he and Clint trekked their way across the border in the dead of night. "We're Fury's janitors, now?"

"Yes," Clint said. "A geographic SNAFU on the ground could lead to a catastrophic political battle for SHIELD when it gets laid out on paper. You think terrorists care about state sovereignty?"

"Why the hell was SHIELD even in here?" Steve asked, gesturing towards the sparse hills they were on their way towards.

Clint didn't know. But three days later, when they finally managed to find the team, Steve got his answer.

They spent days on a convoluted song-and-dance involving leaving cryptic messages in various nooks and crannies in the desolate, rocky hills near the oil field that Iran and Iraq kept slapfighting over.

Towards the end of the third day, they found a crevice in a hill just off of Tarigholghods, whose line of sight they were trying to stay out of. As the sun was setting, they were approached by-

"Trip!" Steve greeted Gabe's grandson with a one-armed hug.

"Captain," Agent Antoine Triplett greeted back, nodding at him and Clint. "Agent Barton. Man, am I glad to see you. Surprised, though."

"Why?" Clint asked, as Trip - after peering around some edges - started heading even deeper into a seemingly random crevice.
"As we understand it, you have 'something heavy' and asked for a team for contraband extraction," Steve asked. "But you also needed a very mobile team. You don't get much more mobile than me."

"That's one word for it," Trip said darkly.

'It' turned out to be black market Chitauri weapons.

"...you're kidding me, right?" Steve asked, staring in bewilderment at the crate of weapons.

"How did this many end up on the black market at once?!" Clint nearly shouted. Nearly, but not quite, because they were really, really not supposed to be on the Iranian side of the border, even if they were only a mile from it.

"We don't know," the team leader, Agent Garrett, answered honestly.

"It's what we've been trying to find out," continued the last team-member, Agent Ward.

"But so far, no dice," Trip finished.

"Will you be able to carry this?" Agent Garrett asked, not out of doubt but out of necessity. He closed the lid of the crate and locked it. "We can't carry the crate by ourselves, and we have no way of transporting this without being seen."

Steve sighed, glad he hadn't taken the shield out of its cover, just yet. In retrospect, he probably should have known what kind of mission this was going to be when, instead of his custom tactical suits, he had to take one of the regular SHIELD field uniforms and the special bag that hid his shield.

He kept the pack on as he hefted up the crate, testing its weight.

"I'll carry it," Steve said with a nod. It would be one hell of a run, but it was, realistically, only a mile to the border, and about another ten until they'd be safe. "Especially once we hit the Iraqi side of Al-Fakkah."

"Have I mentioned how much I hate this place?" Clint said. "Because it's flat ground for miles. Sneaking in here was bad enough, but we are going to be seen on our way out."

"As long as we're not caught on the way out," Ward said. "We should be fine."

"Let's hope," Steve said. "They took one hell of a risk sending me in here."

But that risk paid off. Steve didn't have to purposely slow down his pace to match the rest of his team, he was already slow due to the weight he was carrying. They were seen and shot at, but at enough distance that they could split up. Steve made a break for the border while the rest all split up and doubled back, distracting the NAJA that were shooting at them in the first place. It was most of the night before they rallied, on the Iraqi side of the oil field, and they weren't safe until morning - which was thankfully how long it took until Steve needed to set down the crate and take a breather.

"Just a few minutes," Steve said, falling back on a rock and pulling out his canteen.

Garrett tried to lift up the crate, and struggled to lift one end of it a few inches off the ground.

"Take all the damn time you need, Captain," he said, shaking his head ruefully.

That still meant less than twenty minutes, which was the time it took them all to eat their morning MRE's and rehydrate.
By afternoon, a helicopter met them about twenty miles off the border. Some Army rig that SHIELD was borrowing, it took them and the crate to Camp Adder - or Tallil, as everyone else called it.

They barely landed when the SHIELD team was whisked away for treatment and debriefing, while Steve and Clint were taken into another private room for a debriefing of their own.

The dour agent in charge of this entire operation, Victoria Hand, was not impressed with their reports.

"Next time," Steve said. "Just tell us what we're getting into. Especially for something like black market alien weaponry."

"Fuck. Al. Fakkah," was Clint's final pronouncement.

But they still gave an accurate report to the best of their abilities. Then they changed, showered, and called their families while eating something approaching human food.

It took Steve a solid five minutes to get Stiles to calm down through the shitty phone reception, which was nothing compared to the half-hour it took Clint. Well, his kids were younger, and he had three of them - that was understandable.

"Hey, I got your message about the robbery," Steve said, once Stiles was finally calm. Stiles reporting that someone tried to break into the McCall's home during the middle of some study group had been the first message Steve saw once he got back to the base. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah," Stiles dismissed. "That was two days ago. Nothing is missing, no one was hurt. We're all just rattled. It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," Steve said. "Especially when you guys have so much else going on."

Stiles snorted. "Compared to all the other shit we've been dealing with, lately, it's nothing."

That was depressingly understandable. He wondered if this robbery would give Stiles any new nightmares or panic attacks - or if Stiles would just not register it, after the stress of his father looking for a second serial killer and having heard a person die.

After a while, they both had to go. Steve sat right beside Clint and ate his way through his dinner as he listened to Laura regale Clint with their children's misadventures.

When they went back state-side, they discovered they'd just missed Nat by less than two days. Steve didn't get a clear answer on when she would be back, which told him enough about what kind of mission it was. He decided that if he couldn't know everything about it, he'd rather not know anything about it - and this being SHIELD, 'knowing everything' was out of the question.

Meanwhile, Clint turned out to have missed some appointment during their unintentionally extended extraction mission. An appointment with-

"The Department of Thaumaturgic Analysis and Preternatural Intelligence?" Steve questioned, fishing around his locker for the keys to his bike.

"Everyone just calls it the Bullshit Bureau," Clint said with a sigh. "They study 'the intersection between mythology and history'. Which really just means chasing down ancient stories and occult shit. But since they were right about the Tesseract, Asgardians, and the Navy, people let them get away with it. SHIELD's covering their asses by having them take a look at my head, after Loki."
Steve frowned. "The Navy?"

Clint huffed in amused frustration as he pulled up his shirt to poke at a bandage on his hip. "Yeah. Apparently, a lot of myths are real, including selkies."

It took a moment for Steve to remember his classics enough to understand that. "Seal-people?"

Clint nodded. "And the source of some of our myths on mermaids," Clint drawled, dropping the edge of his shirt. "Among other things. A lot of myths are real, enough that some people are legit offended by the Twilight shit."

"That one series with the sparkling vampire and the pedophile werewolf?" Steve asked, remembering Tony's sarcastic summary.

Clint pointed a finger-gun at him. "That's the one. But yeah, you ever hear of military sea-lions?"

Steve nodded. That had been an...interesting chapter of contemporary military studies.

"Well, the program works in part to cover up the fact there are a shit-ton of selkies in the navy," Clint said. "And possibly some mermaids. Which they hid from everyone until SHIELD blew it open in the 90's, then it got even more hush-hush or some shit." He stood up with a groan. "I blame you for this."

"Me?!" Steve said, startled. "How's this my fault?"

"You're related to like, two-thirds of the reason everyone lets the stupid department continue to exist," Clint said. "The selkies in the Navy aren't useful to SHIELD, so they were riding on the Tesseract from your day. Just when people were starting to consider shutting them down, anyway, fucking Thor happened, in New Mexico. Then Loki and that stupid spear, and Thor happened again, which goes back to the Tesseract which goes back to you."

Steve nodded, recognizing that Clint didn't actually blaming him so much as venting at him. "Um, sorry?"

"Yeah, yeah, get me a beer next time you're in New York and we'll call it even," Clint said, wandering off to apparently let some magicians poke around in his head.

The twenty-first century just seemed to get weirder and weirder every day. He said as much to Peggy when he went to meet with her, himself, and assure her he was fine.

"It seems every time I pop up, I'm connected to something accidentally giving mythology some credence," Steve said with good humor as he sat down in his chair.

She snorted. "That's because of the prevalence of scientists in SHIELD," she dismissed. "If they pulled their heads out of their arses long enough to admit that science doesn't know everything, we could be gaining so much from the people they want to insist don't exist. Imagine, Steve, if vampires and werewolves worked for SHIELD!"

"Wouldn't the sparkling be against uniform regulations?" Steve deadpanned, and Peggy laughed, and kept laughing even when she started coughing.

Waving off Steve's concern, she said, "I'm sure we could have made it work somehow. Though it's not like real vampires sparkle."

Steve snorted, inelegant and genuine as he tried to imagine the sparkling vampire in a SHIELD
uniform, that one on every other teenage girl's backpack and tee-shirt. Then again, if that happened, maybe women would forget about Steve and go obsess over him.

(He ignored her comment about real vampires. Peggy had told him about her latest brain scans, last time he was here.)

"I will admit," Peggy continued, sounding smug and sheepish in equal measures. "If I could ever be accused of treason, it would be because of a group connected to them."

Steve blinked in surprise. "You thought about treason?"

"No," Peggy said. "But I was rather proud of them holding to their principles, even though doing so came at SHIELD's expense."

"What did they do?" Steve asked.

"This one group we kept running into along the Iron Curtain in Europe," Peggy said. "Les Chasseurs."

Steve frowned. "'The Hunters'?" he translated.

She nodded. "They're humans who've specialized in hunting down superhumans, and for centuries. It's a shame they wouldn't join us, really. With the burst of superhuman experimentation in the last decade or two, SHIELD could have used them."

Steve thought about questioning just who or what they could be hunting when Steve was the first known super-human. Then he decided not to press that particular issue.

"Why didn't they join?" he asked instead.

Peggy sighed. "Apparently, they've had bad experiences with government cooperation." Here, Peggy rolled her eyes. "Except the one government they'd cooperated with before had been the post-Bolshevik government after the Great War. We were nothing like that, but they were skittish, and refused." She draped her hands over Steve's. "Probably just as well. I wouldn't have been surprised, had it led to mutiny in SHIELD."

Steve frowned. "How come?"

Peggy's frown mirrored his own. "Because many of the agents were barely tolerating a woman director," she said, gesturing towards herself. "They might not have tolerated any more women in power. And the Hunters were not about to giving up their tradition of matriarchy for our sakes."

Steve smiled. "Good on them," he said.

"Now," Peggy said. "Tell me what happened in Latveria."

Steve's stomach dropped. "It wasn't Latveria, Pegs - it was Iraq."

"...of course," she said, sounding as frustrated as Steve felt saddened. "Tell me."

Swallowing, Steve started talking.

~*~

When John called Steve on a slow Friday morning, Steve expected the other man to start the conversation. What he didn't expect was for John to say, "I think Stiles might be a bit gay."
Steve blinked at the stove he was heating up for his omelette. "...what?"

John sighed. "Last night, there was some weird drugging incident at the local gay club. When I got there, Scott and Stiles were there. Scott said they were there to cheer up a friend after some kind of bad break-up, but the friend wasn't that close to them and wasn't expecting them. And..."

Steve pulled the eggs out of the fridge. "'And'?

"Well, I think Stiles may have tried to come out, and...I may have joked about in a way I shouldn't have?"

Steve actually paused in his movements. "What do you mean?"

"Well, when I said it wasn't exactly his kind of club, Stiles started to say he had something to tell me. I just - I didn't think, I just said that with the way he was dressed, he couldn't be gay. Stiles said he could be...then he went back to the 'cheering up a friend' story."

Setting down the eggs, Steve took a deep breath. "You thought he had to be straight because of the way he was dressed?"

"I thought that even Stiles wouldn't try to go clubbing in baggy jeans and a hoodie," John huffed. "Even he would at least try to dress nice, right? So it sounds like he was just there for someone or something else. But like I said, his friend wasn't expecting him, so I don't even know anymore."

"Stiles has many attributes, but a good sense of dress isn't exactly one of them," Steve said. That was definitely from John's side of the family, because even Bucky always knew how to look good, forget his Ma and his sisters.


"It might've been building up for a while and you're only just noticing," Steve pointed out.

"Did he ever say anything to you?" John asked.

Steve pursed his lips as he stared at the frying pan in consideration.

"His jeep's name is Roscoe," Steve said, shifting the phone a little. "Which isn't exactly a girl's name."

There was a moment of silence, then a deep, pained groan. "How did I miss that?"

"Well, what did you think it meant?"

John sighed. "I was hoping it was like, I dunno, a pet thing?"

"When has anyone named their car like a pet?" Steve asked. "Especially a teenage boy?"

"I can hear you judging me over the phone," John grumbled.

"You are a cop," Steve pointed out.

"I'm his father," John said, in a tone that made Steve think this is what Stiles' whining would sound like in a few decades.

"Also, when I asked him why Thor was his second favorite Avenger, Stiles said 'his arms'," Steve added, grinning at John's pained sighs.
"I did not need to know that," John muttered, and Steve laughed again. "Great. I always figured I'd have to watch out for Stiles at parties, but now I have to worry about him sneaking into clubs even though he's half a decade underage. Wonderful." Another sigh. "As if he doesn't take enough risks already."

Pursing his lips, Steve balanced his secrecy - his privacy - against the Stilinskis' needs.

"In my experience with gay clubs," Steve said finally. "They'll let him in to give him somewhere to belong when normal parties might not be of any help to him. But they'll look out for him, too, since he's young and came there to be safe. Especially if there are any drag queens there, some of them are protective and can get pretty maternal."

"That doesn't make me feel much better," John said. Then there was a moment of silence, and Steve started cracking eggs into a bowl as he let John put together the pieces. He wasn't surprised when, after a minute, John said, "Wait a minute - in your experience?"

"Gay clubs were around in my youth, too," Steve said. "And today, I can get away with going to bars because as far as anyone knows, I'm just an uncannily similar impersonator. Who may or may not have been approached to be a decoy for Captain America at political and public appearances...which is where the bulk of Captain America photographs come out of to begin with."

"...you're kidding, right?" John said. "That works?!"

Steve nodded, then remembered John couldn't see him. "Yup," he said. "People don't expect Captain America to be queer." Steve winced. "Or, uh - I guess the modern word is bisexual?"

John inhaled sharply. "You've always been?" he asked, soft and curious.

"Well, since my sixteenth birthday, at least," Steve said.

"What happened when you were sixteen?" John asked.

"Met a guy in a club," Steve said. "And went home with him."

"Oh, god," John said. "Stiles is older than that."

Steve laughed again. "I already reminded him to be safe in whatever he does." Steve smirked. "Or, well - during my USO days, someone did posters of me reminding soldiers to use condoms, and apparently someone put it online. I sent it to Stiles."

John snorted. "I'll get a print of it. Frame it and put it in his room or something."

Chopping up some mushrooms, Steve said, "Relax, John. Stiles is smart - he's not going to do anything stupid or dangerous."

"Stiles knows it, too," Steve pointed out. "He's probably not going to do anything stupid."

"I hope so," John said, voice ringing with doubt. "I really, really hope so."

~*~

Stiles was smart, but even smart people can do stupid things.
And it was usually because they were smart that they wouldn't just be a little bit stupid. Being smart led to taking bigger risks, which led to them being monumentally, astronomically, *what-the-ever-loving-fuck-were-you-thinking* stupid.

Like kidnapping a classmate using police property.

"A prisoner transport van?" Steve asked, setting down his sketchbook in shock.

"Yeah," John said, sounding as dumbfounded as Steve felt. "They had sandwiches and were using his cell phone and...and...Steve, they planned this. I don't-" The Sheriff took a deep and shaky breath. "They said it was supposed to be some kind of joke that went wrong. But Steve - how in the hell could a kidnapping be a joke to them?"

Steve swallowed, staring down at the table. "I don't know," he admitted, because he really, really didn't.

John hung up, and Steve sat on his couch, dumbfounded.

Kidnapping. One they'd planned, one they subjected a classmate to, half naked and in the middle of the woods.

What the fuck?

For lack of a better option, he called Stiles.

He wanted to start the conversation off peacefully, rationally, and maturely.

But all he could think of was how terrified that boy's parents must have been not just when he didn't come home, but when someone tried to cover up the fact that he wasn't coming home. He remembered how terrified he'd been when...when...

"What the hell were you thinking?" Steve demanded as soon as Stiles answered the phone.

"It..." He could hear Stiles swallowed. "It was supposed to be a joke, and it just...got out of hand."

"A joke?" Steve demanded. "Stiles, what the hell kind of joke was that supposed to be? You kidnapped him!"

"I know!" Stiles cried out. "I just...it wasn't...we were..."

Steve pursed his lips. "I told you about what happened whenever one of Bucky's sisters came home late. I told you the story of rescuing him. I told you how terrified I was - and we're not parents. What in God's name made you think kidnapping someone and making their parents go through that could be funny?"

"We weren't thinking about his parents," Stiles said. "We-"

"What *were* you thinking of?" Steve demanded.

Stiles' breathing got harsher, but he had no answer.

"You've been bullied, Stiles, and you've seen when Scott was, too," Steve said. "Why would you put someone else through that?"

"I - we've told you about the kind of shit Jackson's pulled!" Stiles protested.
"And that excuses you turning into the same kind of asshole?"

More silence.

Steve clenched his fists. He could hear Stiles' breath hitching. At the same time, he remembered the sheer terror that flooded his veins and fogged over his mind when he'd heard about the 107th while in Italy. Or the night Steve and the entire Barnes family had stayed up all night waiting for Anna to come home.

God, and at least for them, nothing had happened to her. A miscommunication, a trolley snafu, and having covered someone's shift at the last minute were all that made Anna late. But if they'd found out she'd been kidnapped-

Well, Steve didn't even have to imagine. He knew what he would've done - or at least what he would have tried to do - because a few years later, he did exactly that for Bucky. When he found out what had happened to Bucky-

"Do you have anything to say for yourself?" Steve demanded, voice low and no less angry for it.

"...no..." Stiles said, small and thick like he was talking around a lump in his throat.

Steve hung up before he had to listen to Stiles cry.

~*~

It took a week for Steve to calm down.

Actually, he started to calm down after three days. But then John called saying he'd been suspended due to Stiles' actions, and Steve had to start all over again.

So it took a week for Steve to calm down.

A week where no one tried to talk to him or even greet him in the hallways. A week where his subordinates and colleagues looked at him nervously before ever opening their mouths. A week where Rumlow had to run interference and tell Steve to blow off steam before coming back - and preferably with someone or something that wouldn't break under Steve's hardest hits.

A week.

It took a week, but he did manage to calm down. Eventually.

He went through two or three punching bags every night, and finally broke the latest reinforced one from Tony. In the absence of Natasha to spar with, half the STRIKE team took him on at once, no one wanting to take him on alone but no one wanting to let him keep stewing. Steve apologized to everyone, after, despite the fact he was the only one with any broken bones, a fracture in his arm. He went to Medical, but it would heal so fast on its own that all they could really do was document that it happened. He managed not to snap at anyone, though, which was improvement.

A good night's sleep did the rest. He still couldn't make sense of Stiles' actions, but he had enough distance and self-awareness to realize he shouldn't have snapped at Stiles and projected so many of his own fears onto the teenager. Hell, given that neither of the boys were in a jail-cell, it looked like even the Jackson boy wasn't taking it as hard as Steve was. Even if he was, Steve handled his last talk with Stiles in one of the stupidest ways imaginable.

Given Stiles lacked the emotional maturity to realize why kidnapping a kid wasn't funny, he also
likely needed to be told that even though Steve was disappointed in him and angry with him, he still loved Stiles and hoped he would do better - whatever that meant in the end.

Once he calmed down, he called.

(Though he made sure to call while making dinner. Having something else to focus on made it less likely he would lose his mind while talking.)

"Steve," Stiles said as soon as he answered. It wasn't a greeting, but the beginning of something. "Listen-

"I'm sorry," Steve said, cutting him off. He heard a surprised click of jaws snapping shut. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Yeah, actually, you should have," Stiles said, sounding as tired as Steve felt. "I deserved it."

Steve couldn't refute that.

He wanted to try asking about the kidnapping stunt, but he knew starting with that would only lead to disaster. Same for asking about his father and the Sheriff's department.

"So what are you doing?" Steve asked, instead.

Stiles laughed. "Sooo many things. Right now, heading over to Lydia's for her birthday party."

Blinking in surprise, Steve set down the peeler he was skinning the potato with. "Your dad hasn't grounded you?"

Even over the phone, he could hear the sound of nervous swallowing. "He said he didn't want to feel any worse than he already did," Stiles said, voice thick like he was talking around a lump of tears in his throat. "Home isn't the best place to be, right now. Besides - whatever problems I've got, Lydia needs this, after everything she's been through. She deserves something nice, and a big party is just her thing."

Steve tried to summon up a smile, for once glad that phones meant they couldn't see each other's faces. "That's a good start," Steve said. "But it's Jackson who you need to apologize to."

Here, Stiles snorted. "Jackson dumped her when she needed him most, because she was making him 'look bad'."

That...actually made a lot of sense.

Steve didn't ask about it now, knowing neither of them had the emotional distance to talk about it just yet. But as Stiles grumbled about the unhealthy dinner his father was no doubt eating right now, Steve wondered if that was why the boys had kidnapped Jackson. To make him go through three days of nightmares and fear like Lydia had, teaching him a lesson for dumping her after such a traumatic experience.

It didn't justify the boys' actions, not by a long shot - but it would explain them.

He posited as much to John ten minutes later - who had, indeed, enjoyed a greasy burger - after ending his conversation with Stiles and calling his father.

"He didn't say that," John muttered. "Why didn't he say that? He never once tried to defend himself, Steve, why didn't he say that?"
Steve frowned at the sound of John's voice, staring at his diced potatoes without seeing them.

"It wouldn't excuse him," John continued. Steve heard indistinct movement and clinking and more swallowing. "It wouldn't, it wouldn't excuse him but at least it would make sense, at least I could understand it. Steve, he didn't say anything to me, why didn't he say anything to me?"

There was the sound of a glass thunking on wood, and then Steve understood.

John was _drunk._

Steve clutched the knife so hard he bent the handle. Damnit, right when he was about to start chopping up the chicken, too.

John continued mumbling and asking why Stiles did any of it and why he never said anything and why, why, why. All Steve could hear were Stiles' words from just a few minutes before.

*Home isn't the best place to be, right now.*

Steve remembered that from his own youth. He remembered the days when he dreaded going home and he remembered why.

God, he hoped Stiles' father wasn't anything like his own. He hoped and he prayed.

"John," Steve asked. Because in his lifetime, he's met one too many drunk, violent fathers - or their kids - to to risk Stiles' safety on the benefit of the doubt. "How much have you had to drink?"

"...much more than I should," John said, and that was a plus. Self-awareness. Violent drunkards always thought they were fine. If John knew his judgment was impaired, then hopefully he wouldn't do anything too rash. "Not like it matters, since I don't have a job, anymore."

"You should get some rest," Steve said.

John snorted. "I've been resting all day. I don't have a job, anymore, Steve, resting is all I'm doing."

Steve heard more swallowing sounds, followed by another thud of glass on wood.

"If this really is what was going through the boys' heads, maybe we can do something about it," Steve said. "How about you sleep on it, right now? We'll talk in the morning and figure something out."

John laughed, low and wet and spine-chilling.

"I know what it sounds like when someone's trying to pull me out of a bottle and into bed, Steve," John said. At least there were no more pouring or swallowing sounds, no heavy thuds - or worse, hollow ones.

"Then I'll be blunt," Steve said, trying to channel his mother at her toughest. "Put away the bottle, and get to bed."

John sighed. "I should, shouldn't I?"

"Yeah," Steve said. Here, he'd been worried about latent anger at Stiles, and instead he was getting angry at John. He took a deep breath, though, because look at what happened the last time he talked to a Stilinski in anger. "C'mon - save some booze for a better day. Put the bottle away."

Steve remembered wanting to grab bottles out of his father's hand and smash him over the head with
them.

For the first time since he met the Stilinskis, Steve was glad he was three-thousand miles away from them.

"Please," he said, choking out the word through gritted teeth. "Be sober for Stiles, if not for yourself."

John laughed again, something which sounded like a punch to the gut.

"M'pretty sure he prefers me drunk," John mumbled. Another dreaded swallow. "D'I tell you 'bout the time he got me drunk?"

Steve frowned, trying and failing to straighten out the knife. "No," he said. When men tried to accuse other people of getting them drunk, it was usually passing on the blame for their own actions.

"Kep' refilling my drink," John said. "I asked him for a little bit. He gave me a lot and kept giving me a lot. Think tha's how he knew so much about the Argent case. My drunken ass told 'im. Didn't realize it until the next morning, when I was more hungover than I'd been in two years." Then more of that laughter that sounded so close to a sob. "And even that was after he cut me off."

Steve frowned. People accusing others of getting them drunk were usually just drunkards in denial. But John was normally nothing like a drunkard. And as much as it killed him to think this, Stiles was also just manipulative enough to get his dad drunk for information, if he thought was important enough - and multiple murders would fit the bill.

Well, Steve couldn't really fault John for turning to drink in his...grief, for lack of a better word.

(And he shouldn't be jealous that John still could, that he could still drown his sorrows when Steve hadn't even been able to take them for a swim after losing Bucky.)

"Well, then," he said, trying not to imagine John sitting in the sea of empty bottles in a bombed out bar. "This is me, cutting you off. Put the booze away and go to bed. Let's all talk in the morning."

"Y'r right," John said. "I'm glad you're here, Steve."

"Technically, I'm not," Steve said, attempting something approaching levity.

"No, I mean-" He could imagine John trying to gesture something, and hoped the man didn't knock over any of the glass off the table. "Family. We didn't - Claudia didn't have anyone and I didn't have anyone and that was fine until Claudia wasn't, and then it's just me and Stiles. And sometimes Melissa, but she can't - she can't even look at me when I drink. I have more than two beers and she starts thinking of Rafael." John laughed. "S'why we're not going on those dates the boys keep hoping for. She's not ready to live with a drinker, and I'm not ready to give it up."

Steve sighed, giving up the bent knife as a lost cause. He'd use something else for the chicken, and find a way to replace the knife later. Or fix it. "That's...another problem for another night," he said. "For now, just go to bed."

"I will, I will," John said, his promise belied by the gulp Steve heard. "Soon's I finish this glass."

Steve shut his eyes. He knew how easy a glass could become half the bottle could become the whole bottle could become...

"No, John," he ordered. "Go to bed."
"I can damn well handle-"

"The hell you can!" Steve snapped, giving up on dinner entirely. "Your son wouldn't even make you dinner because he doesn't want to be home, right now."

"He's got tha' stupid party," John snapped right back. "Because I'm such a fucking sap that I can' even dis'pline my own son and now he's turning into a psychopath, just like-"

John cut himself off, but Steve was pretty sure he knew what John'd been about to say.

"Just like who, John?" he demanded, voice as cold as the ice that he'd lived in for almost three times his waking lifespan. "Just. Like. Who?"

"...you weren't there, Steve," John said. "When Claudia fin'ly los' her mind. She - Stiles... God, no wonder Stiles's so fucked up, sometimes."

Steve shut his eyes, thankful that Stiles wasn't around to hear this.

"John," Steve started, not even bothering to hide his frustration.

"You weren't there!" John shouted. "You'ave no fucking clue what i's like for the love of your life to not recognize you, to thin' their little kid is trying to kill them, to attack you and attack him and make you feel so helpless because there's nothing you can do except watch them lose their mind and just keep hurting people and I can't, I can't-"

There it was - the sobs undercutting every 'laugh' from John this entire evening.

"You have no idea," John accused. "Claudia died 'cause of my stupidity and I hafta live with'at, and I gotta be there for Stiles and I can't. But I do it, anyway, I do my best never to hurt him and sometimes I hate Claudia for what she did to us. I know i's not her fault but I hate her and I hate that Stiles still loves her after everything she did to him, and then I hate me for hating her, for resenting her and wishing she'd died sooner. And I keep going, anyway, I keep living even when it would be so easy to grab my gun and go join her. So don't you fucking tell me what I can and can't handle."

Steve laughed, cold and harsh like the winter that took Bucky from him.

"You think I don't know loss? You think I don't understand what it's like to hate someone for living, to hate myself for still being alive?" he demanded. "Be glad you can drink, John. I don't blame you for turning to the bottle the moment you get a break, since I did the same damn thing as soon as Bucky died. Drank up half a bombed-out bar and thanks to my wonderful metabolism, I couldn't stay drunk long enough to enjoy the alcohol poisoning, let alone forget Bucky's screaming."

"Steve-

"You think I don't know what it's like to want to die?" Steve demanded. "I do. You have no idea how disappointed I was to wake up seventy years later, alive and well when everyone I loved was dead or has a foot in the grave, and my entire world as I knew it gone." He laughed. "You want to know how long it took me to realize I wasn't in hell or purgatory? That I wasn't just living my worst nightmare as some cosmic punishment but I was actually alive in the future?"

Another gulping sound, but it was dry, like the only thing John was swallowing down was his own nervousness.

"How long?"
"I don't know," Steve answered. "Because sometimes, I'm still convinced I am. I wake up to my phone instead of an alarm clock, to SHIELD instead of the SSR, and to the Avengers instead of the Howling Commandos. Every other morning this happens, I pray that when I actually open my eyes, it will all have been some terrible dream, or that God's finally decided I served my penance and I'm finally dead. And then I open my eyes, and it's all real, and I'm still alive and still wishing it would end. I snap out of it, I go through my day, I go to bed, and I do it all over again the next morning."

"I-"

"But hey!" Steve continued. "At least I'm not crying myself to sleep more than twice a week, anymore!" Even though John couldn't see it, Steve shot a nasty grin into the emptiness of his apartment. "That went down when I met you two. As of Thanksgiving, it's not even once a week. Because of Stiles, and because of you."

"I never asked for that," John shouted. "Goddamnit, I should've told Stiles 'no' on Thanksgiving!"

And that-
That did it.

Steve hadn't been expecting such a low blow.

But then, that's how it's always been, hasn't it? No one can hurt you like the people who love you.

There was only one thing Stiles had requested of John on Thanksgiving - at least, only one thing that made sense in this conversation.

It hadn't even been a real request, but a split second decision from both of them. Both Stilinskis had been so heartbroken about the idea of Steve having no stupid medical proxy, no one he could call family, that Stiles only had to look at his father. Just one look, and John nodded, and that was both of them inviting Steve into their little family.

He felt a drop of something on the top of his bare foot, and looked down, then up, looking for a leak. There wasn't one, but the ceiling was blurry enough that Steve realized the drop was a tear drop.

Because he was crying.

"Yeah," Steve said, voice thick and throat sore. "Maybe you should have."

"Shit, no," John said. "I shouldn't've - I didn't mean that, Steve, you, you're the bes' thing to happen to us since Claudia."

Steve took a deep breath. God, he couldn't believe he was about to do this.

"If you really believe that," Steve said, already regretting the words he was saying, what he was about to say. "Then put the booze away."

There was a moment's silence, two, three.

The sound of pouring, of liquid landing into an empty glass...

And then the sound of a the top being screwed back onto a bottle. A chair scraping against tile, uneven footsteps, a cabinet opening, a thud - a heavy thud - and then the dull rattle of a cabinet closing.

"I'm finishing this glass," John declared. "Because I need to be able to sleep when I go to bed right
after it."

It was...Steve knew when to push, and when to take what he could get. This was progress, this was compromise, this was something he could work with.

"Good goddamned night," John said, and then the line went dead.

Shit.

At this level of inebriated honesty, John wouldn't have bothered with the charade of putting the bottle away if he was going to keep drinking. Steve mostly took him at his word when he said he was done.

Mostly.

Because John was also angry and depressed, the booze was still in the house, and Steve met far too many alcoholics to take anything for granted.

He tried calling Stiles twice while putting away the ingredients and setting aside the knife. Maybe Tony could fix it, or at least figure out how Steve could fix it. Steve was about to call Stiles a third time before remembering that Stiles was at a party.

So he sent a text - something Stiles would see, at some point tonight.

*Your dad's been drinking,* he said, finally. *Don't go home until morning. He said he went to bed, but just in case.*

Then he pulled out his bundle of take-out menus. After a while, he settled on a Thai place, ordering a noodle dish that made for great comfort food. He then paced around, checking his phone every minute. He regretted ordering delivery - a brisk walk to pick it up would have done wonders for his head. At least eating it and filling his stomach helped a little.

Though also it made him feel like his stomach was full of lead once he did get a response.

*He's not like that!* Stiles texted back, and Steve sighed.

*I'm sure he's just asleep,* Steve said. *But just in case, you should consider going home with Scott or staying at Lydia's. It might not be safe for you, yet.*

*FUCK YOU!!!* was Stiles' expected response. *Just because YOUR dad was an abusive drunk doesn't mean mine is!*

...okay, maybe he hadn't expected this.

*I know that,* Steve said. *But just in case, okay?*

He didn't know why he was surprised by Stiles' response.

*NO!* And Steve could just hear the righteous indignation in those two letters. *NOT OKAY! DONT PROJECT *YOUR* DAD ONTO MINE!*

*I'm not,* Steve typed. *I'm just not taking your safety for granted, either.*

*Go to hell!* Stiles said. *My dad won't ever hurt me! FUCK YOU FOR THINKING HE WOULD!*

Steve sighed. No use continuing down this road.
I'm sorry, he said. *Just take care of yourself, okay?*

No response. After an hour, he sent, *At least tell me you got home safe, wherever that is for tonight?*

Another hour.

*Stiles?* he asked.

Nothing.

With a sigh, Steve texted the other Avengers, asking if anyone had contact with Stiles and could check in on him, explaining simply, *He's ignoring me, right now. I just want to know he's okay.*

Tony was the first one to respond within an hour, saying, *He's okay. Still pissed, though.*

It was one thing to know how protective Stiles was of the people he loved. It was another thing entirely to be on the receiving end of that protective ire.

Stiles was a Barnes Boy through and through.

For once, Steve regretted that.

~*~

In the morning, he woke up to texts from Clint and Nat. The former confirmed that Stiles was safe, but at home. The latter let Steve know she was finally back in town and wanted to talk to him about something urgent.

Steve tried texting Stiles again, but still to no avail. He pondered calling John, but decided to give it a couple more hours. The man would still be hung-over as hell, and Steve didn't want to make his mood any worse.

He went to the Lincoln memorial, and took nearly ten minutes to find Nat. In his defense, her hair was still blonde from whatever the hell her mission was, and she was wearing a dress. Sitting on the steps in front of the Lincoln statue, she looked like a college girl waiting on a date.

No wonder she'd asked him to wear the fake glasses for this meeting.

"How'd your mission go?" Steve asked, as he dropped down onto a step just below hers.

"Do you really want to know?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

Steve knew better than to nod his head. Instead, he asked, "What's all this about?"

Nat took a deep breath, bracing herself - which terrified Steve. "This is about Stiles' friends."

Steve froze, shocked and confused in equal measures.

"...what about them?" he asked finally.

She reached into her dainty purse and pulled out her phone.

"You know how Scott asked me for some 'ninja' help on New Year's?" she asked.

Steve nodded, the memory still bringing a faint, fond smile to his face. "How's that going?" he asked.

She snorted. "Most dedicated student I've ever had. I considered trying to recruit him for Operations.
He's already better - or at least more invested - than some of the cadets, there."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "Scott?" he asked. He couldn't imagine that boy being violent, or carrying out operations like raids, traps, and extractions.

"Don't worry," Nat said, matching his incredulity with a wry smirk. "I told him as much and he said he didn't think he could balance being a soldier with being a veterinarian." She rolled her eyes, fond, but then her expression fell. "But that's not what I'm here about."

"What are you here about?" Steve asked.

"Well...Scott was already interested in this stuff on his own. He'd been practicing pretty much since the Battle of New York, copying videos and such. The fact that he was already putting so much work into it is why he's improving so much in such a short period of time. Or that's what I thought." She fiddled with her phone. "I also figured his dedication came from his girlfriend. She also does gymnastics, and her family sells weapons, so she had to learn a lot of self-defense as a kid. I figured it made sense, that he wanted to share this with her and wanted to impress her." Nat smiled. "I thought it was cute, actually, that he asked me to help her and him both. He has a hot superhero's phone number and he just wants me to help him make his girlfriend smile."

Steve nodded, trying to figure out where the hell she was going with this. "You said you 'thought'...?"

She nodded, tapping at her phone. "Just before you and Clint came back from your extraction mission, Scott and Allison sent me a video of them sparring. It was already bugging me, but I ignored the feeling." The still frame on-screen was of Scott and Allison in black work-out clothes, facing each other with their fists up and feet spread apart in excellent sparring stances. "I gave them both a lot of suggestions. Later the same day, they sent me a new video, vastly improved...and now freaking me out."

Without further ado, she tilted her phone screen at him, and played it.

Ten seconds in, Steve bolted upright to get a closer look.

The video was of Scott and his girlfriend, Allison, and they were sparring - but it didn't look like a sparring match.

It looked like a no-holds barred fight.

If they were pulling punches and kicks at all, Steve couldn't see any evidence of it. There was something almost feral about the fight, a latent power getting unleashed for this match. They laid into each other like trained enemy combatants in the field.

Natasha hummed, as on the little screen, Allison dodged a punch, ducked under Scott's arm, and whirled around to latch onto his shoulder. She planted a foot on his backside and leveraged herself up, until she had a knee slung over his shoulder and herself wrapped around her head. It looked like a childish yet effective imitation of one of Natasha's most successful moves.

Scott countered it the same way Steve usually did - throwing himself backward to slam into the ground, painfully hard. Steve only did it in the field because he knew his head would heal from it even if he did land wrong. With Nat, he knew she could get herself out of that without hurting herself, or hurting him too much. If done wrong, that move could result in a fatal head injury.

But they didn't do it wrong. Allison threw herself off him at the last second, flipping mid-air and landing in a crouch. Scott was relaxed on his landing, enough to swing his hips back up and jump
back onto his feet, dodging Allison's sweeping kick. She took it in stride, immediately turning to plant herself on a knee and leveraging her foot into a back kick straight into Scott's chest. He blocked it with his arms, but stumbled back long enough for Allison to twist again and also get to her feet.

Steve remembered how often Scott would go down when practicing lacrosse with the boys. Even taking a ball to chest would set him wheezing. A kick like that should've left him on the ground, not blocking half a dozen strikes and then lifting Allison up to attempt to throw her - and remain standing when she clung to his arm and spun her weight around to throw them both to the ground.

They grappled, not like kids wrestling, but using moves Steve's seen Clint and Nat demonstrate for SHIELD operations cadets.

Eventually, Stiles' voice, from behind the 'camera' - most likely holding the phone recording this - yelled, "Time!"

Allison and Scott froze, half twisted around each other on the ground, and staring at each other.

They weren't staring in shock at their capabilities, nor with the brutality of a moment ago that evaporated at Stiles' shout.

They stared at each other with young love, like they were about to kiss each other.

Steve never found out if they did, because the camera jolted and turned, until Stiles was filming himself.

"Why do I get the uncomfortable feeling I just filmed their foreplay?" Stiles asked.

"Stiles!" Scott and Allison yelped in indignant unison, just as the video ended.

Steve snorted, the flashing humor doing nothing to ease his rattled nerves.

"See what I mean?" Nat asked, exiting the video screen.

"Yeah," Steve said, then frowned, taking a closer look at the timestamp. "This - this would've been right around the time the boys kidnapped Jackson."

"When they did what?!" Nat demanded.

Steve swallowed. "They said it was some kind of joke. They kidnapped him, kept him in a police van in the middle of the woods, tried to text his dad like they were him. The Dad figured it out, they got caught. The boys said it was supposed to be a prank that had gone wrong. I'm pretty sure they were trying to make him suffer the same way Lydia had before he'd dumped her."

"The girl Bruce is e-mailing, right?" Nat asked. "The one who had a mental breakdown and spent three days naked in the woods?" Steve nodded, and Nat frowned. "Is that relevant?"

"I have no idea," Steve answered honestly. "Because I can't see a connection, but..." He took a deep breath. "Scott has serious asthma. Almost as bad as what I had before the serum, and back then..." He pointed to the video. "I would've gone down in ten seconds flat, not lasted almost three minutes."

Nat pursed her lips. "He progressed rapidly over the last few months. At first, I dismissed it. He already does sports, and he'd been trying to do this on his own for so long, I attributed his rapid progress to that. And for the most part, that explanation is still what makes the most sense...for him."

Steve frowned, but didn't say anything, letting her continue.
"It was actually the girl, who first set off alarm bells," Nat said. "The way she fights, it was...familiar."

"Familiar how?" Steve asked.

"I'm not sure," Nat said. "But - every time I watch, I feel like I'm supposed to be taking notes or something."

Steve felt his heart skip a beat. When she said felt in that tone of voice and with this meaning...

"You think this is connected to the Red Room?" Steve asked.

"It can't be," Natasha said. "I've already done background checks - and there was a lot that was easy to dig up, after her aunt. General consensus in the FBI seems to be that the family tends to bend a lot of rules when it comes to firearms sales, but not much more than what goes on in the Bible Belt. No one looked too hard at it."

"Did you?" Steve asked.

"Somewhat," she said. "I did start figuring out that a lot of violence seems to follow them. You look at them individually, it's nothing too unusual. Basic, low-level organized crime. But taken all together..." Here, she took a deep breath. "And it still doesn't explain Scott, how he can move so well with the asthma and low muscle-tone you described him as having, and..." She started tapping at her phone. It appears Stiles sent her that particular video, because she tapped out of it to her general message center, then tapped at Scott's name. She scrolled through messages - half written in English, half in Spanish - to another video.

"You remember his face in the second video?" Nat asked. "The one I just showed you?"

Steve nodded, slow and guarded. "What about it?"

"That was recorded less than eight hours after this was," Nat said, and started playing another video.

It seemed the same as the one she just showed him - only clumsier and slower. Scott and Allison were still just as passionate, bordering on feral. But twice, their footing slipped when they landed from some complicated jump, Scott tangled his arm through hers accidentally, and Allison actually landed a punch on his face, giving him a split lip.

A split lip which he didn't have in the other video.

The video ended the fight halting at the ding of a timer, and Scott walking over to wherever the phone was propped up to record them.

Nat waited, silent.

"When I split my lip," Steve said, measuring out his words. "It heals like any other cut I get. A little slower than my skin, but still much faster than any normal humans." He swallowed. "And it still takes me half a day for it to disappear completely."

With a nod, Nat said, "Did you see or hear anything-"?

"No," Steve said. "This is...this is the first time I'm getting any reason to be - I don't even know what I'm supposed to be, right now."

Nat exited out of the video. "At first, I was watching the girl trying to figure out why her fighting
style felt so familiar. Then I started watching him, because I remembered you joking about how Scott's lungs are almost as bad as yours were before Rebirth. I started to wonder if he's really progressing so fast because he'd already put in so much work before, or if it's something else." She took a deep breath. "Stiles mentioned how Scott couldn't play on the lacrosse team. The only reason Scott was on the team at all was because their coach needed him to help the 'real' players. Scott could do the maneuvers perfectly. He just could never sustain them long enough to play a game."

"Those who can't do," Steve quoted.

"Teach," Nat finished for him with a nod.

"But all of a sudden," Steve continued for her, remembering the text he got when the Avengers had gone out for celebratory dinner together. "He's on the team's star position. And named co-captain."

She nodded. "At first, I was thinking steroids. Sad, but not unusual."

"Except they wouldn't cure his asthma or even reduce it like that," Steve started.

"And they wouldn't heal injuries so fast," Nat finished.

Steve frowned at the video. Watching it, something was bugging him, too. He held out his hand and she passed it over, letting him go back to the first video Nat showed him - the second one these two had sent.

As he watched it again, he asked, "You said you dug into her family?"

"Yeah," Nat said. "Nothing noteworthy, outside of the serial killer. They sell customized guns and antique weapons. They've been doing it for generations. The family used to make and sell knives and swords and the like at the start of the 20th century. Not to mention archery equipment, custom and generic."

Steve whistled, impressed, as he watched Scott and Allison at the peak of their fight.

"They look like us," he mused.

He meant it speculatively, but Natasha froze, eyes wide. She grabbed the phone and moved the video back by about two minutes.

"That's it!" she breathed.

Steve frowned, and looked closer.

"She looks like me," Nat said. "And not just that, but watch-" Scott took a pretty harsh blow to his leg, but moved with it and then ignored it, continued to strike out at her.

"That's what I do," Steve realized, leaning in closer. "I take some hits because I can withstand them."

"A lot of guys who want to think they're tougher than they are do the same thing," Nat said. "So I ignored it, but - it actually works almost as well for him as it does for you. And her-" Allison did that muted mimicry of Natasha's leggy headlock. "That's...Steve, I swear to god, this is almost like a Red Room demonstration video. A smaller and weaker female opponent against a larger and stronger male one." She bit her lip. "Maybe that's why I felt like I had to take notes - I had to watch dozens of these as a child."

"A stronger opponent..." Steve tapped at the screen to pause it on a shot where Scott was holding up
Allison with only one side of his body. Mostly his arm. "I saw him on Thanksgiving. He was pretty strong, but not *that* strong. He couldn't have built up his strength this much in only a few months."

"Do you have any idea of what this could be about?" Nat asked.

Steve stared at the frozen image, but after a minute, he shook his head.

"Once Stiles calms down and stops ignoring me, I'll prod a bit and see if I can find something out." He paused, then added, "Please, don't take this to SHIELD."

Nat rolled his eyes. "Of course not, though I doubt it would matter. They've been getting leads all the time, and 'superhuman tips' have skyrocketed since the Battle of New York."

"You going to ask Scott about this?" Steve asked, already standing up to stretch his legs.

She stood up, too. "Sort of. If there's something he's actively hiding, I'm going to have to be careful."

"He's a kid," Steve said.

Nat's expression darkened. "So was I."

Steve pulled out his phone and sent Stiles a text, asking if they could talk, as he and Nat bid each other goodbye.

He pocketed the phone, then went on a small grocery run and headed home. There, he checked his messages.

Stiles was still ignoring him.

~*~

Stiles continued to ignore his texts for the rest of the day, that night, and the following day, too.

So Steve was a bit surprised when he woke up on Saturday morning to see John calling him.

"Hey, John," Steve started.

"S-Steve."

Steve froze where he lay in bed, hearing the shaking in that single name.

"John?" Steve asked, pushing himself upright in worry. The Sheriff was one of the most reserved and stoic men Steve had ever met in his life. In many ways, he reminded Steve of Colonel Phillips.

Steve remembered just what it took to leave Col. Phillips rattled. This was the first time he'd ever seen - or rather, heard - the Sheriff be so afraid.

"Steve," John said, sounding terrified and like he was talking around tears, around a lump in his throat that Steve was painfully familiar with. "Last night, there was - so much blood, half the force, and Matt - the killer, we- we just-"

"John," Steve said, swinging his legs over the side of his bed, feeling more alert than his few hours' sleep could answer for. "What are you talking about?"

He heard John take two deep breaths. Even after, Steve could hear the trembling in every inhale and exhale as he spoke.
"Last night," John said finally. "There was a mass murder at the police station."

Steve's stomach dropped right through his marshmallow mattress.

"What happened?" he asked. Not as a man to his adoptive family, but an officer to a soldier, because Steve knew what it was like to need a rock in the midst of chaos.

"Stiles...he figured out who the killer was," John said, sounding like he was still in shock. "We went to the station. But Matt found out, and - he had a gun, and..."


John took another deep breath, and started explaining.

Three hours, two phone calls, and one more ignored text later, and Steve was on a plane to California.

~*~

Chapter End Notes

Stiles' POV is the sequel, which is up! ^_^ And I want it known for the record that I'd written that Pokemon reference in before Pokemon Go was released.

Yes, I will eventually include the nogitsune, Agents of SHIELD, and Civil War. No, this is not a Scott-bashing or a Tony-bashing fic. Also, are you guys going to care too much if I make Deucalion a Russian mobster?

Preview of Chapter 6:

"Holy shit, you're Captain America!" she cried out. Her wide eyes, greasy blonde hair, and torn up leather jacket all gleamed in the dim light of the Argents' front porch.

"Yes, I am," Steve agreed. "You must be Erica."
**Soak in Warm Water**

Chapter Summary

This was at least the fifth weirdest thing Steve had ever seen in his life.

Maybe even the fourth.

Chapter Notes

Happy Star Wars Day, everybody!

I finally published a chapter shorter than the previous one. :P Yes, the chapter count went up again, shhh!

It's come to my attention that many of you haven't seen Teen Wolf. Thank you so much for giving this crossover a chance! :D I tried to write this chapter to be understandable without having seen the show. If something still confuses you, please ask me about it! (Though be warned, a lot of it is stuff that'll get explained next chapter.) ^_^

(And if you only know Teen Wolf via Sterek fandom, please disregard everything you know and consider reading this. I know seems is aggressive, but I'd rather lose a few readers now, than be accused of baiting-and-switching later.)

**New Warnings:** Violation of bodily autonomy, and slight gore. Nothing worse than the show. Though that's not really saying much...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

~*~

Steve woke up to the sound of Stiles' screaming.

Same way he had for the last three days.

Lurching out of his bed was routine at this point. He ran out of his room, almost hitting the opposite wall as he shot across the hall to Stiles' room.

Inside, Steve barely dodged Stiles' flailing limbs to squeeze in behind the sleeping boy.

"Stiles," he said, in the calmest voice he could manage. He wrapped his arms around Stiles', pinning his arms in an embrace as the boy continued to thrash around, still stuck in a nightmare. "Stiles!"

Stiles jerked and his eyes finally opened as he yelled, "Dad!"

"He's okay," Steve said immediately, keeping his voice calm despite the flailing teenager in his arms.
"He's okay, you're okay, you're in your bedroom, and the attack was several days ago."

Stiles stilled and looked around, chest heaving as he realized his surroundings. Clutching Stiles as tightly as he was, Steve could feel Stiles' heartbeat start to slow down.

"...Steve?" Stiles asked.

Steve nodded, his chin rubbing against the top of Stiles' head as the teen slumped down in bed. "Yeah," he said. "It's me."

"I woke you up, again," Stiles mumbled, squirming to disentangle himself from Steve's embrace. Steve let him go, sitting back a little and giving Stiles the space he needed.

"It's okay," Steve said. "I'll grab a nap later."

Stiles nodded - well, it was more of a vague jerk of his head, but close enough.

"Let's go make breakfast," Steve said. "We both need it."

He and Stiles didn't say a word as they headed down to the kitchen. He kept an eye on Stiles, letting him take the lead on breakfast. The simple actions helped wake him up and pull him further and further away from his nightmare. By the time they sat down to eat, Stiles was even grumbling about enriched wheat and whole grains and whatever the hell he decided was wrong with Steve's waffles, now.

Steve had tried to encourage Stiles to go running with him, that first night. It was a no-go, but cooking worked well-enough.

Halfway through, Steve heard the ringtone of Stiles' morning alarm from upstairs. Stiles jolted, but slipped upstairs to shut it off - and didn't come back down.

With a sigh, Steve covered up his breakfast to finish later, before clearing the rest of the plates.

He hoped Stiles was eating enough at school, because he sure as hell wasn't at home.

(He hoped, but he didn't expect.)

Upstairs, Steve got dressed and washed his face, scratching at the growing beard - but he still not shaving it. A teenaged serial killer murdering several police officers in their own station, right on the heels of another serial killer, drew press from across the country. The last thing this town needed was the media circus of Captain America in town.

Thank god his beard seemed to be a shade or two darker than his hair. Combined with a hat and some sunglasses, and no one ever had a clue who or what he was.

That came in handy half an hour later, when he and Stiles pulled up to the school. Steve stopping in front of the school, he got out of the car and pulled Stiles into a tight, full-bodied hug.

"Thanks," Stiles said, not pulling away for several moments.

"Any time," Steve said. "And remember, send me a text or call me, and I'll come get you, okay? No matter what time it is. Your dad and I can clear things up with your school later."

Stiles nodded against Steve's chest before he pulled away. He clutched at his backpack straps, and looked nervously towards the school. There, Steve could see several students glancing right back at him.
"I hate living in a small town," Stiles said. "Everyone all up in each other's business."

"Is that why half of them seem to be pointing at me?" Steve asked. No one seemed to be pulling out their smartphones or anything, so it didn't look like he'd been made.

Stiles flushed. "When you went missing for a bit, I kinda mentioned my 'special forces uncle' in class, once. I think people were starting to think I'd made the whole thing up, until now."

Steve nodded. Hiding his face did nothing to hide his body, and he had no delusions about his physique. He patted Stiles on the back, reminded him to keep his phone on, and watched him walk into the school.

Stiles went, pausing once and only once as he looked to the side of the school. Steve followed his gaze to the bike racks, spotting Scott wheeling in and bending down to lock the bike. As soon as Scott looked up, Stiles turned away and walked into the school.

Scott didn't seem surprised, or even particularly hurt. He just looked resigned, slumping a little, before jogging up to the main entrance and slipping into the school, too.

Something was going to break, soon - and it killed Steve that he had no idea what it would be.

He climbed back into Stiles' jeep. It took him two tries but he got it working, and headed back home.

Beacon Hills had suffered two serial killers in a span of only a few months. Between Kate Argent's killing spree to cover up her arson, and Matt Dahler's bloody and brutal rampage through the local police force, most of California and half the rest of the country were zeroing in on this small town - and the survivors of the teenage serial killer's bloody last stand.

There were only about half a dozen reporters parked around the neighborhood, but they were bad enough.

While Stiles normally parked the jeep out in the driveway or even on the street for convenience, Steve pulled the jeep into the garage. Between the beard, the hat, and the sunglasses, it was unlikely that anyone would recognize Steve, even the press - but none of them were interested in tempting fate, or igniting a man-hunt for Steve's identity.

The house was a little dim, due to all the blinds being pulled shut. Granted, this being California, that didn't necessarily mean much, but it still jarred him, compared to how it usually looked. In the kitchen, he found John sitting at the table, picking his way through the egg-white omelet Stiles had left for him while working on his department laptop.

Steve caught a glimpse of mangled, blood-covered flesh on the screen, and turned away.

"Are you home for the day, or just on a working lunch?" Steve asked.

"Bit of both," John said. "My deputies made me come home to eat, shower, and get some sleep, but I'll head back in a few hours." With a bitter smile, he said, "Every other law-enforcement agency with even a scratch of jurisdiction is coming in on this, anyway. Goddamn vultures." Taking another bite of his omelet, he muttered, "At least the FBI didn't send Rafael, this time."

"Scott's father?" Steve confirmed, reaching for his plate of unfinished waffles on the counter. Covered in fruit and saturated in syrup, John looked almost offended by it when Steve sat at the table and went back to eating it.

"Yeah," John said. "The man specializes in serial killers and mass murders. This sort of thing would
be right up his alley. The only reason it isn't him is because of his own son's involvement." John clicked and typed something on the laptop, before pushing it away a bit. "God, I need a drink."

Steve froze, wondering if he needed to find an even better hiding spot for the booze he'd pilfered out of the kitchen when he first got here. John saw this, though, and waved away his concern. "Relax," he said. "I've barely got my job back, I'm not going to hit the bottle again anytime soon." He sighed. "I just really, really want to."

With a sympathetic nod, Steve resumed his breakfast, though he made a mental note to relocate the two bottles he'd found, just in case.

"Press still out there?" John asked. Steve nodded around his mouthful, and John groaned. "Fantastic," he grumbled. He eyed his laptop, seeming to debate something, then with a sigh, pulled it closer to him.

"Stiles always tells me not to read my own press," Steve said, realizing what John was doing.

John raised an eyebrow. Steve conceded with a silent nod, turning his attention back to his food. He didn't listen to that advice as much as he should, and John had even less buffers between him and the press than Steve did.

“What the…”

Steve looked up from his waffle to see John frowning at the news.

“Hm?”

“It’s saying that the only non-fatal injuries were me and Stiles,” John said, bewildered. Steve waited for him to elaborate, taking another bite of the waffle. “Steve - Scott was *shot*!”

The fork froze halfway up to Steve’s mouth, syrup dripping onto the table.

“…what?” Steve demanded, setting it down.

John kept reading, looking more and more panicked as he did.

“Abdominal,” John muttered, reaching the end of the clipping and looking lost as he looked at Steve. “He - I remember - it was the only shot Dahler fired, that night. I remember Melissa’s scream, and the blood…when Dahler was locking her in the cell, Scott was standing right next to me and he was - he was barely standing. I could *smell* the blood, there was that much!”

The fork bent in his hand at that mental image, at the idea of a teenager locking up Melissa in one of the jail cells at gun-point.

A bullet-wound to the gut would have been the only thing keeping Steve at bay if someone held his mother at gunpoint.

The problem being that back when his mother was alive, such a wound would’ve killed Steve. But Scott…

“That’s not possible,” Steve said, thinking of this morning.

“I saw him-”

“I saw him bike up to school, this morning,” Steve said. John’s jaw snapped shut. “He - he was a little slow, but he was still moving and he didn’t seem to have any problem bending down to lock up
his bike.” Steve swallowed, absently wiping that drop of maple syrup off the table. His conversation with Nat resurfaced in his memory. “He’s moving like I do, a few days after getting shot.”

John looked down at his sugar-free orange juice.

“This can’t be…” John took a deep breath. “That night, when Matt locked up Melissa in the cell… she was begging him to let her take care of Scott.” John shut his eyes, and Steve pretended he didn’t see the moisture on the man’s eyelashes. “Matt seemed so sure that Scott would be fine. I thought it was just typical teenaged misunderstanding of how the world works. Too many action movies, not enough education…” He opened his eyes, looking at Steve. “But at one point, he said… when Melissa was begging, Matt said to Scott, ‘they have no idea, do they?’”

Taking a deep breath and losing his appetite, Steve pushed his plate away. “Wait here,” he said, and went to retrieve his tablet.

Five minutes later, he was playing the video, one of the two Steve had made Nat send him. “This is the first video Natasha showed me,” Steve said. When Scott and Allison started laying into each other, John’s eyes opened wide and round in shock. "She's been helping Scott with his techniques, and Scott's been working with his girlfriend on it, too."

"This…” John swallowed, still not taking his eyes off the video. "This is - I had no idea he was even capable of something like this!"

"Neither was she," Steve murmured. "Originally, it was - I guess you could say the 'style' of the fight that first got to Nat. Allison and Scott look the way Natasha and I do when we spar, and Allison’s fighting style was a little too familiar to her."

John slowly nodded. When the video ended, he looked Steve in the eye and asked, "'Originally'?”

Steve pulled up the second video. "It came around eight hours after this one, which Nat critiqued to help them." He hit play, then added, "Watch his lip."

A minute later, John frowned when Allison busted Scott’s lip. It took another ten seconds for the implications to sink in, horror and confusion spreading across his face as he watched the remainder of the video in shocked silence.

"...eight hours?” John croaked, once it was over. "What - what does…” He shook his head, standing up and pacing by the table. "How can Scott have an advanced healing rate?” he asked. "No way in hell is he old enough to be a part of any kind of super-soldier experiment."

"And most child-soldier programs involve kidnapping a much younger child and isolating them from their family,” Steve continued.

"God, everything's been so weird, lately,” John said. "We still don't know whether or not Matt is connected to Argent, somehow. Hell, we still can't figure out why she murdered the Hales!"

Steve frowned, something niggling at his memory. "Hale?” he asked.

"Yeah, they're the family Kate Argent murdered six years ago," John recited. He paused, then looked at Steve. "Why?"

"That name sounds familiar,” Steve said. It took him a few minutes to remotely access the SHIELD servers, but he ran a search on the name, narrowing it down to Beacon Hills.

Then his eyebrows shot up at the file that came up.
"Steve?"

"SHIELD had a file on them," Steve said. Eyes wide, John rounded the table, and Steve tilted the tablet towards him. It currently showed an old photo of the Hale family, dated to a decade ago. "But it's only the Bullshit Bureau."

"The what bureau?" John asked, looking between Steve and the old picture.

Steve set down the tablet, trying to figure out how best to explain this. "They're officially called the…" He tapped one of the more bureaucratic links on the file. "Department of Thaumaturgic Analysis and Preternatural Intelligence," he read off. "They study myths and legends to look for useful grains of truth. They rarely come up with anything, but when they do…"

"…when they do?" John prodded.

"…some of the mythological creatures from history and legend are real," Steve said. "Which I imagine would shock me more if my first mission in the 21st century didn't involve me fighting alongside a god from Norse mythology to battle aliens."

John fell back into the chair by Steve's. "That…"

"Apparently, either mermaids or selkies or something along those lines are real," Steve said with a shrug. "And serve as a unit in the US Navy. There are also rumors about a lot of programs around the world tapping into myths and legends. No one paid attention to them or thought they were anything more than Cold War propaganda. At least, not until there was a Norse god wandering around the halls and asking how to use the coffee machine. And the thing is, the object that started the Chitauri invasion? Also once nothing but another myth the Bullshit Bureau was chasing down, until it was in SHIELD's labs."

With a slow nod, John said, "And they're…what, investigating the Hale family?" he asked.

Steve started skimming the files on his screen again. "It's hard to tell - SHIELD is very need-to-know, so I can't actually see much. But…" He frowned. "It…looks like the Hales might not be human?"

John's eyebrows shot up. "On a scale of you to Thor, how 'not human' are we talking?" he asked.

"I have no idea," Steve admitted. "We - the Avengers aren't the only super-human assets that SHIELD has. We're just the most powerful ones, and as of the Battle of New York, the most famous ones. But I'm not sure what the others are, how much is rumor and how much is fact."

John's eyes were wide, but he nodded in increasing understanding. "Where do the Hales fall into this?"

"Not a clue," Steve said, with a wince. "I'd put in a request for more access, but…"

"If it's not a mission or case you're working on, you're unlikely to get it," John said. Steve nodded, and the Sheriff sighed. "Okay, well - is there anything on the Argent family?"

"Believe it or not, I might have to ask Nat about that," Steve said.

"Natasha?" John asked.

Steve pursed his lips. "Those videos I showed you? It was Allison that made Nat take a closer look at them in the first place. Something about the combat style between her and Scott was familiar for
her, so she started digging." When John opened his mouth, Steve repeated, "They look like us - me and Nat - when they spar."

"And you have super-healing, and Scott might, too," John said, rubbing his forehead.

"On the surface, it looks like the Argents are a pretty typical arms-dealing family," Steve said. "Renowned for high-caliber weapons among law-enforcement circles. Boutique and custom weapons to private citizens, some of which tap-dance on the edge of legality at best. Minus the serial killer, there's nothing unusual. If they lived in the Bible belt, it would even be typical."

John nodded, reaching across the table to drag his laptop over. "Pretty much what we found," he said. "Our own initial assumption was that there were some organized crime ties gone wrong. We dismissed that since the Hales had no ties to organized crime…"

He trailed off. "John?" Steve prodded.

The Sheriff took a deep breath. "The Hales have no known ties to any kind of organized crime - but they were a very wealthy and influential family. The family's been here since the Gold Rush, they practically founded this town. There was a lot of money that seemed to disappear or couldn't be tracked, but even after the murder, we didn't think too much on it. Old money like that, it's expected. They got into all kinds of disagreements with local political leaders, school boards, that sort of thing. But there was never any indication of anything downright illegal. Nothing even that unethical, beyond the usual suspiciously-timed public works donations that influential families get into."

"But you think there was something else going on, after all?" Steve asked.

"Honestly? I don't even know anymore," John said, skimming something on his laptop. It looked like financial records, something Steve could make neither heads nor tails of. "There is nothing to suggest either the Hales or the Argents had any kind of organized crime ties. The only organized crime even in this town is a little Yakuza chapter, and while I can't pin anything on them, they mostly seem to deal with white-collar crime. I haven't exactly looked, but I don't recall anything connecting them to either family."

"And either way," Steve said. "It still wouldn't explain how Scott got a healing factor."

John's fingers froze over the keyboard as he remembered.

"...damnit," he said, leaning forward and rubbing his forehead. "You're right. The Argents and the Hales could both turn out to be hidden suburban crimelords, and that still wouldn't explain half of this. Scott, the animal killings, or any of the other weirdness." Leaning back in his seat and staring rather helplessly at the screen of his laptop, he said, "There's something going on, something bigger than competing crimelords or plain old serial killers." After a moment, he snorted. "Plain old serial-killers'. That's not a phrase I ever expected to have to say."

Steve looked at John's face, the laptop, then his tablet. With a rough swallow, he set down his tablet, shut down the laptop, and pulled John's plate across the table.

"You should finish your breakfast," Steve said.

"I'm not hungry."

"That's why."

With a rough laugh, John nodded, finishing up the last few bites of the omlet. He looked at the laptop when Steve put their dishes in the sink, but ultimately he went upstairs, took a shower, and went to
Steve washed all the dishes, then went back to bed himself after sending off a text to Nat, asking her to send him anything she could get her hands on about the Hales and the Argents. A few hours later, he woke up in time to see John off, the Sheriff resoundingly ignoring the press barrage. One upside, at least - the reporters followed him to the station, leaving the house alone.

Which was good, since a little while after, Steve got a text from Stiles reading simply, *Please come get me.*

Steve shot off a quick text to John to call the school, and by the time he arrived at Beacon Hills High School, Stiles was waiting in the front office. He all but leaped up from the bland chairs when he saw Steve.

"You okay?" Steve asked, mindful of the administrative ladies listening in. He pulled Stiles into a tight hug, and subtly tugged the bill of his hat even lower.

"Yes," Stiles lied. "Coach cancelled lacrosse practice because the FBI is interviewing him about Matt and my last period is just a study-hall anyway and I can't - I don't want to deal with people, Steve, please don't make me-"

Stiles' rambling was muffled by Steve's jacket.

Steve slowly pulled them out the door and into the parking lot. He considered letting Stiles drive to help relax him, but between the boys' shaking hands and drooping shoulders, Steve opted to make the drive, himself.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Steve asked.

Stiles sniffled. "The school is making me see the counselor, tomorrow," he said bitterly. "And she'll make me talk about it, anyway."

"That's always fun," Steve drawled. "I still have to see a psychiatrist once a month."

Stiles sniffled. "How long are you in town for?" he hedged.

Steve shrugged. "As long as you need me? As long as SHIELD lets me?" He shot Stiles a hopeful, sidelong smile as they pulled out of the parking lot. "I'll be here for the last lacrosse game, that's for sure."

This time, Stiles' laugh was wet and bitter.

Steve knew the feeling.

~*~

As devastating as the circumstances of Steve's presence in Beacon Hills were, there was one upside to it: he got to see the BHHS Cyclones' Championship Game. Steve and John took some seats towards the back of the small lacrosse stands, both because of their heights, and to keep Steve out of most people's sights. He didn't have his big sunglasses - just the hat - and felt a little exposed without something to hide his identity.

None of them expected Stiles to play, least of all Stiles himself. He seemed irritably content with being the King of the Bench.
"But why is Scott on the bench?" Steve asked, as he and John watched the game start. He leaned so he was speaking right into John's ear. "I thought he made first line?"

John frowned. "They have a pretty strict academic policy to be on the sports teams, here. He's been struggling in school, lately..." He sighed. "Which only started around the same time as all the other crap. Melissa's been losing her mind over it."

They continued to watch the game in relative silence. Steve, in particular, noted that it looked like everyone was avoiding Jackson Whittemore - even some of his own teammates.

He frowned as he remembered something.

"Didn't Jackson's father put a restraining order on the boys?" he asked. "Wouldn't that ban them from the game altogether?"

John swallowed. "David - Jackson's father - rescinded it after Matt's Massacre." He huffed in bitter humor. "Said that after going through something like - that - the boys didn't need more problems on their plate." Watching the Cyclones' aggressive play, he added, "And to be honest - I'm starting to think their reasons weren't about Lydia, but were related to Matt."

"Have you asked?"


Stiles and John weren't communicating beyond logistics and the occasional calming-down-from-a-nightmare phonecall. There was no way in hell John could've asked about something like kidnapping a classmate. Realistically, they hadn't really talked to each other since the kidnapping had actually happened in the first place.

Any further speculation went out the window, though, when Stiles was put into the game.

Stiles was put into the game.

At least something good was come out of this hectic night.

Steve and John stood up, cheering, when Stiles was put on the field. They damn well hugged each other and Steve happily bore John yelling, "My son is on the field!" right into his ear.

Of course, out of deference to the people behind them, they also sat back down, but still.

John was grinning, and even though Steve was pretty sure they were about to watch the Cyclones lose, he felt happy, too.

Out of all the sporting events that could have been his first one to actually attend since he woke up in the 21st century - since 1944 - Steve was glad it was this one.

Even more so when it turned out Steve had been wildly off about the game.

"He has the ball?" John asked.

"He has the ball!" Steve cried out, grinning and cheering.

And a moment later-

"He scored! John, Stiles scored!"
That wasn't even the first time.

When Stiles scored another goal for the Cyclones, Steve cheered for him, almost leaping up and only staying in his seat for the sake of the pair of parents behind him. He grinned and threw his arms up, waving like a maniac.

It took him a moment to realize John wasn't cheering, too.

"John?" he asked, lowering his arms as the two teams squared off again.

"Stiles - he almost never plays," John said. "What if - what if he's like Scott?"

Steve frowned, looking between Stiles, and Scott - who was sitting on the bench…and looking around, rather than paying attention to the game. The way his gaze was darting around, it was like he was looking for someone, and not finding them.

"...no," Steve said, watching Stiles. "He's not any faster or stronger than he's ever been. He's still slower than most of the other players, and not throwing as far as them." He continued to watch, trying not to feel ill at the thought of using his combat analysis skills on a high school lacrosse game. "He's just really good at dodging, and moving around the other players."

It became more evident once Scott - despite whatever was keeping him on the bench before - was put into the game, anyway, when two other players were injured.

"...that's not possible," John said, eyes wide as he watched Scott playing in tandem with Stiles - and even Jackson. "He…Steve, he was standing right next to me when Matt was putting Melissa in the cell. I could smell the blood from where he'd been shot!" He looked at Steve. "Would you…?"

Steve nodded. "This is - this would be normal for me. But there is literally no one else I know who has this kind of healing rate." Watching Scott and Stiles' play on the field, he added, "Tony, Nat, and Clint all have normal human healing rates." He tilted his head. "And uh - Thor and the Hulk wouldn't be affected by a handgun in the first place." With a snort, he added, "Or most human guns in general. The Chitauri's weapons barely touched them. And the Hulk beats up tanks."

"Matt used a normal 9mm," John said. "That was no alien weapon."

They looked back out onto the game. The away team had gained the advantage, but there was enough time in the game for the Cyclones to get it back.

As they did five minutes later.

"Let's just watch the game," John said finally, voice steadier than it was moments ago. "And think about this later."

Unfortunately, 'later' never happened.

The good news was that the Cyclones won the game.

Despite everything weighing them down, Steve and John jumped up and cheered - especially since Stiles was the one who seemed to be behind the win. Their boy had scored four separate goals, and combined with Scott's defense, had won the game.

The small crowd poured out onto the field, including them.

It was just as John and Steve reached the grass that the lights went out.
All of them.

"What the…?" Steve asked, reaching out to get a hold of John's shoulder, before they could get separated and lost.

There was chaos from the middle of the field as dozens of cheering, running people collided into each other, only for the cheering to taper off. He heard laughter from some of the teenagers, jokes about raves and midnight parties, happy to continue celebrating in the dark.

But just as Steve was about to offer to go check on some of the lights, himself, he heard a scream.

It came from the middle of the field, and Steve cut a path through the crowd towards the source, wincing as one of the mobile field lights flickered back on. The two teams of lacrosse players were huddled around something, and Steve's breath caught in his throat when he and John saw what.

"Isn't that…"

Laid out on the field, covered in blood from a large stab wound in his stomach, was a boy Steve had only seen in pictures from the attack on the Winter Dance - and heard Stiles complain about.

"Jackson!" the Cyclone goalie cried out.

There was more and more screaming as people realized what had happened, the entire crowd moving like a wave away from the victim. Even Steve felt like he was being crushed as he moved against it. The two teams of lacrosse players looked like a rock in the storm with how everyone moved around them.

Collapsing to his knees by Jackson, Steve pressed shaking hands to the boy's open wound, the teenager's chest heaving under his hands. Before he could do anything else, a smaller and familiar pair of hands gently shooed him away. He looked up to see Melissa already checking his vitals and applying pressure with far more expertise than Steve. He fell back on his ankles, looking up only to see John already on the phone, calling in an ambulance and some officers to assess the scene.

Steve looked towards the group of terrified boys in red jerseys, looking through the faces and frowning when he realized someone was missing.

And not just anyone.

"John," Steve called out. "Where's Stiles?"

The Sheriff got off the phone, frowned at Steve, then looked around - realizing what Steve had. "What the…"

With Melissa focusing on Jackson, Steve stood up and turned around several times on the spot.

"Where's my son?" John demanded, and all around them, teenaged boys started muttering as they realized it.

"What?" Melissa asked, looking up with panic on her face and blood on her hands.

Steve swallowed, looking around one final time, before looking down at her.

"Stiles is missing," Steve said, chest heaving like a train in the mountains as he realized one of his worst nightmares just came true. "Stiles is gone."

~*~
"No, I'm not sure that this doesn't have to do with me!" Steve snapped at the SHIELD agent on the phone. "I'm not even sure where Stiles is!" In the stunned silence, Steve took a deep breath. "Look, I'm not calling in for help. Most likely, this is related to his father's work, not mine. But I'm keeping you apprised, because we have no idea what is happening or where he is."

"Of course, Captain," Sitwell said. "I'll fill out a report, but I'll hold off on filing it. You have my number, text me or call me with updates."

Steve nodded, even though Sitwell wouldn't be able to see him. "Thank you."

He hung up and turned around, watching as Jackson's father climbed into the ambulance after his son. He made his way back to the nervous crowd, trying not to wince at the Cyclones' nervous looking around. These boys should've been celebrating winning the game, right now, not…this.

"Steve?" John asked, voice and expression barely restrained.

"I kept SHIELD apprised…and if this turns out to be-" Steve swallowed. "Something serious, they can send in some reinforcement." Looking down, he admitted, "Don't know how much that'll help."

"Will they help, even if this is my fault and not yours?" John asked.

Steve looked around them again. "Yes. Though honestly? I don't think this is because of either of us." He smiled grimly at John. "Stiles is already in so much danger because of you and because of me…of course he not only had to find a third door to danger, but go careening right through it."

John nodded, looking less than a step away from breaking down crying. Turning towards the crowd, he started to walk towards it, only to stop and look around.

"…John?" Steve asked.

"Where's Scott?" he asked.

"Where's-" Steve frowned, looking around. "Or Melissa?"

John started turning around the spot, eyes widening, until a sharp voice said, "They said something about Bilinski."

Steve and John both turned around to see the lacrosse coach, Finstock, standing right there. With scowl lines in his face and dark hair all akimbo as if he'd been playing the game, himself, he looked almost as pissed as Steve felt. What remained of the boys' lacrosse team stood behind him.

"McCall, his mom, and Lahey," Finstock reiterated. "Just ran off, saying they needed to look for Stilin- uh, Stiles." He frowned. "Where is he?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," Steve started. Finstock narrowed his eyes, before they widened.

"You're his uncle?" he asked. "He said something, once, someone in the special forces." He looked Steve up and down. "Didn't believe a word of it until now."

"Believe it," Steve quipped, greatful that he'd grown out his beard enough to not be recognized. He turned away, anyway-

-only to stop short when he saw one of the Cyclones marching up to the away team. The goalie, the one that had yelled Jackson's name in horror a few minutes ago.
"What the hell did you guys do to them?!" the boy in the red jersey demanded.

"It wasn't us!" protested one of the boys in the green jerseys - Steve was pretty sure he was the captain.

"Really?" the Cyclone demanded. "Jackson just so happens to get stabbed after you guys lose and Stiles just so happens to go missing after he costs you the game and you expect us to-"

"One of your teammates turned out to be a serial killer and you think this is on us?" the away team captain demanded.

Steve winced. Right.

Matt Daehler had been on the lacrosse team. Stiles had never mentioned him much, but in all the press about the teenaged serial killer, the most popular photo was the one of him in his lacrosse uniform.

Just as both lacrosse teams looked ready to rush each other, Finstock yelled, "DANNY!"

The angry boy turned around, glaring, but that was enough for John to step between the two lacrosse teams - nudging 'Danny' away from the other team's captain.

"Boys!" the Sheriff snapped, getting all the teenaged lacrosse players' attentions. "I don't know what the hell is happening, here, but whoever is doing all this, fighting won't help." He looked between all the players, one by one, until they looked down. "Everyone, off the field, now. Change, shower, and go home. If I hear about one, single fight, you can bet your asses I'll be calling in squad cars and hauling you off, I don't care how old you are." He looked around. "Understood?"

Silence.

"Is that understood?" John repeated slowly.

It was a testament to how sternly John spoke that over two dozen angry, teenaged boys just nodded - some with clenched jaws and most with glinting eyes, but all of them conceded. They continued to glare at each other as they trooped off vacated the field, Finstock herding 'Danny' and the rest of the team away.

As soon as the lacrosse field was empty, John breathed a sigh of relief, then turned to Steve.

"I'm going to start looking around," he said. "Doubt it'll do any good in a place that was as crowded as this, but maybe I can find…something…"

As John trailed off, Steve realized he was looking at something. Steve followed his eyes, turning around to see…nothing. At least, nothing that he could tell. However, John took off, running towards the edge of the field, the side that opened up towards the woods. John jogged past the edge of the field, past the property line, and halfway to the woods. Steve followed him, slowing down only as he approached what John had seen from the middle of the field.

"Tire tracks?" Steve asked, bewildered.

John was crouching down, hand hovering over the tracks, but not quite touching them.

"Very, very recent tire tracks," John said through gritted teeth. He looked up at Steve. "There was no way this was just some angry kids taking out a sore loss on him. This was a planned kidnapping - and executed by professionals."
They followed the tracks all the way to the road - but the dirt and tire tracks only went a few dozen feet on the asphalt before fading away. A smaller, back-street exit out of the school, there were no security cameras even in this direction. As the Sheriff investigated the area with a far sharper eye than Steve could manage, he called Stiles, then Scott, then - getting the number from John - even Melissa.

No answer.

After a while, they gave up and went back to the parking lot. There, half the crowd had already vacated the area. Half a dozen cops were taking statements from people, and John went over, trying and failing to wipe the harried look from his face as he spoke to his officers. Steve headed towards Stiles' jeep, and sighed when he realized it was locked.

He glanced into the back, though, and spared a moment to be grateful that Stiles was so messy. Anyone could press their noses to the window and still not know what was really in the trunk.

Feeling helpless, Steve pulled out his phone, and took only a moment to decide who to call.

Clint didn't even bother with a greeting, instead answering the call with, "How are they?"

Steve shut his eyes, slumping against the jeep. "After Stiles' team won the game, the lights blew out. When they came back on, one of his teammates was laid out on the field with a stab-wound, and Stiles was gone."

"Gone?" Clint asked.

"Missing. We found some tire-tracks, but there were no cameras even in that direction, and the trail died out almost as soon as it hit the road."

"Oh, shit," Clint said. "I can't imagine there's much I can do all the way over here, but…"

Steve smiled bitterly into the night. "I know, I just - I have no idea what the hell I'm supposed to be doing, right now, or what I even can do. We don't even know why Stiles was kidnapped or what the fuck else he was involved with."

"What do you mean, what else he was involved with?" Clint asked.

Steve took a deep breath. "It would be one thing if he were taken by someone who wanted to take the Sheriff's son as leverage, or someone who wanted to take Captain America's nephew as leverage. But Stiles seems to be getting into some crazy mess completely on his own, and we have no idea what it is, so we don't know where to even start looking. Stiles' friends skedaddled before we could talk to anyone - though it looks like they're looking for Stiles, too."

"Call them?"

"No answer."

"Shit," Clint repeated. "Need me to come over there and help?"

"…not yet."

"You know we'll all fly over there in a heartbeat if you need us, right?" Clint pressed.

"I know!" Steve snapped. He rubbed his forehead, watching John slip inside the school - presumably to go to the boys' locker room. "Sorry. I don't know why I called."
"I can take a few guesses," Clint drawled. "I'd be a wreck if someone took Cooper or Lila or Nate."

"Stiles isn't my kid."

"He's your family."

Steve breathed out through his nose. "How are the kids, by the way?" he asked.

"Good," Clint said. He knew full well that Steve was seeking a distraction. "Cooper lost another toy dinosaur. Nate's his usual self, a screaming little poop machine. Lila's got her heart set on some new Pokemon…thing, I don't even know if it's a toy or a game or what, anymore. Kid's stuff is so complicated, these days."

"I know," Steve said, with a wet chuckle. "I have no idea what most of the stuff in Stiles' room even is."

Clint groaned. "Don't remind me. My kids are going to be teenagers, soon."

Steve's laugh felt awful close to a sob. He was about to offer that Clint call John up for advice, when the man ran back out of the school. The Sheriff was jogging towards his SUV, one hand clutching his phone to his ear while the other one waved Steve over.

"Gotta go," Steve said, already weaving between cars.

"Go," Clint ordered in agreement, the line going dead a moment later.

John ended his own call as Steve approached. Pocketing his phone and pulling out his keys, he said, "Stiles is at the hospital."

"…what?!"

They clambered into the old SUV, and Steve was still struggling with the seat-belt as John explained, "I don't know. I just got a call from the receptionist, saying Stiles was in their ER, and looked pretty beaten up. But he was still conscious, walked in on his own two feet, and didn't appear to have any head-wounds. That was it."

"Beaten up?" Steve asked, bewildered. "And - how'd he get to the ER?"

"I. Don't. Know!" John cried out, knuckles white with how tight he gripped the steering wheel.


They didn't get pulled over or even followed as they broke every speed-limit to get to the hospital. Whether it was because most of the local police force were occupied at the school, or because they knew their boss' car, Steve neither knew nor cared.

Either way, they reached the hospital less than two hours since Stiles went missing in the first place. An ER nurse who recognized the Sheriff took them over to a small corner where Stiles sat.

Steve's heart skipped a beat for the first time since Tony fell out of the Chitauri portal in New York.

Sitting on a hospital bed, Stiles sat in an awkward angle, which must've had something to do with his arm being in a sling. His face was covered in bruises, his lacrosse jersey was missing, and his under-shirt had some blood-stained tears, with white flashes of bandages from underneath. He was slumped sideways against Scott, who stood by the bed and held him up with one arm around his waist and another holding Stiles' good hand. On the other side stood Melissa, still dressed in her
civvies from the game, but sewing neat stitches into what looked like a cut on Stiles' hip. A tall, gangly kid with curly blond hair lurked behind Scott. Despite the fact neither boy was wearing their lacrosse uniform anymore, Steve recognized him from the game. Was this the 'Lahey' that the coach had mentioned?

The red-haired girl standing in angry silence in front of Stiles with her hands on her hips, Steve recognized from pictures. Lydia Martin looked a lot better when she wasn't covered in blood, strapped to a gurney, and being loaded up into an ambulance.

"Stiles!" Steve and John yelled in unison. All five heads snapped up in eerie unison.

John rushed ahead, stopping at the end of the bed. Scott let go of Stiles to let John take his place. John carefully slid beside Stiles, trying not to jostle him under Melissa's care. However, Stiles still hissed in pain a moment later.

"Hey, Dad," Stiles said, anyway. Despite whatever pain he was in, he still leaned into his father's sideways embrace. He turned to Steve with a weak, watery smile. "I'm going to have to send a thank-you note to Sergeant Polkow."

"To who?" Lydia demanded, Isaac looking just as bewildered. Melissa also frowned in confusion, even as she finished stitching up the gash on Stiles' side.

"My self-defense instructor from S.H.I.E.L.D.," Stiles answered. He tried to strengthen his smile, but it didn't work. "His moves helped against the sore-losers who kidnapped me."

Lydia scoffed, and Melissa clenched her jaw in something that looked like fury.

"Uh-huh," John said, watching in something approaching pain as Melissa lifted up Stiles' shirt to press a bandage over the wound she'd just stitched up. "You mean the entire team of sore losers who we were talking to when all of you disappeared after the game?"

Scott, Melissa, and the curly-haired blond boy winced, while Lydia narrowed her eyes at Stiles.

"...well, even high school teams have groupies," Stiles said, shrugging and wincing when he moved the arm in a sling. "These guys must've been friends of the other team-"

"You're telling me a bunch of high school kids managed to get a car up to the field and kidnap you into it, beat you so bad that they broke your arm, and dropped you off at the ER?" Steve asked.

"My arm isn't broken!" Stiles protested, removing his good arm from John's grip to wave at the bad one. "My shoulder was dislocated, that's all." With a winsome smile, he added, "One of the moves Polkow showed me...didn't go as well as I'd expected it to."

"Stiles," John said. Taking a deep breath, he added, "You were kidnapped by professionals, not teenagers. And I'm guessing they're the ones who stabbed Jackson."

Stiles winced, but didn't look surprised. Either Melissa or one of the teenagers must've filled him in.

"Killed him!" Lydia snapped. "I came here to see him, but apparently, he didn't make it."

Before the news could sink in, Steve took a bracing breath and turned to Scott.

"And does any of this have to do with your new healing factor?" Steve asked.

Melissa froze, hands hovering over the little bin of used supplies. Stiles and the other boy paled, and
Scott's eyes widened.

"...his what?" Lydia demanded.

John also looked at Scott. "You were shot in the stomach last week, Scott. Did you really think I'd forget that when I saw you playing a championship game?"

Scott winced. "I...was...I didn't think..."

"And Scott, you remember that Nat's a spy, right?" Steve said. "You sent her two videos of you and Allison sparring, only eight hours apart. The lip that she split in the first one was completely healed in the second one."

Scott shut his eyes like he was pained, the blond boy stared at Scott like he was an idiot, and Stiles glared at Scott. "I told you she'd notice!"

"I was hoping she-"

"She is ex-KGB, you dumbass!" Stiles snapped.

"Ex-KGB?" the blond boy asked, sounding even more confused.

"Well?" John demanded. "We've had two serial killers in this town in less than half a year, we've had crazy killings that we can't discern the real causes of all of, and Scott has a new healing factor. You two kidnapped Jackson Whittemore, who has a stab-wound that as far as we can tell, he somehow inflicted on himself despite having no weapons on hand during the game."

Steve turned to Stiles. "Are these related to each other? And to whoever kidnapped you, right now?"

Stiles opened his mouth, looking ready to protest.

"Yes," Scott said. In Steve's periphery vision, John suddenly went pale and wide-eyed, so Steve turned around-

-and froze when he saw Scott's eyes glowing.

Standing with his back to the rest of the ER, none of the dozens of other people in the massive room would see the way the golden glow in the boy's eyes. But Steve did. And John, and Lydia, and Melissa, and Stiles would've if he weren't facepalming himself.

"And there goes my plausible deniability," Stiles grumbled.

"What, like you had it before?" the blond boy asked.

When John looked between the boy and Scott, the boy rolled his eyes...which flashed gold as he did.

"What the...?" John asked, sounding as dumbfounded as Steve felt.

"You know," Melissa said, looking between the three teenage boys, hands steady but voice shaking. "I still don't know what you are."

"Werewolves."

Everyone looked at Stiles, who sighed.
"Look, I don't have time to explain," Stiles said. "But werewolves are real, you're standing next to two of them - uh, Steve, meet Isaac, Isaac, Steve - and there are a lot more in town and they cause trouble."

"Like the one that attacked me and bit me?" Lydia demanded, taking a step back - but not actually leaving. "I - is that real? That -"

"Certain werewolves can turn other people into them," Stiles said. "And that includes Peter, the guy who bit you, and we don't know why you're not turning, and since he's dead-"

"Not anymore," Scott said. Stiles looked over. "That's why we're here - Peter's...alive. Not an alpha anymore, but alive, and he and Derek told us Gerard is trying to get Jackson."

Stiles' jaw dropped. "How the fuck is he alive?!" Stiles demanded. "We burned him alive and Derek ripped his throat out, how -"

"I think it might be my fault," Lydia said.

At the same time, Steve shouted, "You WHAT?!"

A moment later, he slumped his shoulders and ducked his head when half the ER center turned around to look at them. Mostly other patients - the staff, presumably, were used to people shouting.

As people looked away again, John rounded on his son and demanded, "You did what?!!"

Stiles winced, but started to ease off the bed. "Look, I don't have time to explain everything. Werewolves are real, and most of the time, if you get bitten by the wrong one, you turn into one, too. Except Lydia didn't, and Jackson turned - or is turning - into something else-

"Which we need to get out of here now," Isaac added.

"-Which we need to get out of here, ASAP," Stiles repeated, glaring at Isaac before looking back at Steve and John. "And along with werewolves and lizard-people -"

"Lizard-people?" Steve asked, completely lost.

"-Werewolf hunters are real," Stiles said. "Including the one who just kidnapped me and beat me to shit in his basement."

For a very brief moment, Steve was stunned into silence. His heart thundering like it hadn't since he first saw Loki's portal open over Manhattan.

Then Scott's eyes widened. "-C-Chris?" he asked, sounding like he was hoping to hear something else.

Stiles shook his head. "Gerard."

"He wouldn't!" Scott protested - sounding like he absolutely believed this Gerard person would.

"You watched him cut someone in half and you think he's above kidnapping and beating up teenagers?" Stiles asked.

"He what?!!" Melissa demanded.

"A werewolf!" Scott protested. "He'll do anything to werewolves. But you're human, Stiles, he wouldn't touch you!"
Stiles pointed to his face. "He just did!"

"Gerard Argent?" John demanded. All three boys nodded. "You're telling me your school principal kidnapped you?" Stiles nodded, and Steve stared in bewilderment. He'd glimpsed that old man at the field...and, now that he thought about it, didn't see him after the end of the game, despite all the chaos. "Why?"

"A distraction, or a message, I'm still not sure," Stiles said. He took a deep breath, seemed to decide something, and looked at John. "And it's not just me. He's got two other kids, Erica and Boyd - uh, Erica Reyes and Vernon Boyd. They're-...still there."

It was very obvious that Stiles had been about to say something else.

Steve could take a few guesses as to what. He clenched his fists, trying not to think about it yet.

"Gerard Argent is holding two teenagers captive in his basement?" the Sheriff demanded.

Stiles nodded. But when the Sheriff reached for his pocket, Stiles reached out and grabbed his father's wrist. "They're werewolves, too. Gerard's got them strung up and electrocuted and- trying to explain their condition to people who don't realize what they are - you can't involve the department in this!"

"You want me to just leave two teenagers there?" John hissed. "Two kids who are - wait, did just say 'electrocuted'?!"

Stiles waved it away.

"This guy will kill you," he said. "He's - he's not going to kill Erica and Boyd, not when he can still use them, but he'll kill you-"

"I'd like to see him try," Steve said. Putting a hand on Stiles' good shoulder, he said, "John and I will go get them."

Stiles' shoulders slumped, and with a reluctant nod, he said, "He'd...probably have a tough time hurting you."

"We need to get Jackson out of here," Isaac chimed in. "Derek, and uh...this Peter guy - they're meeting us at the empty warehouse in downtown to figure this out..."

Scott looked almost apologetic as he turned to Lydia. "And Peter seems to think you can help."

Lydia's hand were shaking as she grabbed onto the strap of her purse. "That might have something to do with the fact I just brought him back from the dead by accident."

Now everyone stared at her.

"...we are definitely coming back to this as soon as possible," Stiles said. "But right now, we just gotta roll with this." Clapping his hands together, then wincing as he jarred his bad shoulder, he said, "Okay, so we need to rescue Erica and Boyd, and kidnap Jackson-"

"Again," Scott muttered.

Stiles ignored him. "-And meet Derek and the zombie-wolf at an abandoned warehouse in the closest thing to downtown this stupid town has, because my life is a movie now or something."

Steve snorted, gripping the edge of Stiles' hospital bed to hide how much they were shaking. "Still
not as weird as my life."

"True," Scott said.

"That's not exactly saying much," Stiles muttered.

Isaac stared at him in bewilderment, while Lydia's eyes narrowed in speculation. "What," she started to ask.

"Guys!" Melissa cried out. "Bigger problems!" She looked between Stiles and Scott. "Jackson's in the morgue, boys."

Stiles and Scott looked at each other. "Well, we already know the cameras down there don't work," Stiles scoffed. "Hospital budget cuts work in our favor, for once."

"How do you know that?" Melissa demanded.

"If they did, I'd probably be in jail by now," Scott said.

"And so would Derek," Isaac said with a snort.

"What-" Melissa shook her head. "Never mind. We'll get back to this later - but mark my words, we will be getting back to this."

"Right," Stiles said with a wince. "And if we're about to go up against werewolves and lizard people, there's something in my jeep that I'll need."

"There's something in your jeep that I'll need," Steve added.

"And someone will need to stall Mr. Whittemore if we need to get Jackson out of here," Melissa added.

Steve and John shared a look, but Steve clapped a supporting hand on the Sheriff's shoulder.

"Think we can handle this?" John asked, sounding as lost as Steve felt.

Steve shrugged. "To be honest, I went into New York on about as much information and preparation - and a lot less sleep."

Scott and Stiles snorted, Melissa's eyebrows rose, and Isaac and Lydia looked even more confused. John gave Steve a watery smile, and nodded. "All right. Let's do this." He paused, then looked at Stiles. "Whatever the hell 'this' really is."

Feeling the overwhelming confusion welling up in everyone, Steve he turned to Lydia. "Miss Martin, you have a car, right?"

Lydia nodded. "Ms.," she corrected.

"You and Stiles get to the school, and get Stiles' jeep," Steve said, nodding at her correction. He turned to the three behind him. "Scott, Isaac, Melissa - you three work on getting Jackson out of here." He turned to John. "We'll go to the Argents and get the two kids there, out."

John narrowed his eyes. "Can someone explain to me why we're kidnapping Jackson Whittemore again?"

"He's a kanima," Stiles said. Since that explained nothing, Stiles added, "He's supposed to be a
werewolf, but he's turning into a murder-puppet lizard thing, instead. Matt was using him, but after he died, Gerard took control of him, instead."

The Sheriff paled at the mention of Daehler. "Matt…that night at the station…?"

Scott and Stiles looked at each other, and slowly nodded. "Yeah," Stiles said. "That was how Matt was able to kill them all - he had control of Jackson."

The Sheriff's eyes fell shut, pained, as the implications of that started to sink in.

Steve knew a thing or two about making sure unfortunate implications didn't sink in too deeply.

"John," he said. "If those two kids are still there, we have to go, and now."

John took a deep breath, opened his eyes, and nodded.

Steve looked between the small group assembled, and said, "Let's go."

~*~

Steve drove through the dark streets of Beacon Hills, following John's directions to the Argent house.

"I've been there twice this year, already," John said. "First time when we were trying to figure out what the hell was going on with Kate. Second time when Victoria…killed herself."

Steve looked over.

"Victoria is Allison's mother. She gutted herself with a giant knife," John said. "Her family said she'd been close to Kate, but now I'm sure it was something else."

"So Kate Argent is Allison's aunt, Victoria Argent is her mother, and Gerard Argent is her…?"

"Grandfather," John answered. "Chris Argent is her father."

Doing his best not to bend John's steering wheel in his grip, Steve focused on the road again. "So what do you know about the house?"

"I'm not sure," John said. "It'd been very obviously cleaned out, when we were investigating after Kate. At the time, we thought that had been something she'd arranged."

"But now, it looks like the rest of the family is in on it," Steve continued. "Well, what do you know of the layout? We need a plan."

The rest of the drive over, they planned. John told Steve everything they knew about the house. Combined with what Scott and Stiles had been able to tell them, they came up with not only a plan, but a back-up plan, and a last resort plan.

All of that turned out to be a moot point, because after pulling up to the house, John had barely pulled his gun out when the front door opened, and two teenagers clinging to each other stumbled out.

Steve took a sharp breath. Both kids' clothes were torn in several places, even the sturdy-looking leather jackets they were both wearing. There were smudges of blood all over them, and they looked like they were barely standing upright. The boy's skin was dark, so it took Steve a minute before he realized there was some blood on his skin under the tears in the clothes. With the girl, it was more
obvious, though it also looked like neither of them were bruised. Between the make-up and the nice clothes, it was obvious the girl was the kind to care an awful lot about her looks - which made her matted hair, smudged make-up, and disarrayed clothes seem even worse.

Behind them was a man who looked to be about John's age, and seemed to almost be herding the kids out. Based on his age, this must've been Chris, Allison's father.

The Sheriff aimed the gun at him.

"Get the hell away from those kids, Argent," he said. Steve felt a burst of second-hand fear on behalf of every criminal in Beacon Hills that's ever had to face him down. "Now."

Chris Argent raised his hands and obliged. He backed away from the kids and off the porch, and Steve approached them.

"Hi," he said. While he wasn't surprised, his heart still broke at the way they flinched. "I'm Stiles' uncle."

The blonde girl narrowed her eyes at him, as the boy - this must be Boyd - looked up him and down.

"The SHIELD uncle?" he asked dubiously.

Steve's eyebrows rose a little, but he nodded. "I work for SHIELD, sometimes," Steve said. "But not today. Right now, I'm just here to help."

In Steve's peripheral vision, he could see that John was still leading Argent away, drawing close to the man and yelling at him. Steve paid them no attention, assessing the damage to the kids. Assuming they had a healing ability like Scott, then…

Then they still needed help.

Suddenly, the girls' narrowed eyes flew wide open.

"Holy shit, you're Captain America," she blurted out, eyes wide and shining with surprise in the dim light of the Argents' front porch.

"Yes I am," Steve agreed. "You must be Erica."

Her jaw dropped open.

"...Stiles' uncle is Captain America?" Boyd asked.

Steve shrugged. "It's a long story." He glanced over to the two men. "But one I'll have to tell later."

He turned his entire body, hearing John yell, "...three teenagers?!!"

"I didn't even know Stiles was here until she mentioned it a minute ago!" Argent snapped, pointing at Erica. She flinched, and Steve couldn't not step in front of her, get between her and Argent. "I've been trying to get my own daughter away from my father, and I never thought he'd touch your son! He's human!"

"But torturing teenaged werewolves is okay?" Steve demanded.

Argent narrowed his eyes. He must not have heard Erica's outburst, because he immediately asked, "And who the hell are you?"
"Stiles' uncle," Steve quipped. "Why in the hell is imprisoning anyone in your basement okay, regardless of their species?"

With a clenched jaw, Argent said, "It isn't. Which is why I just freed them, and why I'm trying to find my father, so I can shoot him before he shoots me."

That threw Steve for a loop. "Why would he want to kill you?" Steve asked.

Instead of answering, Argent pointed at the two kids behind Steve. "Them, and because I'm trying to keep him from doing to Allison what he did to Kate."

"What did he do?" John asked.

"Turned her into the monster she died as," Argent said. "But I don't know where the hell he is. And I no longer know what he is or isn't capable of, what he's willing to do. Before tonight, I never would've expected him to touch a human."

"Funny," Steve said. "Scott said the same thing."

Argent shut his eyes like he was pained. "Sheriff, I know you're furious, but right now, so am I, and for the same reason. I have to find my father before my daughter does. I want to stop him, too."

John glanced back at Steve, an asking look on his face. "Think he's telling the truth?"

Steve frowned, but before he could decide, the boy behind him said, "He is."

Turning around, Steve blinked at the two kids in surprise.

"How do you know?" Steve asked.

"People's heartbeats do this weird…'thing' when you lie," Erica said. "Boyd already knows how to listen for it, and I'm…learning."

Once the implications sunk in, Steve's eyebrows shot up. "You can hear people's heartbeats!?"

The two teenagers looked at each other, but nodded at Steve.

With a swallow, Steve looked between them, the front door of the Argent house - the prison they just left - and Argent.

"...yeah," Steve said. He looked at John and tilted his head back at the kids. "I'll take their word for it."

John turned back to Argent. "Do you know what the hell is going on with Jackson? All this 'kanima' business?"

"I think so," Argent said. "I know he was stabbed, earlier - probably by himself."

"Himself?" Steve asked, dubious - despite the fact this was the conclusion Stiles, himself, had come to.

Argent nodded. "Best guess, my father made him do it. He has control of the kanima-"

"Like Matt Dahler did?" John demanded. "When he slaughtered four of my deputies?"

With slumping shoulders, Argent nodded. "What Matt did to your men, my dad wants to do to every
werewolf and supernatural creature in this town. And he's no longer above using another supernatural creature to do it. I don't know what his plans are, but they can't be anything good." He looked between Steve and the Sheriff. "I take it you two do know something, though?"

"That Jackson is still turning into something," John said. "Stiles, Scott, and - some others. They're getting Jackson out of the hospital, and meeting up with Derek Hale at an abandoned warehouse on the edge of the Old Factory Belt."

Argent frowned. "Why?"

John and Steve shared a look.

"We're not sure," Steve admitted. "Honestly, we didn't even know about werewolves being real until half an hour ago. We're flying by the seat of our pants, here."

"But we do know that people have already died," John said. "And more people might die, soon, so we need to move fast."

Argent nodded, and gestured his head towards the car John and Steve just came in. "Then let's go."

~*~

"Anything special about this place?" Steve asked, as they raced downtown towards the address Scott had given them. "Why there?"

"Probably because it's the abandoned Hale property closest to the hospital," Argent answered from the passenger seat.

John – who hadn’t trusted him to sit in the back with the teenagers – leaned forward. "And you know this how, exactly? Because I remember how much of a pain in the ass it was for me to get their asset and estate records, and I have the law on my side."

"Exactly," Argent said with a flat tone. "So that means you have to follow the law."

John scowled as the implications sunk in.

"The ‘closest’?" Steve questioned, before John gave into his temptation to throttle Argent right there in his seat.

"The Hales are Old Money," John reminded him. "There are still nearly a dozen properties across town in their name. Warehouses, office buildings, an apartment building, a defunct bank, an old brewery…they used to run all of these."

"And we’ve been watching most of these," Argent said.

In the rearview mirror, Steve saw Erica perk up. "Is that why-"

Boyd elbowed her in the ribs, and she glanced at Argent and closed her mouth. John looked even more pissed.

"You said they ‘used’ to?" Steve asked. "What happened?"

"Same thing that happened to everybody else," John drawled. "The economy."

Argent snorted. Steve wanted to do exactly what the angry expression on John’s face suggested, but he took a deep breath, and looked at the teenagers in the rearview mirror.
“This ‘kanima’,” Steve asked them. “What can you tell us about it?”

“It’s a werewolf gone wrong,” Boyd said.

“Jackson, right?” the Sheriff asked.

Both teenagers nodded, and Erica added, “It’s an abomination. It’s not supposed to exist.”

“Neither are you,” John deadpanned at them.

“Or me,” Steve muttered.

Argent gave him another inquisitive look, but with Erica’s snort, his attention focused on her. She flinched, John glared, and Argent turned back in his seat to stare straight ahead.

Wise man.

Weaving through downtown, Steve said, “What else?”

“It’s like a lizard,” Erica said. As they drove through pools of light from the streetlamps, her face almost seemed to flicker in the mirror. “Scales, a tail, paralytic venom—”

“A tail?!” Steve demanded, while at the same time, John cried out, “Paralytic venom?!”

Erica winced, and nodded. “Um – avoid the claws. And the tail. And it, if possible.”

Steve ground his teeth. “I’m not so sure that’s going to be an option for us.”

For the last two blocks, Steve didn’t even have to pay attention to the directions on John’s phone—he spotted Melissa’s car, and followed.

Inside a dilapidated warehouse, Isaac and Scott pulled to a stop and clambered out. Steve hadn’t even stopped when his rear passenger door opened and the two teenagers spilled out of the SUV.

“Isaac!” Erica yelled.

The boy in question bolted from Scott’s side to Erica’s, practically leaping at Erica and Boyd as he wrapped his arms around them. Then he took a step back and looked between them, face hardening as he took in their battered forms and torn up clothes.

“What. Happened?” He said, a growl in his voice that spoke to his lupine nature.

As the three men climbed out of the SUV, Argent called out, “My father happened.”

Isaac opened his mouth, but a furious voice from what sounded like across the warehouse roared, “What did he do?”

Steve turned to see a young man with fangs and a warped face and no eyebrows what the fuck running across the floor of the warehouse towards the trio of teenagers. He skidded to a halt a few yards away. Looking between Isaac and the leatherclad pair of teenagers, his monstrous features melted away to reveal a handsome, human face.

A human face that Steve recognized, despite the ten years between now and the picture from the SHIELD file. There was no mistaking that jaw, the dark hair, the piercing hazel eyes—

-eyes which started to glow red as Derek Hale looked from the teenagers, to the men behind them –
and finally to Scott, who was opening the door and pulling out Jackson Whittemore’s limp body, wrapped in a hospital gown.

“You had to drag a cop into this?” he snarled, pointing at the Sheriff, who bristled. Behind Hale, another man was meandering up to them. He looked closer to John’s age than Steve’s, and had a slick smile that did little to soften his equally piercing gaze.

This must be the…zombie-wolf, as Stiles called him.

Neither noticing nor caring about the undead werewolf, Scott glared right back at Derek. “Gerard kidnapped Stiles!”

“Just what we needed,” Hale snapped, glaring back at the Sheriff, then frowning as he turned his attention to Steve. “And who’s this?”

“I’m Steve,” Steve answered. “Stiles’…uncle.”

“Derek,” Scott said, sounding equal parts pissed and fed-up. “We need all the help we can get, and you don’t get much better help than the Sheriff and Ca-” Scott caught himself while looking at Argent. “A SHIELD agent.”

Behind Derek, the older man – Peter? – narrowed his eyes at Steve.

“You dragged SHIELD into this?!” Derek Hale yelled.

At their side, Scott laid out Jackson’s still form across the concrete and asked, “How do we deal with this?”

Turning, Derek demanded, “Where’s Lydia?”

Steve opened his mouth to answer, but behind Steve, Argent yelled, “Hale?!”

He turned to see Argent glaring, slack-jawed, at the older man beside Derek.

Peter Hale greeted Argent’s shocked fury with one of the smarmiest smirks Steve had ever seen outside of a sleazy bar in Brooklyn. Possibly even in them. “Argent.”

“Chris,” Scott implored. “We have bigger problems, right now!”

Argent ignored him, still glaring at Peter. “We buried you, we burned you-”

“Again, I might add,” Peter answered, smarmy smile hardening.

“Guys?” Scott pleaded. Steve noticed Erica backing up away from Argent, moving somewhat behind Steve, dragging Isaac and Boyd with her. Even John stepped between the teenagers and the adults.

“You’re supposed to be dead!” Argent continued. “So how are you here?”

“Now really,” Peter crooned. He pointed at Steve, who jerked in surprise at being mentioned by them. “He’s dead for seventy years, and nobody cares. I’m only dead for a few months, and suddenly, it’s an inquisition!”

Bewildered, Derek, Isaac, and Argent all turned to stare at Steve in confusion – while Erica snickered behind him.
Thankfully, before Steve had to deflect, Scott yelled, “GUYS!”

At his sharp cry, everyone turned back to him. Pointing again at Jackson and looking at Derek, Scott repeated, “What do we do? How are we supposed to save him?”

Derek’s jaw clenched, ignoring Peter’s snide commentary and focusing on the immediate problem.

“We’re past that, now,” he said. Scott’s eyes widened, and Derek continued with, “Especially now that Gerard has control over him. He’s using the kanima as his own personal attack dog.”

“No,” Argent countered. “A kanima is like a rabid dog. My father would never tolerate something so out of control.”

“You have no idea just how right you are!”

Steve could feel that voice dripping down his spine as he turned to see the source. From an alcove formed by a support column and some dusty crates, the old man Steve recognized as the school principal stepped out of the shadows.

With a gaze that looked ready to pick apart Steve’s soul and sell them off piecemeal, Gerard Argent continued. “Luckily, the kanima is the furthest thing from out of control.”

With a guttural cry from Derek and movement in the corner of Steve’s eye, he turned in time to see Jackson awake. No, not awake – there was no light in his eyes. But he was upright, clawed hands digging into Derek’s stomach as a wave of blue light flashed over his skin and scales started to appear in their wake.

That wasn’t the weirdest thing Steve had seen in his life, but it was getting pretty close.

“Thank you, Scott,” Gerard said. “For bringing the kanima to Derek – and thus, bringing Derek to me!”

Derek slammed his fist down on Jackson’s head.

His fist seemed to bounce off Jackson’s head. With a roar – a literal, honest to god roar that might even give the Hulk some competition – Derek grabbed onto the wrist of the claws thrust into his side and yanked. Steve winced at the very slight squelching sound, but his eyebrows rose when Hale practically swung the reptilian body away.

Not very far or very hard, though. Given he was already falling to his knees and losing coordination in his arms, it was pretty obvious why.

Steve jerked at the gunshot from beside him. He looked over to see Argent aiming at the boy – center mass, ready to kill-

-except the scales were spreading across Jackson’s body. The bullets bounced off of him even more than Derek’s fist had.

The shreds of the hospital gown were just slipping off of Jackson as he prowled around and somewhat in between them, and-

-and-

-as his entire back split in half.

Steve almost gagged and backed away at the sight of all that flesh, the blood and the slight
movement of all the boy’s organs and his ribs, and the boy’s spine.

Especially as he realized the spine was *growing*.

Growing into a tail.

Almost as fast as the boy’s flesh had parted, it sealed together again like nothing had ever happened.

Except that it wasn’t skin that came back together, but scales.

Standing before them stood a humanoid lizard, with a ridged head, a tail as long as its body, and slitted, yellow eyes.

After Steve’s own transformation and the Red Skull and the Chitauri invasion-

“This is officially the fourth weirdest thing I’ve ever seen,” Steve blurted out, and jumped when several roars surrounded him.

He turned around and froze when he saw all the teenagers’ faces.

Scott, Isaac, Erica, and Boyd were all – changed. Their faces warped into something monstrous, something lupine, their jaws and brows wider, their eyes all glowing gold, and all sporting fangs and claws.

Right.

Werewolves.

“Maybe the fifth,” Steve muttered.

There was another sound – almost like a roar.

Almost, but not quite, because the werewolves’ roars were still nothing on the sound of a 1980 Jeep CJ-5 engine.

The lizard thing – the kanima – started to jump, but it was too late to escape the ramming of the baby-blue jeep that crashed through a wall of boxes and hit it dead on.

The kanima skid across the warehouse floor, almost dazed.

From the driver’s seat, Stiles whooped, “Booyah!”

From the passenger seat beside him, Lydia was staring at the lizard in horror.

“That’s Jackson?!” she cried out.

Sensing the opportunity, Steve ran towards the jeep.

Unfortunately, so did the lizard.

“Pop the trunk!” Steve shouted over his shoulder, just as he caught the reptilian attacker mid-air. One hand on it’s neck and another on its elbow, Steve slammed it down on the ground. He tried to hold it in place, but when he felt the tail start to wrap around his arm, he had to throw the kanima away from him.

He couldn’t help but smile a little in rueful satisfaction when it slammed into the opposite wall,
cracking the bricks before it landed on the concrete.

For a moment, everyone looked at him. Erica, Scott, and Boyd were grinning with predatory glints in their eyes. From the floor, Derek’s eyes were wide with shock. John was keeping an eye on the lizard as he unholstered his gun. Isaac, Argent, and Lydia were staring between him and the lizard, stunned and confused in equal measures. Stiles was clambering out of the jeep, Gerard was narrowing his eyes at Steve, and Peter Hale—

—was gone?

Before Steve could look around for the older Hale, he saw the lizard thing getting up, the scales scraping like sheets of paper as its tail slid across the floor.

So Steve backed up, towards the back of the jeep.

He had no intention to hide, though. Stiles knew it, yanking the trunk open.

By the time the lizard threw itself at Steve again, he already had his shield up.

With a distinctive clang Steve hadn’t quite heard since he was fighting off aliens, the kanima slammed into vibranium.

The kanima was not quite an unstoppable force, nor was Steve an immovable object. Knees relaxed, Steve let himself fall back, his hat falling off as he took the lizard with him. With a sharp flip of his legs, the lizard was on the floor, and Steve was standing over it.

“…I will admit,” Gerard said. “I was not expecting Captain America.”

“No one ever does!” Steve yelled, as he brought his shield down, and finally heard something like a crack come from a bone in its body.

Another strike, and the lizard screeched. The sound made Steve want to curl up and cover his ears. He could see everyone else doing exactly that. Except Lydia, whose tears were shining in the industrial lighting.

Steve brought the shield up one more time, but before he brought it down again, there was a fwoop sound, and an arrow planted itself in the lizard’s shoulder.

With another excruciating screech, Steve felt something between a whip and a punch from behind him. The force him over the lizard and halfway towards John, Argent, and the werewolf trio beside them.

Right. A tail.

Scowling from the floor, Steve looked back at his target. Following the general direction of the arrow, Steve traced its approximate path to the warehouse entrance.

There stood a very pretty young woman, aiming a very deadly-looking arrow at them with a bow that looked—

—that looked like the kind Tony made for Clint.

Damnit.

“Allison!” Gerard called out with a jaunty wave, ignoring the kanima’s screaming as it pulled the arrow out. “You’ve arrived!”
There didn’t even seem to be a wound on the kanima.

Steve pushed himself up without letting go of the shield. He blinked in surprise as he noticed how Erica and Boyd were backing up towards Argent.

Backing away from Allison Argent.

She had a blankly furious look on her face that Steve had seen too many times within a few months of fighting Nazis. It didn’t belong on a kid like her.

Given the rest of her family, though, Steve wasn’t all that surprised, either.

With freezing silence, Allison turned on the spot, moving the bow.

She aimed for Derek, and let the arrow fly.

Steve threw himself in front of her arrow, the shield barely deflecting it away from the paralyzed werewolf. The arrow skittered across the floor.

In front of Steve and Derek, Isaac’s face was contorting in rage as he looked between Erica and Boyd’s faces, and the girl they were even more terrified of than Argent.

“Allison?” Argent called out, lowering his gun.

She didn’t seem to hear him. Her unseeing and almost murderous gaze locked onto Steve’s shield like a target.

With dawning realization obvious even on his lupine features, Isaac launched himself at Allison.

Not missing a beat, Allison dropped the bow. She twisted out of the line of attack with a move that would’ve made Nat and Clint proud in equal measures. But she hadn’t disarmed herself. When Isaac landed and turned on her, she was sporting a pair of ring daggers. She twirled them with disconcerting ease.

“NO!” Scott yelled. Steve couldn’t tell whether it was Isaac or Allison – or even both – that Scott was yelling at.

Not that it mattered.

She may have been human, and Isaac may have been a werewolf with fangs and claws, but he never stood a chance.

Fitting her body under Isaac’s launched form, she stabbed up, then around, blades tearing his clothes and sinking into flesh with a sound even Steve could hear over a dozen yards away. Isaac – completely untrained and running on instinct – took a swing at her. She dodged it, and used the opening he gave her to slice at two of his tendons, before whisking around him and stabbing him twice in the back.

He dropped like a corpse, and Allison turned her attention to Derek – and to Steve in her way.

“Allison?” Lydia quietly called out from somewhere behind Steve.

That was the first time Allison faltered.

At that moment, the lizard creature screeched again.
With a roar, Boyd threw himself at the overgrown lizard, as did Scott a moment later. Even Steve couldn’t keep track of the furious blur of scale and fur, fangs and claws. John and Argent both aimed their guns at the brawl, but only firing once or twice, during the brief moments they had a clear shot. Erica was still looking between the brawl and Allison, still deciding which was the bigger threat.

When Boyd dropped to the floor, immobile, and Scott was backing away from the kanima, it became obvious which threat was bigger.

John and Argent both fired off a few more rounds, but they all seemed to bounce off the kanima’s scales. When a bullet ricocheted into the brick wall, shattering a single brick and cracking a few more, both of them stopped firing.

Steve threw himself at the lizard. Gerard’s chuckled practically oozed into his ears as the kanima fought back.

It was strong – definitely stronger than the Chitauri, maybe even as strong as Steve. It was agile, and fast, even faster than Steve, who could barely throw his shield up against all the blows from the claws on its hands and its feet.

Unfortunately, for all the weird things Steve has fought before in his life, none of them ever had a tail.

He didn’t even notice the aching sting on his shin, at first.

But he did notice when his right leg went numb.

He noticed when he couldn’t move his entire lower body.

He noticed when he fell to the ground, unable to move a single part of his body.

And he noticed when the shield rolled away from his limp fingers, clattering just a few feet away, face down.

Steve clenched his teeth and tried to move. He jerked…something. He didn’t know if it was his leg or his hip, but it didn’t have any effect. The lizard seemed to no longer take notice of him, prowling towards the two men beside Erica. Despite how ineffective they’d been before, Argent and John shot at the kanima again.

A pair of worn sneakers and a pair of nice heels stepped right in front of Steve’s limited field of vision.

Well away from them, Steve winced at the sound of two guns clattering to the floor. The kanima must’ve disarmed John and Argent. Argent had a knife – where had he even gotten that from? – while John was stepping closer to Erica. He seemed to be trying to get between her and the various threats around the room. But Erica had claws out on both hands. With the way she was looking around the Sheriff, Steve knew who was really protecting who.

In front of Steve, Stiles started moving. Following the sound of Stiles’ footsteps – and how Lydia’s heels turned, how she turned to track Stiles – Steve realized Stiles was pouring the black dust into a circle around his own limp form.

Gerard seemed to squint, before his eyes widened – just as Stiles closed the circle.
With a sharp hiss from Gerard, the kanima threw itself at them. Lydia flinched, whimpering and backing away.

Stiles, however, stood his ground – and a moment later, Steve could see why.

Instead of hitting them, the kanima hit thin air in front of Stiles, right over the black line. Blue light emanated from the…from the point of impact. Something like a protective wall flashed between them, them before the lizard bounced away.

“Oh, you’ve gotta be kidding me,” Argent said.

At the same time, John yelled, “What the hell was that?!?”

Gerard narrowed his eyes at Stiles.

“So that was your mountain ash at the rave,” he said. “I was wondering when Hale got an Emissary.”

Stiles frowned in confusion. “A what now?”

That made both Argent men look at Stiles in surprise.

The Argent woman – no, the Argent girl – wasn’t paying any of them any attention.

Seeming to shake off Lydia’s voice, Allison turned her attention back to Derek. She started advancing towards Steve and Derek both-

-only for the lizard to launch itself at her, wrapping its tail around her neck and wrapping its clawed hands around her wrists, holding her hostage.

Steve…did not see that one coming.

“Not yet, Allison,” her grandfather crooned.

“Grandpa?” she said, speaking for the first time. Steve’s only seen her in those videos of Nat’s and, well, now. He had somehow expected her voice to be harder. Her very teenage voice caught him off guard. She sounded so young – as young as she really was. Even Steve had forgotten the ‘child’ part of child soldier. “W-What are you doing?”

“Not yet, sweetheart,” Gerard said.

“Dad?” Argent – Chris Argent – said in shock.

“I’m afraid I need Derek for something,” Gerard said.

For some reason, that was when Steve squinted at the circle of dust. Between the rough size of the slice of the circle Steve could see, and the sound of Stiles’ footsteps while making it, he realized that the circle was only around him, Stiles, and Lydia.

But not Derek.

He could see Stiles thinking about it, though. The boy was looking speculatively at Derek several feet away, and trying to gauge the distance of the kanima from them both. In the distance, Steve was pretty sure Erica was even trying to think of how to cover Stiles.

Steve could already see what Stiles and Erica only realized a moment later. It was too far, and it
would take them too long.

“What could you possibly need him for?” Argent demanded of his father. He stepped forward, but when the kanima jerked and Allison cried out in pain, he stopped.

Without moving, John demanded, “What the hell would make you hold your own granddaughter hostage?”

A slow smile crawled across Argent’s face.

“He’s sick.”

The two words came from the limp form closest to Gerard. Nonetheless, Boyd’s quiet pronouncement rang out across the room.

Gerard nodded towards Boyd, for a moment looking like the school principal he was supposed to be. Then, he looked to Steve.

“We can’t all have your good health, Captain,” he said.

“So what do you want?” Steve ground out, glaring at the geriatric psychopath.

Scott answered, “He needs the bite.”

…and what?

Steve frowned, wondering what it meant that Scott had said that while looking at Derek.

Then it clicked. Gerard didn’t want a bite – he needed a Bite.

“No…” Argent said, looking between Scott and his father in horror. “Dad, you can’t become a werewolf, you just have to kill yourself sooner!”

“Oh, I will,” he said. “But not before I make sure to cleanse this town of every supernatural filth that the Hales have plugged it full of.” With a speculative look at Steve, he added, “Maybe everything other than human.”

“Oh, hell no,” Erica snarled, crouching like she was ready to risk the kanima to launch herself at Gerard.

“Oh, yes,” Gerard said. “Because if Scott doesn’t bring Derek to me…”

The lizard pulled on Allison’s limbs more. Steve winced at the sound of her pained whimpering.

“No!” Scott cried out, and all movement from the kanima and the girl in its grasp. “Don’t!”

“Scott,” Isaac snarled, from where he was struggling up. There were small puddles of blood all around him. Steve had a moment where he couldn’t wrap his head around the fact the kanima’s helpless hostage had been the one to do that – despite the fact he’d just seen it for himself.

“Don’t do this,” John said – at Scott. “I’m still not sure what’s going on, but don’t give that man power.”

For a moment, Scott shut his eyes. He took a deep breath, and opened them again.
The determination on Scott’s face made Steve’s stomach sink.

Without a word, Scott turned and walked towards Derek. Derek snarled at him, but he couldn’t move as Scott lifted him up, and started dragging him towards Derek.

“Scott!” Steve yelled out. He even managed to jerk his legs enough to move most of his body. “This is what he wants, don’t give it to him!”

Scott ignored him.

Trapped in their respective places, Erica, Isaac, and Boyd all snarled at him.

Scott ignored them.

“Don’t do this!” Derek snapped at him, struggling, but not strong enough to dislodge himself.

Scott ignored him.

Ignoring everybody, Scott wrapped his hand around the back of Derek’s head as Gerard pulled up his sleeve.

When Scott forced Derek’s teeth into Gerard’s flesh, everyone who could look away, did. Steve couldn’t turn his head away – though he did realize he was able to move his shoulders again.

He had to watch as Scott dropped Derek, the werewolf’s fangs slipping out of the flesh with a sound like Allison’s blades.

He had to watch as Gerard lifted up his arm in victory, with ruthless victory in his eyes.

He had to watch as…Derek licked at the blood on his teeth in confusion?

A moment later, Gerard’s eyes widened, and the victorious look started to melt away.

He looked down at his arm, and Steve followed the man’s gaze towards his blood – which was getting dark.

“What the…” Steve heard Erica mutter.

And Steve saw when Scott slowly, cautiously…smiled.

In front of Steve, Stiles started laughing.

In his own confusion, Steve tried yet again to stand. He failed, but he was able to start moving his limbs under him.

Eyes wide, Gerard reached into his pocket and pulled out a little anister of some kind. A pill case, from which he pulled out a pill.

Breaking it in half, a bit of black powder spilled from it and bounced onto the floor.

It looked like the black powder currently making a protective ring around Steve.

“MOUNTAIN AAAAAASH!” he roared.

Stiles doubled over in laughter, and Steve started to put the pieces together. He didn’t have nearly the whole picture, but he had enough.
“What did you do?” he asked Scott – out of incredulity more than anything else – as he managed to turn his body and push his shoulder up with one hand.

With a pained roar, Gerard collapsed onto his hands and knees, puking up black blood. The wound on his arm, instead of healing like a werewolf’s or bleeding like a human’s, was almost gushing – gushing black blood. It started to dribble out of his nose, and Steve was pretty sure the man may have even been crying tears of black blood.

It was disgusting, but if the looks of relief on Scott and Argent’s faces were anything to go by, it was also a good sign.

Assuming Steve was extrapolating the rest of the situation correctly, Nat was also going to fall out of her seat laughing when Steve told her about this.

Unfortunately, their victory was short lived.

“Kill them!” Gerard roared at the kanima – which was apparently still in his grasp, given how it dropped Allison to turn towards Scott. “Kill them all!”

The lizard launched itself at Scott, who got under it and struck up in a move eerily similar to what Allison had just pulled on Isaac. The lizard skittered away, and jerked.

Gerard’s control over it was slipping.

But not fast enough. Because it looked up, and threw itself at Derek and Scott both-

-only to clang against a vibranium shield again, and screech at the head of shining blonde hair behind it as it skittered across the ground.

Erica held Steve’s shield up against the lizard attacking Derek. She even managed to shove it backwards a bit. Knees bent and shoulders braced like Steve’s, her stance was clumsy, but strong.

Scott snapped his wrists as he sprung his claws out again, and roared as he bared his fangs. Chris still had his knife, and Allison was scrabbling for her ring daggers. John looked ready to also go after the damn thing, unarmed and vulnerable as he was. Isaac was struggling up, as was Steve, pushing himself up on his hands and knees. Boyd was snarling from the ground, and even Stiles was tensing like he was ready to use that black powder – the mountain ash – however he could. Everyone was ready to fight the kanima-

“Jackson Harper Whittemore!”

-except Lydia.

Despite all the people standing ready to fight it, the lizard…stopped.

It stopped, it stood, and it turned towards Steve – or rather, towards Lydia in front of Steve.

Her entire body was shaking as the monster turned its attention on her. But looking up at her out of the corner of his eyes, Steve realized she wasn’t backing down. Hands clenched into shaking fists and her purse almost falling off her tense shoulders, she stared at her (ex?)-boyfriend. Despite her small and terrified frame, her voice was filled with a strength even Steve wasn’t sure he could ever match.

Lydia Martin stepped out of the protective circle of mountain ash.
“What are you doing?” Gerard screamed, actually collapsing from the force of his shouting as he yelled at the lizard.

The kanima ignored him.

The reptilian creature stepped forward, causing all the werewolves to snarl and the humans to flinch. The kanima ignored them.

“Kill them all NOW!” Gerard screamed.

The kanima ignored him.

“This isn’t you,” Lydia said.

The kanima listened to her.

As Lydia walked towards the monster, it took another step forward – not on all fours like a lizard, but on two feet like the person it was underneath.

The tail was shrinking.

Slowly reaching into her bag, Lydia said, “I know what you are. I know who you are. And this isn’t it. I love you, Jackson, and I know this isn’t the real you.”

The scales were flattening – almost melting away.

Lydia pulled out…was that a key?

Yup. A simple brass housekey. The lizard looked from Lydia’s face to the key.

“Midnight, mid-afternoon, and mid-morning, remember?” she said.

Scaled claws reached up towards Lydia-

“I always know who you are,” she said.

-and shaking, human fingers brushed against the key she was holding up.

Naked as the day he was born, no tail in sight and scales fading away, Jackson Harper Whittemore wrapped his hand around Lydia’s.

Maybe this was back up to the fourth weirdest thing Steve had ever seen.

“NOW!”

Steve flinched and nearly collapsed again at the sound of Peter Hale’s shout.

He barely managed to stay on his hands and knees. That wasn’t enough to stop both Hales from descending on Jackson, driving their claws right through him.

Lydia screamed, as did all the werewolves. Argent just seemed bewildered, while Stiles and John had matching expressions of fury as Jackson’s dead body fell against Derek, who was holding him up and extracting his claws from the boy’s belly.

Dropping from Jackson’s limp fingers, the key Lydia had held up fell to the floor with a faint clink.
“Why would you do that?” John shouted, a step away from marching up to the two werewolves and socking them in the face. Steve felt his stomach shriveling into a little ball of acid as he watched a drop of Jackson’s blood drip down Derek’s claws.

Hale – Peter Hale – held up his hand. “Wait for it,” he said, with an oddly commanding voice.

“Wait for what?!” Steve demanded, breaths feeling tighter as he pushed himself up to his knees. “You just killed him!”

“You can’t be reborn while you are still alive,” Peter said, keeping his eyes on Jackson.

Incredulous, Steve tried to stand up, and failed.

He was sitting back on his ankles when Jackson started moving. A full-body jerk, and twisting in place.

Derek let go of Jackson, who stood on his own two feet, face transformed and eyes glowing an electric blue as he roared, loud enough to rival Derek’s.

The werewolf panted, healed. There was neither a scale nor a hint of open flesh anywhere on his body.

Fur, fangs, and claws melted away, and a confused and terrified human boy stood before them.

He looked down at his naked, healthy body, then over to the key on the floor – and finally up at the girl in front of him.

The first word Steve ever heard Jackson Whittemore say was, “Lydia?”

With a cry, she threw herself at Jackson.

The two wrapped their arms around each other like they never wanted to let go.

“Told you so,” the older Hale said smugly.

Steve let out a sigh of relief.

He was alive.

The boy was alive. Every kid that walked into this building was alive and walking back out on their own two-feet. Maybe even every adult. The night was already coming out ahead of most of Steve’s missions, with SHIELD and back in the war.

“Steve?” he heard. Stiles’ voice was thick with unshed tears as he crouched down in front of Steve. “You okay?”

Looking between Stiles, and the girl he’d been in love with for years wrapped around a former homicidal lizard, Steve said, “I feel like I should be asking you that.”

With a wet chuckle, Stiles just shook his head. “I’m fine,” he lied. He looked over a John, who was looking at Jackson with relief.

“Thank god,” John said.

“Excuse you?” Peter demanded. Derek, Argent, and Scott glared at him, though it didn’t look like Peter cared.
Scott just shook his head and looked at the Sheriff. “We need to get Jackson back to the hospital – my mom won’t be able to hold off his parents for much longer.”

There was a sudden shout, a clatter of vibranium against concrete, and then a wet, seeping voice.

“That won’t be necessary.”

They all turned to see Erica in Gerard’s grasp. The man’s chin and half his face was covered in black blood. He had one arm wrapped around her neck and holding onto her wrists twisted up behind her. A few yards way, Steve’s shield rolled to a stop, after Gerard managed to disarm her.

Derek snarled, and his eyes burned red as Isaac and Boyd’s glowed gold.

Steve had no doubt that under any other circumstances, Erica would still have been fine.

But none of them moved, because Gerard had John’s sidearm pressed right against Erica’s head. The black metal formed a gun-shaped void in her bright hair that none of them wanted to test.

“What do you want?” John demanded, staring between Erica, and his own weapon being used against her.

Jackson wrapped his arms tighter around Lydia, even as she turned around in them to glare at Gerard.

“Dad,” Argent said, looking more and more shocked by his own father with every passing moment. “What are you hoping to accomplish?”

“Why, an escape, of course!” Gerard said, looking far too amused for a man who had as many furious people staring at him right now. “Allison, sweetheart, go get your car.”

The girl standing well behind all of them, right where the kanima left her, didn’t move.

Gerard’s face hardened. “Allison!” he snapped.

Scott stepped in front of her, snarling at Gerard.

“Dude,” Stiles said, crouched on one knee, as he looked between Erica and her captor. “You lost. It’s over!”

“Mr. Argent,” John said, slipping into that calming voice with which he could talk down even the most accomplished of criminals. “There’s no need to do this. We can work together on a solution that makes us all happy.”

“Your police de-escalation techniques aren’t going to help you here, Sheriff,” Gerard drawled.

Peter muttered something under his breath. A moment later, he snarled, as did all the werewolves, all of them growling or even roaring at Gerard – even Erica. The man didn’t even flinch. He just pressed the gun against Erica’s head, and she snarled but stilled.

Something hit Steve’s knee. He looked down to see Chris Argent’s gun right against it.

“Are you sure you want to pit your speed against that of a bullet?” Gerard taunted the werewolves.

Half a dozen yards in front of him, Peter Hale was standing back on two feet, like he hadn’t just kicked something behind him with his heel.
The werewolves’ roars covered the sound of it clattering across the floor.

Without a second thought, Steve picked up the gun. He still couldn’t quite stand, but his shoulders were moving fine.

“Erica,” he murmured, praying that the hearing which allowed werewolves to hear heartbeats would let her hear him. “Tilt your head as far away from Gerard as you can in three…two…one…now!”

Erica yanked her whole body away, actually managing to tear out of Gerard’s grasp due to sheer surprise. The man pulled the trigger – and the bullet only hit her hair.

Steve took aim, right at the man’s forehead, and pulled the trigger.

The gunshot was almost thundering in the warehouse, Erica’s hair was splattered in blood, and Gerard Argent was dead before his body hit the floor.

~*~

Chapter End Notes

I have also adjusted the next fic, Talking Cure (Stiles' POV), to be readable without having seen Teen Wolf.

If anyone's interested, I'm also getting into fanvidding. :)

Please check out these wonderful banners for my fics, from darkofthebluemoon7!

Preview of Chapter 6B 7:

"Okay, so, um - remember the night Laura died?" Stiles asked.

"Let me guess," John said. "Scott was there, and that was when he was bitten by a werewolf?"

Stiles scowled at his father. "Do you want to hear the story or not?"

Steve and Melissa facepalmed in unison.

May the Fourth be with you!
Avoid Erratic Heat Sources

Chapter Summary

Previously:

"Stiles is missing," Steve said, chest heaving like a train in the mountains as he realized one of his worst nightmares just came true. "Stiles is gone."

Standing before them stood a humanoid lizard, with a ridged head, a tail as long as its body, and slitted, yellow eyes.

“This is officially the fourth weirdest thing I’ve ever seen,” Steve blurted out, and jumped when several roars surrounded him.

He turned around and froze when he saw all the teenagers’ faces. Their faces warped into something monstrous, something lupine, their jaws and brows wider, their eyes all glowing gold, and all sporting fangs and claws.

Right. Werewolves.

“Maybe the fifth,” Steve muttered.

Scaled claws reached up towards Lydia-

“I always know who you are,” she said.

-and shaking, human fingers brushed against the key she was holding up.

The gunshot was almost thundering in the warehouse, Erica’s hair was splattered in blood, and Gerard Argent was dead before his body hit the floor.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 7 hit fucking 40,000 words and I'm not even done with it yet. So you know what? Fuck my outline, ya'll are getting this shit scene by scene from now on.

*tableflip* *sobs*

To clarify a common confusion: I'm just altering canon so that Nathaniel Barton was born a few months after Avengers 1, instead of Avengers 2 like in MCU canon. That's the only significant change to MCU timeline/canon thus far.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
The next morning, Steve woke up groaning on the Stilinskis’ couch to a knocking sound and a crick in his neck — the one he still got despite how often he slept sitting upright.

Steve started to move, only to realize there was a warm, slightly snoring weight on his shoulder. Looking down, he smiled to see that Stiles had slept through the night. Despite the bruising on his face, and the sling braced against Steve’s shoulder for the long nap, he looked peaceful.

Granted, ‘the night’ was only a few hours, but for Stiles and his propensity for nightmares, it was progress nonetheless. Steve briefly rested his stubby chin on Stiles’ head as he blinked the sleep out of his eyes and scanned the living room.

On the other end of the couch, Scott slept curled up over the couch’s arm, face mushed into a pillow instead of a shoulder, and legs tangled up in Stiles’. Melissa was still conked out in the easy chair on Steve’s side. In the sofa on the other side of the coffee table from Steve, John was just starting to stir.

Their snoozing faces almost glowed in the mid-morning sunlight, giving everyone a serene appearance. If it weren’t for them all being dressed in their wrinkled, day-old clothing, and the bruises on Stiles’ face, Steve would never guess what they’d gone through last night.

Another knock rang out, and Steve remembered what’d woken him up in the first place.

With an intimidating briefcase in hand and an exasperated eyebrow rising over his glasses, Agent Sitwell looked rather unimpressed on the Stilinskis’ doorstep.

“Really, Captain?” he asked, beleaguered. “Werewolves?”

“Werewolves,” Steve answered with a nod. He stepped back to let Agent Sitwell in.

“Aliens and superheroes weren’t weird enough for you?” he asked, dusting his shoes off on the welcome mat before coming inside. “You had to go and get tangled up in werewolves?!”

Steve held up his hands in innocence as he led inside. The clacking of the agent’s professional shoes on the hardwood floor seemed to echo in the stirring household.

Then again, maybe Steve’s sense of volume was still upended from all the roaring last night.

He led Sitwell to the Stilinskis’ rarely-used dining room, where Sitwell set his briefcase down in a seat without comment.

They looked to the living room. The back of the couch hid the boys from sight, save for the tops of their haircuts, and it did nothing to stifle the sounds of their yawns. John and Melissa were standing up and stretching out, blinking in surprise at Agent Sitwell.

“Hello,” the SHIELD agent greeted, stepping forward to the parents with his hand outstretched. Scott’s head of fluffy hair peered over the back of the couch. “I’m Agent Jasper Sitwell, from the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division.”

“You guys really like your long names, don’t you?” Melissa quipped, shaking Sitwell’s hand. Stiles’ head joined Scott’s in looking at them over the back of the couch.

Sitwell sighed. “Yeah, we get that a lot,” he admitted. “I’m sorry to wake you all, but this needs to be taken care of sooner, rather than later.”

The adults nodded, and Steve added, “Can you give them a few minutes to wash up? I’ll get
“Of course,” Sitwell said. “It’ll take me a few minutes to set up, anyway, and SHIELD’s plane food isn’t any better than anyone else’s.” He looked down at the boys and added, “I mostly just need to talk to Steve and your parents, if you want to go back to sleep for now. I’ll get statements from you a little later.”

“…you’re kidding, right?” Stiles asked, even as Scott seemed to sigh in relief, before looking warily between his mother and the agent.

Steve gave the boys a reassuring nod and gently tilted his head towards the stairs. Even Scott looked hesitant — until Stiles hissed in pain as he got up, wrapping his good arm around the one in the sling.

John started to move, only for Scott to reach up and wrap a supporting hand around Stiles’ bare wrist—

—and black veins appeared on Scott’s wrist, disappearing under his sleeves. All of them stared, save for Stiles who just stood there, shoulders loosening.

“Thanks, buddy,” Stiles murmured, pulling away after seeing everyone else’s faces. “But I got the good stuff from the hospital.”

“…what?” John asked, looking back and forth between Scott’s arm and Stiles’.

“Uhm…” Scott gave them what he must’ve thought was a reassuring smile, as he and Stiles started inching their way toward the staircase. “I can kinda…ease his pain? Or anybody’s. Or anything’s.”

“Mostly pets at the animal clinic,” Stiles added under his breath, as Scott shrunk under the adults’ collective gaze.

Scott dragged Stiles away, and the SHIELD agents and the parents stared at each other in equal bewilderment.

“…werewolves,” Sitwell grumbled again, and turned back toward the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later, Scott took two plates of eggs and toast upstairs to Stiles’ room, while the adults sat down at the table.

“So,” Sitwell said. He looked at Steve and reiterated, “Werewolves. Of all the weird things for you to get tangled up in.”

Steve nodded, glancing up to the ceiling towards Stiles’ room. “One of whom can probably hear you right now.”

“Of course,” Sitwell muttered, looking down at his laptop. Looking back up at them, he said, “The Bullshit Bureau were happy to have something to do, for once.” He looked at John and Melissa. “Pardon my French — that’s what we usually call the Department of Thaumaturgic Analysis and Preternatural Intelligence.”

Melissa frowned. “So…what, this department is dedicated to supernatural creatures?”

“Not exactly,” Sitwell said, taking a bite of his eggs. “Their job is to just look to myth and legend for grains of truth.” With a wan smile, he added, “Supernatural individuals are considered and handled by the same department that keeps tabs on all ‘gifted’ individuals, regardless of the source of that… enhancement.”
John narrowed his eyes, coffee mug thudding down on the table. “What does…’keeping tabs’ actually mean?”

“Not much,” Sitwell promised, with a shrug.

Steve raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “You have a standing file on the Hales.”

“Sort of,” Sitwell said. “The Bullshit Bureau does, but from what I gathered, it wasn’t because they are werewolves, so much as they are an influential family — or, uh, I guess the correct term is pack?”

Steve nodded, not quite believing it but not being able to refute it, either.

“And to be honest, it’s not like there’s much in the file to begin with,” he continued, eyes skimming whatever was on his laptop. “They only came up in the first place because of the Argent family, and even that was only on our radar because of a minor international arms deal from nearly a decade ago. We knew the weapons they’d been trading were modified — the Hales, the existence of werewolves, were just our explanation as to how and why. Since their trades were otherwise legal and in order, it was no longer our concern, so the case went back to the ATF as a firearms management investigation.”

Here, he tapped out a quick note on his laptop, then looked back up at them. “So why don’t you explain to me what happened, so I can figure out whether or not we should regret having let that case go?”

Melissa gripped her fork with white-tight knuckles, and John clenched his jaw, so Steve sighed and said, “I’ll start.”

“I’ll have to get statements from all of you,” Sitwell reminded him.

Steve nodded.

“Last night, at the championship lacrosse game at the high school,” he started. “Stiles was kidnapped. We were still in the process of trying to find him when we got a call from the hospital saying he was there — and had been beaten up pretty badly.”

Sitwell nodded, giving them all a small, encouraging smile.

“I was already there,” Melissa said. “After the game, Scott and Isaac-”

“Isaac Lahey?” Sitwell checked. He must’ve already gotten the local LEO reports from John’s officers.

“He’s a werewolf as well,” Steve added.

“Most of these kids are, apparently,” John muttered.

Melissa swallowed. “I had found out my son isn’t human, anymore, last week. I found out during… in Dahler’s…”

She trailed off.

“During Matthew Daehler’s massacre at the police station?” Sitwell offered.

John stared down at the table, and Steve was grateful he’d opted for a simple eggs and toast. He only saw the pictures of the massacre, but John and Melissa had been there. Steve doubted they would’ve
been able to eat any meat or anything with ketchup.

With a jarring nod, Melissa continued. “So when I ran into the boys, they’d started out looking for Stiles. But they already figured that Gerard Argent had been the one who kidnapped him, and they believed he might want Jackson—or Jackson’s body, as we thought the case might be. And was, for a bit. Well…”

Covering up her own lack of total understanding, Melissa took a very large bite of her eggs.

“Yeah, Jackson Whittemore coming back from the dead’s been confusing even for us,” Sitwell remarked lightly. “And believe me, that’s saying something.”

Melissa smiled wanly, and continued.

All told, filling in Sitwell took less than an hour.

They took turns explaining, mostly a series of events with very little background — the lacrosse game, the lights going out, Stiles disappearing and reappearing badly beaten at the hospital. His crazy revelations that Steve wasn’t sure he’d have believed if he were anyone else. Getting to the Argent home to find Chris Argent releasing two teenage werewolves…

“And they looked about as bad as Stiles suggested,” Steve muttered. At Sitwell’s silent askance, he elaborated. “Boyd — Vernon Boyd — was covered in blood and bruises, it just took me a minute to notice because it was night and he had dark skin and clothes. And Erica — Reyes — looked about ready to keel over. If they didn’t have healing capabilities, neither of them would’ve even been standing by that point, let alone been able to come to the warehouse with us.”

Sitwell looked up in disbelief when Steve mentioned Jackson turning into a lizard-person, and again when Steve mentioned getting paralyzed by the venom. He grimaced — as did John and Melissa — when Steve described Gerard Argent forcing the werewolf bite to become one himself, and how the man had started oozing black blood from his eyes and every orifice in his body instead. Steve glossed over Lydia and the Hales turning the kanima back into Jackson, to get to Gerard Argent holding Erica hostage with a gun to her head.

“And Peter Hale-”

“The one who went missing a while back?” Sitwell asked, setting down his coffee with a confused frown.

“Apparently, he died, too, and then came back from the dead a few months later,” Melissa said. Sitwell stared at her, and she raised her hands in innocence. “It’s what the kids said. I still don’t know the details, so I’m inclined to take their word for it right now.”

“Does anybody stay dead?” Sitwell muttered, as he added that to his report.

“Well, the last serial killer did,” John said with a shrug. “Kate Argent?”

Sitwell grimaced, and Steve wondered how much of the Arson Argent case he’d read on his way here.

“Anyway,” Steve pressed on. “I guess Hale — uh, Peter Hale — took advantage of the werewolves’ higher hearing. Got them all to roar at the same time. Did nothing to Gerard, but Peter was able to kick a gun back to me without Gerard noticing. I picked it up and shot Gerard in the head.”

Sitwell nodded. “That everything?”
“That’s everything,” Steve said.

“I wasn’t exactly in a position to explain the truth to my deputies,” John continued. “Given that all the werewolves in question were reluctant to expose their true natures any further, and without that as proof…and with everything else…” He sighed, rubbing his forehead.

“This is a very common problem,” Sitwell promised. “Up until New York, no one ever believed in anything outside a…very narrow understanding of the world.”

John laughed, though it sounded more like he was choking on his breakfast.

“To be honest, this is why SHIELD usually just keeps matters like these under wraps,” Sitwell continued. “Because it’s so insane that most people wouldn’t believe us, anyway. If it hadn’t been for all the social media about it, and the fact that it was in such a well-known and highly-watched city, I’m not sure anyone would’ve ever believed the Chitauri invasion was real, either.”

For a moment, Steve wondered what would’ve happened had Loki and the Chitauri invaded back during his day — and turned his mind away from such dark prospects.

“Anyway,” John continued. “I told everyone most of the truth, just leaving out how we really found Erica Reyes and Vernon Boyd, and all the supernatural elements thereafter. As far as my deputies know, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.” John swallowed, seeing past his empty plate. “I…I told them that Argent threatened Jackson’s life. I tried to keep the kids out of the official story as much as possible.”

“You did the right thing, Sheriff,” Sitwell promised. “Crazy stuff like this — supernatural, superhumans, all of that…your deputies would likely not have believed you, and even if they had, it would’ve landed all those kids into even deeper hot water.” He tapped the logo on the back of the laptop. “This is what we’re here for.”

For a few moments, Sitwell finished typing up his notes, while the rest of them finished their breakfast in tense silence.

“You told a very strong, very solid cover-up to your deputies,” Sitwell said. He must’ve noticed the look on John’s face, because he reiterated, “One that’s good for both your department and those kids. You told them the truth, where it matters — they don’t need to know everyone’s species to know what happened.”

John’s laugh sounded closer to a sob, this time.

Sitwell looked to Steve. “Believe it or not, we even have an interest in the investigation that has nothing to do with you. That unknown paralytic toxic is normally right up our alley, and something that would’ve led to our involvement in this case, anyway — you being there just got us called in a lot faster. So both to the public, and within SHIELD, we can obfuscate your involvement, and thus your relationship to the Stilinskis.” He reached out to pat Steve’s shoulder. “They’ll stay safe.”

“Thank you,” Steve said with an honest nod. “That’s my main concern, here.” He winced. “Though none of us are happy with the lying.”

Sitwell nodded. “Not many people are. But unless we turned every instance of meta- and superhuman into a media circus…well, like I said, no one would believe us. Trying to get civilian courts to process a case with superhumans that most of them don’t really believe or know exist, don’t understand…” He shrugged, with a small, hapless smile. “There’s all kinds of 6th Amendment violations waiting to happen if we tried. Keeping just one element of these cases under wraps lets the
rest go through regular channels — because if we didn’t, then the only way for this to be a legal case is if we handled the entirety of it."

Steve winced at the thought of that, and Sitwell nodded. Then he turned to Melissa. “Honestly, ma’am, I don’t expect much will happen to your son outside of this case.” He glanced at John. “Or any of the other kids, for that matter.” He focused back on Melissa. “SHIELD has far more useful superhumans to worry about, none of the werewolves in this town are involved in military research or intelligence, and the Bullshit Bureau’s job is mostly to research historical anomalies, not investigate present ones.”

Her shoulders slumped in relief.

“I do need to get statements from the boys,” Sitwell continued. “And will interview everyone else involved in this case for their statements. But otherwise, I should be out of here by the end of the day.”

He looked back to the parents. “Let’s get the boys down here, and get their statements.”

Melissa started to ease out of her chair.

“Scott,” Steve said — without actually raising his voice. All three adults looked at him. “Scott,” Steve repeated, just in case Scott really had been trying to not eavesdrop on them. “Agent Sitwell wants to take your statements, now.”

For a moment, there was no response.

Then upstairs, a bedroom door creaked open, and two pairs of footsteps pattered down the hallway. John slumped at the sharp reminder of what Scott was, now. Melissa actually dropped back into her seat, stunned.

Sitwell tilted his head as he looked at Steve.

“Something Howard once said to me,” Steve said, as they heard the boys start down the stairs. “About adjusting to… This. The only way to really do it is to live, and try to live it out.”

Stiles barged into the dining room. Behind him, Scott shuffled forward, peering around the doorway but lurking at the threshold.

“Stiles, Scott,” Sitwell greeted, with the standard non-threatening body language of an investigative agent interviewing kids. “Why don’t you give us your side of the story?”

Out of the six seats at the table, the adults had taken the four in the middle, so now the boys took the seats at the end, Scott by his mother, and Stiles between Steve and his father.

“I…” Scott swallowed, glancing at his mother, then back at Sitwell. “I heard it all,” he continued, ignoring Melissa looking studiously down at her empty plate. “And I don’t think we have much to add.”

“That’s fine,” Sitwell said. “I still need to hear your side of the story, and anything you do have to add.”

It wasn’t much, since Sitwell wasn’t here to deal with the entire murder case at hand, or the serial killers before. Apart from some vague background about the teenagers trying to investigate the
murders, themselves, and their principal’s hatred of werewolves — “He cut one in half!” — they focused on what happened last night.

Scott described Argent first threatening him at the lacrosse game, then the Hales appearing soon after Stiles was kidnapped to talk Scott into utilizing Jackson’s body to leverage Gerard for Stiles.

“Hunters know how we work,” Scott explained. “We would never have found Stiles in time that fast. Since Gerard was the only person left who could’ve kidnapped Stiles, we figured this would be a faster and surer way to get him back. We just needed to get Jackson out of the hospital. But by the time we got to the hospital and were able to find out he’d died and was in the morgue, Stiles turned up.”

Melissa still wasn’t looking up from her plate, but she reached out a hand toward her son, who grasped it in his own and squeezed.

Stiles’ arm was back in its sling, his face was bruised, and he held himself in a manner Steve remembered from his own cracked ribs, as he explained what happened after he was kidnapped.

“They threw me down the stairs into some basement,” Stiles said. “It was dark at first, so I had no idea I wasn’t alone, until I found a light switch. That was when I saw…” He paused, took a deep breath, then continued. “Erica and Boyd. They were strung up by their wrists, and the Argents were using some low, constant electric currents to keep them from shifting or using their strength.”

Melissa tightened her grip on her son, eyes misting as the implications of what some people were willing to do to her boy started to sink in.

“Gerard showed up,” Stiles said. “And he wasn’t exactly subtle about what he wanted. Erica and Boyd weren’t gonna give up Derek, so I was his next resort. He already wanted Jackson, anyway, and expected me to be the messenger….” Stiles glanced at his dad, his gaze flickered over to Steve, and then he refocused back on Sitwell. “He, uh, figured if I showed up ‘beaten to a pulp’ — his words, not mine — then that would…incentivize Scott.”

Here, it was Stiles who reached out. John grasped his free hand. Steve brushed his hand against Stiles’ hip in support, taking care to avoid the sling.

“So Gerard started laying into me,” Stiles continued. “It was — mostly pretty simple, to be honest, punching and kicking. I’ve seen worse fights at school, and…I’ve been taking all those self-defense lessons from SHIELD, right? And I’ve been practicing with Scott since he decided to become an Instagram ninja, so…well, I managed to kinda like, not exactly flip him, but do that whole body weight displacement thing, and get away from him….” Stiles sighed. “But as I was about to run out, I…it was only a second, but I didn’t want to leave Erica and Boyd behind, and he just…grabbed me back again.”

John’s other hand shook as he gripped the table with white knuckles. Melissa’s face had hardened into the professional demeanor of a nurse listening to a victim’s explanation of how they got their injuries, and Scott’s eyes flickered gold in a stone-hard face.

“Anyway, he, uh — dislocated my shoulder, beat me up some more. Then put a bag over my head and escorted me back up those stairs. I was shoved around, into a car. Five minutes later, he pulled the bag off my head while we were stopped at an intersection, and ten minutes after that he was shoving me out of the car outside the hospital.” He smirked, the expression shaking but his eyes determined. “Idiot spent so much money on the cameras at school and he didn’t remember to stay out of their range, last night.”
Scott choked down a wet laugh of his own.

“Well, I walked into ER, told them my name and my dad’s name and how to reach him, and that was when Scott, Melissa, and Isaac showed up.” He frowned, then turned to Scott. “What were you doing with Isaac, anyway?”

“He was gonna help me find you,” Scott said. “And then get Jackson to get you.”

Stiles scowled. “Of course he was. Probably wanted to lord it over me.”

Scott rolled his eyes.

“Anyway, Melissa started patching me up, and I was trying to explain what happened when Dad and Steve showed up. So I was gonna try and redirect, before somebody—” He glared at Scott, who smiled back without a trace of regret. “Just decided to reveal everything we’d been trying to hide for months—”

“Why, exactly, was that?” Melissa demanded. “I mean, boys, this is a…” She looked at Scott. “I thought I knew why you tried to hide your asthma in kindergarten, but…” She swallowed. “Did I—”

“No!” Scott protested — now looking quite guilty. “That was about Dad, this was something else.”

“Was there any form of metahuman coercion?” Sitwell asked, a step away from busting out a victim interview checklist.

Scott shook his head. “I just…first we just wanted to hide that we’d been out when we weren’t supposed to, then it was — I was sure that there had to be a cure for this, and I thought I could get rid of this without anyone ever knowing what happened to me.”

“But why, Scott?” Melissa demanded. Scott flinched when she slammed her fork into her plate.

“Why would you hide this from everyone?”

The boy’s eyes were oddly shiny in the late-morning sunlight.

“I turn into a monster, Mom,” he murmured. “Why wouldn’t I?”

Steve and both Stilinskis winced when Melissa started crying, and Sitwell tried to hunch down behind his laptop. “I can come back later,” he started to offer.

“No,” Scott said. “I just…” He looked between his mother and the SHIELD agent. “Can we get this over with?”

“Don’t think for a second we’re done talking about this,” Melissa warned, voice stern even as she wiped tears from her face.

Scott’s shoulders slumped forward, and he nodded.

“Anyway,” Stiles continued, sending cautious glances at the McCalls before turning his attention back to Sitwell. “Scott revealed he was a werewolf — and Isaac — so we explained what had really happened to me, and that Gerard wanted Jackson’s body. We made a plan: Scott, Isaac, and Melissa get Jackson’s body, Steve and Dad go to the Argents’ to rescue Erica and Boyd, and Lydia and I used her car to go get my jeep since that had Steve’s shield in it. That and some mountain ash, though I don’t think I’d mentioned it at the time—”

“That magic dust you used to repel the kanima?” Steve asked.
“Yup!” Stiles said, pointing at him.

Sitwell paused in his typing to look between Steve and Stiles.

“…did you just say ‘magic dust’?” he asked. His tone betrayed just how little he wanted to hear the answer.

“Exactly what it sounds like,” Steve said. “Or at least looked like, last night.”

“I’m…not a hundred percent sure how it works, either. Literally it just works because I believe in it?” Stiles admitted, shrugging his good shoulder. “But it does! Once I make a closed loop with it, nothing supernatural can cross over the line.”

Sitwell pulled off his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose, looking about as pained as Steve felt at that explanation. “Seriously, Cap?” he asked, pulling his hand away from his face to look at Steve. “You practically time-traveled. You fought off aliens. You’re on a team of superheroes. And that wasn’t enough for you?”

“I didn’t actually have anything to do with this!” Steve pointed out, not hiding the small smile at Sitwell’s exaggerated woe. “This was my family’s fault, not mine.”

“How is that supposed to make this better?!” Sitwell protested, burying his face in his hands. “First superheroes, then aliens, now magic!”

Both boys started snickering, John rolled his eyes, and even Melissa gave them all a watery smile.

“Ugh…” Sitwell groaned out, before putting his glasses back on. He gestured for the boys to continue, despite how little he looked like he wanted them to.

Scott laid out the process of smuggling Jackson’s body out of the morgue — “Though it wasn’t actually as hard as you’d expect, I guess crime-show writers only do their research at hospitals with good budgets?” — and Gerard telling them where to go.

Their version of the night’s events were mostly the same. John and Melissa looked almost nauseous when the boys backtracked to explain how they’d made the plan to switch out Gerard’s pills in the first place, with the help of Scott’s boss, Dr. Deaton.

“I’m pretty sure Gerard’s original plan was to get Scott to kill Derek somehow,” Stiles chimed in. “That would make Scott the alpha and then he could give Gerard the Bite.”

Scott winced.

“…I think I’m going to have a long talk with Deaton after all this is cleared up,” Melissa muttered, her head turned toward the table as her eyes trailed up to Scott’s. “Given he apparently knew all of this and told me none of it.”

“Would you have believed him if I didn’t show you?” Scott asked, eyes flashing gold for emphasis.

“Would you have lied to my face if I asked you about it directly?” Melissa countered.

Even Steve knew it was supposed to be a rhetorical question. Yet the implication of Scott’s pause was enough for Melissa’s eyes to widen in shock as John’s shoulders slumped forward.

“Anyway,” Steve cut in, hoping to get them all back on track.

“Right,” Stiles said, eyes flickering between the McCalls, before he focused back on Sitwell, who
was taking a long, awkward sip of his coffee. “So, Gerard starts trying to order the kanima to kill us all, except Lydia managed to use the power of her love to get it to transform back into Jackson.”

Coffee splashed over Sitwell’s fist as he slammed the mug down on the table while coughing. Steve thumped his back lightly, as Sitwell grimaced up at Stiles.

“I’m sorry,” Sitwell said, patting his own chest around some tapering coughs. “What do you mean, ‘the power of her love’?”

“She literally just yelled his name out really loud,” Stiles grumbled.

“And talked to him a little, reminding him who he really was,” Scott added. “We’re pretty sure the kanima is something that forms from the lack of an identity, so when Lydia reminded him of what identity he did have—”

“By reminding him of their relationship,” Stiles spelled out, with a dramatic eye roll. “He turned back…” He pointed at Scott. “Because of the power of her love.”

Sitwell looked even more pained at this explanation than he had at the discussion about the magic dust.

“…okay,” he accepted. “Ms. Martin was able to…trigger Mr. Whittemore’s transformation back to his human state.” He sighed as he typed that out. Steve supposed that wasn’t much better. “And then what?”

By the end of them explaining how the Hale men killed Jackson — “He died twice in one night? And came back both times?!” — Sitwell looked about ready to just quit SHIELD and settle into a middle management job somewhere a little less crazy.

“Like the CIA,” he grumbled. “I could be putting together boring reports on some useless third-world country like Wakanda. But no, I’m here writing up reports about resurrection and werewolves and magic!”

“At least you’re not the one trying to clean up after Tony’s messes?” Steve offered.

“Don’t jinx me!” Sitwell muttered, jabbing at his laptop. Steve worried he’d poke a key right out of his keyboard. “Well, Sheriff, you actually did half our work for us. We just have to clarify our role in quarantining and investigating the unknown paralytic toxin, and keeping the on-the-ground SHIELD agent’s identity obscured for security reasons. Otherwise, your story given to the deputies can go to the public as is.”

“…great…” John muttered.

Sitwell paused to look at John. “Like I said, Sheriff — you told everyone the parts that mattered. The extraneous details don’t really change what happened, and keeping them quiet means keeping this case as civic and rightful as possible within the law, and keeps these kids safe.” With a stiff smile, he added, “From their own parents, if necessary. Some parents can’t even handle their kids being gay or changing college majors, imagine how they’d react to finding out their kids changed species on them?”

John accepted that with a wan smile. Sitwell must’ve seen that he wouldn’t get any further, as he just finished his typing.

“Well, everything is otherwise in order,” Sitwell continued. “So I should be out of here by the end of the day, once I get everyone’s statements and collect the last traces of that venom.” He looked up at
them. “Anything you can tell me?”

“It worked when the kanima cut my leg with its tail,” Steve started, then stopped at the bewilderment on Sitwell’s face.

“There was a tail?!” he cried out.

“…yes…” Steve said, realizing that none of them had really described the kanima beyond its general reptilian nature. “It had a tail.”

With a long groan, Sitwell tried and failed to rub the stress divots out of his forehead.

“Of course,” he muttered. He took a deep breath, then another, then looked back at them.

“Continue,” he whined.

“It had venom on its claws, and its tail, and it could secrete it,” Scott recited.

“The way you took it changed how long it lasted,” Stiles said. “I got some on my hands a while back, and I was paralyzed for basically a few minutes. It completely wore off in less than half an hour. When I got cut into my hip with it at the station, though, it took more than an hour to wear off. Longest I saw it last was nearly two hours, and that was when it was cut into Derek’s neck — and werewolves heal faster than Steve, so that’s really saying something.”

“…werewolves heal faster than Captain America?” Sitwell asked, eyes almost as wide as his glasses.

Again.

Stiles purses his lips and nodded, gaze flickering at Scott and back. “A lot faster, sometimes, though it’s…pretty inconsistent.”

Sitwell buried his face into his hands.

Steve reached out and patted his shoulder, and smiled when Sitwell glared at him from between his fingers.

“I need to put you on some kind of quota,” he grumbled.

Sitwell only took another ten minutes to finish up his questions. Once he was done, he showed them the digitized paperwork he would send to SHIELD and municipal law enforcement.

“That includes what you should tell the public,” Sitwell concluded, as he packed up his briefcase. “I’ll get statements from LEOs, talk to the other kids, and Derek Hale.” He paused, then looked down at his phone. “I wonder if he’s related to Ruthie…” He saw the confusion on their face. “Air Force colonel, Ruthie Hale. I went to school with her, and I know she’s from this town.”

Steve wondered what it meant about the Hale family, that Stiles and Scott looked so shocked to hear that — even after Sitwell shrugged and added, “But she never talked about her family much.”

The boys just looked at each other with disbelief.

“Ms. McCall,” Sitwell said, holding his hand out to Melisa to bid her farewell. She shook it, and he went around the table. “Scott, Sheriff Stilinski, Stiles…” When he came to Steve, he pointedly withheld his hand. “Try not to get into anymore trouble for the rest of the week, Captain.”

Steve smiled ruefully as he stood, making his way to the door to show Sitwell out. “I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises.”
I've started a **chronological posting** of the entire Winter Wolves series, for anyone who's been trying to keep up but has been struggling to keep everything in order.

**If you are on Discord, come on by to Teen Wolf Chat!** This lovely pack of Teen Wolf fans has been a tremendous help to me both in writing fic, and in learning how to do other things like **make gifsets** for Winter Wolves. And as always, you can come say hi on Tumblr! ♥
Apply Loose, Dry, and Sterile Dressings

Chapter Summary

Previously:

Nat smiled. "Stiles got sick of playing middle-man and gave me Scott's number to help him directly. And since Scott's girlfriend turned out to be a former gymnast, he's even more dedicated to learning some good moves." Her smile took on a sly edge as she added, "Really dedicated."

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Erica held Steve’s shield up against the lizard attacking Derek. She even managed to shove it backwards a bit. Knees bent and shoulders braced like Steve’s, her stance was clumsy, but strong.

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When Scott forced Derek’s teeth into Gerard’s flesh, everyone who could look away, did. Steve couldn’t turn his head away – though he did realize he was able to move his shoulders again.

Chapter Notes

Please don't freak out about all the missing tags and new chapter number/fic length! As you can see in this timeline, I'm taking the original plan for Frost Bite and splitting it into two fics (with another small one in between). All the tags that disappeared, will be in the second half of Frost Bite/the next fic or two.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve wasn’t sure what he expected when the boys had told them about Hale ‘training’ young werewolves in an old, abandoned rail depot on the edge of town.

Whatever it was, he didn’t expect it to be this decrepit. The doors were surprisingly quiet when Steve slid them open — despite their age, they were recently repaired and oiled. But once inside, even he almost coughed on the dust of the ‘lobby’ — not that there was much of one to be had, above-ground.

“…why am I getting a bad feeling already?” John muttered.

“I’d be worried if you weren’t,” Steve said, looking around and taking note of the surrounding fields of overgrown grass and cracked concrete. “Guess it would be hard to sneak up on this place.”

“No cameras,” the sheriff said with a frown, with a critical eye for the building’s security (or lack thereof) despite being off-duty.
“But with the range of hearing Scott says they have?” Steve said, holding out his thumb to take a very rough measurement of the distance between the depot, the tree line in one direction, and the street in the other. “That might not matter. Hale might already know we’re here.”

With a grimace, John said, “Then the fact he hasn’t come out here doesn’t exactly bode well for us.”

Steve shrugged, and tried to look on the optimistic side as they walked in. “Maybe if we meet him on his ground, he’ll be less hostile and more likely to listen to us?”

It had sounded less naive in his head, but not by much.

Standing atop a staircase that was more rot than wood, staring into a room full of decades-old equipment and a trio of abandoned train cars, Steve murmured, “Let me go first. I’ll be better off if this collapses.”

With a grimace, John nodded.

“Hale?” John called out, as Steve went down. “Derek Hale?” John only started his own trek down once Steve had his feet planted on cracked cement.

The space extended beyond the area lit by dim industrial hanging lamps, and Steve had to squint to see where the far walls extended to. John’s calls echoed around the large and empty room as he descended.

Steve turned around to make sure the staircase didn’t collapse under John’s feet, either, then turned back around-

-and jumped right out of his skin at the man right there glaring at him with glowing red eyes.

Where the hell had he even come from?!

“What?” Hale demanded, the glow in his eyes fading away to human hazel, but jaw still clenched tight and voice sharp. And was it Steve’s imagination, or was he still wearing the same ratty jeans and worn out shirt as he had been two days ago?

Steve raised his hands slightly, in what he hoped was a placating manner. “We just wanted to talk, Mr. Hale, and ask a few questions. Clarify a few things.”

Hale looked past Steve, at John. “Am I being arrested again, Sheriff?”

“No,” John promised, patting his civilian jacket almost pointedly.

“Then I’m not sure I have much to say to you,” Hale said, his face a careful construction of neutrality. His blank face didn’t extended to the rest of his body language, though — his crossed arms did not hide his shaking fists.

For a moment, Steve couldn’t tell if Hale was actually on the verge of shape-shifting again, or if the industrial lighting just deepened the shadows on Hale’s face.

“SHIELD is co-handling this case with the county,” John started. He grimaced, looking a little hesitant, but moving forward nonetheless. “They’ll be able to obfuscate the superhuman element of this case — including from the kids’ parents — without having to bury it entirely.”

“Good.”

Hale might as well have been a robot, for all the intonation he had.
This was going to be a little harder than they'd thought it would be.

“We were hoping to hear your side of this story, Mr. Hale,” Steve started.

Hale’s eyebrows rose in incredulity. the dim lamp light only seeming to darken them. “‘My side’ of the story?” he asked. “What ‘side’?”

“We’ve heard the boys’ version of events, as of late,” John said, with a gentle, if neutral, expression. “But it’s not the most flattering to you, so we were hoping to hear your perspective—”

He cut himself off at Hale’s derisive snort.

“Of course it’s not flattering,” Hale snarled, that last word almost echoing around the abandoned rail depot. “They’re the ones who decided trusting Hunters was a good idea! But sure, I’m still the bad guy.”

Steve pursed his lips. “They trusted one Argent, and didn’t even tell her everything when she became compromised—”

“Compromised?!” Hale shouted, eyes flashing red as his face contorted in rage. “Allison hunted down Erica and Boyd, shot them full of arrows, and had them strung up and electrocuted in her basement! You call that ‘compromised’?!”

“Given that it was all on her psychopathic grandfather’s orders, yeah,” Steve said, stepping forward in case Hale turned violent.

Captain America versus a werewolf. If this hadn’t been in a comic book at some point in the last seventy years, he’d eat his shield.

The very shield which, in retrospect, he should’ve brought down here with him. It would’ve come in mighty handy if Hale busted out any fangs or claws.

“Scott and Stiles trusted the worst possible people they could,” Hale said, slowly shaking his head. “The Argents declared war, and they went to them anyway—”

“They had no business being in a war in the first place, Hale!” John cried out. So much for staying polite. “They’re kids!”

“What, and you think psychopaths care?” Hale snarled. “Do you know how many children were in my house when it burned? How many kids the Argents murdered in cold blood?”

“So what, they did it to you, now you’re going to do it to someone else?” Steve demanded, then winced. That was not how he’d wanted this to go.

Hale narrowed his eyes. “I’m surprised a World War Two veteran doesn’t have a greater appreciation of giving everyone the tools to fight for themselves. War doesn’t choose who to kill.”

“But you did,” Steve said, clasping his hands behind his back. “You recruited three teenagers to join your war—”

“I found the three teenagers who needed a pack the most!” Hale snapped, throwing his arms up in anger. “Sheriff, you didn’t have a goddamn clue what Lahey was doing to his kid until you were arresting Isaac for his murder. Have you found Boyd’s missing sister yet? Because he looked for her a hell of a lot longer than any of you ever did, and never found a damn thing, either. And if you don’t trust me, then why don’t you ask Melissa how Erica’s mother treats her every time she had a
seizure?"

“There are laws in place,” John started, pointing at Hale.

“And they failed!” Hale snapped right back. “You were supposed to protect those kids, Sheriff — and I’m sure that if you knew what their lives were like, you would have. But you didn’t, so I did.” He swallowed, and Steve wasn’t sure if the red tint in Hale’s eyes a was supernatural glow or a trick of the poor lighting. “I never wanted them in this war, either, I never wanted to be at war at all. This was supposed to end with Kate and Peter. Kate’s psychotic father is the one who thought she was right to murder an innocent family and go after the rest of us — and I wasn’t going to leave my new pack defenseless.”

“You didn’t seem to mind leaving Scott in the dark,” Steve said.

Hale threw his hands up with a laugh that turned into a snarl as he turned away from them, hands clenched in his hair. Steve looked at John, listening to Hale take several bracing breaths. Just as John looked about ready to step forward, Hale whirled around on them.

“The Bite is a gift,” Hale said, eyes blazing red and fingernails morphing into claws. Steve should’ve brought his shield. “One Scott never even tried to understand—”

“From what he told me, he didn’t want it,” Steve said. Was this some weird werewolf politics thing? How the hell did he end up trying to understand werewolf politics to begin with? “And you got his cooperation by dangling a cure in front of him.”

“Really, Captain?” Hale demanded. He gestured up and down at Steve’s body. “I would think you of all people would understand.”

“I signed up for this,” Steve answered. Hale opened his mouth, but Steve could already see what his next argument was, and cut it off with, “Do you know the story of my first mission, back in my war? The one that ended my USO tour and put me in the field?” That had been an almost stereotypical beginning of all the silly documentaries Stiles had shown him about himself and his team.

Hale narrowed his eyes, eyebrows lowering as he humored Steve: “You rescued 400 POWs from a Nazi labor camp.”

Steve shook his head. “Not only a labor camp,” he clarified. “A laboratory. I’m not proud to admit this, but I wasn’t going there to rescue the other guys — I went there in the first place for Bucky. I found my best friend strapped to a table, half out of his mind, after being experimented on…by someone who was trying to turn him into-” Steve waved down at his body. “-Another me.”

Taking a deep breath despite the clenched jaw, Hale crossed his arms again, shoulders hunched and brow furrowed. For a moment, there was a low growl that made Steve wonder if a feral dog had followed them down here — before he realized the sound was coming from the man in front of him.

The growl broke off, and Hale looked past Steve, at John. “Do you have a legal reason you’re still here, Sheriff Stilinski, or are you just here to harass me?”

“Hale, you changed the species of several teenagers,” John said, spreading his hands in a semi-helpless gesture. “Doctors and nurses can’t even give kids Tylenol without their parents’ permission. Yet from the sounds of it, none of these kids’ parents know their children aren’t human, anymore.”

“You wanna be the one to tell them, when their kids will have no interest in proving it?” Hale said, eyebrows raising while he tilted his head to the staircase, as if actually inviting them out and planning to follow them. “Be my guest.”
“I know they want to keep this to themselves,” John said, stepping forward. “That’s why I’m here, asking you to be a responsible adult and prove to their parents that werewolves are real, and even if their kids won’t show them-
”

“No,” Hale said flatly, rolling his shoulders back without uncrossing his arms. His entire expression smoothed out into a cold hardness that Steve recognized all too well.

He’d seen that expression in the mirror often enough. Hale wasn’t going to budge on this.

“If and when they want to tell their parents, I’ll step up and support them,” Hale continued. “But not a moment before. I’m not going to take that choice away from them.”

John actually stepped forward, and Steve put a hand on his shoulder — not quite holding him back, but rather holding him in place.

“Sheriff,” Hale said, with a sharp, humorless smile. “This rail depot is a subsidiary property of my family. I own this place. So unless you have a warrant, I can still call for your arrest for trespassing.”

“Really?” Steve said, eyebrows raising. Everything happening outside the law around this town, and that is what he goes for?

Hale’s smile turned almost sickly sweet as he nodded at Steve. “Imagine how that’s going to look, a county sheriff and Captain America getting arrested for trespassing. You sure you wanna risk it?”

Shaking in his shoes, John looked ready to take that risk, so Steve squeezed his shoulder and pulled him back.

“Let’s go,” Steve murmured. They’d said their piece, and Hale wasn’t going to change his mind anytime soon.

With a very human snarl, John turned on his toes and stomped across cement, and up the stairs. They turned out to be a lot sturdier than it looked, since they trembled but otherwise held steady under John’s angry march.

Steve sighed, and looked back at Hale, standing tall with his chin up in defiance. Despite that, Hale looked small, standing alone under the industrial hanging lamp, the dark depot expanding wide and far behind him.

He stood so very alone.

“We’re not trying to start a fight,” Steve said. “And I promise, we don’t have it out for you. I just want what’s best for those kids, and for you.”

“I’ve heard that one before, Captain,” Hale said. “I was stupid enough to believe it back then — but not anymore. So I’m only going to ask one more time.” Hale uncrossed one arm to point up the staircase. “Leave.”

With a sigh, Steve obliged.

Upstairs and outside, Steve slid into the passenger seat of John’s Cruiser, sitting silently as John started the car with shaking hands.

“Those other kids look up to him,” John hissed, driving away from the ‘abandoned’ building with a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. “That’s what they have. This is the only other adult werewolf in town besides the serial killer. This!”
Steve sighed, patting John’s shoulder as they drove back into the town proper. “We’ll figure something out.”


“Not yet,” Steve answered, with a slight head-shake. “Doesn’t mean we can’t came up with one.”

John didn’t look like he believed him.

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The Beacon Hills Nature Preserve was a little chilly for the mid-spring morning, but it warmed up as Scott and Stiles led Steve and Melissa to ‘their’ clearing in the woods. It wasn’t close enough to summer for the trees to be fogged over in California’s infamous ‘June Gloom’, but it was still an overcast day, the sky a grayish blue whose clouds wouldn’t fade away for a few more hours yet.

These woods were pretty quiet. Steve would’ve sworn their footsteps were echoing, if he didn’t know that the young grass in the muddy ground and the wet leaves squelching under their shoes rendered that impossible.

It was his imagination that he heard extra footsteps as they walked through this little forest.

“This is it,” Stiles said to Steve once they got to their destination.

His voice was as flat as it had been all week.

“Nice spot,” Melissa said, looking around her son’s favorite new hang-out. The small clearing was about two dozen yards across. There were some small boulders jutting out of the ground off to one side, opposite where the dirt gave way to grass. “So this is where you’ve been, all this time?”

Scott nodded, fiddling with his fingers as he showed his mom this new side of his life. “I first found this spot the day me and Allison ditched school for our date. Then we kept coming back to it later when we figured out we both liked martial arts videos…”

As Scott rambled on about what he’d been getting up to around here, Steve dropped his shield on the ground by the rocks. Stiles sat atop one, adjusting the shoulder strap of his sling.

“Need a hand?” Steve asked.

“I’m fine!” Stiles snapped, and Steve tried to parse his tense shoulders and dark expression.

Stiles was being unusually circumspect in his anger. Steve had plenty of ideas on how to handle a ranting and raving Stiles, but this cold silence was alien to him.

With a frustrated sigh, Steve tugged off his jacket and dropped it in his shield. He turned around to see Melissa’s softened smile as Scott finished off his explanation of his and Allison’s romantic exploits and competitive sparring with a shy smile.

“I’m not… I’m doing exactly what I’ve always done,” Scott insisted. “Except, y’know, with a girlfriend and in some new places.”

And a new body, which was the reason they were out in the woods in the first place: no one around to see Captain America testing the physical acumen of a boy far too fast and strong to be human.

(Though Steve couldn’t help but feel like they were still being watched.)
“You sure you wanna stay?” Scott asked his mom one more time. “It’s…a little intense.”

Whatever species Scott was, he was still his over-concerned self at his core, and the fussing seemed to reassure Melisa if her fond eye-roll was anything to go by. She ruffled Scott’s hair, smiling at his low wailing about her messing up his hairdo, and perched on a boulder by Stiles.

Steve shot her the most assuring, Captain America Guaranteed smile he could manage, before meeting Scott in the middle of the clearing.

“All right, Scott,” Steve said, holding up his fists while mentally running through the combat evaluation checklist Clint liked to screen new recruits with. Well, Scott was at least keeping his weight on his toes - but he was leaning a little too far forward, in an exaggeration of the proper stance. “Let’s see what you can do, so Nat knows how much of a new one to rip into you for holding back on her.”

Even Steve heard Melissa’s inelegant giggle at that, and despite the slight flush, Scott smiled as he also stood across from Steve. Off to the side, Stiles was blank-faced - was Steve’s joke that bad? - as he held up his phone, with the video camera pointed at them.

“Recording,” he reported tonelessly.

Steve nodded once, and turned to face Scott, raising his fists up as he shifted his weight forward onto his toes. Scott copied the stance.

“I’ll go easy on you, and make the first move,” Steve promised.

Before Scott could say anything, Stiles yelled, “Go!”

Scott was eyeing his legs. Against adult recruits, Steve would start with a right hook…but Scott was still a kid, and Steve had promised to go easy on him.

So he started out with a simple kick - Nat called it a roundhouse kick - toward Scott’s midsection, which Scott actually caught in an even simpler hold. Steve actually had to put some effort into jerking out of the hold. That gave Scott enough confidence to surge forward with a flying kick of his own.

Steve weaved under it but didn’t strike up, letting Scott stick the landing. He swept his arm back toward Scott, just fast enough and too fast - and this hold, Scott was a lot clumsier with. Still, Scott twisted his body around smoothly enough to lock Steve’s arm, his palm coming up behind Steve’s shoulder.

The motion was telegraphed, and ordinarily Steve would have no problem keeping his feet on the ground. But, while werewolf muscle was nothing close to supersoldier strength, Scott was still a lot stronger than Steve’s usual opponents were. Steve was actually caught off guard when Scott dropped to one knee and managed to flip Steve over his head, and only wobbled once in the whole motion.

However, he didn’t follow the motion through, almost letting go of Steve instead of bearing down on him harder as he slammed Steve into the ground. Made sense. Apart from some occasional bouts with Stiles, Scott only sparred with Allison, who was both a woman and only human. Of course he’d gotten used to holding back in sparring.

Steve would only give him some allowance for that, though - Scott also needed to learn how to adapt.

So he twisted out from under Scott, throwing Scott off of him in the same motion as he got back on
his feet, fists up and shoulders back, ready for whatever Scott tried next.

It didn’t take long for Steve to realize what Stiles meant when he referred to Scott as ‘an Instant gram ninja’. Amateur parkour, tutored gymnastics, and self-taught martial arts made for a very acrobatic style. It was no wonder Scott and Allison’s sparring videos looked so impressive - and they both had a lot of potential. Steve could see why Nat got so invested in some random teenagers.

Unfortunately, the flash and fanfare cost Scott. His enhanced speed and strength - and every other local superhuman’s lack of combat skills - were likely the only reasons his fancy footwork hadn’t cost him in a real fight.

That he took so much guidance from Nat showed in how quick he was to take big, flying leaps at Steve. But where Nat knew how to keep herself guarded and struck precisely - using such maneuvers only to compensate for her small size - Scott left himself wide open, and struck almost at random. There was only so much Steve could ignore that.

Stiles called out, “Time!”, right after the third time Steve threw Scott to the ground.

Off to the side, Melissa called out, “Bravo!” with some applause. When Scott flushed and ducked his head at his mom’s display of support, Steve had to fight down a laugh.

“Not bad,” he concluded, holding out his hand and helping Scott up to his feet. “You said your girlfriend did gymnastics?”

“Eight years of it,” Scott said with a nod, dusting himself off.

“It shows,” Steve said, striding back over to where he’d left his jacket in his shield. “That, and the parkour, and Nat’s general disregard for gravity. Good for catching people off guard, and a handy way of using your strength, but you gotta remember not to leave yourself open. Don’t copy Nat. Your moves might look close to hers, but trust me when I say what she’s actually doing is far more advanced. I know you don’t like it, but you’ve got a lot of strength now - use it.”

“Nat makes it sound so easy,” Scott grumbled, trudging over to his mom so she could check over him for injuries, especially checking his midsection. Scott had been shot there barely a week ago, and Steve kicked him there twice in the last five minutes.

Melissa must’ve noticed, if the way she narrowed her eyes at Scott’s unblemished belly was anything to go by.

“See?” Scott offered, letting his shirt drop back down. “I’m fine.”

That didn’t seem to reassure Melissa, who turned to Steve.

“There’s this video of you that aired on the news a while back,” she said. “Something about a raid on some illegal genetics lab in Baltimore?” Steve nodded with a wince, remembering that particular clusterfuck. “You…they showed it over and over again, you kicked a parked car and it slid halfway down the block. And now…” She looked back at Scott.

“I spar with regular, human agents most of the time,” Steve pointed out, shrugging his jacket back on. “I’m used to holding back, and Scott’s not an adult or a SHIELD trainee, either.”

Melissa’s shoulders slumped a little in relief, nodding at his reassurance.

Steve decided not to tell her that the strength he used now would send unarmored, human opponents to the hospital. Scott must’ve realized that, if the grateful look he shot Steve from behind his mom
was anything to go by.

“‘You got the whole match, right?’” Steve called out over his shoulder.

No response. Was Stiles ignoring him, now? He turned around to ask.

Except Stiles wasn’t paying attention. Instead, he was glaring up over at the other side of the clearing, his hand already pocketing his phone.

Before Steve could ask him what he was looking at, Stiles marched over to…one of the trees?

“ERICA!” he shouted. “We can see you!”

“We can?” Steve asked, bewildered. But once he followed Stiles’ gaze, he could see it - a flash of blonde hair and bright clothes through the branches, before a teenage girl dropped to the ground.

Steve had been right about Erica being the kind of girl to care a lot about her appearance. Her make-up looked fresh out of an advertisement, and her blonde hair curled elaborately over her shoulders. Her white shirt, red jacket, and jeans skirt - which seemed awfully short even by 21st century standards - were worlds away from the wreckage of bloodied fabric and torn leather he’d last seen her in.

If it weren’t for her dirt-smudged bare feet, with strappy sandals dangling from her fingers, she could’ve stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine.

“Hi, Captain!” Erica greeted. With shaking hands, she held her arms up like she was on a fashion show and asked in what Steve hoped was a joke, “Like my outfit?”

“…wow,” Stiles said. “I don’t think you could be any creepier if you tried.” Erica growled at him. Stiles flinched, but didn’t back down, instead demanding, “What are you even doing here?”

Her growl trailed off, and her gaze flicked over to Steve.

It seems he had a fan, here.

“Is it so weird that I’d wanna meet Captain America?” Erica demanded.

Scott and Stiles were both stony faced, while Melissa gave her former patient a critical look over.

Steve stepped forward and held out his hand, saying with his most professional smile, “It’s nice to meet you under better circumstances.”

Whatever Erica’s reservations about Melissa or the boys were, they melted away as she grinned while shaking Steve’s hand.

“I can’t believe you’re really here,” she admitted, bright-eyed and still shaking his hand, not seeming to notice that he wasn’t moving it of his own power anymore. “I mean - Captain America! Here! In Beacon Hills! With the-” Her hand froze and her eyes widened as she looked past Steve. He followed her gaze to the shield on the ground halfway across the clearing. “Is that…?”

With a more laid back smile, Steve nodded, pulling his hand back so he could go pick up the shield.

Steve tried to remind himself of everything the boys had said about her. Despite looking like a fashionable teenage girl, she had knocked Stiles unconscious, broken into the McCall house to try to kill a girl, and took half a dozen arrows to the chest less than a week ago.
But she was also just a kid, just like the boys.

“Catch,” he said, tossing the shield her way.

She caught it with the assistance of her gut, clapping her hands around it like a giant frisbee. Erica stayed standing, despite the fact he’d thrown it at her with a force that would knock most humans her size to the ground.

Her fancy-looking shoes dropped onto the muddy leaves below, but she didn’t notice. She was grinning like a kid as she looked down at what she was holding.

“Oh my god,” she breathed out, looking at the shield with bright eyes - despite having used it, herself, a few nights ago.

“No bad,” Steve repeated, and tried not to wince at how even those two words made her face light up like a Christmas tree. “You know,” he added anyway. “You were pretty handy with this the other night.”

She ducked her head, blonde curls obscuring her flushing face. “Thanks, Captain,” she said. “I didn’t really…I just tried to look how you usually did on all the YouTube videos.”

Did 21st century teenagers learn everything on YouTube?

Steve glanced over at Melissa and the boys.

Stiles was still scowling, though when he realized Steve was looking, he stomped back to his rock and reclaimed his seat. Scott narrowed his eyes at Erica in suspicion, and Melissa was walking over with an anxious frown.

“Should you even be out here on your own?” she asked Erica as she approached them. “What if you have a seizure and…”

The nurse-practitioner trailed off as Erica’s expression became even stormier than Stiles’.

“I’m fine,” Erica bit out, eyes glowing gold like a reminder. “I don’t get seizures anymore-”

“Yeah you do!” Stiles shouted from across the little clearing.

“That doesn’t count!” Erica yelled right back, turning to face Stiles and not letting go of the shield. “That was the kanima venom!”

What was?!

“That venom caused paralysis, not seizures,” Stiles retorted, one hand tucked under his sling, the closest he could get to crossing his arms right now.

Frowning between the two teenagers, Steve looked to Scott - who, as usual, obliged Steve’s unspoken request. “When the kanima attacked us in the library, Erica’s arm broke, and she was paralyzed by the venom. She started seizing instead of healing.”

Erica scowled as she clutched the shield tighter to her torso, but she didn’t contradict him.

“The werewolf bite doesn’t cure them,” Stiles explained, keeping a suspicious eye on Erica. “It just…instantly heals them.”

“You know how your lungs and throat start to burn before they swell up?” Scott asked. “Back when
you had asthma?” Steve nodded, quite familiar with the sensation. It’d happened at least once a week for most of his life. “Well, the burning starts, but now my breathing doesn’t slow down at all, and I don’t either. I can ignore it and keep going, because they’ll heal before it swells up…but my throat still *starts* that swelling.”

Melissa looked to Steve, her gaze flicking down to his chest in askance. Steve shook his head. “That’s not how it works for me. My asthma is actually gone, all my conditions are - and I had a lot of ’em.”

Erica shrugged, and despite her disdain for the boys, she shot Steve a sunny smile. “Well, without Rebirth, lycanthropy is the closest we’ll get to super-healing. That was the appeal, to be honest.”

Scott rolled his eyes. “So you changed your species, signed up for Derek’s stupid war, and risked your entire *life* just to get rid of your seizures?”

“Isn’t that why you became a werewolf?” Erica said, lifting up the shield and using it to point to Scott. “For your asthma?”

Scott froze, and even seemed to go a little pale as his eyes widened in shock. Melissa frowned at her son, and Stiles must’ve noticed Scott’s posture, as even he slipped off the rock and approached them.

“What?” Erica asked, looking between Stiles, Scott, and Melissa with a confused frown - and settling her gaze on Steve.

Steve sighed. “I take it Hale told you that Scott wanted to become a werewolf? Became one willingly?”

Erica opened her mouth, then blinked as she thought it through. “He…never specified.” She looked at Scott. “You mean you didn’t?”

Scott was shaking in his shoes, fists clenched tight, but he slowly shook his head. “I didn’t even know werewolves were real until after I started shifting. I was *attacked*.”

She seemed to deflate a little at that, before rolling her shoulders back and straightening up again. “Well, that’s…unfortunate.”

“How did *you* learn about it?” Melissa asked, with a frown.

Erica shrugged again, which was actually quite impressive given she was still maintaining a pretty solid grip on the shield. “Isaac told him about me, and Derek met me in the hospital. After my seizure in gym class?” Melissa nodded, apparently familiar with whatever incident Erica was referencing. “Yeah, so when you found me in my bed where it wasn’t supposed to be, that wasn’t some orderly mix-up - Derek met me then and showed me that he was a werewolf. I accepted the Bite on the spot.” Scott opened his mouth, and Erica added, “And yes, he told me I could be risking my life.” With a snort, she added, “I’d already risked my life just to climb a stupid wall, remember? That’s how I ended up there in the first place.”

“I know,” Scott said, crossing his arms and pressing his clenched, shaking fists against his ribs. “I’m the one that *caught* you, remember?”

Now the shield was starting to shake in Erica’s grip. Steve wasn’t worried about her denting the shield any - even *he* couldn’t do that, and he was still stronger than the werewolves. But if she dropped it on her feet…or worse, got it into her head to try throwing it-

“I would thank you,” Erica said. “But I think we’ve had enough between us since then to make it too
little, too late.” Rolling the edges of the shield between her hands, she said, “Derek told me you were a werewolf, that day - that it was how you caught me. That’s why I said ‘yes’.”

Steve’s eyebrows rose in his surprise - and Scott and Stiles were downright shocked, while Melissa seemed even more confused.

“Why settle for letting someone else ‘rescue’ me,” Erica drawled with a smile sharper than the fangs and claws Steve knew she had. “When I could rescue myself - or better yet, not need rescuing in the first place?”

“Fat lot of good that did you last week,” Stiles snorted out.

Erica’s growl had Steve jerking back in surprise, and Stiles almost toppled off his rock. Scott shifted his weight forward, ready to tackle her if necessary.

“You mean when Scott’s psychotic girlfriend hunted us down like animals?” she snapped, eyes glowing gold. Her knuckles were almost as white as the stripes on his shield, her grip on it was so tight. “I can’t believe you guys turned your back on Derek for her-”

“That’s what you think?!” Stiles cried out, sliding off his rock to stomp up to her again. “We tried to work with him! Do you have any idea how many times Derek lied to us and kept things from us?”

As the three angry teenagers faced off, Melissa had her hands up like she was about to intervene - even as her foot started to slide back, slowly pulling her away from the conflict unfolding before them.

Steve took a step forward. He needed to pry his shield away before anyone did any real damage with it, and stop this fight before it started.

“You mean like you kept your little mountain ash stunt from Derek?” Erica sneered.

“Figures,” Scott ground out. “He lies to us and keeps things from us a million times and it’s fine, and the one time I don’t tell him something and-”

“Given that this ‘one thing’ only worked with alphas,” Erica said, her fingernails elongating into claws that tapped along the shield’s edge. “And he’s the only alpha around, he had a goddamn right to know before you used him-”

“Like I had a ‘goddamn right’ to know before he used me?!” Scott snarled out, eyes glowing gold and teeth growing into fangs.

Steve managed to get between the two of them.

“Hey,” he said, with the cheesiest Captain America smile he could muster. It was usually a pretty disarming expression, whether because it actually lightened people up, or because it made them so incredulous they forgot to be angry. He wrapped his hand around a free edge of the shield facing away from Erica, without taking it from her yet.

Not that he needed to - a quiet, terrified whimper had both werewolves almost jerking back from each other, and looking over to the source.

Melissa was shaking in place only a few feet away, staring between her son and her former patient with wide eyes that were more white than not. Her hands were frozen in the air from where she’d been ready to intervene before the kids started to slip away from their humanity.
The teenagers’ eyes drained of their unnatural golden glows, and their teeth and nails returned to normal proportions.

“Ms. McCall?” Erica asked. Melissa jerked away from them both.

Without a word, Scott backed away from his mother. Steve grabbed the shield when Erica let go, her shoulders and hands slacking.

Flipping the shield between his fingers until he was holding it properly by the straps, he turned - trying not to make it obvious that he was putting Melissa behind himself and the shield. He didn’t think he succeeded, if the looks on the teenagers’ faces were anything to go by.

“Melissa?” Stiles asked, approaching her with cautious concern. “You okay?”

“I’m…” Melissa shut her eyes, swallowing as her hands dropped to her sides and she straightened her back. Opening her eyes again, she fixed her gaze on Stiles - away from Erica and Scott - and said, “I’m fine.”

Stiles didn’t believe her, but at a sharp look from Steve, he didn’t say anything more. Steve turned around, lowering the shield to his side a bit - keeping it between Melissa and the kids.

“How about I take you home?” Steve said to Melissa. “I’m sure the kids will be fine out here for an hour or so…” He glanced over his shoulder. “And not get into any more fights.”

Melissa’s lower lip quivered as she nodded.

“Can I get the keys to the jeep?” Steve asked Stiles, turning back to the kids again. “I’ll come back for the boys in a bit, and Erica…” He frowned as he looked at Erica, and then down to her strappy sandals, still on the ground behind her. They were definitely not the kind made for walking, especially out in the woods. “How did you get this far out of town on your own?”

“They can run pretty far,” Stiles deadpanned, waving his hand toward the werewolves.

But even as he spoke, Erica sheepishly reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a single car key, with a few remote-locking buttons on one side…and a Camaro logo on the other.

The boys’ eyebrows rose up in almost perfect unison, and Stiles asked, “Is that to Derek’s car?”

Erica nodded, looking apologetically between Stiles and Steve. “Um…I was kind of hoping that if I stole his car, it would piss him off enough that he’d actually come out of his angst cave?”

Scott’s lip twitched at her description, and Stiles smirked with what Steve presumed was appreciation for her plan.

“But you can’t drive yet!” Melissa cried out. She flinched when all three teenagers turned to face her at once, but she continued. “You can’t get a license until at least six months after your last known seizure and even then you need a doctor’s confirmation and-”

Melissa cut herself off as she realized how much Erica’s head seemed hunched into her shoulders.

“…you drove without a license, didn’t you?” Melissa asked.

Erica nodded, biting her lip and looking down at her bare, dirt-covered feet.

While a kid driving around without a license was far from ideal, Melissa palming her face in maternal exasperation was a small victory - as was her stepping forward again and holding her hand out.
“I can drive!” Erica protested. “And look, the DMV did not account for non-humans, I’m not going to have a seizure from driving-”

“How much driving training have you even had? Or practice?” Melissa asked. “What happens if you get pulled over?” She took a deep breath, bracing herself for something. “What happens if your mom finds out, huh?”

Melissa flinched at Erica’s scowl, but stood firm. With some indistinct grumbling, Erica dropped the car key into Melissa’s hand.

“When you say Hale won’t come out of his ‘angst cave’,” Steve started to ask. “Do you mean the railway depot?” Erica nodded again, looking surprised that he knew about it. Steve held out his hand to Melissa, who passed him the key in turn. “All right, I’ll go give him his car back.” Looking at Melissa, he added, “Do you…do you still want me to give you a ride home?”

The three teenagers froze again, remembering how this conversation came about in the first place. Melissa took a deep breath and asked them, “Are you…will you be okay out here, for a bit?”

Scott’s face softened at her concern. “Yeah, Mom. Promise.”

Despite the fearful tension in her shoulders, she narrowed her eyes at Scott and added, “And you won’t get into another fight as soon as we’re gone?”

Stiles put his right hand over his heart, fingers tangling in the strap of his sling. “We swear,” he said, with a bright smile and tight eyes that Steve didn’t believe for a second - and neither did Melissa. However, Scott and Erica shared a look, before both nodded at Melissa, and that seemed to be enough for her.

Erica pointed the direction she’d parked it in, explaining the rangers’ maintenance road she’d parked the car on and how to find it. Steve pocketed the key as he and Melissa started off in that direction.

A few paces away, though, he stopped. Melissa paused in her tracks a few steps ahead of him, and they turned back to the kids at the same time.

“If I let you three hold onto the shield,” Steve said, already loosening his grip on its straps. “Can I trust you to make sure I have it back by the end of the day?”

Erica’s face lit up again, as if the last few minutes had never happened. Once the kids all nodded their assurance, Steve tossed it over to her. She caught it a little smoother this time, and with a snappy salute, Steve started off again, falling into step beside Melissa.

Neither of them said a word until they found Hale’s Camaro. It took Steve two tries to figure out which buttons on the key did what, but he managed to unlock the doors and got behind the wheel, Melissa sliding into the passenger seat.

“Was that a good idea?” she finally asked after shutting the door. “Leaving the shield with them?”

Steve shrugged. “The whole point of that shield is that it’s hard to damage…and it’s hard to see, but there’s a tracking chip on there just in case. Unless they pull off the mounts attaching the straps to it, I can find it almost anywhere on the planet for the next decade.”

“All right,” she said, nodding slowly as Steve started the car. “But why did you leave it with them?”

Taking care to ease the car around in the narrow ‘road’ - more like a glorified deer trail - Steve tried to articulate the aching familiarity in the kids’ expressions, the desperation he’d felt in his youth and
in his war.

“My circumstances were very, very different, when I joined Rebirth,” Steve said. “But…I know wanting to get away from the limitations of your own body, and how terrifying it can be to be thrown into a battlefield without much warning or training. I know what it’s like to want to help people, but not knowing how.”

As they approached a real street - there was a gate on the roadway, but also enough off-road space to drive around it - Steve glanced at Melissa. He looked long enough to see the speculation on her face, before turning his attention back to where he was driving.

“I got to where I am because someone - Dr. Erskine - showed some faith in me,” Steve said, finally breaking out of the tree line and onto a paved road. He turned toward the town, getting a feel for how this car drove as he went. “I’m just trying to pay that forward.”

~*~

In the early afternoon sunlight, Steve perched on the hood of the Camaro as he waited for his call to connect.

“Steve?” Tony answered.

“Hey,” Steve greeted, staring at the wall of the Beacon Hills Old Rail Depot for the second time in two days. The empty depot - Steve spent almost twenty minutes looking for Hale and waiting. “You know how to track people by their phones and stuff, right? If I send you someone’s phone number, can you find them?”

“In theory,” Tony said. Steve heard some mechanical bot-chittering in the background - Dum-E and U sounded excited - followed by some clanging metal and a long-suffering sigh from Tony. “But in practice, I wouldn't do much more than narrow down location between cell-towers, so I’m not sure how much I can help you if you’re looking for someone in town. Why?”

Steve sighed, stood up, and started pacing as he started filling Tony in on everything that’s been happening here for the last week or so, and how he ended up with a stolen Camaro outside an abandoned building.

“…so after I dropped off Melissa, I came back to where I last saw Hale - but he’s not here, and I have no idea where he could be. So now I’m stuck with a fancy car and…”

“And no clue what to do next?” Tony asked, with the sound of some tool being set down on a metal table.

Steve sighed. “Yeah. I don’t want just leave this here. Hale seems to hate me enough as it is.”

“So why do you care so much what happens to him or his car?” Tony asked. “If this guy’s a werewolf living in an abandoned train station, something tells me he’s not going to sue you for property negligence if you abandon his car out there.”

“He owns the station,” Steve said, kicking his heel in the dry dirt. “And…I don’t know why I care so much.”

Tony snorted, and Steve frowned up at the sky. “What?” he asked.

“You really don’t know?” Tony asked back. “Unless you left out something big when telling me this whole story, it seems pretty obvious to me.”
“Well it’s not obvious to me,” Steve said. “So care to fill me in?”

Now it was Tony’s turn to sigh. “Hale’s whole family, died? And he’s had his world turned upside down and inside out, and now he has to build himself a new life with new people. He lost everything and he’s restarting from scratch.”

Steve got an uneasy feeling about where this was going. “What’s your point?”

“Do you really need me to spell it out for you?”

“…no.”

Steve opened the driver’s door and dropped back into the seat again.

“Hale lost his world and family to fire,” Tony said. “You lost yours to ice.”

“That’s awful poetic,” Steve grumbled, scrubbing at his face in existential exhaustion. “And I don’t see how it’s relevant. Hale isn’t me. I know I have my moments, but I’d like to think I’m not that much of an ass.”

Tony actually laughed. “That’s debatable,” he quipped, though his voice sounded fond. “Aunt Peggy had some fun stories about you when you lost your temper. Like the time someone got your team the wrong kind of Italian truck-”

“We were going behind enemy lines-”

“-and the time my dad screwed up Private Morita’s radio-”

“German radio signals were different!”

“-and something about a rough draft of a comic book?”

“They got rid of Gabe and Jim! And they turned Peggy into a secretary! And turned Jaques into a coward, and-”

“Yeah, she seemed to be on your side for that one,” Tony said. Despite the slight flares of irritation at those memories, Steve smiled. Tony was a master of manipulating mood, which was damn annoying sometimes, but just as damn useful other times.

“Thanks,” he murmured, and Tony had the decency to not play dumb and ask ‘what for?’. Steve looked behind himself, into the Camaro interior, and added, “Still no idea what to do with this car.”

“Hold onto it?” Tony suggested, with the particular nonchalance of the born-wealthy. “Maybe this Erica girl was right, and Hale will come looking for it.”

“Let’s hope,” Steve muttered. “There are still reporters on the Stilinskis’ street, between Gerard and Dahler. Though I think they’re passing off the grandfather as a conspirator rather than an actual killer?” He shrugged, hoping Tony would hear the sentiment even if he couldn’t see Steve’s gestures and expressions.

The line was silent, and after checking to make sure that the call was still connected, Steve asked, “Tony?”

“Sorry, I just realized…Allison is an Argent, right? The girl I made the bow for?”

It took Steve a moment to realize what Tony was talking about, then he hissed as he remembered.
“Yeah, I…I didn’t get a good look at what she was using that night, but I’m pretty sure it was the one you made for her.”

“She used my bow to hunt down two kids?” Tony asked darkly.

“…yeah. Two *other* kids,” Steve reminded him. “I don’t even know if she still has it, though - she dropped it when her grandfather took her hostage and threatened to kill her.”

Tony muttered something Steve couldn’t hear.

“What?”

An angry sigh. “Sounds like Obie,” Tony grumbled out, and Steve winced. He’d only read the file on the Iron Monger - Tony had never talked about it, and Steve had never pressed.

But, he also remembered Peggy talking about Tony’s godfather, what kind of man Stane had been, how helpful he’d been when Tony’s parents died…and her reignited suspicions about Howard’s death, once it came out what this man had done to Tony and the Stark family.

“Want me to try talking to her?” Steve asked, leather seat creaking as he shifted his weight.

Tony sighed. “What could you even say for me?” he asked. “I’ve got plenty to ask her about her intentions with something I made for her, but…”

“They’re not the kind you want asked through an intermediary,” Steve offered. Tony grunted an affirmative. “Well, I’ve got a fancy car and nothing better to do with it, want me to try talking to her anyway? I can at least pass on a shell number so you can talk to her yourself.”

“…Thank you.”

“But for the record,” Steve continued. “I hope you don’t have to take that bow away from the girl. I’ve only heard about her from her friends, but it sounds like she wants to protect people…she just lost a little too much at once.”

"I know that feeling," Tony said. "That's why I need to talk to her myself."

With meager goodbyes, Steve ended the call, and flopped back into the driver’s seat. He waited a few more minutes, despite being sure Hale wasn’t here, before he texted Stiles asking if he knew where and when Steve could meet with Allison Argent.

Five minutes later, Steve winced as Stiles texted him a link to some local news station, which had several pictures of the Argent house now. The Argents had even more reporters stalking their home than the Stilinskis did.

*But,* Stiles texted a moment later. *We’ve got some ideas for how you can talk to her.*

Chapter End Notes

By the way, I started a blog for Winter Wolves, and for Teen Wolf/MCU in general: Nomad1917. :)
...he texted Stiles asking if he knew where and when Steve could meet with Allison Argent.

Five minutes later, Steve winced as Stiles texted him a link to some local news station, which had several pictures of the Argent house now. The Argents had even more reporters stalking their home than the Stilinskis did. But, Stiles texted a moment later. We’ve got some ideas for how you can talk to her.

—

Steve sighed, stood up, and started pacing as he started filling Tony in on everything that’s been happening here for the last week or so, and how he ended up with a stolen Camaro outside an abandoned building. “...so after I dropped off Melissa, I came back to where I last saw Hale - but he’s not here, and I have no idea where he could be. So now I’m stuck with a fancy car and…”

—

Your dad’s been drinking, Steve said, finally. Don't go home until morning. He said he went to bed, but just in case.

He’s not like that! Stiles texted back, and Steve sighed.

Chapter Notes

Reminder: this fic is tagged ‘Not Sterek Fandom’ for a reason. If you are anti-Allison or anti-Scott (or anti-Tony Stark), I strongly recommend you stop now and Unsubscribe. I’m glad you enjoyed my fic thus far, but I’d rather you leave with a happy memory of my fic, than stay on and become bitter or disappointed by this series.

Content Warnings: Discussions of gaslighting and abuse; themes of grieving military families; discussions of past alcohol abuse and references to domestic violence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Stiles?”

The next morning, Stiles looked up from where he was munching on toasted freezer waffles in the dark living room. If it hadn’t been for the light from the street-lamps coming in through the window, Steve would have missed him.

“...Steve.”
Despite the street light, Steve couldn’t quite make out his expression — and the ball-cap he wore low on his brow wasn’t helping.

“Have a nightmare?” Steve asked, leaning against the door-jamb. Stiles didn’t answer, the silence filled with nothing but their breathing and Steve’s fiddling with the Camaro key. “Stiles?”

“M’fine,” Stiles said, and at least Steve could see him take a giant bite out of the waffle.

“You’re up at 5 AM eating cardboard waffles in the dark,” Steve pointed out.

“Car’board waffles?” Stiles asked with his mouth full.

“You gonna try convincing me Eggo doesn’t taste like cardboard?”

That at least got a small chuckle out of Stiles.

Steve glanced down at his watch. “I have to go talk to Argent, but when I come back, we’ll talk about it, okay?”

“I told you, I’m fine!” Stiles snapped, and Steve nearly hit his head on the door-jamb when he jerked back in surprise.

“Stiles, it’s okay to still have nightmares,” Steve started. “You know I-”

“I know,” Stiles ground out. “And I don’t need to talk, because I’m fine.” Stiles dropped the remaining half of waffle on the plate in his lap as he leaned back against the couch. Was he supposed to do that, with his shoulder? Where was his sling? What- “I had a nightmare, now I’m awake, and I’m eating shitty toaster waffles for breakfast. There. I talked about it.”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “Stiles…you’ve been…lately you’ve been-”

“You’re going to be late meeting Allison,” Stiles said, gesturing toward the clock on the wall. “Aren’t you?”

Steve stood fully upright again, making for the front door. He paused to turn and look back at Stiles over his shoulder.

“We are going to talk when I come back,” Steve said, ignoring Stiles’ mulish expression. “Because something is up and I don’t know what.”

Stiles took another pointedly large bite of his waffle, and with a sigh, Steve headed out.

They’d made sure to keep the porch-light off all night, despite John’s late shift. As such, was too dark for Steve to wear his sunglasses, so he made sure to keep the brim of his cap low on his head. He prayed that the hat — combined with almost a week’s worth of unshaved facial hair — would be enough to obscure his identity.

At this time of dark o’clock, there was only one reporter left waiting outside — and she looked closer asleep than awake, anyway. Still, Steve couldn’t be too sure, and one reporter was all it would take.

He was still thankful he’d parked Hale’s car almost two blocks down from the house. It wasn’t exactly a quiet car.

Being such a suburban town — almost rural to Steve’s big-city senses — the streets of Beacon Hills were almost empty, moreso as he neared the Preserve.
The sun started to peek over the horizon as Steve drove through the woods, scattering the fog with particulate beams of sunlight. The burnt out remains of the Hale house didn't emerge through the trees until he was only a few hundred yards away from it. With the sun lighting up the sky from behind it, it looked more like a house-shaped hole in the forest than an actual home.

The car rolled to a bumpy stop in the mud down the outline of a driveway, just past the edge of a tree line well away from the ruins. The forest was vibrant and alive all around him, yet the plant life did not dare approach the dead house.

When Steve stepped out of the warm Camaro into the light morning mist, he shivered. He knew it wasn't that cold, but he zipped up his jacket tighter, anyway. The mist still carried the faint scent of growing plant life, and he could almost taste the cold forest around him.

He shut the car door behind him, the sound almost echoing between him and the house. As the sound faded, he heard a bird or two chirping in the distance.

Despite years of fighting in the forests of Western Europe, Steve was a city-boy through and through. He still felt a little uneasy when the woods were quiet enough to hear the leaves rustling in the breeze.

He started up the rest of the remaining drive way to the house, his steps muffled by the mud, save for the occasional twig snapping or leaf sliding underfoot. With every step, the faint smell of rotting and ashen wood grew stronger. How much more could the werewolves smell?

Even from all the way over here, he could make out the giant burn marks across the pale wooden walls. The mostly-intact brick chimney was scorched dark. The three-story ruins obscured the sun in his approach, beams of light only visible through the shattered windows and around the sagging remains of a roof. Squinting, Steve made out singed accents on the windows, cracked embellishments on the columns, and scattered pieces of architectural flourishes all around the house.

The Sheriff hadn't been kidding about the Hales being a wealthy family. This hadn't just been a house, it had been a literal mansion.

As he walked, Allison Argent came around the corner of the house. With her dark hair pulled back in an elaborate braid, her make-up done with professional precision, and her pretty outfit looking right out of Fifth Avenue, she couldn't have looked further out of place standing next to a burned down building in the middle of the woods.

The knives strapped to her thighs and the quiver on her back didn't help. She held the bow Steve had asked her to bring — with an arrow already nocked in it, pointed at the ground but otherwise ready to fire.

She looked nothing like the sweet girl he’d seen in Stiles’ and Natasha’s pictures, and everything like the child soldier he’d seen a few nights ago.

He'd be more disconcerted by the difference, if he wasn’t already close friends with so many former child soldiers. For all that Natasha liked to act like everyone’s annoying big sister or favorite aunt, she had one of the highest body counts to her name in SHIELD. Steve never forgot that Clint changed his kids’ diapers with the same bare hands he’d killed people with.

“Miss Argent!” he called out as he strode up to the house.

Even from here, Steve could see her swallow. “Captain Rogers,” she greeted. “I…prefer ‘Ms’.”

Steve nodded, pausing a few yards away. Eying the bow and arrow in her grip, he asked, “Planning
to shoot me?”

“Not you,” she said, looking through all the woods around them.

Steve frowned, also looking around and not seeing anyone — though this was giving him a bit of déjà vu. Eyebrow raised in confusion, he didn’t even have to ask her a question when he turned back to face her.

“I’m being stalked,” Allison reported. Then, she all but shouted. “Except he’s not that good at it, so he’s going to get killed by one of my grandpa’s men if he keeps this up!”

Behind Steve, he heard squelching footsteps, and turned to see…the blond-curled boy he’d met a few nights ago, emerging from the tree-line like Erica had yesterday. What the hell was this kid’s name again? Stiles mentioned it in the hospital-

“Isaac,” Allison greeted coldly, aiming her arrow right at him.

Steve stepped between them, his back to the girl and her bow as he looked at the blond boy in front of him. The boy came to a halt, and Steve saw his pale palms and fancy jeans were all covered in smudges of dirt, though his form-fitting leather jacket was clean.

Isaac didn’t seem to appreciate Steve’s protection, greeting him with a curt, “Captain Rogers,” before side-stepping Steve to glare at Allison. “And aren’t they supposed to be your men, Little Miss Argent Matriarch?”

She scowled. Looked like both of them would need protecting from each other — and neither of them would appreciate it one bit.

With a sigh, Steve took another step to the side, getting between them again.

“Isaac…Lahey, right?” Steve asked, trying to remember all the names he’d had thrown at him over the last few days. Narrowing his eyes, the boy nodded. “All right, is there a reason you’re out here? I came to talk to Allison, not fight anyone.”

“So why’d you pick here, then?” Isaac demanded, waving up to the ruins. “This is where her family murdered Derek’s-”

“Kate broke the Code!” Allison snapped, arrow lowering so she could better yell at Isaac. “If Peter hadn’t killed her, we would’ve-”

“Your grandpa broke the Code, too, didn’t stop any of you,” Isaac sneered, and great, now his eyes were starting to glow gold in anger. “And now you come back here, where your psychotic aunt murdered an innocent pack to get her rocks off-”

“This one’s on me,” Steve cut-in, before Isaac could actually attack Allison like he clearly wanted to. “I asked for a location to meet her without putting anyone in danger, especially her, and Stiles suggested here.” Isaac’s golden gaze didn’t waver when he glared at Steve. “If you’re upset about this, or if Hale is — blame me, not her.”

For a tense moment, Steve tried to prepare for anything, without tensing — and without making it obvious that he was ready for a fight, no matter how much he didn’t want one.

But the golden glow faded out of Isaac’s eyes.

“Does this have anything to do with you having Derek’s car?” he asked, not looking at Allison at all.
Steve shook his head. “Erica stole the car from Hale, but she doesn’t have a license. I’m trying to find him, actually, to give it back.” At Isaac’s wary look, Steve gestured to the Camaro waiting over by the tree line. “If you don’t mind waiting a few minutes, maybe you can help me find him?”

Isaac scoffed, but with one last, wordless glare at Allison — who might as well have been a statue for all her reaction to it — he stormed off in the direction of the car.

Sighing, Steve turned his attention back to Allison.

This was not how his morning was supposed to go. Why did favors for Tony always get so complicated?

“Look,” Steve said, pulling out a scrap of paper from his pocket and walking back up to her. Handing it over, he nodded at the bow in her hands and said, “I’m not here to take that from you. That’s between you and Tony. I’m just here to tell you that he’s not happy with how you used it.”

He was no sniper, but he knew enough to appreciate the gravity of her hands shaking when she reached out and took the scrap.

“That’s Tony’s phone number. A shell number at any rate,” Steve continued. Shoving both his hands back into his jacket pockets to keep them warm, he added, “He wants to talk to you, himself.”

She nodded, pocketing the scrap inside her jacket. She looked down at the bow dangling from her hand and murmured, “He’s gonna take it anyway, isn’t he?”

“I have no idea,” Steve admitted.

Allison chuffed in disbelief, looking back up at him. Glaring at him, square in the eye, she said, “But isn’t that his big thing, right now? That he doesn’t want any more of his weapons to be used to hurt innocent people?”

Steve slowly nodded. “Still — Tony was making these kinds of weapons when he was your age. I’m sure he’ll give you a second chance.” He paused, glancing back toward the car. He couldn’t see Isaac, but then if the boy had gone into the car, Steve wouldn’t see him through the windows at this distance. Allison followed Steve’s gaze, and winced when she seemed to realize who he was looking toward.

But she didn’t look away.

“I’m sure he’ll give you a second chance…but I’m not sure he’ll give you a third one,” Steve warned. He tried to remember everything about this girl he’d heard from Natasha and Stiles — and what Natasha might have told Allison about herself. “Do you… Natasha mentioned you alongside Scott, but only alongside him.”

To his surprise, Allison laughed, a harsh sound that could’ve been a sob — save for the lack of tears.

“We talked once, about this,” Allison said, clutching the body of the bow with both trembling hands. “But being stupid enough to believe my grandpa is a world away from being brainwashed practically from birth.”

Steve scrubbed at his face, because that wasn’t quite what he was going for. But how much of Natasha’s secrets could he reveal? How much of her confidence did he have to break to help out this kid?

“I’ve only heard about what you’ve done from the others,” he said. At this, she looked down, fixing
her gaze on the ground between them. “And most of it seemed to start with you going after the guy you thought killed your mom.”

“I don’t think Derek killed my mom!” she snapped. “They are not supposed to Bite anyone unwilling. He attacked her anyway.”

Steve’s eyebrows rose. “Then what did you have against Scott?”

“…nothing?” Allison’s hands still shook, but she looked at Steve with equal parts hurt and confusion. “He doesn’t have anything to do with this.”

“He was the one Hale was protecting from Vic—your mother,” Steve drew out. Now Allison looked bewildered. “That’s what the boys said. Victoria Argent tried to murder Scott at the rave, and was going to make it look like some kind of accident. Hale got Scott out of there, but had to fight off your mother.”

Her face paled with every word, and she looked a step away from keeling in both anger and horror.

“She was attacked,” Allison murmured. “Outside the rave, my grandpa…”

She trailed off, looking down at the burnt out porch floorboards she stood on — at the scorch marks that were only on the Hale house because of her family’s lies and evil.

Steve sighed. “I’m sorry you had to hear this from me,” he said. “I don’t know if Scott just hadn’t gotten around to telling you or…or something else. But that’s what the boys told me, and based on everything we’ve heard from multiple sources…”

“My grandpa lied to me,” Allison whimpered.

“To everyone, including you,” Steve said. “And then you tricked and tracked down a couple of teenagers who you already knew assaulted and attempted to kill people. You hunted down the guy who you thought murdered your mom. You shot the other kids full of arrows, imprisoned them in your home, and had them tortured to contain them. You tried to kill a man, and stabbed him—” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder, at the boy waiting in the car behind him. “Half a dozen times with knives.”

Allison flinched away from every accusation, her entire body shaking by the crumbling wall of the burnt out ruins.

“…is any of that wrong?”

She shook her head.

“Am I missing anything?” he continued.

Another head-shake.

“Then I feel confident in saying you’ve got nothing on Natasha,” Steve continued.

Her head jerked up in bewilderment. He smiled at her, a wane and humorless expression.

“I can’t share any details,” Steve said. “But she’s been spying, fighting, and operating in and out of the Cold War for longer than you’ve even been alive.” Probably longer than Steve’s waking lifespan. He wasn’t sure how old she was, but he was pretty sure of how young she wasn’t.

Not that Steve could tell Allison any of that.
“She’s done a hell of a lot worse than all of that,” Steve continued. “She’s got a metaphorical ledger dripping in red, and she’ll be the first to tell you she’ll never even it out…but she’ll also never stop trying.”

“…are you comparing me to the Black Widow?” Allison asked, eyes narrowed with something between disbelief and indignation. “I don’t…I’ve never…”

She looked about ready to cry again — and only the sight of Steve seemed to stop her. Actually quaking in her boots, her voice sounded thick, like she was talking around a lump in her throat. Despite this, her tight grip on her bow never wavered, nor did she look away from him.

“There are people who are beyond redemption,” Steve said. “But you sure as hell ain't one o' them.”

No kid had any business fighting in life or death conflict — but they were here, now. She was a soldier of sorts. Steve would do her no favors to treat her like the kid she was supposed to be, but no longer was.

With a deep breath, he pointed to the part of her jacket she’d shoved the scrap of paper into. “Call,” he ordered. “Whatever you have to say for yourself and whatever decision Tony makes about you keeping his weapon — face it.”

Maybe it was his imagination, but he’d like to think her shaking subsided a little.

“Look your future in the eye,” he finished. “As strongly as you’re looking me in the eye right now. Got it?”

Breathing in unevenly, she nodded, scrubbing at her face before any tears could fall in front of him.

“I will, Captain,” Allison said. “I promise…and thank you. For getting me in touch with him. And telling me about my mom.”

An affirmative nod, a sharp wave, and a few hundred steps later, and Steve was climbing back into Hale’s car, ready to take Isaac home.

Except there was no Isaac in the car. Steve frowned, evpeering irrationally into the back seat.

Steve scowled as he started the car and pulled away from the decrepit house.

Bad enough that he had to make himself ignore the teenage girl breaking down crying in his rear-view mirror — what was he supposed to do about Isaac? The boy was apparently able to get around fine on his own, getting out this far into the woods on foot and stalking a semi-professional like Allison. He had claws and fangs and could heal from wounds even faster than Steve. He’d been stabbed a dozen times just a few nights ago and was completely healed, now.

The kid was fine on his own. He wasn’t Steve’s responsibility, he was Hale’s responsibility.

Except Hale was nowhere to be found.

What would Dr. Erskine have wanted Steve to do?

What would Bucky do?

Grunting, Steve braked the Camaro, pulled out his phone, and called John.

“Do you know where Isaac Lahey lives?”
Hill Way Road was lined with chic modern homes on one side, and grand old houses on the other. Steve had all sorts of questions about what kind of zoning nonsense could result in this. Still, the answers were unlikely to make him any less incredulous about the fact Isaac Lahey and Jackson Whittemore lived right across the street from each other.

At least it made Isaac’s home easy to find. It stood opposite the largest ‘modern’ house on the street, which was all sharp angles and bold lines that Tony adored and Steve still found ugly. Was the fancy car parked in the drive way the Porsche that Stiles always complained about?

Steve wondered how Jackson was doing. But if even John couldn’t get through the Whittemores’ isolation in the aftermath of Jackson’s ‘assault’, then Steve had no hope.

So he turned his attention to the house he’d parked in front of.

While not as sleek as the ‘modern’ houses on the other side of the street, the Lahey house made up for it with two stories of grand brick construction and embellishments Steve could not begin to name. The house would’ve been beautiful — if not for all the half-dead foliage, the bent gutters, and the shingles missing from the front-door overhang and the bit of roof he could see from the street.

He rang the doorbell, and heard an elaborate chime from inside the house…but nothing else. Was Isaac not home, or not answering?

When Steve was about to give up and go home, though, he saw a lanky figure roll his bicycle to a slow halt on the sidewalk in front of the house. Isaac blinked at Steve by the front-door, dumbfounded.

“What…what are you doing here?!” the boy demanded, jaw clenched and eyes flickering gold as he dismounted the muddy mountain bike.

Steve started to answer, but couldn’t find the words to do so — especially when he wasn’t sure why he was here, either. Bucky Barnes and Abraham Erskine were closer to comic book characters than actual people to most kids, these days. Even if he could find the words to express Bucky’s gruff compassion or Dr. Erskine’s faith in people, would they care?

Well, the car wasn’t the real reason he was here, but at least it made a nice excuse.

“I was hoping you could help me find Hale,” Steve said, gesturing to the parallel-parked Camaro. He gave Isaac the easiest-going smile he could muster. “The tank’s running low on gas.”

Isaac snorted. Walking his bike up to the driveway, he fiddled with something in his pocket, and the sectional garage door trundled open.

It was presumptuous as hell, but he followed Isaac anyway. Steve stayed out on the driveway as the boy kicked out the stand on his bike, well away from the old SUV parked in there, covered in grime and tilting towards its flat tire.

“I don’t know where Derek is,” Isaac said, reaching for…an American flag? “Hell, I want to know where he is, too.”

Steve watched, eyebrows up and eyes wide, as Isaac walked back out, shaking the flag out from where it’d been wrapped around the plastic pole. He dipped his fingers into his pocket again, and the garage started to close behind them. As it did, Isaac reached up to put the flag in a little stand affixed to the brick wall by the front door. He turned back to Steve, then paused as he caught Steve’s
surprise.

“What?” he demanded, hunched shoulders belying the sharp voice.

“Nothing,” Steve said immediately, smoothing out his expression as he raised his hands in placation. “It’s just…not many people pay much attention to the flag code, these days. Most people who have one on their houses leave it up over night.”

Isaac scowled, almost a punching a hole through his pocket as he fished his keys out of it. “That’s what my dad used to do, too. Even after Camden told him not too.”

“Who’s Camden?”

The house-key paused in front of the door-knob, metal rattling against metal as the boy’s hand trembled.

Before Steve could say he didn’t need to know, Isaac answered, “My brother. He was a marine.”

With another try, Isaac managed to unlock his front door.

To Steve’s further surprise, after Isaac stepped into his home, he held the door open for Steve to follow him. It must’ve shown on Steve’s face, because as Isaac stepped back, he said, “Camden would never have forgiven me if I shut our door on Captain America’s face.”

Steve noted the past tense as he followed Isaac in. Despite the mid-morning sunlight, brightly-painted walls, and large windows, easing the door shut behind them still felt like sealing a mausoleum.

Which made a lot more sense once he stepped into the opening of the living room. A loosely folded funeral flag drooped on the fireplace mantle, surrounded by tarnished medals with creased honor ribbons laid flat on the dusty shelf. Taped to the brick wall above it was a picture of a marine corporal, printed onto home printer paper with faded colors. White cap askew as he grinned at the camera, the young man looked like an older Isaac — but only by a couple of years, looking no older than his early twenties.

No wonder Isaac was so angry about his father leaving the flag out overnight.

Then again, somewhere in the basement beneath Steve’s feet lurked an unplugged ice box that Victor Lahey would chain Isaac into overnight as ‘punishment’ — a method paramilitaries and criminal empires used for psychological torture.

Isaac had a lot to be angry at his father about.

Steve supposed the real surprise was that Isaac cared about how his father (dis)respected his brother’s memory, in light of far worse things.

The teenager fidgeted in his own living room, starting to say something then stopping twice. Steve gave him all the time he needed.

“Did Tony Stark really make a bow for Argent?” he blurted.

That…was not what Steve was expecting at all.

It must have been as obvious to Isaac as everything else Steve had felt thus far, because Isaac rolled his eyes and added, “I listened in on you guys before I left.”

Steve sighed, then figured that there wasn’t much left to obfuscate at this point — nor much reason
“It was a gift,” he explained. “Stiles told us that everyone at his school was bullying Allison, and he wanted to cheer her up. She’s something of an Iron Man fan, so…”

Isaac snorted, wrapping his arms around himself and clutching his shoulders. “I figured she’d be a Hawkeye fan.” Steve shrugged, and Isaac looked at Steve with a shining gaze. “So, what, CEO of one of the biggest tech companies in the world and a literal superhero just…makes a weapon for someone he never met?”

“More like he regifted one he had lying around,” Steve said. “And more as a favor to Stiles. He was planning on improving a prototype for Cli-Hawkeye, but it wasn’t working and he was going to scrap it. He gave it to Stiles, instead.”

“And…when you mentioned Natasha…Scott’s friends with the Black Widow?”

“Friends is a strong word for it,” Steve said, eying the boy’s crumpling countenance. “But he keeps in touch with her, yes. She mentors him on gymnastics and some other things.”

Just like Allison had less than an hour ago, Isaac laughed in a way that sounded a step away from a sob.

“Fucking figures,” he muttered, collapsing onto the threadbare couch opposite the fireplace. “Scott has the Black Widow on his side, Allison has Iron Man on hers, and Stiles has you.”

The single pronoun sounded so scathing, Steve wondered why Isaac had let him into the house at all.

“Erica loves you guys,” Isaac continued. “She’s such a geek girl, she has like a million comic books, and a bunch of shitty Heroes of New York merch, and…and…and she was hunted down by a weapon one of you made for an Argent.”

When Isaac looked over his shoulder at Steve, tears slid down his pale cheeks.

“I’m…” Steve swallowed down the lump in his throat. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you sorry for?” Isaac turned away from him again. “Not like you were there. And you’re not the one who made that bow for her, either.”

Steve took a slow step forward, then another. Isaac must’ve heard of him — hell, he must be hearing Steve’s pounding heart — but did not react. He didn’t even flinch when Steve draped a gentle hand over his shoulder.

“You’re right,” Steve said. “I wasn’t there, then — but for what it’s worth, I’m here right now.”

Isaac remained hunched over his knees. Steve wanted to grip Isaac’s shoulder — but given what John had told him about Isaac’s father, he doubted the gesture would be welcome.

He let go of Isaac’s shoulder, casting around for something to…to do? To talk about?

The living room was clean, but less because it looked like anyone cleaned and more because it was so bare.

The only thing of note in it was…well, the mantle.

“I keep meaning to fix it.”
“My dad just…shoved them into a grocery bag in the basement,” Isaac said, pointing to the flag and medals on the mantle. “He kept saying he’d get a display case, but he never did. I thought — I figured that 'messed up but out' was better than 'staying hidden away’.”

“It is,” Steve agreed, taking a closer look at Cpl. Lahey’s awards. The ribbons looked almost scrunched, and the medallions themselves had seen better days, streaked with grime as they were. “You tried to wipe these down?”

He looked over in time to see Isaac deflate a little, shoulders slumping. “Yeah, I…I got it wrong, didn’t I?”

“Not wrong,” Steve offered. “They take a little finnicky maintenance.”

Isaac’s entire body drooped. “Derek said he was gonna help me with them when all this shit blew over. Get a nice case, get a picture with the best paper from the print shop, metal polishes, replace the ribbons, everything.” The boy looked bitterly between the flag and the cheap printer paper picture. “Guess Camden’ll have to wait, now.”

Glancing between Isaac’s heartbroken face, and the faded print-out of Cpl. Lahey’s bright grin, Steve knew exactly what Bucky would do if he were here.

“You don’t need special polish,” he declared. “And the ribbons don’t need replacing.” Isaac looked up, eyes wary, but hands falling into his lap as he leaned forward, listening as if he didn’t have lycanthropic hearing. “If you’ve got some baking soda, lemon juice, and an ironing board, you can spruce up the medals right now.”

Isaac had all three.

While he went to fetch them, Steve shot off a text to John and Stiles, letting them know he’d be late today because Isaac needed some help with something.

Then he texted Stiles, You still have that display case you used for Bucky’s funeral flag and medals? From before giving them to the Smithsonian?

Yeah, Stiles texted back only a few moments later. Why?

Steve pocketed the phone as Isaac came back, clutching everything Steve had asked for.

Steve showed Isaac how to mix the juice and baking soda into a good cleaning paste, and helped him de-ribbon all the medals. Isaac had gotten a roll of paper towels for the cleaning, but at Steve’s suggestion, he used coffee filters to wipe and rub the medals.

While Isaac scrubbed at the medals — they didn’t need it, but it seemed to make him feel better — Steve plugged in the hot iron and unfolded the ironing board. Making sure the iron was warm enough, without being too hot, he pressed out all the ribbons, getting rid of both the dress folds needed for proper display, and all the creases built up from years of being scrunched up in a damp basement.

Ribbons refreshed, he showed Isaac how to fold them back to display standards, and how to use an iron again to sharpen and set the proper dress creases.

“Though a lot of guys just use double-sided tape, these days,” Steve added. “At least, that’s what Clint tells me.”
Isaac laughed, a small sound but genuine in his joy, and Steve counted that as a win.

“Popping the pin-back and ribbon into the brass shell is the hardest part,” Steve continued to explain, holding up the pieces of the pins for the ribbons. None of this was all that hard, but sometimes the little accomplishments hit closer to home far more than the big ones.

Isaac managed the first and second ribbons all right, but it took him twice as long on the next one.

By the time he got to the last medal left, his hands were shaking so much he almost scrunched the ribbon again.

The shell and pin back clattered onto the table, ribbon nearly slipping off the medallion clutched in his shivering hands. Blond curls obscured his face as his head hung down.

“…Isaac?”

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, looking up.

Steve tried not to jerk back when he realized Isaac was crying.

“What-”

“Don’t you have better things to do?” Isaac demanded, eyes puffed red. “Like — I don’t know, hang out with Stiles? Or spar with Scott? Or…or anything than wasting your time on some kid you don’t even know?!”

Well, he wasn’t wrong.

Steve was supposed to be with Stiles, trying to figure out why the hell Stiles was so mad at him, right now.

Or across the country, with his team and with SHIELD, doing the work that Fury liked to pretend wasn’t dirty.

Or at least keep tracking down Hale to give him his stupid car back.

“I…” Steve looked down at the medals, now looking like a completely different set from half an hour ago, ribbons sharp and medallions shining.

He took a deep breath, and tried again. He’d told this entire story once before, to Stiles. He remembered how he said it, what Stiles had understood and what had confused the 21st century teenager.

“My dad died when I was a kid,” Steve started.

He reached over Isaac’s shaking hands to pick up the pin pieces, and finished putting the last medal together with its ribbon. “Then my ma died when I was almost sixteen…well, I couldn’t afford more than the absolute minimum of a funeral for her,” he continued. “It was shit, to be honest. And that terrified me, because if I couldn’t even pull together a decent funeral for my own mother…how the hell was I supposed to do anything else?”

He laid the last medal out next to the others on the coffee table, lining up them in proper order.

“I couldn’t pay rent on my own, which meant I was about to get kicked out of our tenement,” he continued, elbows braced on his knees as he folded his hands under his chin and didn’t take his eyes
off Cpl. Lahey’s aligned medals. “I was lucky, and had the best friend a guy could ever ask for, and he had a great family. I went to live with Bucky and his folks and sisters, and…that was that. I don’t think anyone else really cared. I would’ve been out on the street without them. Any younger and it would’ve been an orphanage, which wasn’t much better.”

He finally looked at Isaac, who looked confused, but his eyes were dry now — puffy and red as they otherwise were.

“When I was your age, I thought my life was over,” he admitted. “I couldn’t even keep my own roof over my head. I was depending on someone else’s family, which felt even worse once Bucky’s dad bit the dust, too. Bucky’s siblings were all sisters, so he and I were supposed to be the men of the house and yet I was sick all the time. When I wasn’t, I was in art school, which…back then…” He shook his head, clearing out all the historical tangents, and fixed his gaze on the abandoned roll of paper towels. “My point is — I felt like shit, like I was a leech at other people’s mercy. I was pretty sure that I was never going to amount to anything in my life.”

Isaac’s eyebrows disappeared into his mop of curls. “You?!” he asked, voice breaking with incredulity.

“Me,” he said, with a single nod. “And I got over it because two people showed a lot more faith in me than I ever had in myself. Most of you hear about the later guy in your history classes, since he’s the one who made me…” He gestured down at his body. “Like this.”

“Dr. Erskine?” Isaac asked.

Steve nodded again.

“But years before that…Bucky refused to let me wallow,” Steve said. “I was grieving my ma, even while I was angry at her for dying on me, and I was terrified of the whole damn world. Bucky didn’t care. He made me move in with him and never let me leave just because of my bullshit complexes about being a man.”

He got up, lifting the lumpy flag off the mantel and setting it down with care by the medals, before he grabbed the paper towels.

“He and his family took care of me when I was sick,” he explained. As he talked, he started wiping down the dusty mantel. “They let me stay with them while I went to art school in exchange for little more than helping around the home, cleaning their car, and chipping in on the rent. I didn’t actually believe it would ever happen, but he always told me that when I made it big as some hot-shot artist or a comic book guy one day, I could pay them back in full.”

He turned back to Isaac to see the boy’s gaze skittering over Steve’s Rebirth body.

“Yeah,” Steve said, tipping his head to the assumptions written on Isaac’s face. “Since I didn’t have any other family and the army was giving me a place to live, most of the money I earned with the USO and the SSR went back to them.”

“…I’m already a werewolf,” Isaac said hesitantly, narrowing his eyes.

Steve waved that away with the grimy paper towel in his grip. “That’s not my point,” he said, dropping the used paper towel onto the other end of the coffee table from the flag and medals. “The point I’m trying to make is — everything I heard about your dad is that he was a jackass, but he was what you had, and now he’s gone. And you don’t have anyone left except Derek Hale, and he’s even more messed up than you are.”
Isaac snorted, leaning back into the couch cushion, but did not disagree.

“I can’t…there’s so much in this town going on that I don’t understand, and I’m not so sure I can begin to try,” Steve said, remembering Stiles glaring at him from the dark living room while taking angry bites of toaster waffle. “I can’t fix any of this werewolf politics stuff, I can’t give you your brother back, I can’t do anything for you where you need it most.” He pointed to the medals. “All I can do is this. But you know what? I *can* do it. So I will.”

“That’s it?” Isaac asked.

“That’s it,” Steve answered. Then he circled a finger around to indicate the house in general and added, "Though from where I'm standing, you're already way ahead of where I was, at your age."

He returned to wiping down the mantel — even though at this point, it was already clean.

“It wasn’t just Bucky and Dr. Erskine. Peggy Carter and Howard Stark and Chester Phillips and Winnifred Barnes and Bucky’s sisters and the Howling Commandos…in the long run, a lot of people put their faith in me, and I put my faith in them. That’s what got me through the hard days.”

Finally giving up distracting his gaze and hands, Steve dropped the last paper towel and the roll by the first piece. He leaned back against the now-clean mantel, arms crossed.

“I get the feeling that being in a werewolf pack may not be all that different, but whether or not it is…I’m just trying to pay that forward in any little way I can.” He shrugged self-effacingly. “Maybe you can turn around and do the same — for Hale, for Erica or Boyd, or anyone else. But we all have to start somewhere, and for you, that somewhere can be fixing your brother’s memorial. And I can help with that.”

Isaac gave him a long, considering look, then also rose to his feet, before looking down at the lumpy flag.

“It came undone,” he murmured, lifting it up. It took him two tries to get the request out, but he asked, “You gonna help me fix it?”

“Of course.”

Isaac was clearly anxious about unfolding the flag from its original funeral fold, but not enough to stop Steve. He had Isaac hold one end to keep it away from the ground as Steve started ironing the other, smoothing the flag out again. After, he walked Isaac through folding it back into a triangle.

“I don’t remember what the Twelve Folds were supposed to symbolize,” he admitted, as he and Isaac worked on straightening out the stars along the triangle of cloth. “During the war, we were usually too busy to actually go to anyone’s funerals, and then afterward…well.”

Isaac nodded.

Finally, they put the little memorial back together, centering the flag under Cpl. Lahey’s picture, and laying out the medals around it with care.

“I don’t know where Derek is,” Isaac blurted, aligning the medals into the straightest line he could manage. “Except that he’s supposed to be *here*, but he isn’t.”

“Here as in with you,” Steve started. “Or-”

“As in literally in this house, that was half the point—” Isaac stopped himself.
“Point of what?”

“I’m not saying anymore to you—”

“Because I’m Captain America?” Steve drawled.

Isaac rolled his eyes — which was better than the crying from earlier, at least. “No, because you live with the local sheriff.”

Steve frowned. “What…what does that have to do with…?”

Isaac flopped back on the couch. “I’m a minor. Once I was cleared for my dad’s murder…only way to stay out of foster care was if someone took me in. We pretended Derek was an old friend of Camden’s — they were in the same grade — and that he’d moved in with me, so that I wouldn’t be moved around.”

Steve dropped into an armchair diagonal to Isaac. “So you lied?”

“Not…exactly,” Isaac said, eying Steve warily.

“I’m not law enforcement,” Steve offered. “And this stuff was handled pretty differently back in my day.” He gave Isaac the most reassuring smile he could manage. “So to be honest, if you’re okay where you are, then I’m not too hung up who is supposed to be in what custody, on paper…but since Hale is gone, I’m not so sure if you are okay.”

Isaac huffed in tired indignation. “I was taking care of my dad more than he was taking care of me, by the time he died. I have a part-time job, and my dad inherited this house from his dad, so I don’t have to worry about a mortgage, just bills. I can take care of myself just fine, and Derek…he was paranoid. Good reason, too. He wasn’t staying in any one place too long, but when he needed a place to eat or shower or sleep in a bed for one night…this house is pretty big, y’know? Kept the social workers off my back so I could stay here.”

With a sharp drop of his head, Isaac fixed his gaze upward — at the picture of his brother, and the freshly folded flag.

“Next check-up’s in about a week, though,” Isaac murmured. “And if he’s not here for that…” Isaac finally looked back at Steve, jaw clenched hard. “But I have options, and I can do this without him if I have to.”

There wasn’t even the faintest flicker in his bright blue eyes, yet they looked far fiercer than their lycanthropic gold.

“I believe you,” Steve said. “And I wish you the best of luck, though I hope you don’t need it.”

“Probably will,” Isaac said. He gestured out the window, toward the Camaro parked out in the mid-morning sun, and said, “All this time and you still have no idea where Derek is, do you?”

Steve shook his head. “Erica had been hoping he’d come after his car — nothing. And he’s not with you, either.” He paused, trying to remember the last beta’s name. “Maybe he’s with Boyd?”

“Doubt it,” Isaac said with a snort. “I’m not sure if Boyd’s even in town, still. He’s not answering my texts.”

Steve frowned. “Still in town?”
Isaac winced, looking almost…guilty?

“Boyd…” He swallowed, and look between Steve, the picture of Cpl. Lahey, then back to Steve. “Boyd’s leaving. He’d already been planning on running away for ages, but when Derek offered the Bite, he put it off. But our last full moon didn’t go well and with the kanima still running around…he decided to run away…again…”

Isaac trailed off, eying Steve’s chest — where his heart started racing again.

“…you got enough of that ‘faith’ for Boyd?” Isaac asked.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he admitted, “I hope so.” Looking Isaac in the eye, he mentally bemoaned all this teenager-chasing he’d been doing all week and asked, “Where can I find him?”

~*~

Steve drove by the Boyd family residence, ventured inside the ice rink the last beta worked at, and even swung through the local high school.

No runaway werewolf to be found.

He shook with frustration by the time he went back home, parking two blocks down in the other direction this time. He was prepared to trespass over a few back yards to get to the Stilinskis’ if necessary, but the one reporter that had been there this morning had finally given up. Still, Steve kept the bill of his ball-cap down as he went around John’s department SUV parked in the driveway, and back inside the house.

“How’d it go?” John asked, slumped over a bowl of lackluster spaghetti at the table, still wearing pajamas. Despite this, he had some police paperwork spread around him.

Steve grimaced, and made for the fridge. “Not well.”

John turned in his seat, draping his arm over the back of his chair as Steve pulled out the pot of leftover spaghetti. “Stiles said something about talking to Allison about the bow from Stark, and the Lahey boy?”

“Yeah, things got…out of hand.”

Normally, Steve would heat this up stove-top. But after skipping breakfast, his stomach grumbled louder than a grumpy Hulk.

So as he resorted to the microwave, he started explaining everything to John — including how he ended up with Hale’s car in the first place, since John had already been on his late shift by the time Steve came home yesterday.

“And you couldn’t find Vernon at his house?” John asked, by the time Steve wound down.

Steve shrugged. “I drove by it, but mostly to see where it is. I couldn’t exactly go up and knock to ask for him, I didn’t have a decent enough excuse if his family answered…and I got the impression that he avoids his home, anyway.”

With a wince, the Sheriff looked down into his own bowl of reheated pasta and congealed basil-tomato sauce. “In theory, I could intervene. He’s a minor, and kids try to run away all the time.”

Steve scarfed down a forkful of spaghetti as he shook his head. “Woul’n help,” he said, taking two
tries to swallow. “He’s a werewolf, I’m not sure you guys could even hold him.”

“And even if we could — all it really means is he tries again, and this time has a better idea of how to evade us,” John grumbled. “Goddamnit, this is what social services is supposed to be for.”

“Tell that to whoever Isaac’s caseworker is,” Steve deadpanned, and cringed a little at John’s horrified laugh.

Leaving John to his paperwork, Steve took his bowl of spaghetti and headed upstairs, and to the room opposite his own.

“Hey, Stiles do you have- oh, you do.”

Stiles turned in his wheelie desk chair, looking at Steve over his shoulder. He was already dressed to go out. Bucky’s flag and medal case sat on the bed, some pins and mounting pieces inside the case and a print-out about case care on top of it.

“Thank you,” Steve said.

With a silent, sharp nod, Stiles turned back to his laptop.

Steve frowned at the sling thrown across the pillow. Digging his fork into the pasta so it wouldn’t fall out, he reached over and held the sling up. “Shouldn’t you still wear this-”

“I’m fine.”

Stiles didn’t even look up from his laptop.

With a sigh, Steve draped it over Stiles’ keyboard. As Stiles scowled, Steve dropped onto the bed, curling his hands around the cooling bowl.

“Now will you tell me what’s wrong?”

At least Stiles turned to face him, this time.

“You’ve been irritable and angry for days,” Steve said. When Stiles opened his mouth in defiance, he added, “Don’t try to deny it.”

“…I’ll get over it,” Stiles ground out, crossing his arms with an awkward tilt to his shoulder. He definitely still needed the sling.

“Might help if you tell me what you’re trying to get over?” Steve offered, tapping the pads of his fingers all the rim of his bowl and making sure not to squeeze it too hard. “I don’t know what I could’ve said or done to upset you-”

“Are you kidding me right now?!” Stiles cried out. Steve jerked back in surprise, nearly spilling his lunch all over Stiles’ bed.

“I…no?” Steve ran through everything since he got here and could not for the life of him understand-

“You accuse my dad of being an abusive alcoholic, then just swoop in from across the country and- and you can’t think of anything?!”

“I what?” Steve protested. “When the hell did I do that?!”

Stiles’ scowl deepened, eyes bright and fists clenching. He slammed the laptop closed without
looking at it, keeping his glare fixed on Steve.

“Three weeks ago,” Stiles hissed. “Not even a month! When you told me not to come home just because my dad had a few drink.”

So much had happened in the last three weeks, it took Steve a moment to realize what Stiles was talking about.

“What…you mean when you went to Lydia’s birthday party?” Steve asked, incredulous. “I didn’t accuse your dad of anything-”

“You told me not to come home, because it might be ‘unsafe’ for me!” Stiles snapped. He eased himself onto his feet and snatched up his sling.

“Stiles, you’re the one who’d said ‘home wasn’t the best place to be’-”

“Because I felt bad for costing him his job!” Stiles kept losing his grip on the clasp of the sling, but when Steve started to move to help him, Stiles jerked back, kicking his chair back. “Not because of him. You just heard ‘booze’ and ‘upset’ and forgot everything you know about my dad and replaced him with yours-”

“I wasn’t trying to accuse anyone of anything,” Steve said, setting aside his bowl with care. Despite the missed meals, his stomach churned more with every word Stiles said. “Stiles, I didn’t say that because I expected he would hurt you, but in case he-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Stiles said, finally getting his sling on. “And ‘you were only trying to be safe’ and ‘hoped he wouldn’t’ and everything I’m sure Captain fucking America would do.”

“What…Stiles-”

“You went on for so long about how you wanted someone to see you as ‘Steve’ instead of ‘Captain America’,” Stiles sneered, pocketing his wallet and keys. He grasped the print-out in the sling’d hand, while tucking the flag case under his good arm. “And when we finally did, you just started acting like Captain America, anyway. Trying to protect me from your stupid projection of your shitty dad, then swooping in after everyone already died and running around helping a bunch of kids you never met and a dude who seems to hate everyone, including you.”

Steve’s heart and jaw dropped in unison.

“You came here looking for some piece of the guy you were in love with seventy years ago,” Stiles continued darkly. “And now that you’re all over the worst of your depression, it’s like you forgot the entire reason you cared about us in the first place. Now we’re just more people for you to protect or save or whatever, not…not your family.”

“No,” Steve said, shaking his head. “Stiles, that’s not true, I was scared for you, that was the only reason I-”

“You shouldn’t have been!” Stiles yelled, nearly dropping the case in his gesticulating. “You know us, you know who we are and you know my dad’s not like that and you know me, you- you-!”

Stiles’ chest heaved like he’d run one of his lacrosse coach’s brutal sprint drills. His eyes shone in the early afternoon sunlight — but no tears fell.

“You aren’t supposed to be Captain America for us,” Stiles choked out. “You were just supposed to be Steve.”
What was he even supposed to say to that? Where the hell did he start?

Steve didn’t know. A hundred platitudes and a thousand explanations jammed up in his throat, and despite how many times he tried to say something, he couldn’t get a single word out.

He could only watch in silence as Stiles stormed out of the room, leaving Steve so cold, he wasn’t sure he’d ever been pulled out of the ice.

Chapter End Notes

2348 Hill Way Road is the address listed on the prop/paperwork for Coach Lahey’s murder, as is his first name: Victor. I know, I was shook too to find out he actually had a name.

I know I fucked up Talking Cure by trying to fold in another AU, and I recently undid that. If you started to read Talking Cure, but then stopped because of that, I encourage and implore you to give me another chance. ;)
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"You aren’t supposed to be Captain America for us," Stiles choked out. "You were just supposed to be Steve."

Chapter Notes

I lied, there's gonna be 12 chapters now. I think?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve was still staring out the doorway to Stiles’ bedroom when John appeared in it.

"What the hell was that about?" he asked.

Steve groaned and leaned forward, burying his face in his hands.

"Stiles is still mad at me about…” He took a minute to piece together all the other moments. "A lot of little things, but…”

"But he never said anything and now they’re all built up, and exploded out at once?" John offered.

Looking up, Steve sheepishly nodded.

John crossed his arms, and leaned against the doorway. “I couldn’t catch what you guys were saying, just that he seemed pissed and stomped his way out of the house.”

Steve grimaced.

“Uh…a few weeks ago, the night of his friend’s birthday party, I, uh…” How the hell was he supposed to explain this to John’s face? “I told Stiles not to come home because you’d been drinking.”

John went stiff, face paling as the implication sunk in.

Steve hurried to add, “Not because of anything you — look, it was…I told you both about my
“Yeah,” John mumbled, looking less like he was leaning against the doorjamb and more like he was depending on it to stay standing. Steve could feel his gut sinking right through the unmade bed he sat upon. “Yeah, you have.”

“John, I swear I wasn’t—”

“But I haven’t.”

“…you haven’t what?”

Uncrossing his arms to reach a hand up and scrub at his forehead, John stared into space. As Steve was about to ask again, John pushed himself off the doorway, stepping into Stiles’ room and dropping into Stiles’ swivel chair with a tired little groan. The chair creaked a bit under sudden adult weight, but remained standing nonetheless.

“I’m guessing Stiles was mad at you for implying I might get violent?”

Steve nodded.

John sighed, leaning forward and bracing his knees on his elbows, posture mirroring Steve’s.

“Well, he’s never gonna say this, so I will: thank you.”

Steve sat back, stunned. “What?!"

Grimacing, John scrubbed at his forehead again. “I didn’t always, and it’s only been the last few years. I go by my last name at work — military or police — so it was always just friends and family calling me ‘Noah’. My mom died, then over the years, we moved around. I lost touch with my old friends, and struggled to make new ones outside of work…before long, the only people calling me ‘Noah’ were my wife and my father. For the longest time, it was only them. Then Claudia died and my father…”

John reached up and pulled down the neckline of his shirt, stretching it until he revealed a jagged scar on the inside of his shoulder. Tracing a finger over it, John explained, “I got this protecting my mom from my dad. I wasn’t much older than Stiles is now.”

Steve sucked in a sharp breath, even as his throat closed around a lump.

Releasing the neckline to let his shirt slip back into place, John continued, “So after Claudia died, it was just my dad. When I finally started trying to live again….it was easier to start going by my middle name instead. Not so many memories.”

Steve nodded, then chuckled darkly in exhausted humor. Only mid-afternoon, yet he already wanted to crawl back into bed.

Across from him, John wrung out his hands before clasping them together over a bouncing knee.

“Did I…did I say anything, that night?” John asked, his head down but his eyes looking up. “To threaten Stiles?”
Steve stared, not comprehending at first.

“…Steve?” John asked, sounding scared.

“You don’t remember our phone call?”

With a wince, John shook his head. “Only that we had one. I think you’d come up with some… explanation, for Stiles’ behavior toward Jackson, something about Lydia?”

Steve took a deep breath, and another, even as he could see them making John more nervous.

Did he tell John? How was he supposed to tell him?

‘You admitted you regretted making me a part of your family’?

‘You called your wife and son psychopaths’?

‘You considered suicide after she died even though your son was still alive’?

“You were upset about losing your job and…you, uh, wondered why Stiles was being so…” Steve shrugged. “But you were less polite about, so we fought.” Trying for a self-deprecating smile, he added, “And now we know the truth, so it’s a moot point anyway.”

John’s face was caught between horror and relief, and Steve could not for the life of him tell whether he was making the right decision.

For a moment, they sat in awkward silence.

Then John nodded at the bowl of pasta on the bedside table. “You should finish your lunch.”

“I’m not hungry—”

“That’s why.”

Steve winced, remembering this very exchange from less than a week ago. John was right, but his stomach felt full of needles, one for every word Stiles just said.

~*~

If it weren’t for the brief *im at scotts* message late that evening, Steve would’ve told John to start looking for Stiles — with an APB if necessary.

“I can usually afford to wait for him to cool down,” John admitted, checking over his sidearm as he got ready for his shift. “How much longer do you have, here?”

Steve shrugged. “I’ve got three days left — but I can take more leave, if I need to.”

“Let’s hope not.” John nodded in satisfaction, holstering the gun, and turned to Steve as he tugged on his jacket. With a soft and honest smile, he said, “I’m always happy to have you here, but not to the detriment of your job.”

*I never asked for that! Goddamnit, I should've told Stiles ’no’ on Thanksgiving!*

Steve nodded along.

Even if Stiles was avoiding Steve, at least he wasn’t avoiding his own home.
When Steve got up for a run the next morning, most of the leftovers in the fridge were gone, Steve’s shield was on the couch in the living room, and Stiles’ jeep was out in front of the house.

The bar of light coming from the bottom of Stiles’ door almost blinded Steve in the dark hallway when he came out of the bathroom.

He paused in front of the door, and when he knocked once against it, only silence responded.

“So?” he called out, keeping his voice as soft as possible.

Maybe he was still asleep?

Except that Steve heard the slight creak of the swivel chair…yet no answer.

He sighed. Just as well — it’s not like he had a clue about what he was going to say, anyway.

“I’m going for a run,” he said. “I’ll be in the Preserve, where you…the spot you and Scott showed me and his mom.”

Still nothing.

“…Stiles?”

“Fine.”

At least he got an actual response this time?

In the doorway to his own room, Steve sighed as he realized he’d forgotten to plug his phone in to charge, last night.

Granted, there was still enough left for his morning run out, but what was the likelihood he would need it? Most he’d come back to is some ramblings from Tony, complaints about airplane food from Nat, and Lila stealing Clint’s phone to send everyone her selfies again.

Stiles sure as hell wasn’t going to call him.

Steve pocketed his keys, didn’t stop by Stiles’ room again, and went down the stairs.

Outside, Steve saw no reporters. Still, he’d gone almost a week without his morning run. Restless as he was, he had no desire to hold back to human speeds to maintain appearances.

And some small part of him still hoped to find Hale. There was a long list of people willing to hold onto the Camaro until Hale crawled out of whatever hole he was hiding in. But that didn’t mean Steve had a clue about what he was going to do if he was still stuck with it by the time he had to leave.

So he drove out to the woods, parked off the edge of the outer neighborhood, and took off at top speed into the trees.

In the pre-dawn dimness, it took all of Steve’s focus to stay on his feet as he ran.

The trees started out thin enough, close to the hiking area.

But they grew closer together and larger in the trunks as he drifted further away from the ‘legal’ edge of the Preserve. The vegetation on the floor thickened as he went, reaching up towards his knees and trying to trip him into the mud.
For a moment, he almost forgot where he was.

Steve ran like he was kitted out in his old tactical suit, instead of sweat-wicking athletic wear.

Steve ran like he was armed, instead of bare-handed and without even his shield on his back.

Steve ran like he was running toward something, instead of failing to run away from his own head.

His achingly modern running shoes pounded against the muddy ground as Steve ran like it was 1945 again, and his problems were a lot simpler.

Bigger, but simpler.

Figuring out the operational layout of a Nazi base was nowhere near as confusing as figuring out what was going on in Stiles’ head.

Or his own, apparently. For all that Steve hadn’t been running toward anything yet, he still found the woods around him starting to look familiar.

The quiet, half-dead patch of forest surrounding the ruins of the old Hale House were even more unsettling than yesterday, now that he was going through it on foot instead of by car.

Easing into a gentle jog as he approached the ruins, Steve wondered if there were any teenagers lurking in the woods again. Didn’t these things usually come in threes?

If they did, he hoped it meant someone from the Hale pack was out here again; either the man himself, or the last teen Steve hadn’t been able to talk to yet.

But even when he slowed to a walk around the house, no young werewolf wandered out of the trees to accost him in broad daylight.

“HELLO!” he yelled out anyway.

No response.

The house remained empty, the entire estate a spot of old death amid all the new life of the springtime forest.

“Hale? Boyd?” he tried, knowing full well he wasn’t going to get a response. “Anyone?”

Silence.

Even the chirping of the birds was distant, with not enough plant life here to draw them in.

With a sharp, frustrated sigh, he took off again. He made a lazy loop around the former boundaries of the Hale property, shot down the rangers’ maintenance road until he hit a creek, then followed it until he recognized the fallen logs and overgrowth not too far from the kids’ sparring spot.

…which he should have gone to first, if those were really footsteps he heard approaching.

Fast footsteps.

Loud, fast, and furious footsteps, accompanied by a snarl.

“Oh, there he is,” Steve muttered, right before an angry weight tackled him from behind.
The two of them tumbled down a low ridge and into a dip in the forest floor, hitting at least two branches and a rock on their way down.

Even with the serum, Steve felt the breath knocked right out of him when they finally rolled to a halt.

Guess Steve found the teenage werewolf, after all. He looked up into the face of…

red hoodie gold eyes in a familiar and alien face breathe kid breathe

…definitely not Boyd.

“Scott?!”

Behind the ridged brow, fuzzy face, and glowing gold eyes, the familiar boy growled and lashed out — hands already sprouted into claws.

Steve jerked out of their reach and twisted his hips, throwing Scott off him as he rolled to his feet. The werewolf didn’t notice himself slamming into a tree. He bounced off it and threw himself back at Steve, managing to land a solid kick from Steve’s sheer surprise.

But that was all he got. Steve whirled around the next strike to latch onto Scott’s shoulder. Scott moved with Steve twisting him around, letting Steve lift him so he could plant his foot against a fallen tree, then the other one well above it. To Steve’s surprise, Scott used the wooden wall as leverage to flip himself up over him.

Luckily for Steve, Scott was still working off the moves he’d learned copying ninja movies. Scott still didn’t quite know how to control his momentum, and Steve had super-strength regardless.

The boy didn’t even seem to realize what was happening until Steve had him back on the ground, arms twisted up his back and one ankle pinned under Steve’s knee.

Scott slumped over in Steve’s grip, shaking.

Given the rage with which he’d attacked, it took Steve an embarrassingly long moment to realize that Scott was crying.

He let go of one arm. When Scott just braced himself against the fallen tree they’d ended up by, Steve released the kneeling kid altogether. As Steve watched, the claws retreated, and it was his human nails that dug into the dirt.

“Scott?” he tried.

“Nothing I do works!” Scott shouted. The lupine growl faded in time with his features, everything about him melting back into the human kid Steve knew and remembered. When Scott looked up, it was with hairless cheeks, a smooth brow, and wet brown eyes.

“I’m…still not sure…” Steve paused, remembering the last time he admitted this, only yesterday. “I’m not sure what you’re upset at me for.”

Where Stiles lashed out, Scott drew in — literally; he curled up into a ball against the fallen tree, wrapping his arms around his bent legs and burying his face into his knees.

Steve reached out slowly. As soon as his fingers brushed Scott’s shoulders, the boy flinched away. Curled legs kicked into Steve as his own body slammed back into the hard bark of the tree.

Grunting at the impact, Steve bent double over and hissed in pain — and Scott whimpered.
“I’m sorry!”

With one hand to push himself upright, Steve waved the apology aside with his free hand. “You’re fine.”

“…an’ I’m sorry for attacking you,” Scott murmured with a snuffle.

“You have any idea how many times the Howlies decked me when I woke them up from a nightmare?” Steve offered. “PTSD doesn’t wait until the war is over.”

Scott rubbed at his eyes with the end of his sleeve. “I meant…coming out here…”

“About that…” Steve sat back, carefully sitting up right to keep pressure off his bruised midsection. “What, exactly, are you mad at me for?”

Scott swallowed, and for a moment, the anger almost seemed to come back…but then Scott looked down. Eyes fixed on his dirt-scuffed shoes, Scott mumbled, “You told Allison. About her mom trying to kill me?”

Steve sucked in his lips. He’d assumed that Allison didn’t know yet because she wasn’t talking to Scott — but from the sound of it, this wasn’t a simple miscommunication.

Why would Scott try to keep that secret in the first place? He was the one almost murdered in cold blood!

“What, exactly, didn’t work?” Steve tried.

Scott slumped, curling up again and talking to his knees.

“I couldn’t protect Allison,” Scott said. “Or Stiles or the Sheriff or my mom or that rogue omega or…or…or anybody! I couldn’t protect them, I couldn’t get Allison away from her family, and I couldn’t protect her while she was stuck with them. I thought that at least I could protect her memory of her mom. Let her have at least one good thing to hold onto…” He looked at Steve bitterly. “And I couldn’t even manage that!”

Steve knew that look.

Once upon a time, he saw it in the mirror every day.

“Did you ever ask her if she wanted or needed your protection?”

Scott curled up into a tighter ball of anxiety.

“No one ever asked me, and I sure needed it!”

Steve winced.

Between Rebirth for himself, and every other teenage werewolf he’s met so far, it was far too easy to forget that Scott was the one who didn’t want any part of this — even as he was the one in the center of it all.

“That’s…a pretty good reason to make that assumption,” Steve offered, despite knowing how weak it was.

Scott snorted with acidic asperity. It had no place on someone so young.
Steve sighed. “I’m sorry,” he admitted. “I don’t know what to say.”

With a grunt that was equal parts human and lupine — and all parts frustrated teenager — Scott grumbled out, “Figures. You know how to help everyone else—”

Steve’s sharp, bitter laugh cut him off.

“Believe it or not, Scott, if I actually knew how to help anyone, I wouldn’t be out here this morning.”

Uncurling his legs, Scott tilted his head in confusion, wordlessly asking for an explanation.

Shaking off all the dirt and leaves from their tussle, Steve scooted over so he could lean against the tree, right next to Scott.

“I got training in speech-writing and -giving from the USO,” Steve said, looking up into the hazy treetops. “And between all the reading I did in Lehigh and on the road with the tour show, I learned an awful lot about being a leader — but only in the abstract. What I learned about practical leadership, I learned through a lot of mistakes in the military.”

“…s’more than any of us know…”

Steve smiled humorlessly up into the morning mists, squinting at the feeble beams of sunrise burning through.

“There are lots of ways to be a leader,” Steve offered. “When you need to blow up some Nazis or fight off an alien invasion, I’m your guy. But off the field, when it comes to PR and politics and people…there’s a reason I’ll defer to Tony and Nat — and they’re the ones who’ve been talking to you and Allison.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been talking to Stiles,” Scott pointed out. "He's the one who told me you'd be out here, around now…?"

Steve’s head dropped, chin digging into his chest. When he looked back up, he could feel some of the sweaty moisture still on his jaw.

“Yeah, and there’s a reason I’m out here this morning. He’s mad at me, won’t talk to me, and I have no idea what to do about it.”

“You too?”

He looked up to see Scott look down, fixating on digging his does into the dirt.

“Nat…hasn’t been responding my texts. I think she’s pretty mad I didn’t tell her about…” He looked sidelong so Steve could see the flash of gold in his eyes.

“She is,” Steve agreed. “But she also got called into some emergency escort operation in Ukraine, so she’s not ignoring you.”

Scott sagged against the bark at his back. It wasn’t exactly a relief, but it was a reprieve.

“Look, Scott,” Steve continued, shaking off their tangent. “What I’m trying to say is that…”

He paused, trying to balance helping Scott with keeping his friends’ confidences and secrets.

“Nat was the one forced into working for other people,” he said. “And Bruce was the one who got his powers by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and would rather live without them. The
reason I don’t know what to say to you is because I ran full steam ahead towards the stuff all of you tried to get away from. I tried to falsify my identity to enlist, I volunteered for Rebirth, and I went AWOL to go into the field. At your age, I was either in school or in a sickbed, and the only fights I got into never had anyone’s lives on the line. Child soldiers, forced powers, spying in your own hometown…I don’t know how to help you.”

Here, he finally rolled his neck, until he was looking right into Scott’s incredulous gaze.

“But I know people who do. If I can’t help you, I’ll find someone who can.”

Scott…tried to smile.

“How…How mad is Nat gonna be once she gets back?”

“Very,” Steve answered, and smiled tiredly at the boy’s grimace. “But just because you’re mad at someone doesn’t mean you stop caring about them.” He blinked as his own words hit him. “I know I forget that, often enough. Took Bucky half our lifetime to drill that into my thick skull.”

Scott choked out a wet laugh.

“Stiles doesn’t have a Bucky,” Scott offered. “I’m sure he knows you still care about him, but maybe you just…need to remind him?”

The corner of Steve’s mouth curled upward. “Sure — as long as you don’t forget, either.”

He held out his hand.

Scott looked at it warily, as if he expected Steve to punch him again.

But finally, he nodded and reached out, clasping his hand in Steve’s.

Pressing his other hand against the tree, Steve pushed himself up to his feet, pulling Scott up with him. As Scott brushed himself off, Steve lifted up his shirt to peer down at his gut. Scott had one hell of a kick, but the bruising wasn’t all that severe, and would be gone by lunch time.

Despite Steve remembering landing some nasty blows of his own, the one bruise left on Scott’s gut when he peeked at his own injuries was mostly faded, already.

Steve dropped his shirt.

Eying where the bruises were hidden under it, Scott blurted out, “I’m sorry!”

“Don’t be, it’ll be gone soon enough,” Steve waved off.

“But it still hurts in the first place!” Scott protested.

Looking down pointedly at Scott’s chest, Steve nodded. “Yeah, it does, doesn’t it?”

Scott flushed and shrugged back.

“Come on,” Steve said, starting off toward where he’d parked the car. “I’ll give you a ride home.”

“You have the jeep?”

“…not exactly.”
Scott fidgeted in the passenger seat the whole drive home, even as he gave Steve directions towards his house. He shot out of the Camaro almost before Steve pulled up in front of the house — apparently, he could still catch Hale’s scent in here.

“You wanna come in?” Scott offered despite that. “I think my mom is making breakfast burritos.”

Steve glanced down at the clock in the car’s dashboard. He should get home, and follow his own damn advice with Stiles.

…but not on an empty stomach. That was a good reason to delay, right?

Steve finished parking and killed the engine. Before he tugged out the key, he winced when he noticed that despite his joking with Isaac yesterday, the gas tank really was running low. With a rueful shake of his head, he got out and followed Scott inside the house.

“Mo-om!” Scott called out as he and Steve pulled their shoes off in the front hallway. “I’m ho-ome! And I brought Steve with me!”

“In the kitchen!” Melissa’s voice answered, followed by the rattling of a fridge opening.

They found her standing in front of the fridge, still in her blue scrubs and with shadows under her eyes. Judging by the purse on the couch and the sweater draped over a chair, she just finished a shift at the hospital.

She greeted Steve with a tired smile and asked, “Staying for breakfast?”

“Scott offered…” Steve started.

One of the things he’d learned in his line of work was how to pick up information at a glance — like the amount of empty space in the fridge out of the corner of his eye, and the way the egg carton dangled from Melissa’s fingers.

 “…but I’ve gotta get home, sooner rather than later,” Steve continued. “So just coffee? Or I can get out of your hair. I imagine you’re tired, after a night shift.”

She nodded with a relieved smile, closing the fridge as she peered into the carton. A moment later, Steve was glad he’d turned down the offer — they only had two eggs.

He turned to Scott, but paused when he noticed the panicked look in the boy’s eyes.

“You sure?” Scott said. He tried to wave towards the stove casually, but Nat hadn’t been teaching him how to lie very well. “She makes the best breakfast burritos. You can have mine, I’m not that hungry.”

Steve’s eyebrows rose, and Melissa nearly dropped the carton when she turned around to stare at him with the same expression. Scott shrunk back under their combined incredulity.

“You spent half this morning running around after me when I was stress-running,” Steve deadpanned. “Even without super-powered metabolism, that oughta work up an appetite.”

Scott froze, save for his chest heaving under his red lacrosse hoodie. What in the hell…?

He turned to look at Melissa, but she was frowning down at her egg carton.
“Scott, how much has your metabolism sped up?” she asked. She turned to Steve. “How much did yours?”

“Uh, we didn’t have an exact measurement back then, but in terms of ration books…” he blinked as the pieces fell into place. “Oh.”

Melissa tilted her head and waved the carton a bit, asking him for a clue.

“Scott…” Steve stretched out the name as he turned back to the panicking boy. “Have you been secretly buying more food, or just starving yourself?”

Melissa’s eyes widened and her fingers went limp.

If it weren’t for Steve’s own superhuman reflexes, those last two eggs would’ve crashed all over the floor.

Not that Melissa would’ve noticed. She didn’t seem to notice anything else in the world as she shot across the kitchen to pull Scott into a tight hug. Steve set the carton down on the narrow counter, leaning back against it and crossing his arms.

He watched as Melissa cupped her hand around the back of his head, the other hand rubbing small, soft circles into his shoulder. Standing as they were in the doorway between the kitchen-dining room and the living room, she slowly rocked Scott back and forth, a motion chiseled into her muscle memory from half a lifetime before Scott grew half a head taller than her.

When Scott’s breathing started to slow down, Steve answered, “Four.”

Melissa turned them so she could look at Steve in askance. Scott tilted his head to peer at him with one eye, the rest of his face buried behind his mother’s hair.

“We didn’t have an exact measurement for metabolism at the time,” Steve said. “So we assumed my metabolism was about four times normal, because I needed four ration books in order to not feel hungry.” With a embarrassed smile for a seventy-year-old faux pas, he said, “Not that I felt full, but in wartime rationing, no one really did. So having to take four times what I was supposed to was…”

He didn’t finish, but judging by the look on Scott’s face, he didn’t have to.

“On the bright side, we still got terrible chocolates and cigarettes, and even if I could smoke now-”

“No asthma cigarettes?” Scott mumbled.

Melissa looked at Scott in bewilderment, and Steve burst out laughing at her visage.

“You’re never gonna let that go, are you?” he asked. Steve could see the beginnings of a small smile on Scott’s face when he shook his head, not letting go of his mom. “Right, well, no asthma cigarettes-” Melissa’s shoulders were shaking, and Steve let out an exaggerated sigh. “Yes, Melissa, I swear they were real. Doctor recommended and everything.”

“Did your mother let you smoke them?” she asked.

“…no,” Steve admitted.

Scott snickered a little, which Steve took as a victory.

“Anyway,” Steve continued. “Point I was making was I had more to trade and share because of it. There was a black market for food stamps, so I could get people some more of what they normally
didn’t have.”

He looked Scott in the eye. “I remembered all the times my mom lied and told me she was full when I knew she wasn’t. I hated it, too. But hiding how much I needed didn’t help anyone, and starving myself would’ve hurt those around me. People depended on me, whether it was to hold up the stupid motorcycle in the roadshows or flip over an enemy truck in the field.”

Scott bit his lip but nodded, then buried his face back in his mom’s frizzy curls.

Over Scott’s shoulder, Melissa mouthed out, thank you.

Steve nodded back, and kitchen eased into comfortable silence.

Around when Steve was about to make his way out, the Mc Calls broke apart, Scott trying to surreptitiously wipe at his eyes.

“We can do coffee,” Melissa announced, herding Scott to a rickety seat at the small dining table off the side of the kitchen. “Café sábado, how about that?”

Scott frowned. “But it’s Sunday?” At Steve’s look of confusion, he translated, “Saturday coffee, which is…” He grimaced. “Takes more ingredients.”

Steve mentally translated that as ‘more expensive’, and was about to turn that down too — but Melissa waved Steve toward the table, saying, “Not much, we deserve an extra day of chocolate after the last few weeks.”

Scott still looked unsure, but Melissa looked determined. So Steve took his seat, and tried to distract Scott. “I get the feeling that wherever we go when we die, Bucky’s gonna be ready to pelt me with peppermints.”

Melissa raised an amused eyebrow as Scott asked, “Peppermints?”

“Me and my ma used to like peppermint hot chocolate,” Steve explained, planting his butt in the chair under a look from Melissa. “But peppermints were expensive, and so was chocolate. Bucky used to ‘give me leftovers’ whenever I couldn’t find work — though his family didn’t drink it, much.”

With a light laugh, Melissa bustled across the kitchen towards a small pantry. “We don’t have peppermint, I’m afraid. Mexican hot chocolate usually has cinnamon in it, though?”

“I’ll live,” Steve said with an amicable shrug. “I owe Bucky’s memory that much, all the grief I used to give him.”

“How much was that?” Scott asked, a hesitant smile growing on his face.

“We would fight about it every time,” Steve answered, relaxing back in his chair. “Ma didn’t take charity anymore than I did. But he always won, in the end. Even if he sometimes had to bust out the big guns.”

Scott looked wary as he asked, “Big guns?”

“His mom,” Steve answered, with an only slightly shit-eating grin. “They were both nurses, worked at the same hospital. Mrs. Barnes had four kids to my mom’s one, but she also had a reliable husband, while mine…didn’t.” A shadow passed over the Mc Calls’ faces, and Steve made a mental note to ask Stiles for more details about Mr. McCall.
“Well, after he got Stiles to talk to him, at least.”

“Nursing is how this tradition started,” Melissa said, pulling out a yellow, hexagonal box from a cupboard. As she pulled out some milk with giant lettering on the carton proclaiming it lactose free, she spoke over her shoulder. “I started alternating between weeks of day shifts and weeks of night shifts. We already did Mexican hot chocolate on weekends, but Saturday was the transition day, so I started adding coffee to mine. Then Scott insisted on having the same drink, so…”

She pulled out two cans of coffee — a large medium roast can, and a small decaf one. She held them both up, and Steve nodded towards the regular coffee.

“I’m sixteen,” Scott grumbled in what sounded like habit. Despite this, he didn’t protest when Melissa pulled out a pour-over for the decaf, while putting on a pot with the regular coffee.

While Melissa fussed over a warming pot of milk, Steve turned to Scott. “You never actually answered my question, by the way.”

Scott grimaced at the worn surface of the table. “…I’ve been dipping into my dirtbike savings to eat out, and…” He looked guiltily at his mom. “Deaton didn’t actually reduce my hours. I just said that because I was dipping into the money that was supposed to go to the college savings, too.”

Melissa froze, but didn’t turn around. She took a deep breath, and starting stirring in…something…that filled the kitchen with a warm spice that Steve associated with winter holidays, not summer weekends.

“Well, you don’t have to, anymore,” she announced. “We’re gonna go out for breakfast—”

“Mom!”

“-and then straight to the grocery store, for an honest shopping trip,” Melissa continued. “Don’t you dare hold back, you hear me?”

“But I can-”

“¿Me oyes?” she drew out.

The Spanish must’ve meant serious business, because Scott immediately cringed but nodded, despite the fact Melissa was still focused on the pot of hot chocolate in front of her. “All…alright.”

Steve narrowed his eyes at the boy’s evasive expression. “I know that look.”

Scott swallowed, and when he didn’t answer, Melissa actually paused her stirring to turn and look at them.

“…I’m eating twice as much as I used!” Scott protested. “I can-”

“Scott, you’re a teenager, you’re supposed to eat more-”

“Not this much-”

“-and we are not that strapped for cash, seriously-”

“We might be!”

“Oh, and why’s that?”
Scott clenched his jaw and looked like he already regretted whatever he was about to say.

“I know Dad’s child support isn’t official,” Scott said. “You never went to court. He could stop paying at any time and we’d be homeless.”

Melissa paled at that, and Steve wasn’t sure if he regretted accepting the coffee or was glad he was still here. He started to move — to take over stirring, to leave, to ‘go to the bathroom’, something.

But Melissa snapped around to face the counter again, turning her back on them.

Okay, Steve definitely wanted to leave.

But judging by the looks on their faces, he needed to stay.

…Stiles’ temper could take a while to cool down. It hasn’t even been a day since he shouted all those accusations at Steve.

Staying here was perfectly reasonable. A little more time for everyone, and Steve still had plenty of time before he needed to leave town.

(He tried not to think about last year. It had only been a few days between climbing into the SHIELD jet to get to the carrier, and fighting off aliens in New York. Three days was both a lot longer and a lot shorter than it felt.)

Scott hunched over in his seat, crossing his arms and wrapping his hands around himself.

“Most of that goes into your college fund, Scott,” Melissa said, not looking up from her pot. Steve wondered if it actually needed to be stirred this much or if she was just stalling. “I only use it for the house whenever the hospital cuts my hours.”

“…and how often is that?” Scott asked.

Melissa didn’t answer, and her silence spoke volumes.

The tension swelled, and for a hysterical moment, Steve couldn’t help but remember his gas mask training back in 1943. The air pressure rising as gas filled the training chamber, the burning in his eyes and nose and mouth, and the way his throat burned for days afterward because he’d fumbled with his mask.

He’d take the chemical warfare training again over this.

Steve had no gas mask to break this spell, no shield to break him out, and no convenient invasion of Nazis or aliens to get him out of this room.

Looking between the two McCalls, Steve took a deep breath and said, “You know, I had this same fight with my mom?”

Melissa didn’t react, save to turn her attention from the hot chocolate to the coffees. Scott looked at Steve with an almost scared expression.

“Since I was sick all the time,” Steve said. Even though Scott was the one looking at him, Steve spoke toward Melissa. “I’m sure you can imagine Scott’s asthma without inhalers or any modern treatment. Tack that onto a childhood before vaccines existed.”

Melissa cringed at whatever mental images her years as a nurse gave her.
“Yeah,” Steve said, with a nod she couldn’t see. “So I’m sure you understand how pissed my mom was when I took up a job. Not much, just sweeping up at some newspaper offices. Nice job, apart from all the pencil dust. But it still meant needing to walk almost an extra mile, even in the cold rain or in winter. She damn near marched to that office to tell them to fire me.”

When Melissa reached into a drawer for some spoons, the metal clattered together under her shaking hands.

Steve looked at Scott and mouthed, mugs?

Scott took a moment, then nodded and got up, murmuring for her to slide aside so he could pull out the mugs with steadier hands.

After he set them down, Scott leaned back against the sink, only a few inches away from Melissa’s side, and pulling the ends of his sleeves over his hands.

“…you said she ‘damn near’ marched,” Scott prodded. “So…she didn’t?”

“She didn’t,” Steve agreed. “Because I told her the truth: she wasn’t as good of a liar as she thought. I knew she was hungry when I wasn’t, I knew she was crying at night, I knew…” He swallowed. “I knew that I was the reason she hadn’t left my dad.”

Both of them seemed tense as they waited for Steve to get to his point. Melissa fussed over the drinks while Scott started rinsing out the pour-over in the sink.

“I couldn’t stand by, watch someone else hurt, and do nothing about it. I think you’ve heard about that unfortunate personality trait of mine?”

He gestured towards his Rebirth body, and mother and son giggled in surprised unison.

Steve nodded. “Exactly. She was the one who taught me that if I can help someone, I should help them. I couldn’t heal people like her, and I couldn’t…”

He caught Scott’s eye for a moment-

“I couldn’t protect her.”

-and Scott flinched.

“But at least I could do this much, to help her.”

Scott gave Steve a grateful smile, looking like Melissa had a few moments ago — but his face fell when Steve shook his head.

“I did end up getting sick,” Steve continued, and Scott’s face crumbled in betrayal. “But…but that was eventually gonna happen anyway, the way my luck ran. For once, though, I could buy my own medicine. She didn’t have to go hungry for my sake. It wasn’t much — but for us, for her and for me, it was a lot.”

Scott and Melissa shared a look over the mugs of warm chocolate coffee, before she handed two of the mugs to Scott. Scott carried them over, setting one down in front of Steve while reclaiming his seat.

Melissa stayed planted, but turned around, bringing her drink up and hiding half her face behind the mug.
Steve lifted up his mug in a half-hearted cheers motion, then took a sip.

The cinnamon was nothing like the peppermint he and Ma used to have, and mixing coffee with chocolate was still something about the 21st century he needed to get used to.

Somehow, this still felt familiar. It was the warm chocolate, unstoppable maternal rage, and immovable adolescent determination.

“Deaton’s gonna give me a raise,” Scott finally said. Melissa looked at him over her mug. “Starting with the next pay quarter. If I could give that extra bit to you? I’ll keep the rest for the usual budget from before all this.”

Melissa blinked at him over the rim of her mug, once, twice, thrice — then she nodded.

“Okay,” she agreed hoarsely. Steve wondered if the reason she’d never turned around is because she’d been crying. Her eyes didn’t look red, but her throat sounded scraped out. “That sounds reasonable.”

Scott nodded along.

“But only if the raise goes through!” Melissa added, voice a little surer now. “I’ll call him and check if I have to.”

Scott’s nodding was more vigorous now, but he bore a small smile, and that seemed to put Melissa at ease.

The smile they shared was warmer than the drinks.

Gone was Scott’s tension from this morning, as was Melissa’s fear from day before yesterday.

Speaking of which…

Steve took a big gulp of the cinnamon-coffee-chocolate thing and asked, “How much is it gonna ruin the moment if I ask how Erica’s doing?”

Scott looked surprised. “Stiles didn’t tell you?”

“Stiles…isn’t in a talkative mood, remember?”

“Stiles?!” Melissa asked. “Are we talking about the same guy? Stiles ‘Sarcasm’ Stilinski? Can talk the ears off of Saint Francis de Sales?”

“Well, he’s not exactly talking to me,” Steve admitted. “I’m…working on it.”

Melissa still seemed rather shocked, but with a look from Scott, she let the matter drop.

“She’s okay,” Scott answered. “We threw the shield around a bit — don’t tell her I said this, but she really is good. I had to go to work, and I guess she and Stiles stuck around a bit. Since Stiles couldn’t lift it even if his shoulder wasn’t hurt, she carried it to your — uh, his — place in exchange for a ride to her neighborhood.”

“Not her home?” Steve asked. Stiles could nitpick with the best of every accountant Steve had ever met in the Army, SSR, and SHIELD, but surely even he would be willing to take her straight home.

“She’s still not telling her parents,” Scott explained.
Steve sighed — but to his surprise, Melissa nodded.

“That’s actually not a bad idea.”

Scott and Steve both stared at her incredulously.

“…which I admit the irony of,” she added, grimacing over her mug. “But I’ve met Erica’s parents. They…well, CPS can make sure parents do the bare minimum, but they can’t force love, affection, or a heart.”

“What’s that supposed to mean!”? Scott asked.

Melissa pursed her lips. “I’ll leave the details up to Erica. But speaking as a mom who had to find out her kids changed species months after the fact? I don’t blame Erica for not wanting her parents in on this.”

Scott tried again for details, but Melissa wouldn’t budge or answer.

All she would say was, “Even with everything I’ve heard about Derek, if he’s not hurting her, then he might not be as bad for her as her parents are.”

Scott looked horrified by the implications of that.

“Well, I’m working on that,” Steve said, pointing out the window toward the street where the Camaro was parked. “I still can’t find him, and I have to leave in a few days. Pretty sure it’ll get stolen if I leave it out by the depot where anyone last saw him.”

Scott narrowed his eyes at the car in speculation, then nodded in satisfaction with whatever idea came to him.

“Leave it with Isaac,” Scott suggested. “That neighborhood is rich enough that a Camaro won’t stand out — pretty sure Jackson’s Porche is still more, uh, attention grabbing — and it might make it easier for Isaac to…”

He stalled, glancing guiltily at his mom.

“…convince social services that Derek Hale is around like he’s supposed to be?” Steve offered. Melissa looked scandalized, but didn’t actually protest. “All right,” Steve agreed, mentally re-planning his day again. After the Lahey house, then he’ll go to Stiles. “I’ll go talk to Isaac and see what he has to say.”

~*~

Except when Steve pulled up to the Lahey house, he’d barely made it halfway out of the car before the front door jerked open.

Right. Werewolf hearing.

Isaac looked disappointed to see Steve, which made sense. The sound of Hale’s Camaro would’ve drowned out anything that could’ve told him who was in the driver’s seat.

What didn’t make sense was Vernon Boyd all but shoving Isaac aside as he stomped out of the house.

Of course, after all the time Steve spent looking for him, they’d run into each other by chance, here and now.
Like Erica, Boyd was looking a lot better than when Steve saw him last. Unlike her (and every other teenager in this town), he wasn’t dressed like he expected a fashion shoot to pop up around him.

In practical jeans, a military surplus jacket, and a sturdy canvas duffel, Boyd looked ready to hit the road — and sleep on it if necessary.

The boy halted in the middle of the lawn, while the last Lahey gripped the door jamb so tightly, Steve wondered how Isaac’s lycanthropic strength wasn’t breaking it.

Scowling at Steve, Boyd didn’t even bother with a farce of politeness or greeting.

“No offense, but what are you doing here?”

Steve took a deep breath, trying hard not to compare Boyd to the all-too-familiar voice in Steve’s head.

“I was going to ask Isaac if he’d be willing to help with the car, and Hale…”

Boyd turned away to face Isaac, shoulders hunched defensively.

“See!” the teenager snapped.

Isaac’s own scowl deepened in response.

“-and to ask Isaac if he’s seen you around,” Steve tried.

Didn’t work — despite it being true.

Neither boy even seemed to have heard Steve, and Isaac just shouted, “Fine!”

In Steve’s peripheral vision, he could see a lady walk her dog across the street to avoid the impending screaming match. It looked like another neighbor was pulling their front porch door shut.

(When he turned around to look — was it his imagination, or was that a flutter in the Whittemores’ window?)

“Then leave!” Isaac continued, voice ragged as if he were speaking around gravel — or a lump in his throat. “Run away, for all I care! It’s the only thing you ever do, anyway!”

Steve still couldn’t understand what he’d walked into.

Why were teenagers always so angry? Was Steve this angry as a teenager?

Oh, who was he kidding? He was worse-

“I’m not replacing your stupid brother anymore than Derek can replace your psychotic dad!” Boyd yelled back.

-but not by much.

That blow struck home.

Even from across the lawn, Steve could see the flare of gold in Isaac’s eyes, and the tears threatening to fall from them, before he slammed the door shut.

When Boyd turned back around, his expression crumbled and his shoulders fell.
But when his eyes landed on Steve, he just went…blank.

Disconcertingly blank.

A kind of blank that Steve was familiar with.

“I’m not gonna talk to you,” Boyd said.

Steve may’ve jerked back a bit in surprise.

“That’s what you’re doing, right? You got Allison and Erica and Isaac, now it’s my turn?”

Steve grimaced, but didn’t try to deny it.

Instead, he countered with, “You gonna ask me why I care, too?”

Whatever Boyd had been expecting Steve to say, it wasn’t this.

“Yeah, actually,” Boyd said, narrowing his eyes. “I wanna know.”

With a wan smile, Steve answered, “Sometimes it’s easier to help others than yourself.”

Most of the time, in fact, if Steve were being honest with himself.

Boyd seemed curious, but a moment later, he reared back, head held high.

“Thank you…Captain,” he said. “But I can get by on my own.”

And didn’t those words kick Steve right in the gut?

He might as well have been standing outside his apartment after Ma’s funeral all over again. For a strange moment, the Lahey’s lawn melted away and Steve could’ve sworn he saw back alley Brooklyn out of the corner of his eye. That’s the kind of place those words belonged.

But that was a lie, wasn’t it?

Those words didn’t belong on anyone, anywhere.

“Thing is,” Steve said. “You don’t have to.”

Somewhere in the afterlife, Bucky was laughing his ass off at Steve.

Boyd still looked ready to bolt.

“At least let me give you a ride to wherever you’re headed,” Steve offered, nodding towards the duffel bag. “I was coming here to figure out what to do about this car, might as well do something useful with it.”

Boyd glanced anxiously at the car, as if it were ready to swallow him the moment he set foot in it. Steve was about to try Bucky’s tactic — all you have to do is shine my shoes — but remembered that werewolves could hear heartbeat changes in deception.

Steve wondered if Nat knew how to lie well enough to fool a werewolf, then tried to think of something that Boyd actually could do.

“You can help me find a gas station on the way?” Steve…offered? Asked? “Tank’s running low on gas, and whatever I do with this car, I don’t want to leave it empty from my joyriding.”
That was true enough that Boyd hopefully wouldn’t notice that Steve didn’t need help finding a gas station. He could remember the ones Stiles went to, and where he’d topped up his bike almost a year ago.

“All right,” Boyd offered. “There’s one like a block down from the Greyhound— from where I need to be.”

Steve could feel his gut sink through the dried up grass as he recognized the name of the intercity bus.

But then, it was only confirmation of what he was seeing right before his eyes. So he didn’t react, just jerked his head over to the car. “Hop in.”

Interestingly, when Boyd was still watching Steve, he moved out of absent habit toward the driver’s side door. He didn’t seem to realize it until his hand was on the hood of the car, at which point he pivoted toward the passenger seat.

When they both climbed in and Steve started the car, Boyd took a deep breath — and a sniff.

“Scott too?” Boyd asked, hugging the duffel bag that he’d refused to even put in the back seat, let alone the trunk. “What am I, the last one?”

“You’re a hard man to find,” Steve said.

Boyd snorted, looking out the windshield and down the street. “We’re gonna make a left up ahead to get to the main road…”

For a few minutes, the car was silent save for Boyd’s directions. Steve’s empty stomach curdled and burned as they went, knowing he was delivering Boyd to the long-distance bus station. But Steve stuck to his word.

They reached a long road that Steve just had to keep going straight on for a while, and awkward silence shrouded the two superhumans.

“So where you headed?” Steve asked. Stony silence. “Redding? Oakland? San Francisco? Or is it San Fransokyo, now? Everyone just calls it SF, I keep meaning to look it up to be sure.”

“…it’s still San Francisco,” Boyd answered. “But a lot of the Asian enclaves and neighborhoods blended into each other. So some people call that side of the city ‘San Fransokyo’.”

“Thank you—”

“But I’m not going there.”

Despite this, Boyd didn’t say where he was going.

“…are you at least staying in the state?” Steve asked.

Nothing.

“South?” he tried, knowing he sounded desperate but not sure if he could — or should — hide it. “Nicer weather down there—”

“Why do you care??” Boyd snapped, twisting in his seat. Steve tensed, but the car barely started to swerve before he got it back in the lane. ‘I’m not Stiles’ friend, or Scott’s, and Derek’s gone. And… and…you’re , what, going around and giving pep talks to every traumatized, supernaturally
“Not all of you,” Steve said. “Though to your credit, I wish I could. Jackson’s parents have put him on lock down, and Lydia is…already talking to someone else.” Boyd let his silence ask his question for him, and Steve added, “Dr. Banner.”

“…the Hulk?” Boyd asked, his anger briefly hiding behind his confusion. “Why does he care? Doesn’t the Hulk get triggered by anger? Sounds closer to a werewolf than…whatever the hell she is.”

Steve shrugged. “He knows a thing or two about losing time, losing his mind, and waking up naked in strange places.”

A harsh laugh burst out of the burly boy.

“Figures,” Boyd muttered.

“If it makes you feel any better,” Steve offered. Already told one person, might as well tell someone it could help. “Stiles isn’t talking to me, right now.”

Boyd snorted in disbelief, not tearing his gaze away from the suburban tree line and cookie-cutter houses rushing by. “I didn’t know he was capable of shutting up.”

“It’s more like avoidance.”

A beat.

“You avoiding him, or is he avoiding you?”

“Y’know, I’m not sure,” Steve lied, side-nodding to Boyd in acknowledgment. “Maybe a bit of both.”

Judging by the motion in Steve’s peripheral vision, he was pretty sure Boyd rolled his eyes.

For another minute, they said nothing, except when Boyd indicated a turn for Steve to take.

“…it’s not just you kids,” Steve tried again. “I’d like to find Hale, too.”

“To return the car?”

“That would be nice,” Steve deflected.

“You tried his old house’s ruins?”

“Yup.”

“Isaac’s place?”

“Does he have that new flagbox?”

“What about the Old Railway Depot?”

“First place I looked.”

“Bars?”

Steve frowned at the commercial road ahead of him, and the little row of fast food chains they eased
“I can’t get drunk,” Steve said. “Can werewolves get drunk? I got the impression you can’t, either.”

“…there’s supposedly a way,” Boyd said. “Involving — silver? And some special plants? I don’t know… but I’m a year older than everyone else. Erica and Isaac were joking about getting me to buy booze for them in a couple years. At first I thought the same thing you did, but then later, Derek explained…”

He could see the rise and fall of Boyd’s shoulders.

“It was possible, but that he wouldn’t show us until we were older,” Boyd continued. “But also that he wouldn’t make us wait until we were all the way to twenty-one. Said there used to be a supernaturally-owned bar and he’d sneak in. He knew there would be no stopping ‘stupid teenagers’, so he’d rather we experiment where he could keep an eye on us.”

Boyd’s bitter laugh broke Steve’s heart.

“Not that it matters now.”

Steve glanced down at the gas gauge, at the duffel bag in Boyd’s lap, at what parts of the boy he could see without turning his head to make it obvious he was looking.

He ignored the ball of acid in his belly that his stomach had become. It was barely lunch time — the bruising on his gut from Scott must be gone by now — but this kid was leaving now, in the middle of the day.

It wasn’t even a whole day since Stiles’ outburst, Steve was no closer to finding Hale…

…and he really didn’t have a solid plan on what to do with this stupid car.

“Make you a deal,” Steve offered. “Take me to the bar, show me where it is. Help me find Hale, I’ll give you the key to this car.”

Boyd jerked back against the passenger door in shock.

“This car is already stolen, and Hale’s not coming out of wherever he is any time soon,” Steve said. “And that’s been with all of you looking for him.”

Silence.

“…am I still gonna make a right turn up ahead?” Steve asked.

Steve slowed down to bit above a crawl as they approached the busier business streets, until they were barely any faster than the pedestrians. He could see the Starbucks he was supposed to make a right at only a few blocks away, though there were at least two streetlights before it. He managed to go slow enough to have to stop at a red light.

“Boyd?” he asked again.

“You’re just gonna give me a whole car?” Boyd demanded. Steve nodded. “Who does that?!”

Steve shrugged, for once praying for the light to *not* change to green as fast as possible. “I do.” He smirked, a tiny expression, as he remembered… “Not my first time, even. I got a lot of backpay and old royalties when I was unfrozen, so I got Stiles a car for his birthday.”
That worked perfectly.

Teenagers haven’t changed that much in seventy years, and Steve wasn’t so far removed as to forget his own altogether.

“Make a left,” Boyd said, pointing up ahead — past the street Steve was originally supposed to turn on. “At the third traffic light down, then a right at the first stop sign. The one Derek talked about the most was off the 115, in the Old Industrial District on the edge of town.”

Steve managed to suppress a smile, though only barely, as he followed Boyd’s directions.

Still, in many ways, a runaway having their own car was worse than the bus. He’d bought himself a little more time right now, but at what cost?

“I saw Isaac was pretty mad at you,” Steve offered. “But what does Erica think about you leaving town like this?”

Nothing.

“Boyd?”

“She was gonna go with me,” Boyd said. “Night of the championship. We both saw Derek losing it, and that he’d left out a lot about being a werewolf. I just wanted to leave, she wanted to get him help. We thought we’d heard another pack and agreed to go looking, ask them, and if they refused, we would leave town.” Boyd took a deep breath. “But then it turned out to be Hunters, and you came along anyway. So now Erica’s staying.”

“You don’t think she’s gonna miss you?” Steve challenged.

“I think that’s none of your business,” Boyd said — even as he pointed up ahead at an oncoming intersection and made a left-turn gesture with his free hand.

“I think right now, you’re a little bit my business,” Steve said, following Boyd’s direction. “Your family? Friends?”

Boyd snorted. “Only had one friend outside the pack, and we were always gonna have to say ‘goodbye’. All I did was leave a year earlier.” He pointed down the road they just turned onto. “Mile and half, by the way.”

“Got it.” A beat. Then Steve asked, “Why were you gonna split up? Maybe you can-”

“Kyle’s gonna get into West Point,” Boyd said, and Steve blinked in surprise. Boyd hadn’t struck him as the type with military aspirations — despite the army surplus gear he currently wore. “I’m… not. Derek’s ghosted, Isaac’s pissed, and Erica is- I don’t even know. She’s not willing to leave, anymore.”

“So why are you willing to leave her?” Steve asked. “What makes you so sure you won’t get into West Point? What about your family?”

Boyd snorted, practically throwing himself back in his seat. “Answer’s the same to all three, Captain Rogers: I can’t protect anyone.”

Steve frowned at the long stretch of narrow high way curving around the town. There were so many questions crowding his head, and he didn’t even know where to begin unpacking that.
So he stayed silent.

One of the many things he’d learned from Natasha was the power of silence…

…as an interrogation tactic, admittedly, but when needs must-

“It’s why I became a werewolf.”

Steve nodded as if it were obvious and made perfect sense.

It didn’t, but hopefully Boyd would elaborate (and not notice how slowly Steve was driving).

Except Boyd didn’t continue.

Steve tried to remember his own misspent youth. All those times he wouldn’t notice until days or weeks after the fact that Bucky had managed to get Steve to talk…

*Got any bright ideas, you dead jerk?*

“Why did you want to protect people?” Steve asked.

“Really?” Boyd drawled. “Captain America wants to know why someone would want to protect people?”

Damnit.

Steve shrugged again and tried, “I don’t like bullies.” Glancing sidelong at Boyd, he added, “The bullies were a little too big for me to beat up, which is why I volunteered for Rebirth. But you weren’t in a war until *after* you became a werewolf, and you’re twice the size I used to be.”

Boyd said nothing, and in his head, Steve cursed blue enough to make his mother cover her ears in her grave. You *got any ideas, Ma?* Steve wondered.

It was starting to sink in for Steve just how out of his depth he was. Maybe agreeing to this was pointless, what did he know about this kid? Or any of these kids? From John, he knew some technical details and addresses. From Stiles, he knew Boyd had tried — and failed — to pick up the slack of leadership when Hale had started to fall apart. From Hale himself…

*Sheriff…Have you found Boyd’s missing sister yet? Because he looked for her a hell of a lot longer than any of you ever did, and never found a damn thing, either.*

…oh.

“Is this about your missing sister?” Steve asked.

The snarl Boyd answered with seemed to shake the entire car.

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Screw you!” Boyd snapped. “Forget this, I don’t need a car-”

“What happened to her-”

“Stop the car!” Boyd yelled. “I’ll get out and walk there myself!”

Steve obliged, pulling over into a dirt and gravel shoulder only a few hundred yards from the
intersection he was supposed to turn in.

But he didn’t unlock the doors, and left the key in the ignition.

Either of them could break through the windows — or break off the door — but the sound of the locks clicking had Boyd turning to stare at him in shock.

“I’m not gonna make you tell me,” Steve said. “I said I’ll give you the car if we find Hale, I meant it.”

Boyd narrowed his eyes with the distrust of someone who’d spent their life having their cynicism proven right.

“I wanna help,” Steve said. “Because I couldn’t help you guys, either. You and I both got our asses handed to us by that overgrown lizard. We both lay paralyzed on the ground as the people we tried to save, ended up saving us.”

Clutching at the straps of the large duffel, Boyd vibrated with tension.

“I spent most of my life getting the tar beaten outta me, and I couldn’t save anywhere near as many people as I tried to protect.”

Steve was sure that if Boyd had been holding onto anything in the car, it would’ve broken by now.

He found it pretty ironic that he’d run into Boyd fighting Isaac, when in many ways, they had the same problems with the world at large.

At least it seemed like the same solution worked on them both.

“I don’t know what the story is with your sister,” Steve said. “So I don’t know if I can help. But I can help you with this—” He jerked his chin towards the duffel bag. “Right here, and right now. Maybe it won’t mean anything. Maybe it will. Won’t know until I try, right?”

Bucky better be happy, wherever the hell he was.

Boyd clutched the duffel bag closer to his chest…and eased back into his seat. With a shaking hand, he pointed up to the intersection at the end of this part of the highway.

“T-turn right,” he mumbled, voice thick and a little wet.

Steve nodded, making sure to unlock the car doors before he eased it back onto the road.

They were both quiet as Steve drove. Boyd seemed to bury half his face in the duffel bag as Steve made the turn.

“I was supposed to watch her.”

Steve swallowed but stayed silent as Boyd lifted his head and spoke.

“At the ice rink. I was supposed to watch Alicia. I’m her big brother and she’d been wanting to go ice-skating all week, but our parents had been too busy. She loved figure skating and our parents were planning on getting her lessons. But I was bored and didn’t care or pay attention…”

Boyd took a deep breath, then another, then told Steve where to turn left, before he continued.

“I went to the bathroom for a bit and wandered around because I was bored, and when I came back,
she was just…gone. Spent all day looking for her, thinking she’d run off for some reason, maybe someone made fun of her skating again. Then called the rink owner, then my parents…it didn’t sink in for me just how bad I’d messed up until the cops showed up.”

With his arms wrapped around the duffel bag and the skin tight over his knuckles with how deeply his fingers dug in, Steve worried Boyd would tear up his bag, even without his claws.

“They only looked for Alicia for about a week. I spent...weeks. Months. Researching how kidnappers worked and asking around, putting up posters, and begging anyone and everyone if they saw anything and I never...we never…”

Steve kept his gaze firmly ahead as he didn’t comment on the sob that escaped. If Boyd noticed that Steve ‘missed’ the turn he was supposed to make, he didn’t say anything about it.

“We never even found a body,” Boyd admitted. “That’s what I eventually started looking for, but we never found even that.”

Had it really been only a month ago that Steve was chewing out Stiles for holding Jackson prisoner, and making the kid’s family worry?

Had it really been over seventy years ago that Bucky and Mrs. Barnes would stay up late, waiting for one of his sisters to come home?

What would Bucky have done if one of them ever hadn’t?

Steve couldn’t imagine that — but then, he didn’t have to.

The answer was sitting in the passenger seat.

“I’m sorry,” Steve said. “I — I was an only child, but Bucky, my best friend-”

“Stiles’…grandpa?”

“Grand-uncle, his grandmother was Bucky’s youngest sister,” Steve answered. “Bucky was the oldest, and the only boy. He used to worry about them, too. And...you’re...you’re living out Bucky’s worst nightmare, and it’s something I can’t imagine.”

Steve took a deep breath. “I do know what it’s like to lose someone in just a moment, though. Someone you were supposed to look out for, who was your responsibility.”

Boyd sniffed in askance.

_I had him on the ropes._

“You call me ‘Captain’. While we always set foot out the door knowing we were risking our lives, bringing everybody home was still always my responsibility. So when I lost my best friend…”

_I know you did._

“One minute, he was standing by my side on that train.”

_Get down!_

“Next minute, I was reaching out for him-”

_Hang on! Grab my hand!_
"-and I lost him."

A scream that echoed across the icy ravine.

“He fell right in front of me. I was supposed to bring him back home to his mom, his sisters, to Stiles’ grandmother, and I lost him.”

The road blurred a little, and finally, Steve pulled over on a shoulder and threw on the emergency blinkers. Giving Boyd the car wouldn’t mean much if he crashed it.

He turned to Boyd, who stared at Steve with eyes as wide as the saucers that no one used in the 21st century, anymore.

“I can’t bring Bucky back to life,” Steve said, wondering where his tears went. “It’s seventy years too late for me to bring him back home. It’s too late for either of us to bring your sister back home. But I can at least try to bring you back home…whoever that ends up being for you.”

The ensuing silence swelled up in the car, suffocating them. Steve felt like he was down half a lung again as he breathed and watched Boyd, who watched him right back with stunned consideration.

Boyd didn’t answer, or say anything about Steve or Bucky.

He took a deep, shaking breath, then turned away, and Steve matched the motion.

“…I’m sorry,” Boyd mumbled awkwardly. “For everyone you’ve lost.”

Now it was Steve’s turn not to say anything.

“You missed the turn,” Boyd added, looking around. “You can take one at the next intersection, I think. We’re pretty close.”

Steve shook his head. The great thing about sleepy, suburban towns was wide streets and low traffic, so even with the Camaro’s steering, he could make a U-turn.

He and Boyd didn’t talk the rest of the way there.

Part of Steve wanted to push more.

The other part of him worried that he’d pushed too much, off loaded a little too much onto an unprepared teenager.

God, how the hell had Bucky done it? It was never just Steve. It was Steve and his sisters, it was Steve and their dates, it was Steve and the Howling Commandos…

“This is it,” Boyd finally said, pointing into a parking lot.

A familiar parking lot.

When Steve pulled in, he even managed to find and park in the exact same spot as the last time he’d been here.

Then he burst out laughing.

Boyd looked bewildered, but Steve couldn’t help it.

The absurdity of his life just hit him, more than mutant Nazis, glowing cubes, and an alien invasion
ever did.

He was three thousand miles and seventy years away from home, Bucky was dead, and he was in a fancy sports car with a teenage werewolf.

And after searching for Hale for days, apparently Steve should’ve just looked in-

“Th-this was the first place I came to,” Steve gasped out, as he tried and failed to swallow down the hysteria. It made for a poor meal, yet Steve wasn’t hungry. “The first time I came to Beacon Hills. I was nervous about meeting Bucky’s last living relative, and this is where I stopped on my way into town.”

Maybe it was admitting a moment of cowardice a little less than a year ago. Maybe it was talking about the vulnerability from seventy years ago. Maybe it was just seeing Captain America break down beside him.

Either way, Boyd gave him a scathingly incredulous look, and Steve started laughing all over again.

His life really did read like a comic book, sometimes.

“Your first stop in a new town was a gay bar?” Boyd asked, one eyebrow raised and hovering over the slightly rough look around his eyes from their not-crying just a few minutes ago.

Steve sobered a bit in confusion, and Boyd pointed to the bar.

Specifically, to the faded old awning above the entrance.

And the little rainbow flag perched over it.

“Huh,” Steve said. He shrugged. “I didn’t — it was only a few months after I’d come out of the ice, and a lot of that was dealing with the Incident in New York. Still catching up on history, so I didn’t know what rainbow flags meant back then. Didn’t even notice it at the time. And it was in the middle of the day with almost no one there, so nothing of the clientele to, uh, clue me in.”

Boyd snorted, opening the door and stepping out. To Steve’s surprise, Boyd didn’t even take the duffel with him, leaving it in his seat as he meandered around with his head held high, face up only a little higher than usual. Steve was starting to recognize the motion of a werewolf tracking a scent.

When Steve got out, too, he could hear some music coming from inside. It was faint, so it wouldn’t be too loud inside, and it sounded a bit like the rock that Tony liked to listen to.

“Derek’s definitely been here…” Boyd said as he moved. He seemed to wander around the lot a bit, which was much more populated with cars than the last time Steve had been here. Well, it was the weekend. Boyd stopped about a dozen yards away from the entrance. “And I think he’s still in here, now. Not sure I can follow you in, though, I’m not twenty-one.”

“This is a restaurant, too,” Steve said.

“By day,” Boyd muttered under his breath. At Steve’s look of confusion, Boyd rolled his eyes. “This place turns into a club at night, like something out of Hollywood.”

Steve narrowed his eyes at the signage.

“Wait a minute…” he muttered. “Is this the bar you lot chased the kanima into?”

Boyd looked surprised again. “Uh, yeah? Not me, but Scott did. How’d you know?”
Steve started losing it again. “I…we…he…” He doubled over in incredulous laughter as Boyd looked on in confusion bordering on concern.

Just when Boyd looked ready to make a run for it anyway at Steve’s break in sanity, Steve managed to stand upright again.

“Stiles was caught by his dad here…tried to pretend he was sneaking into a club to hide the fact they were chasing Jackson.”

The spectacular way Boyd rolled his eyes reminded Steve of Tony when they’d first meet, and he damn near burst out laughing again.

Instead, suppressing his hysterical snickering as best as he could, Steve said, “W-when I came here by day, they only checked ID if you ordered alcohol. Otherwise, it was closer to a restaurant than a bar. Maybe they only screen the door on clubbing nights?”

Boyd shrugged. “I’m seventeen, I’ve never been in any bar or club, or even a restaurant with a bar in it.”

As the giggles faded away, Steve nodded. “Well, I guess a deal’s a deal.”

Now both of Boyd’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “You’re…you’re not gonna check first? I could be lying to you.”

“If I had reason to believe you would, it’s pretty easy to confirm,” Steve pointed out, gesturing towards the entrance. “So you don’t have much reason to lie to me.”

He pulled the key out of his pocket, and held it up, letting the sunlight glint off of it.

“A lot of people had a lot of faith in me, even when lives depended on it,” Steve said. “I can pay that forward and have a little faith in you.”

Without another word, he tossed it over. Despite the telegraphed move, Boyd still fumbled for the key in his shock.

Hands on his hips, Steve watched as Boyd looked between Steve, the bar, and the car.

This was Steve’s last chance.

“I didn’t get this-” He released one hand to wave down at himself; his supersoldier body. “Until I was in my twenties. Even after I did, the first thing I did was fail to protect the guy who made me into this, or even catch his killer alive. And it was half a year before I went into the field. I spent most of that being a show monkey or a lab rat, not the hero everyone thinks of me as, now.” He tilted his head at Boyd’s body. “You just said you’re only seventeen. Remind me again, how long have you had your powers?”

Boyd grimaced as he looked down at the car key.

“…three months…”

With a huff, Steve looked around the lot, thankful that no one seemed to be out here despite the pre-lunch hour.

Looking back at the boy, Steve nodded toward the Camaro. “You should top up on gas before trying to head outta town.”
Boyd smiled wanly, looking a little unsure now that Steve reminded him of what his original plan had been.

“I…can get a refund on my Greyhound ticket,” Boyd said. “I can use that for the gas.”

“I’ll leave you to it,” Steve said with a nod, keeping his hands where they were as the boy started to make his way over. “And Boyd?”

He turned to look at Steve.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

Boyd nodded, and Steve stood and watched as Boyd climbed into the driver-side door, adjusted his seat, and slowly drove his way back out of the lot.

And took the road that would take him back into town.

It was something, at least.

…and now he had another good reason to keep avoiding Stiles.

“Get it together, punk,” he muttered to himself, and turned and walked into the bar.

Chapter End Notes

Today is June 13th. Happy 38th birthday to Captain America actor Chris Evans, and Happy 26th Birthday to Frost Bite author, ME! ^+^

End Notes

You can always learn more about this series on my winter-wolves tag on Tumblr. I also have a blog dedicated to Winter Wolves and MCU/Teen Wolf crossover, Nomad1917. :)

If you are on Discord, come on by to Teen Wolf Legacy! This lovely pack of Teen Wolf fans has been a tremendous help to me both in writing fic, and in learning how to do other things like make gifsets for Winter Wolves. ♥

All feedback appreciated! Constructive criticism is ♥. :)

Works inspired by this one

Author Commentary: Frost Bite by Nyxelestia

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!