# Three Misfits in New York

by Moraine

## Summary

After Gerard beat up Stiles, the Sheriff doesn't believe his son's lies anymore. He demands answers and along the way mends his fragile relationship with his son. While they do their best to make sure that something like Gerard's attack will never happen again, new and unexpected friendships form and Stiles learns that he actually is kind of special. Suddenly it's not Scott by his side but Lydia and Derek, something he wouldn't have dared dreaming about in his wildest fantasies. Coupled with a surprise trip to New York and meeting an Avenger or five, life is bound to change drastically for the three misfits and their families.

## Notes

So I wrote this. I don't know what to say, except sorry not sorry for indulging in my fondness for Teen Wolf and the Avengers/Captain America movies. The plot bunnies were suddenly
there and wouldn't leave me alone until I had finished this and I hope you'll have as much fun reading as I had writing this. It's woefully far from romance, because Stiles is a minor still, and a traumatized one at that, but it will be there eventually, I promise. In the meantime, I hope you'll enjoy the kids' adventures :)

Chapter 1

It's over. Stiles knows it the moment he's finished spouting the crap about some kids beating him up after the lacrosse game. His father's face is tight with controlled anger, his brows drawn together just so. It's a garishly blinking neon sign indicating that he's one breath away from seriously flipping his shit.

"You want to try that again?" he asks, dangerously nonchalant. "Because I was there, and a lot of things were happening during that power outage, but kids from the other team sneaking away to beat someone up wasn't one of them. Their coach made sure they were all accounted for."

Stiles lowers his head, too tired to even swear. Instead, he looks at the wringing hands in his lap. "I ... I can't," he says quietly. "Just ... drop it, dad."

The sheriff sits back and crosses his arms over his chest. "You're covering for someone."

Since it isn't a question, Stiles only shrugs.

"Is it that Hale boy?"

"Dad-"

"No, son." The sheriff glowers. "If you're covering for a suspected criminal, you have to tell me. This," he gestures at Stiles' face, voice rising a little, "is not a fucking joke."

"I'm not, dad. I swear I'm not."

"So it's your friends then. What have they done?"

"Nothing! They didn't do anything!"

"Uh-huh."

They stare at each other. The sheriff sits still, face mildly expectant but otherwise infuriatingly calm, while Stiles fidgets in subdued agitation.

"You know, I have got all night for this," John says after long, painful minutes. "I'm done with hearing your excuses and lies. I also don't care that you want to protect your friends by not telling me who did this to you. This ends, now."

"Or what?" Stiles asks, rubbing at his tired eyes. "Will you take the jeep away? Cut me off from coffee? Ground me until I'm thirty?"

"Tempting, but unnecessary. Since I'm the fuck- the damn sheriff in this town, I'll just do what I should've done long ago and find out for myself. Maybe I'll start with Scott. That boy can't lie for shit. After I'm through with him, I'm sure that Martin girl would like to share, or perhaps I should just go directly after Hale. My deputies saw him around town with teenagers from your group and you did accuse him of murder. No matter how harebrained your schemes, your instincts are usually pretty good."

"Please don't," Stiles mumbles, exhausted. "I don't want you to ... " He falters. I don't want you get mauled by panicky werewolves. Or disembowled by Peter fucking Hale. Fuck.

"Don't you think that enough bad things have happened already? All you have to do is spill, Stiles,"
his father says, uncrossing his arms and leaning forward. His expression softens and a warm half-smile makes Stiles' eyes tingle. "We'll make this right, okay? All of it. And the bastard who hurt you won't know what hit him."

The thought of his dad squaring off with Gerard is the straw that breaks the camel's back. His insides clench at the imagined horror of the old man holding his dad at gunpoint. Forget werewolves, getting sliced open by crazed hunters is a hundred times worse.

"You can't," Stiles mutters. He swipes at his watering eyes. "It's too ... oh my god, just no. You can't." Still, it's tempting, so very, very tempting. He can feel himself relax into the belief that his dad really can make things okay again.

"I can and I will," John presses as if to cement that belief. "I have to. You're my son and I should've done something sooner." He catches Stiles' face in his hands and wipes the wetness from his cheeks. "I let you down, but no more. Alright? I'm here and we'll work it all out."

Stiles can't help himself. He leans into the touch, his shoulders slumping and his resolve crumbling. He is also sobbing, but at this point he is beyond caring. His father holds him like a child and lets him cry and snot onto his shirt.

"Good grief, this is serious, isn't it?" John sighs. "I'm so sorry."

"N-not your fault," Stiles hiccupps. He's vaguely aware that he's squeezing the air from his father's lungs but he can't help it. It feels too good to be close to him again, to know that they'll be even closer soon.

Hopefully.

After he's cried out, his dad hands him a packet of tissues and puts a tall glass of water in front of him.

"Drink," he says. "It'll help."

While Stiles nurses his water, John orders pizza and calls the station to let them know that he's got urgent family business to take care of.

"You ordered a meat lovers," Stiles accuses upon his return to the kitchen, although it's half-hearted at best. His throat is simply too raw and swollen for proper chiding.

"I'm pretty sure I'll need my strength," the sheriff quips. He pulls Stiles to his feet. "Let's get you cleaned up. If you need painkillers, just say the word."

They set up camp in the bathroom where John carefully cleans and bandages Stiles' scrapes. Shoe-shaped bruises on Stiles' upper arms and chest lead to an investigation of his whole body and before Stiles can protest, his dad has found his smartphone from work and takes pictures of his bruises.

"We're going to do it the right way," he says and keeps the phone out of Stiles' reach. "I'll report this incident and have the station look for the perp. I'm sure that forensics can do something with this footprint." He looks at it and scowls. "It doesn't look like a shoe a kid would wear, and considering the size it clearly was a man. I also believe that it was someone who was at the game. Someone you know, perhaps."

Stiles bites his lower lip and slips on the clean shirt his dad has gotten for him. It's one of his work shirts and smells faintly like detergent and his cologne. It's weirdly soothing, like he wants to cocoon Stiles for a while.
"It was, am I right?" John continues his deduction. He taps away at his phone and Stiles knows that he's sending the evidence to Eileen, the station's officer who works the domestic abuse and juvenile offenders cases. "If he's older, you have to tell me everything you know about him, Stiles."

"I know. Because he'd do it again in a heartbeat." Stiles sighs deeply and steels himself for the inevitable. "I'll give you his name, okay, just not right now. There are more things you need to know, it's all connected. And it's dangerous. Like, really, tremendously, horrifyingly dangerous. Like it-will-kill-you dangerous."

They stare at each other. Finally, the sheriff exhales.

"Okay."

Stiles is stunned, the built-up anxiety leaving his fingers spasming involuntarily. "What. I mean, yeah? You believe me?"

"Unfortunately yes." Re-packing the first-aid kit, John snorts. "Your usual bullshitting doesn't leave you quite so twitchy."

The doorbell rings and John goes to get the pizza. Stiles makes himself useful by getting plates and glasses from the kitchen, as well as the homemade ice tea which his dad loves and would never suspect as being without extra sugar or artificial crap to enhance the taste.

They eat in the living room with the TV running. Watching the local news that are, of course, covering Jackson's death, is the last reprieve Stiles will give himself because, yeah. Jackson died. His dad is right. This is too much, he and Scott are in way over their heads, they need help.

After dinner, they slouch on the sofa. The TV is still on but the volume is so low that it's barely more than white noise to make the silence between them more bearable.

"I'm ready when you are," the sheriff prompts gently. "Will I need a stiff drink?"

"Definitely," Stiles mutters. "But I'd rather you didn't." He heaves another sigh, eyes firmly trained on his hands. "It's a long, complicated story, so ... feel free to ask for cliff notes if it's too much."

John contemplates him. "I have a better idea. Wait a minute." He gets up and returns a few minutes later with both arms full of pens, maps, a white board, several balls of coloured yarn and magnets.

"Visuals, it's a thing."

Stiles gapes at him. "You want me to, like, brief you?"

"Seeing how I keep finding you at crime scenes ... yes. Do your thing."

They put up the white board and, after a few moments of consideration, get Stiles' pin board as well. There, Stiles pins up the map of Beacon Hills and strategically places the yarn and extra pins. On the white board, he writes down names.

"Okay, you asked for it. Man, I feel like giving a lecture ... alright. So, all of the things that happened in the last months? They started when Scott and I went into the woods to look for that half of a body that had you combing the woods ..."

He explains what really happened during that night, puts pins in the map where certain events happened and connects them all with yarn. Each of the involved people get a different color and soon there's an intricate web all over Beacon Hills while the white board is filled with background information regarding the different parties. John lets Stiles talk, although he often interrupts with
incredulous questions and loud curses. Showing him Scott's transformation on his phone is, surprisingly, not the worst part.

When Stiles finishes with what happened right after the lacrosse game, he gets up and folds him into a tight embrace.

"Jesus, kid, that's one hell of a story," he mumbles into Stiles' neck. "No wonder you're so skittish all the time. God, I feel awful. You should've come to me, told me what was going on."

"I couldn't risk you getting hurt. The night at the station was horrible enough to give me nightmares until I die," Stiles replies and grabs his father as tightly as he can. "It was bad enough that the hunters go after kids. If they knew that you knew, they'd probably have killed you just to cover their tracks. And ... and maybe to hurt me and Scott. They're ruthless."

"Not as ruthless as I, believe me. I might have gone soft these last years, but I told you: this ends now."

"Is this the moment where you tell me that you're, like, a character from Mortal Combat who's gone underground or something?"

John snorts. "You'd love that, I'm sure. Sorry to disappoint, but I'm just a pissed-off father who has one hell of a lot to make up for."

"Me too," Stiles mumbles into his shoulder. "I'm really sorry about all the lies and stuff." He closes his eyes as his dad kisses his forehead fiercely. He doesn't want to cry, not again, but, well ... his dad gives the best hugs.

"And I'm sorry for not teaching you how to be smarter." They loosen the embrace and Stiles feels small under his father's watchful eyes. "We'll start tomorrow getting our shit together and I expect your input."

"Yeah, that sounds awesome. And scary. Are we ..." Stiles swallows thickly. "Are we good?"

The sheriff smiles in amusement. "Yes, we are. Chin up, son. Tomorrow, you're getting to troll Amazon like a fiend."

Later, in bed, Stiles can't help but mull over his dad's words and think that they sound alarmingly as if a complete overhaul of his life is in his near future.
True to his word, the sheriff keeps Stiles at home the next day and sits him down at the dining table with a notepad, pens, snacks and drinks.

"I don't know whether you believed me last night or not, but I, for my part, am willing to get back on track," John says and takes one of the small water cress sandwiches Stiles has put together. "First order of the day: our food."

Stiles gapes at him. "You want to talk about food? Voluntarily?"

"Yes, I do."

"But why now? Shouldn't we talk about shooting lessons and stuff?"

"We will do that later. This is not about Argent or the werewolves, it's about us. I realize that you want me to eat healthy things because you don't want me to die."

Stiles flushes and looks down at the spirals he's drawn onto the notepad. "You do eat a lot of crap."

"As the scale keeps telling me. And my doctor. And Melissa." John clears his throat. "The point is, you're right and I want you to feel safe. If you feeling safe means that I change my diet, so be it. Compared to everything else, it's the easiest thing to do, so we'll start here. But if I do this, I'm not doing it alone."

Stiles looks up so fast that he feels a little dizzy. "Really?"

"Really. I'm ready to go all out, throw out the crap, buy the good stuff, look up recipes on the internet and get clever about nutrition. The whole deal."

"Oh my god, okay." Stiles flushes again, this time in anticipation. "Did you know that eating a whole foods, plant-based diet is really good for the arteries? We could totally do that, maybe have meat a couple of times during the week, and we should buy a juicer and a blender, do green smoothies and all that jazz. I read everything about it and even tried the food in that new vegan place. You'll love it. I could take lessons and I'd do all the meal-planning, cooking and shopping."

"Sounds exciting, but I want to help. If we both do that, I want to know what the big deal is."

Stiles can't quite believe his ears and so he jumps up and grabs a huge trash bag. "Can we start now?"

"Sure. 's not like I have to go to the station today." John takes his own trash bag and joins Stiles at the cupboard. "What should I throw out?"

"Everything in a box," Stiles replies, chucking an unopened box of pop tarts, followed by sugary cereal. "White flour, sugar, cake, chips ... we're breaking up with them."

John takes a deep breath, reaches for his snacks and does what has to be done.

After the cupboards they clean out the fridge and the freezer, leaving both nearly empty, and regroup in front of Stiles' laptop to check out staples for a plant-based diet.
"I'd never take meat away from you," Stiles says, scribbling down legumes and root vegetables, "but it's not really good for us. I'll show you studies later, if you want. For taste it's okay sometimes, though. Same with cheese."

"I get that, but do we really have to cut out wheat? What are we going to eat?"

Stiles snickers. He orders Google to show him the wonders of vegetarian dishes. "Behold the food porn, dad. We can eat all of that, promise. And it's really as good as it looks. Anyway, it's noon already, we should go shopping."

"What are we going to eat?" John asks again, sounding decidedly forlorn.

"I thought we could make wraps. We can buy everything we need at the mall. I've, uh, looked into it for a while, but with everything going on and no money to buy stuff because I had to keep replacing car parts and slashed up clothes and, uh, okay, you're looking kind of murderous right now, pops?"

"Wraps," John says firmly and schools his murderous face into something calmer. "But before we go shopping I want you to give your statement at the station. I want to get Argent legally and since you can name witnesses, we should exploit that. I won't let him stay at your school if I can help it. The parents have to know what a SOB he is."

Stiles sighs quietly. "Okay. I-I don't like it, but I get it." He feels his expression slip as something close to disappointment squeezes his stomach. "It's not as if Scott or anyone else with superpowers came to the rescue."

"I'll have words with them about that," John agrees, "but honestly? You shouldn't depend on them for that, son. Your mom and I always believed in the saying that you're responsible for your own health and happiness. When she got sick we didn't just trust her doctors. We looked into everything that promised relief or even a cure."

"I remember that," Stiles says and smiles feebly. "You always asked me to read magazines and stuff and holler when something about dementia came up."

"You were a big help," his dad replies mistily. "We tried everything, and I mean everything, we could to make her better. When that failed, we could let go with the knowledge that at least we didn't just let it happen. That we fought for our family." He scrubs his face and blinks. "What I'm trying to say is that we go down fighting, or not at all, you hear me? Just because we won't shoot Argent with arrows or electrocute him, we can still hit him where it hurts."

"We'll have to find him first, though."

"Oh, we will. Working with the law doesn't mean my fist doesn't have his name on it."

They first write out Stiles' statement and then compile a list of things to buy. After a calming glass of lemonade they leave the house together, shoulder to shoulder. The weather is unexpectedly nice for late April, sunny and warm. Stiles finds that it clashes with the horror of last night and he also feels strangely exposed. His bruises are for the world to see and he doesn't know how to deal with it.

"Don't you dare being ashamed," John admonishes on the way into the sheriff department building when Stiles makes himself as small and inconspicuous as possible. "You tried to help your friends and got roughed up for your trouble. If anything you should be proud that you stood up for someone else."

"Sheriff," Dana, the new receptionist, greets them, saving Stiles from having to answer. Her eyes linger on his unhappy face and she smiles sympathetically. "Hey, kiddo. I'll call Eileen so you can
get this over with."

"Thanks. We'll go on through." John leads Stiles through the station and stops in front of an open door.

Stiles knows Eileen, of course he does, and he likes her. She's tall, heavy-set and has long, blond hair like a valkyrie. But despite her imposing looks she has a heart of gold. It's nearly impossible not to feel safe in her presence. It's a wonder she survived Matt Daehler’s insane attack; many others weren't so lucky. All the new faces around the station make Stiles’ stomach drop whenever he's here to visit his dad.

"Dear god, Stiles," she exclaims and gets up from her chair to hug him. "The pictures from last night only look half as bad as it is now. Sit down, I'll get you some water." While she pours, she turns her attention to the sheriff. "Did you talk about what happened?"

"He's here to give a full statement," John assures her. "We already typed it up for you but feel free to ask questions and make new photos."

Eileen takes her digital camera. "We should. Don't worry, I won't take long."

Still feeling uncomfortable, Stiles lets her take pictures and gets dressed again as quickly as the aches and pains in his body allow.

"I can't believe that Gerard Argent would do something like this," she mutters, loading the pictures onto her computer. "Don't they screen the people who apply for jobs at the school anymore?"

Stiles snorts loudly. "If that were the case, Harris wouldn't be around to abuse students."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, dad. He's just a giant prick who loves to give out detention for no reason."

"To everybody or just you?"

Stiles tenses at the clipped tone. If he didn't know better he'd guess that there's a story there, but he's not brave enough to ask for it right now.

"Sometimes Scott, too," he mumbles.

"That school," Eileen says ominously and makes a note on her writing pad. "No wonder there's vandalism going on."

She takes her time reading Stiles' statement and only asks a few questions regarding Gerard's possible motive. For practical reasons the Stilinskis decided to stick to the truth as much as they can and blamed everything on Gerard’s hate for Allison’s new boyfriend and friends.

"Well, the old man is clearly off his rocker," she says with a headshake. "Beating up kids because he doesn't want his granddaughter involved with them. Who even does this in this time and age?"

"You should've seen her mom, she was scary," Stiles says bitterly as he signs his statement. "She threatened Scott with castration. And meant it."

"That would be Victoria Argent, right?" She pulls up the file of Mrs. Argent's suicide, which had only happened around a week earlier. To Stiles, it seems more like a year. "Huh, she also worked at the school, what the hell? Seriously, we should have a word with the board, John. It's like a meeting
"I'll work on it," the sheriff says, voice steely. "But my son's my priority right now. I'll take a couple more days off but you can reach me anytime if something comes up."

"Good to hear." Eileen reaches out and squeezes Stiles' cold hand. "Enjoy your time together, and maybe you should think about taking self-defense classes. Not to beat someone up, but to feel better about your ability to protect yourself." When Stiles fidgets slightly, she turns and grabs a card from her table. "Here, this is the studio where I send the girls and boys who need to get out of bad home situations. It's two towns away so no one has to know you're going if you don't want to."

John accepts the card and they say their goodbyes. On the way to the mall, Stiles checks his phone and chews on his lower lip as he types listlessly.

"Is everything alright?" John asks at length.

"Yeah, it's just ..." Stiles frowns and fights against a wave of nausea. "Nobody tells me what went down before Lydia and I crashed the party, not even Scott. But I saw Derek and he looked like crap. Fuck."

"Have you contacted the others, or are you just waiting for them to pity you?"

"Course I have, and no. So far, only Derek answered." Stiles puts his phone away again and scowls. "I clearly need better friends."

His father hums quietly. "Is Hale okay?"

"He said yeah, but that's bullshit. Nobody is okay after this."

"Maybe he needs better friends as well," John says thoughtfully. "And a therapist, but I won't be the one to say that to his face."

"Ha, me neither."

They pull onto the parking lot of the mall and make an effort to push the matter back while they shop for groceries. Stiles gets to buy half of the produce section and selects lots of healthy dry goods that have his father pouting. It helps to ignore the inquisitive stares from other shoppers and the dull aches in his body.

Once they're finished with their trip, Stiles sets out to prepare lunch. John retreats to his office and places a few calls. He comes back when the smell of fresh falafel permeates the house and Stiles makes a show of spreading hummus, salad, sundried tomatoes, cucumber and falafel onto a large wrap. He fixes the first for his father and the second for himself and they eat in blissful silence right at the kitchen table, which almost never happens because John usually works on cases there.

"I gotta say that this is a surprise," John admits after the last bite. "I wouldn't mind eating that more often."

"Great, because I remember you telling me I could go wild on Amazon," Stiles grins and then grimaces because his split lip hurts. "Not for cookbooks though, we can get recipes for free on the internet, but we need a good kitchen machine and stuff. If that's still okay, I mean."

"Son, I just threw out all my food and let you buy a ton of vegetables. We're going through with it. Get your laptop before I regret saying anything."
"Yay!"

Just a short while later, both sit next to each other and compare juicers. After choosing one, they decide on a Kitchen Aid for their smoothies and even look into cast iron pots and pans for their cooking because their current cooking ware is outdated and a little worse for wear.

"Sorry that it's so expensive," Stiles says, gulping at the total.

John shrugs. "You can pay me back by finding out what exactly happened last night."

"Will do, daddy-o. Maybe Scott will finally take a damn call."

"Not so fast. I want you to get the story from Hale first. Scott's a good kid, but if he hasn't contacted you yet, you should concentrate on the people who're more willing to talk. Might be interesting."

"Willing my arse," Stiles groans. "But challenge accepted. I'll call him after cleaning up."

John helps and promptly bitches about their lack of a dishwasher, which is hilarious after so many years of Stiles wanting to get one. After doing the dishes, they are back on Amazon and put one into the basket.

"Seriously?" Stiles asks. "You're doing dishes once and decide that you don't want to anymore?"

"Shut up, I'm an adult and can buy a dishwasher if I want."

"Sure, pops."

"For that, I'll choose the meanest fact-a-day calendars they have."

John takes control of the mouse and selects several calendars, ranging from history, biology, geography, sports and, most interestingly for Stiles, brain puzzlers. Then they both look over the many, many intelligence training books and card games that are on offer and pick out more than they can hope to ever work through. At last, several cheap stopwatches find their way into the cart.

Finally at the check-out, Stiles refuses to acknowledge the amount of money their shopping spree will cost. His dad even splurges on superfast shipping.

"Okay, my head is officially spinning," Stiles says and carefully looks his father over. "Why do we need all this?"

"According to your econ teacher, Finstock, you're super smart. I want to make you even smarter." John smirks. "Or are you too chicken to engage in a friendly bit of competition?"

Gaping, Stiles flounders for words. "Never!" he exclaims. "Is that what the stopwatches are for?"

"Yup. We place one next to each puzzle calendar and book and take our time. At the beginning of each week we hash out a reward and check our track record on Sunday. Looking up the solutions is a no-go, though. If you can't solve it, you give up and check it out after the week is done."

"No penalties?"

"Losing is penalty enough," John quips, and damn if he isn't right. Stiles hates losing, it's a trait he shares with both his parents. "Let's outline our daily regimen. We could tack it to the fridge. " He jots down their brain jogging competition and the change in eating habits on a fresh page of their legal pad. "Do you want to add something?"
"Yeah, actually." Stiles rubs over his buzzed hair. "I, uh, I want to start taking self-defense classes. Eileen's right, I need to put this behind me. It's embarrassing enough that someone's grandpa beat me up once. I won't let it happen again."

His dad looks proud. "I'll call the studio. As soon as you feel up to it, you can go. Lacrosse might suffer for it, though."

"That's okay. I guess the warm-ups for self-defense are just as kick-ass as they are for lacrosse anyway. I thought about jogging in the mornings, too." Stiles flushes a little. "I also want to see if I can lower my dose of Adderall. I read the stuff up online and I don't ... it's poison. If I can, I don't want to take it anymore."

"We'll see about that," John says calmly. "Let's take care of our home life first, alright?"

"Yeah, of course. I can't stop cold turkey anyway, unless I want to drop dead or something."

His dad writes both points down in neat letters. "My next phys eval is coming up in the fall, I could run with you, if you want."

"Give me a week and I'm golden."

Because they both feel that they deserve a treat after so much planning and eating healthy, Stiles cuts up strawberries and serves them with dairy-free vanilla sauce. His dad likes it a lot and they both squander another half hour in front of the computer, trying to best each other at mind games. It's more fun than Stiles could have imagined - and harder than expected. While he's adept at collecting trivia on Wikipedia and Google, his father is clever on another level. He's thinking circles around his son and it makes Stiles eager to sink his teeth into the brain puzzlers and riddles to keep up.

It's John who's breaking up the party eventually. "I'll have to call the station and check in. Why don't you call Hale and see what he has to say about yesterday?"

"Sure," Stiles agrees. "I'll let you know if he spills."

"If he knows what's good for him, he will."

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the warm welcome and your interest in my little story. I hope you'll stay tuned and leave a note if you see something you like, or not. :)

By the way, healthy living will play a part in this fic. It's not meant to lecture, it's just my take on Stiles' obsession with his father's health - and his own. I won't be offended if this is not your cup of tea, though I'll be very happy if I can make you curious enough to look into this topic.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Stiles doesn't have much hope of Derek even picking up the phone, but Derek surprises him. After only two rings he huffs out a wary, "What, Stiles?"

"Hey, Sourwolf," he says faux-cheerfully. "Do you have a minute or three?"

"What for?"

"Weeell ..." Stiles spins on his desk chair. "Scott is being a dickwad and doesn't tell me anything about last night."

A long sigh is Derek's response.

"What? I deserve to know. I flattened the fucking kanima for you guys."

"I don't have time for this," Derek says stiffly. He sounds as if he's one second away from hanging up.

"And I don't have time for bullshit. Besides, I'm not the only one who wants to know." He lets that sit for a second. "Call me back when you're done being an angsty teenager."

Knowing that he can't be pushy now, Stiles ends the call and ponders what to do next. He decides on getting a lawn chair out to the overgrown garden and catching a few rays of sunshine. He has lemonade and the music on his phone and dozes off soon after settling down.

When he blinks awake, his dad is sitting next to him, cup of coffee on the tiny garden table between them and the legal pad in his lap.

"Whatcha doing?" he asks muzzily.

"Just making plans for the garden," John replies while scribbling. "We should make the place available for training. Unless you want to plant things to feed us?"

"Nah, I'm not there yet." Stiles looks up into the afternoon sky. "Derek wasn't very chatty."

"I thought so."

"And Scott still hasn't called."

John puts the pad down and squeezes Stiles' shoulder. "Don't worry about it. Take care of yourself, the rest will fall in place."

He's right, it does, and in a fashion that Stiles couldn't have quite predicted.

After an early dinner, a beautiful, huge salad with avocado, olives, leftover sundried tomatoes and roasted pine nuts, they spend some quality time in front of the TV. John solves the crossword puzzle in the Times and Stiles trolls the internet for more recipes. Maybe it is the trauma from the attack, or perhaps dealing with werewolves in general just made him hyper-sensitive to his surroundings, because Stiles hears the window in his room slide up, even if there's no other sound following it.
He excuses himself and makes a quick grrr-gesture to let his dad know that they have a furry visitor.

Upon entering his room he sees Derek lurking at the window, hands in his jacket pockets and looking like a man on his way to the guillotine.

"Hey," he greets.

"What do you mean, others want to know?" Derek asks without preamble. His stance gets even more rigid. "And why are you hurt?"

Stiles plunks onto his bed and folds his hands. "Gerard got me when I tried to set Boyd and Erica free," he admits without fanfare and shrugs. "As to who wants to know, my dad."

"Did you-"

"Tell him? Yeah. I had to. He wouldn't let it rest after Gerard's flunkies dumped me here. And to be honest, I'm glad I did."

In any other circumstance it would have been hilarious to see Derek's face so overrun with warring emotions.

"Are you okay?" he says after long moments, catching Stiles off-guard with the concern in his voice. "With your dad?"

"We're peachy but he really wants to know what went down before Lydia and I arrived. Not just because of Jackson, but Boyd and Erica as well. They're gone and none of the officers have found them yet. Their parents are going ballistic."

Derek relaxes a little, although it mostly makes him look defeated. "They're gone. They told me they wanted to leave the pack and ran away. The hunters must've caught them on their way out of Beacon Hills." He takes a shuddering breath. "I warned them not to go. Not now."

"Believe me, they regretted their decision," Stiles mutters. Absently he rubs over the boot print on his collarbone. "If they still ran away after Gerard and Allison tortured them, I'll let my dad know so he won't waste manpower looking for them."

The werewolf doesn't look relieved. If anything, his shoulders sag even lower. "Do that. Apparently an alpha pack has set its sights on the town. If they're out there, they might have come upon Erica and Boyd. I hope they're not dead, but what Peter told me doesn't sound good."

"Fuck, dude."

"Don't call me dude, but yes."

Derek turns to leave but Stiles stops him. "This is all kinds of bad and I believe you, but I still want to know what happened yesterday. Why the hell won't anybody tell me anything? Is there some kind of, I don't know, gigantic fallout I should be aware of?"

"What does it matter? It's done."

"It matters to me. Nosy sheriff's kid here, remember?"

"Nosy or not, it won't change anything. Ask Scott, he'll tell you eventually."

"Yeah, no, I don't think so. I'm too petty to wait for him to remember that I exist. Besides, you're already here, you might as well get on with it."
For a couple of seconds Derek looks beyond conflicted; it seems as if weighing his options tears at his very soul. At last, however, he steps away from the window and gingerly sits on the edge of Stiles' bed. Mirroring Stiles, he folds his hands between his knees.

"Scott had good intentions, I know he did. But what he did is unforgivable." He looks up, his not-quite-hazel eyes lined with pain. "Gerard threatened his mother's life to make him help get an alpha's bite."

"What? The bastard wanted the bite?" Stiles exclaims.

"Yes. He was sick and desperate. He was also the kanima's next master and together he and Scott managed to get me paralyzed. I couldn't stop them."

"Oh my god, no." Stiles is aghast. He knows, he fucking knows what Derek is not saying aloud, and he's suddenly livid. "Scott really made you bite the asshole?"

Derek nods, eyebrows painfully drawn together. It's not difficult to guess that he somehow blames himself for that.

"I'll kill him," Stiles announces. "Torturously."

"He didn't do it to spite me. He somehow switched Argent's medication with wolfsbane capsules and his body rejected the bite."

"Great plan," Stiles hisses sarcastically. "Did you off him at least?"

"I couldn't and the others were busy with the kanima. Then you came and after Jackson's ... awakening he was gone." He grinds his teeth. "I'd have ripped his head from his shoulders and let Peter tear the rest apart, if I'd been able."

"Fuck." Reaching out, Stiles lays a hand on Derek's shoulder and squeezes. "I'm so sorry. Scott is such an asshole. If it's any consolation, he didn't tell me about any of that either. God, I'm so pissed right now."

"What's done is done," Derek replies quietly and gets up again. "Stay safe and warn your father. I'm not certain how long the alpha pack will wait before attacking. Chris Argent is not in a good place right now, but he might be willing to give you wolfsbane ammunition."

"You, too," Stiles replies and means it. "See you, Sourwolf."

Derek leaves as quietly as he'd come and Stiles wanders back down to the living room.

"That wasn't a very long visit," his father remarks.

"No. But long enough." Stiles repeats what Derek has told him and takes pleasure in the fact that John seems just as aghast about Scott's betrayal as Stiles. "What are we going to do about these alphas?"

John's expression hardens. "Nothing right now. I'll have a chat with Chris Argent, though, make him aware of what's going on. And maybe I should talk to Melissa as well. I don't like how Scott is handling this."

"I don't like Scott right now, period," Stiles says, shifting to lean against his dad's side. "You should've seen Derek. What Scott did really hurt him, and I don't mean physically. If it was me, I'd never speak to him again."
"Sounds as if you don't want to speak to him anyway," his father replies with a raised eyebrow.

"Serves him right." Stiles takes out his phone. "So, how long do you think it'll take until one of them needs me for research?"

OoO

Nobody needs him for research and the last few weeks of school go by quietly. Boyd and Erica are still missing, Allison doesn't come back after the epic kanima showdown (his dad told him in the strictest confidence that Chris Argent has shipped her off to relatives with a background in psychology and human decency) and Scott, though he eventually tries to explain why he did what he did, doesn't really seem to care what Stiles has to say about it. He acts remorseful for a day and then shifts his attention to Isaac who seems more amenable to his way of seeing things.

Stiles finds that he isn't very surprised about these developments, although the feeling of losing his footing leaves him reeling. He's lonely a lot, even though his dad does his best to cheer him up with puzzles, movies, runs through the forest and several evenings of researching ADHD and how to improve the symptoms by way of exercise and nutrition. It turns out that avoiding wheat might be a huge step into that direction and so they commit to it together for real. He also starts self-defense classes but the other students there are generally quiet since most of them have a seriously unhappy background.

"Stiles, you should get out more, maybe go out with that Martin girl," John says after summer break has begun. "The Whittemore boy just left, she might need a friend."

"Yeah, as if she'd want to see me," Stiles mumbles and chews on his pencil. Today's brain puzzle from the hallway table is tough. "It'd be more probable to invite Derek to a barbeque and have him actually showing up."

"We could do that," John says mildly. "In fact, I already have."

"You what? When?"

"I pulled him over yesterday. Saturday is our meat day anyway, so why not? You're right, he could do with a little normalcy and I get to keep an eye on him."

"Who else is invited?"

"It's going to be only the three of us. I don't want Peter near you and Isaac apparently has plans with Scott that can't be delayed. Unfortunately Melissa is on shift, but I promised to save her some of our apple crumble. Maybe she'll swing by after she's done at the hospital."

"Huh." Stiles rubs his forehead. "I didn't know you were serious about Derek needing better friends."

"Where do you think you got that penchant for taking in strays?" John shrugs and picks up his backpack. It's filled with a ton of food and snacks for work. "Considering what he's been through, he's decent enough. It won't hurt to feed him once in a while." He claps his son onto the shoulder and leaves.

As soon as he's gone, Stiles abandons his puzzle as a lost cause and reaches for the laptop. Researching food is fun and he has plans to make Derek scowl. After that he sends a text to Lydia, asking her out for a movie and snack at the vegan place. She replies during his nap in the garden and makes his afternoon by actually agreeing.
They meet in front of the cinema, Stiles in a shirt, jeans and sneakers, Lydia in a pretty summer dress and with curled hair. She looks lovely and he tells her so, for once free of any expectations.

"Thank you," she says, smiling a little. "So, what are we going to watch?"

"I thought about Pirates of the Caribbean: On Stranger Tides," Stiles offers and ducks his head reflexively, expecting to be shot down in favour of some romantic comedy.

Lydia purses her lips and takes a long look at the poster. "Why not. But I want sweet popcorn and a Dr. Pepper."

Stiles, who can barely believe his luck, purchases their tickets and her snacks without complaint.

As they sit in the theater, she studies him suddenly with narrowed eyes. "What's going on with you?"

"Uh, nothing?"

She takes a dainty handful of popcorn and munches on it. "Of course not." Her sarcasm couldn't be thicker if she tried. "Where are your nachos? And for that matter, where are the others?"

"Doing other things," he says, only a little bitter. "And my dad and I agreed to stay away from the crap food. No more Cheetos for me. I've got this." He rummages in his messenger bag and takes out a bag of organic kale chips. "They're better than they look."

He's aroused her curiosity and before he can protest, Lydia has opened the bag and stolen a chip.

"Not bad," she agrees and proceeds to eat more than half before the movie even starts.

After the movie they go to the vegan restaurant and eat salad and sweet potato fries with peanut butter dip. Lydia knows the place and likes it but Jackson couldn't be bothered to take her here.

"He was all about appearances," she says quietly and sighs. "I had no idea how he really felt."

"But you know that he liked you. He gave you that key," Stiles consoles, even though he'd rather saw his foot off than defend his childhood nemesis.

"I'd rather he gave me his words. It might've prevented that disaster," she snorts and looks up, right into Stiles' eyes. "How are you doing now? You look better than in school."

Stiles laughs at that. "Must be the sleep I'm finally getting. Also, I told my dad about everything and he's really helped me a lot. It's great. If only Scott wasn't such a dick."

"You're still not talking?" Lydia wrinkles her nose. "I didn't know that was possible."

"Yeah, well, he did a number on Derek and I won't forgive him for that anytime soon."

"Why?" she asks and picks up the last fry.

Stiles chews on his lower lip and ponders if he should really say this out loud. He knows that once he's voiced his concern, he can never take it back. Saying it aloud will make it real in a way just thinking about hasn't.

Lydia's face softens. "You know, I don't have anyone to talk to, either. Everyone is gone and god help me if I turn to the vapid gossip girls in school for company."

"I'm sorry about that. The werewolf thing kinda ruined your life, didn't it?"
"Not only mine," she replies and inclines her head. She looks very grown-up like that. "But I'm not ruined. It just made me see that I don't need stupid pretences in my life. I'm not thankful that Peter used and hurt me, but I do know myself better now. I won't let anyone do that to me ever again."

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"Things changed for us," she continues, "and we have to deal with it. What has McCall done?"

Stiles is still a little uncertain about Lydia's sudden interest in his dealings but it's good to finally talk about it with someone who can relate. He tells her what he has learned, keeps nothing back, and for once isn't ashamed of the anger he still carries inside.

"I feel bad for Derek," he mumbles, "and I can't help but ask myself if Scott would betray me like that, too, if he thought he had to."

"Of course he would," Lydia answers without batting an eyelash. "He already did it once and the way he acts he clearly thinks he's right. You're not going to stop him if his own conscience won't." As an afterthought she adds, "I'm sorry."

"No, it's alright." Stiles rubs over his arms. "I'm just ... still getting used to not having him around."

"Well, you need better friends," she says haughtily. "And so do I. Psychotic people do look bad on a college application, after all."

They fall silent and play with the straws in their juice glasses.

"You could come to self-defense class with me," Stiles says eventually. "I go four times a week, it's good."

"I do have a life," she smirks, "and a math competition to prepare for, but maybe I'll come and watch sometime."

"Great. It'd be nice to hang out and do summer things. Being an outcast sucks."

"It's not a great loss, considering who cast us out." Lydia slurps the last of her juice. "Text me when you're going next, I'll see if I can make time for your little club."

When he's back at home, Stiles feels nearly giddy at the prospect of spending time with someone other than his dad and his colleagues. The deputies are all great and very willing to take him to the shooting range on their days off, but this, this is friend stuff.

He texts Lydia that his next class is tomorrow at ten in the morning and then steals his dad's unfinished crossword puzzle. He's getting better at those, even the difficult one in the Times. Once he's exhausted his knowledge, he turns to the brain puzzle calendar on their couch table and frowns at the time his father has already written down.

"You're good, old man," he murmurs, grabs the pencil and the stopwatch and sets to solving the puzzle like a fiend. One of these days, the weekly reward will be his!

Chapter End Notes

Derek has made his appearance, yay! I felt so sorry for the poor guy at the end of season
2, but as of now, things are slowly looking up for him ;)

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lydia actually shows up in his self-defense class, if only as a spectator. She arouses the interest of several boys as she settles at the side and even the instructor, a butch young woman in her twenties, isn't immune to her charms.

Stiles enjoys his training immensely, especially since he's almost able to keep up with the others during the warm-up. As he'd suspected it is just as hard, if not harder, than lacrosse training, but he likes being sweaty and sore. It makes him feel accomplished. There's no bench to cool his heels, all he has to do is give his best.

In the second half of training they get to throw each other around with easy techniques. A couple of students have warmed up to Stiles and together they practice tripping, side-stepping and incapacitating. Stiles soaks each instruction up like a sponge and he's even a little smug about the fact that he's among the fastest learners, even though his coordination still isn't the best.

Lydia looks a little impressed when the class is over and Stiles leaves her in Jeanine's capable but flirty hands as he heads to the shower.

"Your teacher sure knows how to sweet-talk," Lydia comments on their way to a little café Stiles has found in the town. "She almost convinced me to join you."

"Only almost? She's losing her touch."

"She offered me a month-long trial." Lydia smiles smugly. "I told her I'd think about it."

"Be nice to her," Stiles laughs. "She doesn't stand a chance against you."

Over a second breakfast they talk about many things, but most of all about Lydia's math championship.

"It's in New York," she glows. "My mom and I will go there, eat all the fancy food and watch shows until our eyes bleed. She told my father and he was predictably chauvinistic about the fact that his girl is wasting her time with science."

"Ugh."

"I'll be gone for a week," Lydia sighs dreamily. "Try not to get killed without me."

Stiles flicks a strawberry at her. "The whole point of my training is not to get killed, Lyds."

"Hmm, you know what? You could come with me, I'm sure my mom wouldn't mind and her credit card sure wouldn't care. She's been worried about me a lot."

Speechless, he gapes at her. "Could I really?" he stutters. "Me?" When she smiles indulgently, he flushes. "Man, that'd be great. I mean, who doesn't want to go to New York?"

"I'll ask and have my mom call your dad." Lydia eats the strawberry and then steals all of Stile's unsweetened apple sauce. "Better start packing your suitcase."

In a trance, Stiles drops Lydia off at home and wanders the house in a daze for the better part of an
hour. His dad finds him zoned out over several puzzles, all solved, and squeezes his shoulder.

"Long day?"

Stiles shakes his head and gets up to start on their dinner. His dad comes home earlier now and does his best to help Stiles with the chores, even though Stiles insists that he doesn't have to. After getting that dishwasher, things are much less time-consuming.

They decide on soba noodles with veggies and a little bit of fried tofu. Stiles has been eyeing a certain wok for days now and knows his dad won't say no if he actually gets around to asking for it. As he cooks, John washes up and changes into sweats and a ratty t-shirt, inadvertently showing off his leaner frame and the newly bulging biceps.

"Do you want to go for a run later?" Stiles asks and gives the stir-fry a hearty shake.

"Yeah, I thought the five mile track. You wanna come with?"

It's a running gag between them; once they've started running, it has become an addiction. The calm of the preserve and the clear air and almost sweet scents are so enticing that they almost never say no to a run.

They eat, waste some time with a crime show and leave for their run when they don’t feel so full anymore. As usual, they start out mellow, trotting through their backyard into the preserve and onto the running path most joggers in Beacon Hills prefer.

This evening, Derek joins them after two miles. He runs without a shirt, but he has a band around his upper arm to hold is iPod. John salutes him and they decide without actually deciding to take the longer route, about eight miles instead of five.

Derek’s music is loud and they don’t talk until they have looped back to the Stilinskis’ backyard.

“You’re in good shape,” the werewolf offers once they’ve cooled down and stretched. “Nice run, Sheriff.”

“Thanks for your company,” John replies amiably. “Protein shake?”

Derek shrugs in what Stiles interprets as, “Sure, why not?” and chances a quick look at Stiles as if he might have a problem with it.

He doesn’t. Derek shirtless is always a treat, especially for guys who want to muscle up themselves.


He drags Derek into their spotless kitchen and throws a bag of frozen strawberries, three bananas, one and a half liters of oat milk, a handful of walnuts and their protein powder into the Kitchen Aid. Thirty seconds later there are three large, gorgeous glasses of protein shake on the counter and they drink the stuff down as if it were manna.

“I have to get back,” Derek says afterwards and places his empty glass by the sink. “Thanks for having me.”

“Next time stay a little longer,” John replies. “Bring clothes. You can use our shower. I don’t think your family home has running water yet.”

Derek seems overwhelmed with the sudden and unexpected hospitality.
“No pressure,” Stiles adds, trying to diffuse the awkward tension. “See you Saturday?”

“Saturday,” Derek forces out roughly, eyes flickering over Stiles’ dishevelled appearance. He hesitates for a second more and then flees out of the still open backdoor.

oOo

The morning of their grill party dawns bright and beautiful. Stiles and his father go for another run and spar a little in their backyard. After showering and eating a light lunch, they check what needs to be bought at the store.

“I’ll go,” John says as he grabs the keys to Stiles’ jeep. “You continue with your puzzles. Oh, and get the garden chairs out.”

“Will do, daddy-o,” Stiles replies and chews on his pen, his mind already on the puzzle-a-day calendar before him.

The sheriff has barely left when a tap at the door disturbs his concentration. Stiles gets up and isn’t even surprised when his hand automatically feels for the baseball bat by the door.

“Yeah?” he calls.

“It’s me, Stiles,” someone says and pauses. “Derek.”

“Wha-” Stiles grips the bat tighter. He yanks the door open and stares at the werewolf. “Why are you here already? And why didn’t you get in through the window?”

“Your dad is out,” Derek says and raises his eyebrows. “He asked me to help you with the set-up.”

“When did he … did he pull you over again?”

“I may have been speeding a little,” Derek shrugs. “It was a good deal.”

Stiles rolls his eyes. “In that case come, our lawn furniture is heavy as fuck.”

Derek is surprisingly good at following Stiles’ directions when it’s not about life or death and he only scowls a little when Stiles offers him a gluten free (but delicious) muffin for his trouble. Afterwards, they lounge on the chairs, bare feet in the grass and faces in the sun. On the table between them glasses with lemonade are sweltering in the heat. It’s heavenly and for once the silence doesn’t bother Stiles.

When the sheriff returns with the shopping bags, he has Lydia and her mother with him.

“Surprise,” he says and smirks at Stiles’ flailing limbs. “I’ll get the grill going and you can get drinks for our guests.”

Lydia and Derek eye each other with mistrust and Mrs Martin seems to feel a little out of place in their wild little garden, but nobody screams and the lemonade is a huge hit with the ladies. They also nibble quite enthusiastically on vegetable sticks and strawberries and Mrs Martin praises John for his ability to light a fire so effortlessly.

“Don’t mind her, she’s just practicing getting back into the game,” Lydia mutters, only a little embarrassed. “It’s about time, anyway.”

“Why?” Derek asks and surprises Stiles almost as much as he surprises Lydia.
“Because,” she flips her hair back and curls her lip, “my father is a lying, cheating bastard that got off too easily in the divorce. I want her happy, and I want her to find a man who is good for her.”

Derek’s gaze is intense but then he looks off and away into the woods behind their garden after a few moments. Sharing a look, Stiles and Lydia decide that maybe the topic of dating isn’t a good one, not with his track record. It’s just as well because John gets the fire going and they begin dishing out salads, bread and other snack stuff they can munch on until the coals are ready for the meat, corn cobs and tofu.

“Do you also have grilled veggies?” Lydia asks.

“Coming right up.” Stiles balances two iron pans, followed by Derek who holds the plate with the meat.

They start the music and relax in their chairs. The adults drink beer, Stiles and Lydia enjoy water and more of the lemonade. Soon enough, the coals are good and they busy themselves with the main part of the meal. Halfway through, Melissa arrives, still in scrubs but hungry and happy to be there. The sheriff plies her with potato salad and a green smoothie. Once the initial awkwardness is gone, she and Mrs Martin find a lot to talk about. In fact, they get along very well, bonding over disappointing husbands and their children while John has Derek in a conversational headlock about his lack of a job and the danger that threatens Beacon Hills. If it weren’t so serious, Stiles would’ve found Derek’s stuttering and badly worded euphemism hilarious.

He finds it hilarious anyway, because he’s a horrible person.

Lydia smirks as well but it doesn’t distract her from her favourite topic: her upcoming math championship. She shows Stiles the agenda and explains the more annoying fine print in her contract.

"None of it was a surprise to mom and me, but it'll be worth it. At least we'll have the evenings in the city to look forward to. Oh, and by the way, there's a huge surprise waiting for you."

"Even bigger than your visit today?"

Lydia smiles as if she finds him honestly endearing. "I was sworn to secrecy but I guess your dad will make his announcement soon," she says.

Derek watches them carefully but doesn't comment, despite his obvious curiosity. The sheriff doesn't make them wait long in any case; after dishing out Stiles' home-baked apple crumble and coffee he looks around and takes in the little gathering of people.

"I'm not one for long speeches so I'll just make a quick announcement and then break out the beer. It's not what the occasion deserves, but Natalie assured me that she doesn't mind."

Mrs Martin smiles and Stiles glances at Lydia.

"To make a not very long story even shorter: Lydia got invited to the most prestigious, state-wide math championship in New York - congratulations for that! - and Natalie generously invited Stiles and I to accompany them on their trip."

Stiles gapes at him. "Really?" he cries. "We both?" When his father nods, he scrambles to his feet and gives Lydia's mother a big, awkward hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

Laughing, Mrs Martin pats his back. "You're welcome, Stiles. I'm glad you'll keep Lydia company ... and safe. It'll give John and I time for some adult time."
The sheriff's face flushes and Melissa is the first one to erupt into gales of laughter. Lydia follows because her mother looks positively scandalized about her own words. Their howling is infectious, so naturally Stiles has to laugh, too. Only Derek keeps quiet.

"Hey, you alright, man?" Stiles wheezes. "Come on, you gotta crack up about this, too! Damn, I'll lord this over him for ages!"

That gets him a small smile, but even then the werewolf looks troubled.

John steps next to Derek's chair and claps him on the shoulder. "What's with the long face?" he asks. "Are you homesick?"

"Homesick?" Stiles wipes his streaming eyes and gets himself together.

"After the fire Laura and I lived in New York," Derek says quietly, almost as if he is ashamed. "I didn't want to at first because Peter was still here, but there was no way for us to take him with us, and staying was out of the question."

He and the sheriff share a look that is strangely intimate and Stiles suddenly knows why his father is so adamant about inviting and including him. It's not a topic they'll discuss openly, that much is clear, but he's glad that Derek found someone to talk to.

"You could come with us," John offers, deceptively nonchalant. "Take a break from this town."

Stiles can't believe his ears but at the same time hearing his dad's words makes his heart beat faster and his excitement rise.

"I can't," Derek replies immediately and looks down at his hands. "You know I can't."

"Do I?" The sheriff kneels down and lowers his voice. "All I know is that you had a shitty few months and could do with a holiday."

"The alpha pack-"

"They're after an alpha, or so your uncle said," John interrupts gently. "What will they do if that alpha leaves?"

Derek's pinched face doesn't relax. "They could hurt the people here to draw me back. It's kind of you to ask, but I've caused enough trouble already. I can't leave Beacon Hills unprotected."

"Dude, I hate to say this but we managed without you for years," Stiles says, unwilling to let Derek shoot them down. "Besides, it's not your fault a family of psychos was trying to off you."

"Don't call me dude", Stiles' dad snorts amusedly at Derek's dry tone, "and it might not be my fault, but this is how it is."

"It's just a week," Stiles wheedles. "Scott and Isaac can play at being adults for one week. You could totally show Lydia and I around and take us to all the cool places. Also, I wanna see you stuff your face with one of those huge, crazy New York hot dogs."

He spooks as Lydia drapes herself over his shoulder.

"You really want him to come along?" she asks with all the non-judgement that totally judges him. Melissa and her mother have calmed down and get interested in their conversation.

Stiles pops the 'P' as he says, "Yepp. Two bodyguards are better than one, don't you think?"
Lydia considers Derek for a moment. "Hmmm, daddy always said that having a big dog in a big, dangerous city is a good idea for any pretty girl." She turns to her mother. "Do you think he'd spring for my very own protection detail?"

"I have money," Derek protests, embarrassed and affronted.

Natalie shrugs elegantly, "Why spend it when I have a perfectly rich ex-husband?" Just like that she has her smartphone out and types into it as she speaks. "The flight is already taken care of since John mentioned that you might be coming along. Can you share a room with Stiles? Then John can have his own."

"I-" Derek looks a little steamrolled. "What?"

"Wonderful," Lydia's mother swipes one last time over the screen of her phone and then lets it vanish back into her purse. "The flight is in two weeks, Stiles and John will give you the details."

Melissa smiles widely at them all, completely ignoring the stunned silence. "Wow, you'll have so much fun, I'm already envious. I demand postcards and all the text messages!"

Stiles promises that and more and the evening ends with an almost magical feel to it.

*I'm going to New York*, Stiles can't help but repeat over and over in his mind as he lays in bed and stares at the moonlit ceiling. *I'm going to New York with my dad, Lydia Martin and Derek Hale! Life, I love you right now. Thank you!*

Chapter End Notes

I just noticed that this chapter is a little short. But hey, the first mention of New York! :D
The next week passes so quickly with homework, self-defense classes and puzzles that Stiles almost gets whiplash when Sunday rolls around and his father announces that he has won this week's competition.

"Took you nearly a month but there you are," he says, pride evident in his voice. "You solved all but one, like me, but more than half quicker than I could. Well done."

"Which one did you forfeit? The code breaker?"

John nods. "It drove me crazy all week."

"Me, too," Stiles grins. "Let's get ice cream and look that mofo up."

They enjoy their treat and curse up a storm as they discover the sequence of the code. Only a tap on the back door gets them out of their fever to solve more of the same riddles.

"I forgot that Derek is coming for a run," John says. "Go get changed, I'll let him in."

Once again, Derek is bare from the waist up and equipped with his iPod and a small water bottle. Unlike the last time, however, he also carries a small bag - proof that he took the sheriff's invitation to shower at the house seriously. He nods when Stiles comes down the stairs.

"Parcours today?" he asks.

"Only if you're dragging my exhausted ass back home," Stiles retorts and grins. "I won a whole tub of coconut ice cream that you gotta help me demolish before we leave for the Big Apple."

To his pleasant surprise, Derek shrugs at the offer which is as good as a 'yes'.

The parcours jogging stretch in the preserve is made up of steep inclines, rocky downward slopes and several obstacles like teeter-totters, monkey bars and big tires for high knee runs. Derek has no problem whatsoever to get through while Stiles and John curse occasionally and laugh when they trip over their feet or slide down a slope.

Sore but happy they return to the house. The evening is balmy and sweet and it is no hardship to decide to shower first and make smoothies later so they can enjoy them in the garden with their feet in the grass and surrounded by fireflies.

"So, have you decided to come with us to New York?" Stiles asks and licks ice cream off his spoon.

He shared with his dad and Derek, of course he did, and the quiet bliss on both men's faces is its own reward.

"I shouldn't," Derek mumbles, eyes flitting to Stiles and back down to his bowl. "But I want to."

"Good. Chris Argent and I had a talk the other day and he promised that he'll look after the town in our absence." The sheriff snorts. "After what I've learned, it's the least he can do for you."

Derek frowns and his shoulders hunch. "You shouldn't trust him. And I don't want to owe him
anything."

"Dude, he owes you way more than just babysitting Beacon Hills for a week," Stiles huffs. "Also, big, bad werewolves are his responsibility. He might as well hunt those who actually deserve it for a change."

John shakes his head at his callousness but Stiles already knows that he's kind of an asshole when his family and friends are threatened.

"I'm just saying out loud what everybody thinks," he mutters with an eyeroll and shoves another spoonful of ice cream into his mouth.

"It's not only Argent I don't trust," Derek sighs. "There's also Peter."

"What, are you afraid that he'll somehow off one of the alphas and resume his psychotic killing spree?"

"Stiles." It's more than just his name, it's exasperation, agreement, defeat, worry and anger all rolled in one word.

"No, listen, dude. He went mad for a while, which, yeah, understandable considering the shit that went down, but he's back now and has a reason to look after your territory, right?"

Derek's scowl could skin a tiger alive, Stiles is sure, but he doesn't let that deter him from what he wants to say.

"Look, if he really decides to go after the alpha pack, there's nothing you can do to stop him anyway. He'll find a way, alpha's orders or no. And if he somehow manages to become an alpha again, we'll deal with that ... again."

"You won't," the sheriff informs him resolutely. "But I will."

"You shouldn't have to," Derek grinds out. He places his bowl onto the small table and rises. "It was bad enough to have Stiles underfoot and see him get hurt. I can't ask that of you."

"You don't have to." John stands as well and stacks their bowls together. "We're in this together, son. You better get used to it."

Stiles stretches. "I don't know about you, but I could use a little mindless TV."

"NCIS or nothing," John says. He tows Derek along, offers him a beer and Stiles can't help but snicker at the comically helpless look on the werewolf's face.

Once the episode is out, Derek leaves and the Stilinskis call it a night.

"Only one more week," John says, eyes crinkling as he smiles. He looks years younger and downright happy, despite the added responsibility he's assumed since Stiles' epic revelation. "Don't be disappointed if he doesn't come with us, though. You've gotten plenty good at self-defense in a short time, Lydia will be safe."

"I know. I just ... I dunno. I guess I want him to loosen up a little, is all."

"He has to want it too," John reminds him gently and ruffles Stiles somewhat longish hair. "You're getting fuzzy, kid. Want me to shear it off tomorrow?"

"Alright, but go see a hairdresser before the trip, or you'll look like a woodland animal."

"Har-har, dad."

They hug each other good night and Stiles spends a good five minutes brushing his teeth and giving his admittedly overgrown buzz cut the evil eye. When he returns to his room, he nearly has a heart attack.

Peter Hale is sitting on his desk chair and reading the paper he's written for Finstock's economy class.

"How America's dietary consumerism affects the global distribution of resources," he says, lips curled into a smirk. "A good essay, truly, though unfortunately wasted on the majority of your fellow students."

"What do you want?" Stiles hisses. Unashamed he grabs his baseball bat which has a bit of mountain ash glued to the tip and raises it threateningly. With the other hand he takes his phone from the desk, although Peter is only a couple of feet away.

The werewolf's smirk widens. "Nothing substantial," he says. "I just wanted to express my appreciation in person."

"For?" Stiles presses number one and lets his thumb hover over the call button.

"For giving my nephew the opportunity to leave this hellhole, of course. A change of scenery is just what he needs." Peter abruptly stands and places Stiles' essay on top of his closed laptop. "But also for speaking up in my defense."

"I didn't," Stiles mutters, disgruntled and disturbed about the man's eavesdropping. "Not really."

Peter shrugs. "I take what I can get."

It's said nonchalantly, as if he doesn't really care, but in that moment Stiles gets, truly gets, that the other man has to be lonely, and likely also bored out of his mind. Being surrounded by teenagers can't be fun for a man of his intellect.

"Well, Derek won't," Stiles says, regaining his equilibrium. "Not as long as he thinks you'll kill him in his sleep." He pauses. "Or sell him out to the alpha pack."

"Hmm, good points." Peter inclines his head and looks Stiles over. "What if I told you that I have no intention of doing either?"

"I'd ask you why."

"Because, even though Derek will only be gone for a week, I'd have an opportunity to step up as his second and see how I like running this charming town's defense. Not that I'd be any good against an alpha pack, of course, but the everyday things I'm sure I can manage."

"You seriously want to be Derek's second?"

Peter shrugs elegantly. "You're an intelligent boy, I'm sure you can understand my reasons."

Stiles understands enough, he thinks. "High enough in the food chain to have power but not high enough to directly deal with supernatural douchebags?" he guesses and can just barely suppress an eyeroll.

"Or douchebags of the human variety," Peter agrees. "You have to agree that your ... friends aren't
quite up to the task yet. Besides, my first stint as an alpha was less than satisfactory for everyone involved. I'd like to avoid being burnt to a crisp for a third time. Apprenticing seems like a good compromise, don't you think?"

Stiles doesn't quite know what to say to that. 'Sorry' seems too much and too little at the same time. Knowing what pain the man had to suffer doesn't make turning and torturing his friends alright in his book but ... but he understands. God help him, he understands.

And he wants to give Peter a chance, even if it's not his place.

"Have you told Derek that?" he asks.

"Not yet. He won't listen to me, but he might listen to you."

Stiles shakes his head. "This is between you two. My dad and I did everything we could to persuade him, but he deserves to make his own choices." He reluctantly lets the phone sink. "Why don't you try being honest with him?"

A grimace flits over Peter's handsome features. "Because I like my head attached to my neck."

"So does he." Stiles wets his lips. "Look, I know what happened with Kate Argent. I know that she ... he was young and stupid, okay? If you're blaming him for what happened, you should just tell him. You should have it out with each other, maybe get a good maiming in. His man pain is killing him, just as it killed you. Nobody needs a repeat performance."

Peter's lip curls in disgust at Kate's name. "No, indeed."

They stare at each other for a long, uncomfortable moment.

"Talk to him," Stiles repeats finally. "Be honest. And be quick, my dad and I really want him to come with us."

"You like him," Peter says and an almost surprised smile bares his sharp teeth. "How darling. I'm still convinced I should've picked you and not Scott."

"It's not as much of a compliment as you think. His computer password is still Allison," Stiles huffs. "Now be gone, I have to get up early tomorrow."

Peter's eyes flash for a second and then he's out of the window like a creepy shadow.

Stiles sets his bat down and chances a look at his essay. There's not a single wrinkle in the paper. There are, however, a few notes in the margins.

"Fucker," Stiles scowls after checking them out because they're actually helpful.

Chapter End Notes

Another shorty, but there's Peter! I kind of love him and think that he's vastly under-appreciated in the series. He's got so much potential and seems to be so clever that I never really could see him as the type to forcibly take what he wants. In my head-canon, he has more patience than that. YMMV, of course, so please tell me what you think! :)
Stiles gets a haircut after training the next day and spends his time preparing dinner and solving his puzzles for the day. He also goes over to Lydia's house to quiz her for her championship and teach them both some basic hacking skills. His dad isn't exactly fine with it but agreed that knowing how to track someone's GPS signal might save lives one day.

"You're way better at this than I am," Lydia sighs after half an hour of reading instructions on an obscure website and playing around with little things.

"Only because it bores you," he teases and hits enter. Almost at once Derek's GPS tells them that he's on a run through the preserve, most likely checking the perimeter. "But it'll be good not to have to depend on Danny all the time. He's a cool guy and everything, but not really there, you know?"

Lydia does seem to know what he means because she only twirls a lock of hair around her finger and lets her bubble gum snap.

Soon enough they're bored with being cooped up inside and relocate to the pool in Lydia's garden. Stiles has brought swim trunks and isn't above pushing Lydia into the water. He pays for it dearly but it's worth it to see her come out of her queenly shell and have fun. Also, Lydia in a bikini. Enough said.

They stay in the water until their skin becomes pruny and gross, not to mention a little sunburned and Lydia invites herself to dinner when she learns that there'll be veggie burgers at Stiles' place.

On their way through Beacon Hills they see Scott and Isaac coming out of Deaton's animal clinic. Both werewolves turn as they hear the jeep's rumble and Scott raises his hand in greeting, but other than that they might as well be strangers.

Lydia helps making dinner by washing salad and cutting up onions and tomatoes. The back door to the garden is open because it's hot, almost sweltering. There's a thunderstorm in the air, they can both feel it.

"Are you still not talking to Scott?", she asks, playing with the gluten free buns and poking at Stiles' homemade ketchup.

Stiles flips the first two patties easily. "No, and he's not talking to me, either. I guess after I yelled at him for being a dick he's not so keen on hanging around anymore."

"Hmm."

"I'm making new friends at the studio, I'll get over it eventually."

Her small hand touches his shoulder comfortably. "Good. You deserve better than that."

The first clap of thunder makes them jump and then giggle. Stiles asks Lydia to unplug everything that isn't needed because it sounds a bit too close to his liking. When she returns he has dished up the burgers and lets her assemble hers first. She waits until he is done, too, and they eat to the sound of heavy rain and rolling thunder. Flashes light up the dim kitchen every now and then, adding an impressive light show to the tinny sound of the battery operated radio.
"I guess I won't get my run in tonight," Stiles says wistfully. He wonders if Derek has a dry place to wait out the storm and then hopes his father is clever enough not to drive in this weather. "That's the only thing I'll miss in New York."

"There's a gym at the hotel," Lydia tells him and bites a pickle in half. "It's not the preserve but better than nothing."

"Maybe there'll be so much to see that I don't even need to run because I'm on my feet all day, anyway," Stiles grins.

"Well, I will only be packing one pair of heels," she replies and tosses her hair. "Be prepared for a lot of walking."

They finish their dinner and put the things away after Stiles gets a call from the station that his father is needed due to a lot of incoming emergency calls. Since it doesn't look as if the storm will soon abate or pass, they make themselves comfortable in the living room and entertain themselves with Stiles' logic training books. Lydia is good, her mind bendy and quick and it's way more fun than it should be for teenagers to work through the problems. Seeing her pore over puzzles and codes, Stiles realizes that she's not an unfeeling person, not even an especially haughty one, just pragmatic at heart and therefore not inclined to deal with other people's bullshit.

It's a wonder she's even talking to him now after he's bothered her for so long.

It's nearly eleven when the weather finally gets better. Lydia leaves with a tupper container of the lentil salad Stiles has made for his father's lunch and he plugs all the appliances back in so his dad won't fall on his face in the narrow hallway when he finally gets home.

Finally ready for bed, he stares at the ceiling of his room. Seeing Scott for the first time since school let out for the summer hurts more than he'd wanted to admit in front of Lydia. It hurts even more to know how easily Isaac has replaced him. Of course they have fought before, had silences between them that lasted for a while, but never as long as it does now.

He wonders if they'll ever speak to each other again. If they can mend that horrible rift between them and come away as better friends. Or even just friends again, Stiles isn't picky at this point.

For a minute longer he wars with himself. Then he picks up his phone and shoots Scott a text.

*Hey, how r u doin?*, he writes.

And then he waits.

By morning, there's still no answer.

oOo

Two days later, Stiles is getting jittery with nerves. It's time to start thinking about what to pack for their trip, other than his beloved laptop.

"Was that really necessary?" Lydia says by way of greeting as she comes into his room and looks pointedly at the explosion of clothes all over Stiles' furniture. She daintily deposits her handbag on his chair and picks up a couple of t-shirts and button-ups. "It'll be hot in New York, you'll only need one pair of jeans for the flight. These shorts will do." She tosses the clothes at his head. In no time at all she has packed his small suitcase and then has him clean up the rest. "Can we do something fun now?"
"Sure. I have to be back by seven, but we could go to the lake and row around."

"I'm driving."

An afternoon on the lake makes him hungry because of course Stiles does all the rowing, but Lydia buys him dinner at the vegan place so they're even.

"We still have an hour," Lydia says. "I want to go to the cemetery."

Stiles' good mood gets a damper. "Why?"

"Do you sometimes dream things that feel real?" she asks. When he nods, she purses her lips. "Ever since that storm I feel creeped out when I pass that damn place and I want to know why. I just don't want to go alone."

"Well, it's not the kind of date I expected but why the hell not?" Stiles tries to joke even as goose bumps raise the hair on his arms.

Lydia doesn't answer, just drives them to the cemetery and like a heat-seeking missile leads him to ...

"Oh, hell, no," Stiles blurs as they stop in front of Kate Argent's grave.

A single, rotten flower arrangement lays on the dry earth. The Californian heat has killed the young grass that tried to come up after the burial; testament to her remaining family's distance.

Serves her right, Stiles thinks.

"It's here, Stiles," Lydia says almost hysterically. She stands with her feet apart and her fists balled as if someone glued her on the spot. Her eyes are wide and she trembles like a scared mouse. "It's here!"

"What is here?" he asks urgently, hand already on his phone.

"I don't know," she gasps and then sobs. "Something. Oh my god."

"Okay, I'm going to call Derek."

He does and feels immense relief when the werewolf promises to come at once.

"He'll be here soon," he soothes the distraught girl. "Maybe he knows what's up with Argent's grave."

"I just want it to go away." Lydia's voice gives out. She turns to Stiles and falls against him.

He holds her until the quiet sound of feet on dried out grass alert him to the presence of one, no, two werewolves.

Peter, who's two steps behind Derek, greets Stiles with a small nod. He then turns his attention to Lydia who has yet to look up.

"What's going on?" Derek asks, as usual without preamble.

"I have no idea," Stiles sighs. "She says she felt the heebee-jeebies since that storm the other night. I tried taking her away but ..." He gestures helplessly at the girl's arms around his torso and the face squished against his chest. "It's got to do with Kate Argent, though, so maybe we should take this seriously."
"We take everything to do with that family seriously," Derek says stiffly, eyes narrowed in anger and loathing.

"I wonder what trouble she could cause now," Peter says, his cultured voice sounding bored despite the intrigue. "If I remember correctly I slit her throat quite neatly."

Lydia gasps and whirls around. "You!"

"Me," Peter volleys back, not quite amused but definitely getting there.

"You!" Her voice is breathy and close to hysteria.

"Yes, me." He rolls his eyes. "If you'll excuse me from our titillating conversation, there's a grave to desecrate." Without another word he kneels on the ground and starts digging with his claws.

"Shouldn't we at least call Mr. Argent and tell him about ... this?" Stiles asks.

"Not right now, I hope," Peter huffs. "Dear Lydia has turned out to be other after my bite, and therefore I'd rather deal with her warning first. But if it's so important to you to inform Christopher, please do. Don't let me keep you."

Stiles looks at Derek uncertainly but his face is like marble.

A few more minutes pass. Peter digs like a demon, wholly unconcerned with his clothes or manicure, or the fact, that it's not even close to twilight and anyone could see them.

"Now would you look at that," he drawls after he's crashed the lid of the coffin. He waves them closer.

Inside the coffin lays indeed Kate Argent, but she doesn't look especially dead. In fact, the tear in her throat is almost closed and her cheeks look nearly rosy instead of sunken in and rotted. There are also blue spots on her temples and collarbone.

Lydia shrieks in terror and stumbles back and Derek turns away to vomit.

"How is that possible?" Stiles whispers because no-one else will. He feels ill, but not ill enough not to watch what Peter is doing.

"It seems that my claws weren't quite enough to end the bitch," he replies almost cheerfully, tracing the old cut with a finger. "In that case I'll make sure she won't get up during the next few days, hm?"

"Uh ..."

"Do you have objections, nephew?" Peter calls.

Derek staggers back, pale as a sheet and a little sweaty. "No," he croaks as his eyes rove over Kate's features. He sinks to his knees. "Please, just ... end it."

Peter sighs, gets up and pulls him into a short, one-armed hug. "Of course. You can watch, or not, whatever you want. You can even help, if you like." A dry grin shows a row of sharp, gleaming teeth. "It's not every day that people get to kill their nemesis twice, after all. I always felt like cheating you out of your revenge."

Stiles backs away. "Okay. I'll go after Lydia. Call me when you're ... done here. Okay?"

Derek doesn't turn to acknowledge him but Peter does.
The walk back to Lydia's car takes years in Stiles mind. The crying girl leans heavily against his side and all he can think about is how she saved them all from a disaster of epic proportions.

"You did good," he mumbles into her hair. "No idea what you did, but we owe you, Lyds. Leave the rest to them."

He takes her home with him because her mother would only worry. It takes two cups of tea and his secret stash of chocolate to calm her down, but at last the tears dry and the shivers stop.

"I don't know why I ever looked down on you," is the first thing she says - and promptly starts sniffling again. "I'm a horrible person."

"Hey, no," Stiles gathers her into his arms again and holds her. "I was pretty horrible, too. But this is better, right? Also, finding dead but nearly alive bad guys before they're actually alive again and even have someone preemptively rip their head off? Totally worth it. I'd even say priceless."

Lydia blows her nose. "Yes. I'm almost grateful Peter didn't stay dead."

"Yeah. I'm not sure Derek would've been able to ... to do what had to be done. I guess he really liked her, back then. Before she burned everything down."

"Is that his story?" she asks in a small voice.

Stiles nods, though he's not entirely comfortable sharing with her. It's Derek's story to tell, but after the trauma Peter put her through he figures that she deserves some answers.

"He was sixteen and she infiltrated the school by becoming the new, hot swimming coach. I guess he never smelled the hunter on her because of the chlorine."

"What a bitch."

They fall silent and Lydia slowly puts herself back together. The sheriff finds them camped out on the couch but doesn't ask. He does, however, invite Lydia on their run, which she politely declines. Shortly after she leaves and the Stilinski men set out to the preserve.

"What was that about?" John asks and glances at his son. His feet are pounding out a steady, quiet rhythm. Stiles is after him to trade his crosstrainers for five-finger running shoes but he isn't quite comfortable with the idea yet. "Is she finally warming up to you?"

"Maybe as a friend," Stiles returns without much bitterness. "But that's okay. I like it. She's great."

They jog the long route and stop at the halfway point for water. There, undisturbed by other runners, Stiles quietly tells his father what they have discovered in Kate Argent's grave.

"I'm sure they put it back together after ... you know," he finishes. "But I don't know if they'll tell Mr. Argent about it."

John sighs, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Maybe they shouldn't. Lydia's involvement could cause even more bad blood. And Kate Argent's was already dead, they only made sure it sticks."

"Aren't you worried about Peter's unholy turning powers? Whatever Argent has become, it wasn't a werewolf."

"At this point I'm more worried about the fact that he actually let her keep her head on her shoulders," John quips. At Stiles' snort he says, "Sorry. It's been a long couple of days. We're still
understaffed and the storm didn't do us any favours."

"Are they still okay with you leaving for a week?"

"It was the first thing they told me after the storm hit. I have so many vacation days racked up that it's either letting me go or finally start paying for them. Maybe my application scared them."

"As it should," Stiles replies and feels a vindictive sort of triumph.

They complete their run and enjoy the evening in front of the TV. The sheriff likes to watch reruns of Medical Detective and Stiles can't say that they bore him. They drink their smoothies and eat vegetables and bread with hummus before they head to bed.

Chapter End Notes

I'm back, and I bring creepy stuff :) From now on, updates will happen every other day, barring emergencies and real life and other such bothersome stuff. Also, this story is still not beta'ed and is therefore still an offending mess of American and British spelling. I'm very sorry and hope you'll stay with me regardless.
The next day brings a not entirely unexpected visitor. Stiles is busy mowing the lawn and clearing away the last bit of debris from the storm when Peter strolls into the garden, hands in his pockets and an indecipherable expression on his face.

"I thought you'd just call," Stiles tells him and wipes the sweat from his forehead. "How'd it go?"

"It was stomach-turning," Peter drawls, "as was everything to do with that woman. Fortunately she won't be bothering us anymore."

"Off with the head?" Stiles guesses and has to repress a hysterical chuckle when Peter smirks at the *Alice in Wonderland* reference. "How is Derek?"

"He took it as well as expected, which is to say that he let me rip her head off and stood by as I buried it outside of our territory." The werewolf shrugs. "I didn't think he had it in him, to be honest. I wouldn't have held it against him."

"And did you talk about it? About her?"

"We will when my dear nephew is ready."

"Are you okay to wait?" Stiles can't help but ask. "Because I think you have plenty to say on that subject."

A slight incline of the head is his only answer. Peter's quietness creeps Stiles out a little, though he supposes that he can be happy to hear anything about it at all.

"Anyway, I'm glad that she is out of the picture for good now," he adds, just so he won't stew in silence.

"I heard what you said to Lydia yesterday."

"Excuse me?"

Peter's eyes narrow a little. "About her doing well, whatever it was she did. I have a suspicion about her *otherness.*"

At once, Stiles tenses. "So?"

"I owe her a great debt and I'd like to start making amends."

"Are you asking me for permission?"

"That, and for your assistance as mediator." Peter's gaze is intense. "While I haven't forgotten your advice about honesty, in this case it might be prudent to seek Lydia's approval for a meeting first. I shouldn't be the one to introduce the merits of an ... alliance, since she would never believe my good intentions."

Stiles can't believe his rotten luck. As if being asked to play carrier pigeon between Peter and Derek hadn't been bad enough.
"I am not sure I believe you," he says and glares. "Besides, nobody has forgiven you for attacking her and I don’t think we ever will."

"I'm prepared to live with that," Peter replies. His casual calm is replaced by unnatural stillness. "However, us working together can only benefit the pack in the long run. It is my doing that she is other, let me do my part to at least help her live with it. Believe me when I say that her newly awakening powers won't keep her in good health if they remain unchecked for too long."

"Ugh," Stiles groans. "I hate you."

"Hmm, yes." Cocking an eyebrow, Peter gives up his forcefully nonchalant stance. "In the meantime, take this and have her wear it in New York. If she doesn't, she might as well stay home." He throws a pendant on a delicate chain and Stiles catches it reflexively. "Tell her good luck for her competition."

He nods and saunters away, leaving Stiles staring at his retreating back. Only when he's well and truly gone does he look at the pendant. It's round and heavy, a rough bronze amulet with a carved sigil. It'd be pretty if it weren't from Peter but that's not the worst part.

Stiles can feel it vibrate in his fingers and it freaks him out.

oOo

Doctor Deaton's face is somewhere caught between thoughtful and taken aback - not a good look in Stiles' opinion.

"Where did you get this?" Deaton asks quietly, only now glancing up from the charm. He holds it not quite like a snake about to strike, but definitely like something that isn't sold on street corners or the internet.

Well, maybe the internet.

"Won't you tell me first what it does?" Stiles counters the question and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

Deaton sighs. "I'm not trying to be cryptic, but in my profession it pays to know the context of things."

"Yeah, okay, I can get behind that," Stiles mumbles.

"I'm glad you came to me. This in itself is not dangerous, at least not to you, but it could be for several supernatural species." Deaton hands the amulet back and looks imploringly at Stiles. "A powerful witch forged this charm. It dampens magic and senses, especially the senses beyond the normal."

"Can you give me an example?"

"Of course. This particular charm won't influence werewolves much since their abilities are mostly physical rather than magical, but let's take a siren for example. To lure her prey she has to infuse her voice with magic. Let her carry the amulet and all we would hear would be her song, but not the compulsion behind it."

"Fuck, sirens are real? Are there beings who can sense things, like maybe death? Or not-death? Would the amulet influence them?"
Deaton's shrewd eyes bore into Stiles'. "Yes, absolutely. They wouldn't feel death as much, maybe not at all. It depends on the strength of the creature, I'd say." He smiles a little. "Won't you tell me who gave it to you, and for whom it is intended?"

Stiles rubs a hand over his face. "Oh god, yeah, I probably should. But can you do me a favour and keep it to yourself? I'm not sure what's going on yet and I don't want to cause a panic ... or a hunt. We just got off the crazy train and I'd like to keep it that way."

"If there's no murder on the horizon, you have my word, Mr. Stilinski."

Comforted by this promise, Stiles tells Deaton what has happened these last few days, starting with Peter's wish to become Derek's second, continuing with finding a disturbingly only-barely dead Kate Argent and ending with Peter's gift to Lydia.

"He says it's to protect her in New York," Stiles finishes, "because her ability has to be trained or it would make her sick, or at least locked up in the loony bin."

"I see," Deaton says softly. "Please relay my gratitude to him when you see him next. It is very generous to part with such a valuable charm. Had you come to me, I couldn't have helped so readily."

"So it is safe for her to wear?" Stiles asks. "Can we trust him?"

"I don't know about trust, but Miss Martin definitely should wear the amulet. She can give it back after her return if she feels uncomfortable with its origin."

"Do you know what she is?"

Deaton's zen expression slips for a second. "I have an idea. Unfortunately I don't have advice for you concerning this matter, since I'm too far removed from the situation. But I can and will tell you that you should consider training your own abilities."

Stiles' mouth drops. "What abilities?"

"I told you that you have a spark," the vet reminds him. "You successfully willed a mountain ash line into being without any training whatsoever and you felt the magic in that charm. I'm convinced that you should explore the extent of your abilities. It might be that you won't ever be able to do much more than that, but you could also go far. Only one way to find out."

"I-" Stiles twitches involuntarily. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes. I'd like to aid you in your discovery, if that's agreeable to you."

"Of course, doc," Stiles flushes. "It's just ... I never dreamed that I'd ever be somehow, you know, special, what with all the muscular, growling furballs around."

"Even without any magical abilities you'd be special," Deaton chides but his lips twitch in amusement at the overused statement. "If you're interested, come here before your departure. I can give you the addresses of a few contacts who can show you what magic users typically do. Maybe someone has time to work a little with you."

"That'd be great," Stiles breathes. His eyes hurt, they're so wide in astonishment, and he tries hard not to be too hopeful. "Thank you."

"No, I thank you, Mr. Stilinski," Deaton replies and his smile gets wider. "If you turn out even half
as talented as I suspect, I'll finally be able to concentrate on the animals in my clinic again."

It takes two days for Stiles to emerge from his reading binge. Deaton's manuals for sparks are *interesting*. So interesting, in fact, that he nearly skips training and cooking and even running for them. His father makes him, fortunately, and lets Stiles explain why he's shutting the world out in such a manner.

"If I work hard, I'll be able to do magic, dad. Actual magic!" Stiles gushes. "I even trained a little. Wanna see?"

"Sure," John says, dubious but ready to support, just as he always is.

"Doc Deaton gave me some more mountain ash", Stiles takes a pinch - and throws it over the sheriff's beer glass.

"Hey!"

"Watch," Stiles flails as the black ash falls down in a thin, perfect circle. "Isn't that awesome?"

"Wha-" John gapes first at the glass and then at his son. "How did you do that?"

"No idea. I just wanted it to happen. Too bad Derek isn't here, he could've shown you that your beer is now safe from werewolves."

"Ha. I'm more concerned about my human son." John takes his beer and takes a long swallow. "Seriously, since when are you ... whatever you are?"

"Apparently always if Deaton's books can be believed. I read that modern medication often fucks with such things, so maybe the Adderall is to blame."

"And you lowering your dose means that you can do magic now, Harry?"

"Very funny, dad." Stiles makes a pinching motion with his fingers and the mountain ash sails back into his hand. He puts it into the small plastic bag Deaton gave him. "So, what do you think? I should do this, shouldn't I?"

"Would you let it be if I asked you?" the sheriff asks wryly.

"Possibly, but only until I'm eighteen," Stiles says apologetically. "Which is still a year away, but this is so cool. It's worth waiting for, I know it."

John ruffles his hair. "In that case I won't make you wait. But I don't want to see your grades or friendships suffer. Agreed?"

"Yes!" Stiles wraps his father in a bear hug and squeezes him tightly. "I'll learn all about wards so you and the others at the station will be safe. There might be sigils for cars, too, I'll have to look it up, and we definitely should do something with the house. It's ridiculous how often people get in here without invitation."

As if on cue there's a knock on the front door.

"I'll get it," John says, patting his son's hair one last time. A minute later he returns with Derek. "He wants to talk to you. I'll be in the garden, beating your puzzle scores."
He leaves with his beer and two of the puzzle-a-day calendars. Stiles invites the werewolf to sit down and offers a drink.

"How are you doing?" he asks quietly.

Derek sighs. "I've been better. But that's not why I'm here."

"Oh." Stiles' good mood evaporates. "You want to tell me that you're not going, then."

"Actually I came to tell you that I am going, if the offer still stands." Derek folds his hands. "I need a break from this town. I don't trust Peter, but I need to get away more."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. If not for you and Lydia, Kate would've come back eventually. I'm grateful."

Stiles carefully sits down next to him. "Peter helped, too."

Derek exhales harshly. "I know."

"He was here and said that he knows what Lydia is now. He even gave me a family heirloom or something."

"Yes."

The curtness of the answer makes Stiles sweat. "If that's not okay with you, I can give it back."

They look at each other for a moment, Stiles apprehensive and with inexplicably pounding heart, Derek quiet.

"No, keep it," the werewolf finally decides. "No matter what Peter wants with Lydia, it'll help her for now. It's his prerogative to make overtures and hers to deal with them."

"Yeah, he was a gigantic dick, but if he wants to clear his conscience, I'm all for it." Stiles shrugs to mask his nervousness. "It's more than Allison and Mr Argent are doing right now. Or Scott."

"I wouldn't hold my breath for them to ever do anything," Derek mutters and lets his head fall into his hands. "That's why New York is easy. There are no local packs and no established hunters. You can just be and live your life there."

Stiles lays a hand on the other man's back and rubs gently. "Okay." And, because he wants to say it, "I'm glad, dude."

A bit later they go for their run, not stopping because of persistent mosquitoes, and Stiles finds an opportunity to test his newfound skill on Derek. Before he can grab his shake, Stiles has thrown mountain ash around the glass, this time in a fancy triangular shape.

"You didn't just ..."

"Yepp, I did, Sourwolf." Stiles smirks at the glowering werewolf. "Good luck getting your precious protein."

Derek swipes at the oh, so fragile barrier with little success. Light runs along his claws and makes his red eyes glow.

"Don't be an ass," John chides and gets the glass out of the circle. "Forgive him, he's a child with a
new toy."

Derek grunts and Stiles sticks his tongue out.

They bicker all the way through NCIS, accompanied by more mountain ash pranks and semi-painful punches to the shoulder that are often deflected with clever self-defense moves. The sheriff doesn't say anything about it, but when Derek's gone from the house afterwards, considerably less morose, he smacks a fond kiss onto Stiles' forehead.

Chapter End Notes

Tadaa, finally Stiles gets a nudge and starts exploring his Spark side. I hope you'll like this thread of the plot, as it will have an impact later ;)
"He's really coming?" Lydia asks after Stiles' training. She nurses a green smoothie in their favourite café and looks unfairly attractive in her light blouse and skirt. "I thought he'd hide in his old house or run wild for a while."

"Yeah, no, thankfully not."

"Is he actually going to leave Beacon Hills in Scott and Isaac's incapable hands?"

"Uhm, not directly." Stiles sucks the last of his own drink through the straw in a bid for time. "He's leaving it in Peter's."

"In Peter's," she repeats stonily.

"Who else could do it?" Stiles challenges her. "You said it yourself not five seconds ago. Scott is a lot of things, but he's not yet a very capable werewolf and Isaac is even newer at this than him."

"I was joking, Stiles," Lydia hisses. "Why him, of all people?"

Stiles looks around and pulls her closer. "Because," he hisses back, "there's a freaking alpha pack coming. Do you think Scott and Isaac can handle even one alpha alone?"

"Can he?"

"I don't know," he replies honestly, "but who'd you rather trust to win a fight?"

"Well, Scott seems to have developed quite the penchant for backstabbing." Her words are dripping with sarcasm.

That's a low blow but Stiles refuses to let her win this argument.

"Look, if he's good enough for Derek, he's good enough for me. At least I can be sure that he'll take a goddamn message when shit goes down."

That shuts her up and she almost looks apologetic. "He did come to help us, didn't he?" Her sigh is deep and weary. "I hate this town."

"Nah, mostly it's the people that get on my nerves."

They finish their drinks and return to Stiles' house. He's eager to show her what he has learned from Deaton's books and Lydia is a captive audience. She tries the trick with the mountain ash as well, and while her circle will certainly hold out werewolves, the ash doesn't bend to her will like it does to Stiles'.

"This is a surprise," she says and smiles at him. "Good for you."

"It is, isn't it?" He puts the ash back into his newly acquired glass and closes the lid. "Deaton gave me a couple of addresses and said to check them out. Some are esoteric stores, I googled them, but a few others ... no idea."
Lydia purses her lips. "I hope this is worth cutting into my shopping time for."

"I'll go when you're busy making other people cry," he smirks.

"As long as you'll be there for the finale, I don't care," she retorts loftily.

She's long gone when Derek shows up for their evening run. Stiles has looked forward to it since it'll be their last run before their trip. Unfortunately, he doesn't come alone.

"I'm sorry, he insisted," Derek says with an eye roll.

Behind him, Peter snorts. He's wearing a simple T-shirt and shorts combo and apparently he likes to run barefoot. "I merely expressed a desire to get in touch with our esteemed sheriff in a casual setting."

"And why do you want to meet with the law?" John asks, closing the front door to the house behind him. "Are you ready to own up to your crimes?"

"Not quite," Peter smirks, "but I thought it'd be smart to finally get to know the head of the local law enforcement. I heard a lot of good things about you these last weeks."

Derek suddenly flushes a little and Stiles has to bite back a grin.

"Methinks he means our smoothies," he cackles.

"What do you really want, if it's not turning yourself in?" John sighs.

"Well, for starters I'd like to know how I can clear up that misunderstanding about my death ..."

Stiles and Derek have already heard enough and leave the sheriff to Peter's tender mercy. They set a brisk pace and listen with one ear to the conversation behind them. Stiles lets out a snorting laugh every now and then when his father shoots down Peter's needlessly charming comments, and Derek can't help but smirk whenever the sheriff heaves an aggrieved sigh. It's an awkward get-to-know and more than once Stiles has to wonder if his dad is being hit on.

"Dude, I'm not calling him daddy," he grouses after a particularly suggestive remark that has his father groaning with exasperation.

Derek spits out his water and stumbles over his own feet. "What?"

"You heard him!"

"I really wish I hadn't."

They both grimace and run faster. Stiles is already winded but whatever, he doesn't need to hear silky innuendo directed at his dad that would make a hooker blush.

Thankfully Peter only stays for a protein shake and leaves obediently when Derek calls it a night.

"Well, for an insane murderer he's surprisingly entertaining," John says once they're sure that the Hales are out of earshot. He shakes his head. "I really need a vacation. So much."

"Only one more night, daddy-o. Go finish your packing, I'll do the dishes and stuff."

The sheriff smiles his proud, crooked dad-smile and pulls Stiles into a one-armed hug. "Alright. If I'm asleep in an hour, don't bother waking me up."
"Kay."

It's only half past nine when Stiles goes upstairs as well. He's tired enough to forego his me-time in the shower and directly falls into his bed. Dealing with crazy people has that effect on him sometimes.

oOo

The next morning is spent in a flurry of last minute activities. To keep things simple they make muesli smoothies for breakfast so they won't have to let the dishwasher run and stuff the last of their things into their suitcases. They travel without toiletries because they don't need much at home and can buy everything they need in New York. Except for their phones, the sheriff's shaving kit and their toothbrushes their luggage consists entirely of clothes and shoes. Stiles even decides in the last minute to leave his laptop at home.

He wonders how Derek packs.

The question is answered around noon when Peter drops his nephew off at the house.

"Safe travels," he says with only a small smirk and surprises Stiles with a gentle head butt and a hand to his side that could almost be called scenting. It makes Derek's eyebrows do complicated things, even though his mouth is frowning.

"Don't let Scott and Isaac do something stupid," Stiles replies. He's not sure what brought the almost affectionate gesture on but he won't look a gift horse in the mouth.

Peter offers the sheriff his hand, smile widening when he accepts with an amused huff. "You can count on me to keep the whelps in line."

"Not dead, preferably," Stiles warns, just because he feels that it has to be said.

"Alright, enough with the babysitting talk," John intervenes. "Get in the car, I'm driving."

Derek turns to go but his uncle grabs him before he can get away from their group and pulls him into a short but tight hug.

"Don't stay gone," he murmurs, most of his amusement gone.

"No," Derek agrees and returns the embrace with his free arm.

They clumsily rub the sides of their faces against each other. Stiles stares at the intimate display and feels his heart break a little for the Hales. Finally allowing contact after so many years and horrors has to be kind of overwhelming.

The moment ends soon enough and everybody pretends that Derek isn't visibly reluctant to climb into Stiles' jeep. Stiles and his father follow, both not willing to prolong the awkward moment. When they leave the driveway of the house, they all wave at Peter, though, and it isn't as weird as Stiles would've thought.

During the drive to the airport, Stiles nods off while he listens to the country music his dad has tuned in. Derek is just as zoned out.

Meeting Lydia and her mother at the check-in terminal after the quiet drive almost comes as a shock. Travelers are everywhere, it's hot yet drafty and it smells like a dozen fast food restaurants and a million sweaty people all at once.
Derek keeps his bag as hand luggage, but everybody else has to check in a suitcase. It takes forever, just like the security check. Stiles sees Derek surreptitiously sniffing the other passengers that go on their flight.

"Are you making sure none of them is carrying a weapon?" he asks, only a little incredulous.

Derek growls quietly. "Hunters don't need a weapon to kill and I'd rather not die 30,000 feet above ground."

"What do they smell like? Usually, I mean?"

"Like weapon oil and sometimes like gun powder when they've recently tainted bullets with wolfsbane. Mostly there's ... nerves. Aggression. Excitement. It's hard to describe. Every one of us who's ever had to deal with them just knows."

Stiles whistles. "Impressive. Can you find out who's the air marshall?"

Derek immediately points to a nondescript guy in his forties. He wears brown trousers and a checkered shirt and carries a beat-up leather bag. "Gun oil, suppressed nerves, too even breath. Not a hunter; he's seen me and hasn't reacted although all of them in this area know my face now."

Eying the man, Stiles relaxes. "Good. But seriously, can they be any more cliché? Who even dresses like that anymore?"

"Not all of them look like Liam Neeson," Derek shrugs. He nods to a tall, blonde bombshell on the other side of the waiting area. "That's his partner. I'd stay away from her, she's on her period."

Stiles scrunches up his face. "TMI, dude, what the hell?"

"Just thought I'd give you fair warning," the werewolf smirks. "She's in a fine mood."

The rest of the party joins them and they troop over to a restaurant where Stiles, his dad, and Lydia can get a green juice. Her mother and Derek follow suit because it's too close to boarding to go somewhere else.

Thirty minutes later they're on the plane, waiting to taxi out.

"Don't do that," Lydia says and grabs Stiles' nervously drumming fingers. He's squeezed in between her and Derek and can't decide whether that's a good thing or not. "It's only five and a half hours, you'll survive."

"It's only my third time flying," Stiles breathes. "Sorry."

She squeezes his hand and smiles slightly. "Just sleep. Or we could do puzzles if you want."

"Yeah, maybe."

The plane jerks into motion and the safety instructions begin. Outside, the airport buildings are getting more distant as they roll onto the runway. As the plane gains speed and the turbines roar with the effort to propel it into the air, another hand lands on Stiles' arm.

Derek watches him calmly and takes a bit of the tension pain from Stiles' shoulders and neck.

"Thanks," he sighs and closes his eyes.

As they rise higher and higher, everybody on board seems a little subdued. Stiles sinks into his seat.
and tries to relax. It's good to be anchored by the others, he likes how little of a big deal it is for them to accept his anxiety.

When they reach their final altitude and his ears stop popping, he shyly smiles his thanks and releases their hands.

"Hey, Lyds, there's something I've been meaning to give you," he says and takes Peter's amulet out of his messenger bag. "Here."

Derek watches avidly as she accepts the necklace and looks it over.

"What is it?" she asks with a raised eyebrow. "Don't tell me it's a gift, I know we're past that stage."

"It's, uh, a loan?" Stiles tries. "Deaton said it'll help keep your spidey senses down because New York is, you know, basically a Moloch rife with blood and thunder. There's bound to be something tickling them."

"Where did you get this?" Her eyebrow lowers and the corners of her mouth turn down. "Not from Deaton, I presume."

"It's my family's," Derek says quietly. He shares a look with Stiles during which they decide to tell her the truth. "To be honest, it was Peter's idea to offer it to you, but he has my support in this."

"It won't harm you, Doc Deaton made sure of that," Stiles adds quickly. "You can give it back later. Just try. Please?"

Lydia takes a deep, wobbly breath. "If it's from him, I don't want it," she says. "I don't want anything from him." She can't let go of the charm fast enough. "I'll take my chances with blood and thunder, thanks."

Stiles knows that there's no point arguing right now. Not only are they on a plane with two hundred plus other people who shouldn't overhear their talk about supernatural things, he also respects her too much to make a scene.

"Okay," he murmurs simply and puts the charm away.

"Okay," she repeats in a shaky whisper.

They dispel the awkward tension with the biggest puzzle magazine Stiles has ever seen. Lydia puts it on his little table and hands both him and Derek a pencil.

"If you go easy on me, I'll hit you," she threatens, and so they don't.

Stiles had never thought much about Derek's intelligence, he'd been too busy trying to survive, after all, so it is hilarious to see him make Lydia actually sweat. He's especially good at logic puzzles and has a terrific spatial sense.

"What?" he huffs when they stare at him calculatingly. "You didn't think Peter was the only clever one in my family, did you?"

"I'd love to see him go up against my dad," Stiles whispers dramatically. "Fight of the titans."

Halfway through their flight the attendants start serving food and drinks. The fare is not what Stiles is used to after changing his diet but it's alright. Even Lydia seems content to eat her chickpea ragout on rice but then again she knows that he's packed a ton of snacks to tide them over.
They share the treats after the trash has been taken away and talk about the things they want to do in New York.

"When I'm not cheering for Lydia, I have to see the Stark Tower, of course," Stiles lists off. "It's like the greenest building on the planet and people say that it's got great feng shui. Maybe I can get a last-minute ticket for a tour. They were all sold out when I looked online. Oh, and I want to play chess with the old dudes in Central Park. The rest is pretty much open. And you, Sourwolf?"

"Except playing babysitter for two teens ... not much." Derek lifts a massive shoulder, bumping against Stiles'. "Maybe I'll see a few people, say goodbye properly."

Lydia snorts as if their small plans are an insult to her cosmopolitan senses. She rattles off a long list of sights and plays to see, explains where she needs to go shopping to make her father regret ever giving her a gold card to buy her love and what foods she wants to try.

"I'm down with the food," Stiles says, "but I draw the line at mani-pedis in some super-expensive beauty temple. Don't you have to be at least lifted to be admitted there?"

"Don't be absurd." Lydia rolls her eyes. "They need fresh meat to gossip about every now and then."

At long last they begin to sink. Children start screaming as pains and uncomfortable popping in their little ears wakes them up and the adults sigh either in annoyance or weariness. At least it's a clear night and they can see the city lights from Lydia's window. It's so breathtaking that Stiles almost forgets to be afraid. Touchdown is gentle and easy, the euphoria in the cabin nearly palpable.

"Thank god," Lydia mutters. "I could eat a horse. Let's get off and find a Thai place or something."

Everybody is on board with her suggestion, even though it's nearly midnight when they finally get into a taxi and set out for their hotel.

Chapter End Notes

Wohoooh, finally they're in New York! The chapter is not much in outward plot development, but I really wanted to focus on the relationships (and the changes) between our favorites a little before delving into the Avengers part of the story. Thanks for being so patient! :)
Chapter 9

The driver is of the helpful sort and suggests a Thai restaurant close by.

"Can't miss it," he drawls in a broad accent. "They make good spring rolls. Open all night."

He drops them off in front of a large, elegantly illuminated building. It looks like Stiles always imagined a New York hotel would look: classy, stately, imposing. Everything in the lobby is white marble, brass and dark wood, though the fabric on the numerous chairs and sofas is coloured in deep scarlets, greens and blues. They're a fresh breeze in an otherwise intimidating setting.

They dump their things in their rooms, Lydia and her mom in one, Derek and Stiles in another and the sheriff in his own single room. He crows a little about it but Stiles is quite alright with sharing.

Their first walk through New York is thankfully a short one. Nobody carries more than they absolutely have to, even if they have a werewolf and a cop to protect them from muggers. The high rises all around them and the broad streets are a little intimidating. Stiles, who knows a few big cities, is nonetheless absolutely riveted. The exhaust-laden, almost muggy air and the sheer energy of the city that never sleeps make his insides hum and his fingertips tingle.

John insists on inviting them all since Mrs Martin took care of everything else so far.

"Choose what you want and order enough so we can share," he says and passes a menu to Natalie. "If you don't, that's your loss."

Stiles gleefully flips his menu open and settles on spring rolls and vegetables in a sweet sour sauce with lots of tofu. Lydia chooses the same in satay sauce, Mrs Martin gets a duck dish and Derek picks three different curry dishes, one vegetarian and two with meat. The sheriff makes his son proud by foregoing his customary beef, even though it's Saturday and therefore his meat day of the week.

"I'll take some from Derek," he shrugs.

Mrs Martin eyes his lean, fit body appreciatively before saying, "Maybe I should give this vegetarian thing a go. You're all so good-looking."

"Mom!" Lydia hisses and Stiles does nothing to hide his smirk from his dad.

Even though it's very late, the restaurant is packed and they have to wait a while for their food. When it comes, all teasing is forgotten and they inhale as much as they can. It's good too, spicy and juicy and crispy. Sharing is a joy and topping everything off with a little fruit for dessert makes it almost perfect.

It's almost four in the morning when they return to their rooms. Stiles mumbles a soft goodnight to everybody. He has the bed by the window and has to give his all to resist the call of his blankets. Thankfully the bathroom has two sinks, so he and Derek can brush their teeth at the same time. He's even tired enough not to get flustered while changing into his sleep clothes. Derek, of course, is indifferent to his feeling of body envy. He drops everything but his boxer briefs, rolls onto his stomach and burrows into his pillow.

"Night," he huffs. In the pale not-quite-night-but-not-quite-morning-yet-either light streaming in through the window, his triskelion tattoo stands out starkly on his skin.

"Night, Sourwolf," Stiles yawns back and falls face first onto the mattress. He's asleep in seconds.
Breakfast is included in their stay, although they got up so late that it's already lunch time. The kitchen offers vegetarian fare, even vegan if one asks, which is a pleasant surprise. Stiles ravenously eats his food while mentally calculating how long he can go without his now customary green juice. His father observes him with a fond smile while Derek merely nurses his coffee and pokes at a plate full of French toast.

"It's Sunday but that's no reason not to go out in New York," Mrs Martin says, smiling brightly. She looks well, perfectly made up and dressed to impress. "Lydia and I would like to check out the convention center where the competition will take place but we could meet up afterwards for a tour with the tourist bus."

"Sounds great," John says and spears a strawberry. "You in, Stiles?"

"I guess so." He looks at Derek. "What about you? Do you want to come along?"

Derek's eyes lift as if he wasn't listening at all. "What?"

"We'll make it a guys only thing until Lyds and Mrs Martin are done," Stiles tells him. "Though I'll have to be boring and step into a Whole Foods for a second."

"Only a second?" his dad asks sarcastically. "The last time you promised me that, we were in there for an hour, Stiles. An hour. Do you have any idea how long that is in man-time?"

"Are you calling me a girl, pops?"

They argue until they're back in their rooms and getting the things that are vital in a city, meaning cell phones, wallets and, in the women's case, cans of pepper spray and emergency make-up. Only fifteen minutes later, the Martins are gone and the sheriff looks sternly at his son.

"You've got fifteen minutes for Whole Foods," he says. "After that we're having ice cream."

"What do you want to do?" Stiles asks Derek, only to be met with a shrug. "Come on, dude, it's a nice day, so stop with the brooding. You don't want me to do something about that."

Derek looks at him like he's a lunatic but he doesn't yet know that Stiles has a couple grams of mountain ash on him ... enough to cause one hell of a lot of mischief for only one morose werewolf.

"I don't care," he says quietly. "I just ..." He shrugs and puts his hands in his jeans pockets. "I want to be back, that's all. You can go wherever you want, I'll tag along."

"In that case, off to Whole Foods," John decides. "It's already afternoon, let's not waste any more time."

They find a store a mere five taxi minutes away and Stiles gleefully vanishes inside, leaving his father cursing. It doesn't take long at all to find their preferred brand of soap, protein powder, oat milk and frozen strawberries. It is, however, a lot of fun to fuck with his dad and Derek. He leaves a track for the werewolf to follow and dupes him with nearly invisible lines of mountain ash he has to work around before he can go on.

Derek still catches him, coincidently at the freezer where an inhuman assortment of coconut-based ice creams has dazzled Stiles, and shakes him like a rat.

"Those New York dogs you've been going on about are on you, son," John scowls. "Thirty minutes!"
"That's torture!"

"Psssh. I heard you laugh when Derek couldn't follow me out of the dry goods aisle." Stiles grins. "Come on, let's get this stuff back to the hotel."

"I'm getting gray hair," John complains. "Why aren't you gray, yet, Derek?"

"Good genes," Derek grunts, "but he's wearing away at them."

Since the corners of his mouth lift as he says it, Stiles doesn't take him too seriously and counts his first mission to get him to lighten up a win.

Later, Derek leads them through the streets and shows them around. He knows a lot about certain buildings and events although he says that he hasn't lived in this part. Before it's time to meet the Martins, he shows them his favourite deli on the way to the subway. It's medium sized and so busy that they're glad not to be hungry just yet, otherwise Stiles might have cried over the delicious looking pitas that are so close and yet so far.

"We can come back for them later," his father says sympathetically and squeezes his shoulder. "Maybe before your chess thing in Central Park."

Derek looks a little shy as if he hadn't expected anyone to like the same things he does.

The ride on the subway is another thing off of Stiles' bucket list. He likes how the car rattles, the noise, and the zoned-out other passengers. A lot of them listen to music, many read and a few brave souls even rest their eyes, although they clutch they bags and purses tightly. A couple of guys look like gang members, though thankfully they seem satisfied with looming in a corner and talking smack with each other. One stop before their destination, a whole flock of young people in colourful clothes gets on. They remind him of Brazilian carnival dancers, complete with feathers and paillettes. They're also loud and excited.

"Flash mob," Derek supplies and as soon as he says it, the group starts singing, using everything in the subway car as instruments. Their dancing is wild and energetic. "They're mostly harmless but watch your pockets."

Stiles and his father do and leave the subway with a first impression that neither will forget anytime soon. They've almost reached the convention center when John's phone begins to ring. He accepts the call, signaling for Stiles and Derek to wait.

"Hey Natalie ... we're just around the corner, why? No, don't panic, we'll be there in a minute ... try to calm her down, okay? Yes, of course." He hangs up and starts walking. "Lydia's had some kind of episode, we're meeting them inside. Maybe you should lead the way, Derek, might be faster."

"Yes, sir."

They jog to the main entrance of the center and meet with a concerned bellboy who's obviously been instructed to wait for their arrival.

"We don't know what happened, Miss Martin suddenly started screaming bloody murder. Mrs Martin is very worried about her," he supplies. He stops in front of a nondescript door. "Here we are, sirs. Please let me know if we can do anything to help. Anything at all."

Mrs Martin opens after his knock. She looks like a ghost, no trace of her earlier vibrancy left. "Come inside, please," she croaks. "Thank you, Warren. I'll call if we need something."
The bellboy tips his cap and leaves.

"What happened?" John asks even as he strides into the small room. "Is she okay?"

"I don't know," Mrs Martin sobs. "One second we were shown around the competition hall and the next she started screaming like someone was going to murder her. I've never heard her be so loud. It rattled everyone in the building." She shows her arm. "And I still have goose flesh."

"What happened then?" Stiles asks quietly. His eyes are trained on Lydia's exhausted, tear-stained face.

"Then she walked off ... like she was in a trance or something. I was so scared, there is a huge balcony outside, you know. I thought she might jump."

"Fuck. Derek, give me your phone." Stiles only barely waits for the other man to hand it over. Within seconds he's connected to Peter, impatiently waiting for him to accept the call.

"Peter, this is Stiles," he begins, not giving the werewolf the opportunity to banter, "we have a situation here."

"Does that situation by any chance involve Lydia?" Peter replies calmly. "Because if it does, I have to say that I expected better of you."

"No, you didn't," Stiles says, only a little insulted. "You knew that we'd tell her the charm was from you, and that she wouldn't accept it." Mrs Martin looks at him strangely. Lydia just presses her lips together and wipes her smudged mascara from her cheeks. "Now, would you mind telling us what's going on with her?"

Peter sighs as if it's a huge imposition. "As I told you, I don't have definite proof, but I strongly suggest looking for a body, wherever you are. If my suspicion is correct, and if your situation includes screaming and walking around unawares, Lydia has survived my bite because she's a banshee. A death omen, if you will, although it's not that easy."

"Are things ever?" Stiles snarks. Behind him, Derek curses.

"Make her wear the amulet," Peter instructs, all patience gone from his voice. "I don't care what she thinks about me, but once her powers have begun to manifest, there will be more situations like this one. She'll scream, scare a lot of people and possibly be locked away in the loony bin before the week is over. Trust me, none of you want that to happen." He ends the call, leaving Stiles and the others stranded in horrified silence.

It's Derek who moves first. Just as Stiles has demanded his phone, he now demands the amulet that Stiles is thankfully carrying in his pocket. In two strides, he's in front of Lydia, holding the necklace open like a noose.

"Wear it," he demands.

She shakes her head, eyes watering again. "No. I want nothing to do with him."

"Wear it," Derek repeats tightly. "I'm not asking."

"Do it, Lyds," Stiles says and edges closer. "We'll explain, but you have to."

"You put it on," she orders, raising her chin defiantly. "No-one from his family will touch me ever again."
"Okay," Stiles agrees. He takes the necklace from Derek, opens it and fastens it gently around her slender neck. "I'm sorry."

Lydia takes a couple of deep breaths. Then she looks at everyone in the room, saving her mother for last. "I want you to explain it now. My mom has a right to know and I want this over and done with."

"Lydia, what ... what are you talking about?" Mrs Martin sits next to her daughter and brushes a strand of hair from her clammy forehead. "This isn't healthy, I should call an ambulance."

"That won't be necessary," Derek says gravely. He sits on the low, sturdy couch table. "Lydia will feel better soon."

John clears his throat. "Maybe this isn't the best place for this conversation," he says. "We should get back to the hotel."

"Not yet." Stiles hates that he has to do this. "First, we have to look for a ... you know what, Derek. You wait with them, dad, we'll be back soon."

He and Derek leave the room before anyone can object.

"Dude, this is creepy," he hisses. "Why in the world would a creature be attracted to death? And why would someone die in the middle of the day? I mean, hello, inconsiderate!"

Derek snorts. "Most people don't try to be inconsiderate when they die. They just do. And as to why ... I have no idea. Let's get through this week first and then Peter will tell us everything we need to know."

"How does he even know about this?"

"He kept the bestiary in our family."

"Oh."

Warren, the bellboy, jumps as he sees them coming and nearly squeaks when Derek asks him where Lydia was first found.

"She was on the fifth floor, the west wing," he tells them and leads the way. "She'd have gone further but we managed to get her back down to the ground floor."

The next few minutes are quiet and tense. Stiles watches Derek like a hawk and Derek is as concentrated as he's ever seen him. Halfway through the mentioned corridor, he stiffens.

"Was it here?" he growls.

"Yes. How do you ..."

Derek stops in front of a door, room 549. Stiles notices, and leans against the door. Away from Warren's wide eyes, he sniffs along the crack.

"Open," he orders.

"What? Sir, I can't do that, it's locked, the guest is inside. What will I tell them?"

Nothing, Stiles thinks, except maybe 'Oh my god!' He shivers.
"You'll think of something. Open the damn door." Derek turns around and glowers at the kid. "Now."

"Okay, okay, jeez." The bellboy fumbles with the key card but manages quickly enough. "Here you are." He trails after them. "What are you even looking for?"

They stop before a large bed and freeze. A man is lying there in his expensive suit, both sleeves rucked up and the wrists slashed. Contrasting with the rich, red blood that has sullied the blankets, his skin is ashen. Stiles has to wrestle with the urge to puke.

"I told you, inconsiderate," he heaves out.

"Oh my god!" Warren shouts. "Oh fuck, oh god! Is he dead?"

"Calm down," Derek instructs. He carefully circles the bed. "Yes, he's already dead. Call your supervisor, have him call the police. Tell them that you needed to be here because you lost something, your keys or whatever." He then very calmly explains why he and Stiles were never here and seals the deal with a handful of hundred dollar bills.

"Dude, you just totally paid him to lie to the police!" Stiles whisper-shouts furiously in the elevator. "My dad will kill you!"

"No, he won't. He and Natalie would like being caught up in an investigation that doesn't have anything to do with us even less. Lydia merely found the body, there's no need for us to get involved. Now come on, let's get out of here, Warren said he can only wait for ten minutes or so before he has to call someone."

He drags Stiles back to their small out-of-the-way room and takes the sheriff to the side to explain what has happened.

"Jesus," John sighs, "it's always an adventure with you, isn't it?"

Meanwhile, Stiles helps Lydia to her feet, assures her that she looks a little rough but still gorgeous, and leads her and Mrs Martin from their hide-out.

The police haven't arrived yet and so they mumble a quick but heartfelt thanks at the receptionist and try to leave as inconspicuously as possible. Stiles thanks all the deities that cabs are in abundance in this city. As exciting as finding the body was, their getaway is decidedly less so - not that anyone complains about that.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your wonderful and kind comments! It's so good to know that you enjoy the story so far and see you speculate about possible future twists and turns. Some of you are really good at that, and in a few cases not too far off the mark ;)

In this chapter, the first character (and a half) from the MCU makes an appearance and I'm so excited. More will follow in the next chapter, so please stay tuned!

"You know that there's still a chance of the police calling on you," John says after they've converged in the Martins' hotel room. "It'll just be routine questioning if that bellboy doesn't give you up, but you should be prepared. I'm not sure how often championship participants flip out and scream their heads off."

"Happens more often than you'd think," Lydia says dryly. She nurses a glass of ginger ale because her mother won't let her have a real drink, no matter how well deserved. "If they ask, I'll blame it on my nerves and they'll believe it."

The sheriff smiles faintly. "Alright. Now on to the hard part. Who wants to do the honors?"

None of them is too eager and so Stiles sighs, rolls his eyes and takes it upon himself to once again introduce an adult to their crazy teen horror universe. Mrs Martin takes it all in with the expected amount of drama and when he's finished, both she and Lydia are sobbing.

"I'm so sorry I didn't believe you when you told us that a man had attacked you," Natalie whimpers. "Just say the word and I'll find someone to kill him, honey."

"Uh, please don't. Peter's just getting his act together and we need him if we want to keep Beacon Hills safe from that damned alpha pack." Stiles pinches the bridge of his nose. "Not that I like it or anything and I'm not defending his actions, but ... he's been through a lot, too, okay? Maybe we should give him some more time to heal before we wash our hands of him."

"John?" Natalie looks at the sheriff. "What do you think?"

He shrugs. "I trust my boy. Peter has a lot to make up for, but Stiles is right: if it weren't for the Argents' attack, none of it would've happened in the first place." He nods at the charm around Lydia's neck. "As far as I can see he's willing to make amends. How you deal with it is up to you, of course, but keep in mind that somebody has to teach her how to be a banshee."

They fall silent.

Mrs Martin breaks first. She mutters a heartfelt, "Oh, fuck it!" and raids the minibar. Everybody gets a tiny flask and she sarcastically cries, "To Beacon Hills, our personal hellmouth. Bottoms up!"

Stiles wrenches his bottle open and guzzles the shot of vodka down before his father can stop him. Lydia does the same with her Jägermeister. The sheriff only sighs and hands Natalie his bottle when she's downed hers.
"I'm sorry," Derek says into the morose silence. His voice is wrecked. "It's my fault."

"Dude, no," Stiles protests. "It isn't."

"Yes, it is." Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Derek continues, "If I hadn't been so stupid and gotten involved with ... I told her what she needed to know."

Natalie eyes him blearily. "What?"

"You don't have to tell them," Stiles insists.

Derek does it anyway. He confesses his part in the destruction of his home and the death of almost all his family members. His short, concise tale is heart-wrenching and when he's finished, Mrs Martin's fury has found a new target.

"That woman can be glad she's already dead!" she rages. "I can't believe what kind of people our school board hires. I'll have words with them about that!"

Lydia tenses and Stiles is fairly sure that Natalie Martin having words with someone was only one step up from being skinned alive.

"Unfortunately that doesn't change anything," Derek murmurs, defeated. "They're still dead and Peter's still insane. I wish I hadn't been so stupid."

Stiles can't take his self-flagellation anymore. "Dude, do you really think she would have left your family alone if she hadn't been able to get close to you? That bitch had years of experience on you, she'd have found out whatever the hell she wanted to know anyway."

The sheriff steps up to the werewolf and rubs his shoulder. "He's right, son. I questioned Stiles' teacher, Harris, at some point and he confessed that he and Kate Argent met in a bar before the Hale house fire. He was already drunk and told her everything she needed to know about committing arson and getting away with it." He looks Derek in the downcast eyes. "He should've known better and he was an adult at the time. If we play the guilt game, the same rules apply. Argent could have easily found out via the internet or from her hunter buddies but she chose to seduce Harris because apparently that's how she operated. She wanted to ruin as many lives as possible, even if it was second-hand. His refusal wouldn't have stopped her, just made it a little harder for her, and maybe even more exciting, don't you think?"

Derek looks at him as if he desperately wants to believe him.

"Can we agree that he'll keep it in his pants next time and get on with it?" Lydia asks and slurps down another bottle from the bar. "I'll wear the damn thing, okay? No more dead bodies for Lydia."

"You didn't even see it," Stiles snarks. "Just made a royal fuss."

She throws her pillow at him and he throws Mrs Martin's shawl back. Just like that the heavy tension lets up and they can breathe again.

Later, when they've calmed down enough to go out for food, Derek invites them to pizza and the best tiramisu on this side of the Atlantic.

oOo

On Monday, Lydia and her mother put on their war paint, choose their armor with care and tell the men not to bother accompanying them to the first round of the championship.
"You can come watch when I've reached the quarterfinal. Before that it's not worth anyone's time," Lydia says and sounds so bored that Stiles has to repress his fervent admiration for her. "There's a participants' dinner tonight and afterwards we'll catch a show, so don't wait for us."

"Yes, ma'am," Stiles grins. He turns to Derek and his father. "Does that mean we can crawl all over Manhattan today?"

The others like the idea and so they part ways. First order of the day is, of course, a green juice. Stiles gets one for Derek, too, just because he's being reluctant and broody. While they wait, his phone chimes.

"Is it Melissa?" John asks. "You did promise to send her pictures."

"I did and she was jealous of our spring rolls and my chess game in the park," Stiles replies, frowning as he sees Scott's name. "Ugh, it's from Scott."

Derek sounds as reluctant as Stiles feels when he asks, "What does he say? Is something the matter at home?"

"No, thankfully not." Stiles lifts his phone a little and reads out loud, "Dude, wu? R u rly in NY? Y didn u tell me? We always wanted to go together. Bring a souv! Talk to you later."

He shows the text to his dad and snorts at his bewildered frown. No wonder, Scott has actually written, 

"Dude, wu? R u rly in NY? Y didn u tell me? We always wanted 2 go 2getha. Bring a souv! Ttyl.

"Do I have to answer that?" he wants to know.

"Not right now, no," John decides as he rubs his temples. "But if you do, please use proper language. This chat speech is an abomination. I raised you better than that."

It's as much of a permission to procrastinate as Stiles is likely to get and he sighs quietly in relief. Scott's intrusion into their family time is as jarring as it is unwelcome and he just hopes that his erstwhile former best friend won't suddenly want to have regular contact again. He's just gotten used to not continually having Scott around. It also rankles that he's only texting because he wants something.

"It'll keep until we're back at the hotel tonight," his father reassures him, clapping his shoulder. "Our order is nearly ready, anyway."

Juices in hand they then make the journey, braving the Monday morning rush hour and the press of people in the streets. Both Derek and John's tempers are frayed when they get off the subway near Central Park and so they take a short walk through the park where they only have to dodge joggers and moms with their trolleys.

Stiles easily finds the chess players who're just setting up their boards. When two grizzled, old men invite him to play, he can't help but being enthusiastic. After sending his dad and Derek off for a few minutes, he sits and plays a quick round. When it becomes apparent after their game that his opponent is homeless, Stiles doesn't hesitate to give him and his friends a few dollars for coffee. They shuffle over to the cart with a cheery salute, leaving him by himself. The finished game, which Stiles won, is still on the board.

"What a charming little act of humanity," a gentle voice mocks him.
Half expecting it to be Peter from the sarcastic tone alone, Stiles looks up - and starts. Before him stands a slender man in the most unusual clothes he's seen in a long while, and there'd been the drag queens at Jungle not too long ago. He has long, black hair, light eyes and a pointed chin.

*Like Draco Malfoy,* Stiles sniggers to himself.

Out loud he says, "Don't be a dick. Coffee is manna, even for homeless people like Stan and his buddies." He collects the figurines and points at the empty bench. "If you wanna play, just say so."

The man regards him as if he can't quite believe how Stiles is talking to him.

"Very well," he draws at length and sits down. He meticulously folds his green coat and leans a fancy looking stick with a sharp blade against the backrest. "Explain the rules of this puny game and I shall defeat you."

Stiles bites back a laugh. "Alright, dude." He shows the stranger what each piece can do and they start a first test game. "By the way, are you coming from a cosplay party or something? I really dig your costume, man."

"Cosplay?" the man asks, pausing. "I'm not sure what you mean. My coat is made of the finest leathers and spider silks. Asgardian, of course."

Stiles smirks. "Of course." He takes a rock. "Do you mind telling me your name, Asgard dude?"

"It's Loki, brother of Thor, son of Odin." He moves to take one of Stiles' pawns. "I suppose it's custom to now ask for yours, even though your life span is only just above that of an insect."

Stiles, who is way too used to rude people, merely shrugs. "Call me Stiles. My real name would make you weep and I can't see gods cry."

"Are you mocking me, human?"

"Only a little."

Loki's pinched face relaxes and he smirks. "Hmm."

They play in silence, Stiles mostly reacting to the other man's strategy, but predictably wins against the newbie.

"Not bad for your first time," he offers and stands. "I'd stay for another one but my dad is waiting over there and he's looking a little pissed."

"You have quite a courageous heart," Loki says. "We shall see each other again and I'll test your mettle on this checkered battle field once more." He collects his staff and saunters off, coat billowing behind him.

"We're gone for ten minutes and you're already attracting the loons," John says and shakes his head. "Come on, we discovered a tourist bus stop just outside the park."

They board the bus and Derek sits next to Stiles, sniffing him carefully.

"You smell strange," he declares and raises an eyebrow. "Who was that guy?"

"No idea. He calls himself Loki. I guess he's a cosplayer or something."

Derek still looks a little dubious but lightens up as soon as they come near his old neighborhood. It's
good to hear him talk about his years in the city and to see the coffee shop where he spent a lot of
time studying and meeting with friends.

All too soon, however, the bus carries them away from Derek's old haunts and the werewolf
becomes quiet once more. Stiles is tempted to ask if they can get off and spend some more time there,
just to see Derek relax and maybe smile, but it's getting late and they still have a lot to see before they
can even think about lunch.

Their tour guides them through all of Manhattan and of course passes the Stark Tower, which is
situated almost next to the Grand Central Station. Stiles can't get enough of the huge building and
creases his neck until they turn a corner and he has to give up.

After completing one round they get off for delicious Indian food and seek out the first of the five
addresses Deaton has given Stiles. Upon seeing the tiny esoteric store, the sheriff excuses himself in
favor of finding the next coffee shop, but Derek comes in with Stiles.

A small bell jingles above the door and it's very quiet once it closes after them again. The small place
is cramped with narrow shelves, each overflowing with trinkets and books. Stiles has a hard time
keeping his hands to himself.

"Dude, are those real harpy feathers?"

"Don't call me dude." Derek scrunches up his nose. "They smell like moth eaten bird and old man."

In that moment a woman in her thirties comes out from the back and greets them cheerfully. She's got
red, curly hair and dresses like Catwoman, except this Catwoman wears faux leather and has bare
feet. Around her neck she wears a chaos star.

"Hey there, what can I do for you?" she asks with a welcoming smile.

"No idea, but Alan Deaton said to visit you," Stiles replies. "Hi."

She inhales, at once alert. "You must be Stiles. I didn't know you'd bring a protector, otherwise I'd
have loosened my wards." She turns to Derek, quite obviously checking him out and liking what she
sees. "As long as they're in place, no other being will be able to determine whether my goods are
valuable or mere toys for wannabe witches."

"It's fine," Derek says stiffly.

"I apologize anyway, it's bad form when guests are expected. Come on in, I'll make you tea."

She locks the door, flips the sign at the front door from open to closed and leads them into a tiny
room that's only barely less cramped than her shop.

"I'm Cordula, by the way. Alan told me what your talents are so far," she calls from the equally tiny
kitchen. "I know he gave you books; do you know what kinds of magic you might be interested in
yet?"

Stiles shrugs. "I want to know everything eventually, although being able to kick ass might be good.
Our town has kind of become a hellmouth lately."

"Yes, I heard what happened." Cordula places two steaming mugs of fruit tea on the table. "Alan is
by no means a gossip but when a nemeton dies it's a pretty big deal. The one near your home town
has declined for a long time, I'm sorry to say."
"What's a nemeton?"

She smiles warmly. "You're a curious one, that's good but I'm getting ahead of Alan's training. I shouldn't explain too much or you'll become confused. Just know that nemetons are magical trees. They're collectors and beacons of great power. If one dies, its stored magic becomes corrupted and attracts all kinds of things you don't want to deal with. They can be saved but that's not my story to tell. Let's talk about that ass-kicking you mentioned. Whose ass do you want to kick, and why?"
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Oh my gosh, here goes nothing. Avenger #1 makes his big entrance and I just hope that you find the situation entertaining enough to stick with the story. Please tell me what you think because for a lot of reasons this is my favourite chapter so far. ^_^

They spend nearly an hour in Cordula's company and tell her as much as they dare without giving up too much to a stranger. She's a good sport about it, even approves, and hints at many different practices and possibilities. At the end of their talk she hands Stiles several books she wants him to read.

"Remember that an attack is never the best course of action. Magic is all about free will and hurting none, unless they want to hurt you first. As long as you keep that in mind, you can do one hell of a lot with seemingly defensive work."

"Thanks, that's awesome. I'll send them back when I'm done reading them."

"Just give them to Alan, he'll return them." Cordula takes Stiles' hand. "One last thing: let me see what you can already do. Usually I'm pretty good at feeling people out but you're still so new that I can't read you."

Shrugging, Stiles takes the small bag of mountain ash out of his pants pocket and flings a pinch around Derek's cup. The ash lands in a perfect square and the werewolf growls as he tries to reach his tea but gets rebuffed.

"I hate when he does it," he says and takes Stiles' cup instead.

"That's it," Stiles grins, "hence my being here and picking your brain."

"For 'that's it' it's not bad at all. You seem like a natural to me, so keep at it and you'll get better soon," Cordula grins back and high-fives him. "Good luck with your studies. I wrote my e-mail and phone number into one of the books. If you want to talk or rant about Alan, just contact me."

"Thanks, I will."

They say their goodbyes and leave the shop. The sheriff is still gone and so Stiles doesn't feel too bad for taking up so much of their time.

"How about we do something you want to do now?" he asks, one eye on the text he's writing to his father. "You've been really good about following my ass all over town." He presses send and only seconds later his phone beeps. "Dad says he'll go back to the hotel and lay down. Apparently a buddy from NYPD invited him but he's got a night shift this week. I wish I could come with, visiting New York's finest must be so cool."

"Well, we could always go and visit the Met," Derek says. "A friend worked there when I left, maybe he can smuggle us into the closed parts."

Stiles gapes at him. "Could he really?"
"If he's working today."

"Let's go. If that happens, I'll buy you twenty New York dogs!"

oOo

It does happen and Stiles is over the moon. They surprise Derek's friend inside the museum, which almost gives the poor guy, a blond, bored-looking twenty-something, a heart attack, and allow him to usher them through a nondescript door. Away from prying eyes, the man first hugs the stuffing out of Derek and then exclaims over his sudden appearance.

"Where have you been?" he cries, looking the werewolf over and shaking his head. "No phone call, no message, nothing. I should hit you, asshole!"

Stiles snorts and the other man's attention is on him.

"Who are you?" he asks suspiciously.

"Stiles," Stiles introduces himself and waves awkwardly. "I'd think twice about hitting him. Been there, done that, almost broke my hand."

"Ha." The guy punches Derek in the shoulder anyway. For such a pudgy guy there's a lot of oomph behind the hit. "Why are you even back? No, nevermind, I don't have time for that right now. You could've called, the others will flip when they hear that you're in town."

"I was going to do that," Derek defends himself, hunching his shoulders and scowling. "Eventually."

Stiles and the other guy share a look.

"Uh-huh. I'm Mike, by the way. I'm sure this antisocial jerk hasn't mentioned me even once."

"No, but to be fair he hasn't mentioned anything at all about New York either, except that he's been living here."

"Standing right here," Derek reminds them. He's a little flushed and looks extremely uncomfortable.

"You deserve it," Mike tells him dismissively. "Now, should I guess what you're here for, or will you admit to your shame?"

Derek sighs deeply. "I'm sorry." He takes out his phone and looks at his friend. "I'll be here all week, just let me know where you want to meet. I'll come and explain then."

"You better, man."

They check their contact info (which earns Derek another punch in the arm because apparently he's changed his SIM card a few days after leaving the city) and then Mike finally lets go of his anger and smirks at them.

"So, since you're already here and I'm feeling generous, do you want to see what the Met is working on at the moment?"

"Dude," Stiles breathes, meaning, Do you even have to ask?!

"It'll knock your socks off," Mike promises and leads them further into the building. "Do you like superheroes, kid?"
What he shows them in a code-locked wing of the building is beyond anything Stiles could have expected or dreamed of, even though the exhibition is still being assembled.

"This is about Captain America!" Stiles says reverently, gaping at huge tabloids with pictures of Steve Rogers and his friends on them. "I'm three seconds away from a nerdgasm."

Derek rolls his eyes and drags Stiles with him. Together they read the tabloids, listen to some of the already hooked up audio displays and let Mike tell them everything he knows about this new exhibition.

"The old one was small and dated," he says smugly, leaning next to James Buchanan Barnes' full-sized photograph. "You don't have it from me, but there are certain rumors and that's why the Met got generous with its money and put this baby together. Everything here is new: the tabloids, the contemporary witness videos, audio reports ... you wouldn't believe how much material the whole staff has gone through these last eight weeks. It was insane. Opening date is sometime in August, maybe September, depending on certain things."

Stiles knows that he's fanboying and doesn't care one bit. "I can't believe we got to see it before all others. Thanks, man, this is huge! I owe you so much, I can't even."

"Yes, thank you," Derek says quietly, but genuinely. "You didn't have to do that."

"But I wanted to. Come on, you haven't seen huge yet," Mike grins.

They walk through more aisles and pass video screens showing people from the fifties and sixties, recorded for eternity and frozen in mid-move. At last, Mike stops them in front of a large, already completely arranged showcase.

"This is the center piece of the exhibition," he says proudly. "I was allowed to help with the handling and I've got the NDA to prove it."

Struck dumb, Stiles and Derek look up at Captain America's original suit, the one he'd been wearing while freeing his friends and fellow soldiers from Hydra's clutches. The numerous tears and bullet holes have been patched up meticulously but there are still faint dirt stains visible, giving the thing an eerily authentic look.

"Fuck me sideways," Stiles gushes. He looks at Derek. "There's no way you'd fill out that suit, man. You have serious muscles going on, but not like that."

Derek gives him his best bitch face.

"Seriously, the Cap has like 6 inches on you. You'd fall over the legs and right onto your grumpy face."

Mike snorts with laughter. "Right? I'd pay good money to see him try it on, though. It'd almost be worth getting fired over."

"Is that so?" a dry voice says and nearly spooks them to death. Stiles has to grab Derek's hand to hide the claws.

A black man in a dark leather coat and with an eye-patch comes out of the half-shadows and looks at them calmly. His arms are casually clasped behind his back. Stiles has never seen a guy look more villain-y and after Peter Hale that's really saying something.

Next to him, a huge dude in his late twenties observes them in a manner that tells Stiles at once that
he doesn't think they're a threat but he'll be cautious just in case anyway. His simple t-shirt and jeans outfit, made complete with a black ball cap, does nothing to hide the military stance from Stiles.

"Shit, you're Steve Rogers," Stiles blurs after a minute of silent, wide-eyed staring.

Mike makes a rattled 'eep' sound.

The black guy's lips twitch and nobody misses the not-really-amused tone in his voice when he says, "Well, Cap, it seems like the super soldier is out of the bag."

oOo

There are consequences if one gets caught doing mischief, Stiles knows that. Being a sheriff's kid has nothing but prepared him for that ... but he couldn't, in a million years, ever have predicted that the consequences would be this.

"Uh, I'm not sure I understand, sir," he says carefully because, hello, since when does some creepy government dude not make someone's life miserable if he has the chance?

"I don't either, Director Fury," Captain Rogers seconds Stiles' words. "Shouldn't the boy's father be informed?"

In the corners of the room, two men in black suits stand watch, neither showing any hint of an opinion.

Fury folds his hands over his flat belly, patiently outwaiting the questions. "You heard me well enough. I don't think that this is a matter for national security since your reappearance will be common knowledge soon, Captain. And as to Mr Kloepfer's little private tour ... as far as I'm concerned he was never there and never saw us. The same goes for his friends, as long as they'll sign an NDA."

"Oh my god, that's worse than torture," Stiles groans and yelps when Derek hits him over the head. "Ow! It's true!"

"The NDA will only be valid until all the major news channels report Captain Rogers' return," Fury continues, not heeding Stiles' grumbling. "Be aware that, while this is a mutually beneficial agreement, I will have an eye on you all until this matter is out in the open. If you run your mouth before that, you won't like the consequences."

"Ha, an eye. Good one, sir. Also, you're evil, because Captain America! How am I supposed to not talk about it? I'll shrivel up and die first."

Fury smirks. "Hand over your IDs for a second, I'll have to process your information."

They do and watch avidly as Fury scans them with his smartphone.

"Where the hell is Beacon Hills?" he asks when he's done and there's been a beep, apparently announcing the arrival of surface intel. "Sounds like a hick town."

"It is," Stiles sighs mournfully.

"Your dad's the sheriff there, kid? You've got some balls, sneaking around the country's largest museum."

Stiles can't help but preen. "I try." His grin widens when he sees Captain Rogers smile slightly, even
though his huge arms remain crossed over his chest.

"There was a lot of action in your small hick town lately, Mr Stilinski, with you right in the middle. I wonder what your father thinks about it."

"Well, he wasn't very happy, but we're cool now."

Moving on, Fury's good eye settles on Derek. "Hmm, two arrests and several speeding tickets in the last six months, Mr Hale. If that's how you deal with your sister's death, I'm not sure you should hang out with impressionable high school kids."

"Excuse me, what?" Mike croaks, stunned. "Derek ... what the hell?"

The werewolf closes his eyes for a second and balls his hands to tight fists.

"Crap. Can we, uhm, leave them for a couple of minutes?" Stiles asks, heart in his throat. "He won't bolt, it's just ... a really sore topic. Please?"

"Let them," Rogers nods and strides to the door of the small office, letting himself out. Stiles scrambles to follow and Fury's protection detail comes last, although they look less than impressed with the sudden drama.

"Thanks, and sorry about that," Stiles sighs after shutting the door firmly. At once, one of the men takes up post in front of it. "So, what are you going to do with your evening, since we crashed your super secret tour of the exhibition? Which, by the way, shouldn't you have come sometime after closing time, when no-one's around?"

Rogers snorts softly. "I tried telling him that. I just wanted a bite to eat."

"What can I say?" Fury drawls. "Budget cuts affect everyone. Plus, I have a shit ton of meetings during the next couple of weeks, I deserve an afternoon off, dammit."

"You do this for fun? My condolences." Stiles decides to brave the elephant in the room and asks, "How long have you been back, Captain?"

"Two weeks or thereabouts." Shrugging, Rogers takes his cap off and cards his fingers through his flattened hair. "I feel like I've landed in an alien society. Everything is so loud and fast."

"Yeah, it's great, isn't it? Also, the food, dude, the food!" Under Fury's watchful eye, Stiles takes out his phone and shows the captain pictures from their first night in the city. "Thai is awesome, you should definitely try it."

"As I said, I could eat," Rogers repeats, a little more pointed.

"Jesus, you're a bottomless pit," Fury growls. "So, Thai, eh? I'll have something delivered here if it'll make you stop whining."

Stiles offers him a fifty. "Make it triple, sir, and tofu for me. Derek won't admit it but he's a stress eater."

Fury snags the bill and turns away to talk to his underling.

"Too bad you can't simply go out yet," Stiles says sympathetically. "Must suck to be treated like an exhibit."

"I'm used to it."
"Yeah, just like Derek is used to people fucking him over. It doesn't make it okay."

"Are you done?" Fury asks. "Food'll be here in thirty."

Since neither Derek nor Mike react to the director's knocking, they leave them be and return to the exhibition for a lack of things to do. It's exhilarating to listen to Captain Rogers' firsthand accounts and watch him pick apart the tabloids and timelines. It becomes apparent that he and Fury have come here for a reason after all because every small detail Rogers corrects, Fury types into his phone. Stiles tags along, taking everything in and pinching himself every now and then to make sure he's not dreaming.

Rogers stops in front of a wall that shows how tall he was before the serum, and after.

"Crazy, isn't it?" he smiles as Stiles steps next to the mark. "I was at least half a head smaller than you are now. I was tiny, easily the scrappiest kid from the block. I never understood how Howard Stark managed to change me so completely."

"Well, science is just another word for magic, or so I've heard," Stiles says reverently. He gets away from the wall and rubs his prickling arms. "Have you ever regretted agreeing to the treatment? I mean, they used you for propaganda for a long time, even though you're the best soldier ever. I'd have quit if they'd try to pull that shit with me."

"Those were different times," Rogers says and raps his knuckles against the showcase that holds his old suit. "Hopefully you'll never know how different."

Twenty minutes later, Fury's agent brings the food in and Stiles carefully places half of it in front of the still closed office door. They then hole up in another office and peel away the lids from their aluminum dishes.

"It smells strange," Rogers comments and dips his little finger into his sweet and sour sauce. "Mmh, but tastes interesting."

"Be grateful it's from a place that doesn't use glutamate and other crap," Fury grumbles. "Stark warned me what it'd do to your sensitive oldtimer stomach."

"Yeah, stay clear of the processed stuff," Stiles agrees. "The last time I ate Cheetos, they made me puke. It was gross."

"No Cheetos, got it."

They dig in, Stiles unashamedly stealing pineapple from Captain Rogers and forking over his mushrooms when he asks. It's fun to see the man enjoy it so much. When they're finished, Rogers pulls out a notebook and makes to strike out Thai food from a list.

"No, don't do that," Stiles orders.

"What, why?" Rogers is clearly confused and even Fury seems curious in a bad-tempered way.

"You loved it, didn't you?"

"Yes, but that's not the point. This is my to-do list and I did the Thai food."

"Dude, "Stiles moans. "You don't strike out things from the to-do list, or bucket list, you really liked." He pulls out his wallet and unfolds his own impressively long list. "Look here? It says Disney Land. Me and my dad have been there like a gazillion times already but I never crossed it out
because then I wouldn't be able to emotionally manipulate him into taking me again."

"Did it work?"

"Did? It still does," Stiles says smugly. "Disney Land is awesome. All kitsch and commerce and childhood memories and whoever says otherwise is a lying liar that lies."

Hearing that, Fury barks a laugh. "If he wants to go, I'll be sure to remember you, Stilinski. Your old man won't mind taking one more, I'm sure." His watch beeps. "Alright Captain, time's up." He stands and nods at Stiles. "It was nice meeting you, kid. Keep your mouth shut and I'll even let you keep that picture of Rogers you thought you could sneak past me."

"Damn," Stiles mutters and grudgingly deletes the picture. "Sorry, Captain."

"Call me Steve. Why don't we take a real photo together? Here, Director Fury gave me this, you do the honours." He presses his brand new iPhone into Stiles' hand and looks at him expectantly. "Maybe I'll actually get around to visiting Disney Land. I only remember Bambi and Micky Mouse but there must be a lot more to it now."

"Uh, okay." Getting the camera to work is a piece of cake and Stiles snaps the picture. "Wow, you're really photogenic. Can I send it to me?"

Fury sighs, aggrieved that his ward is on Stiles' side. "If it leaks, I'll have your head, Stilinski."

"I know, I know. Thanks so much, it's awesome and I'm trying not to geek out right now." Stiles punches in his number, sends the photo and saves it in his 'private' folder.

Captain Rogers, no, Steve, laughs. "It's still strange that people are all in awe, no matter the century."

"It'll stop once they learn how boring you are," Fury says idly. "Come now, there's a gym with your name on it. Stilinski, remind your buddies to keep their mouths shut."

"Yes, sir."

He waves and Steve waves back and then the two men and their shadows vanish into the museum.
This chapter is for the people who maybe wondered how the sheriff’s night shift with his colleague went.

Also, the nextAvenger makes an appearance, in his own, unique way :)

Stiles waits another ten minutes before he scrounges up his courage and leaves the office. The food in front of the other door is gone and he hopes that Derek and Mike have managed to get at least a little bit of it down.

"Hey," he says quietly after knocking and entering. "Are you two alright?"

"Not really," Mike mumbles and rubs at his red eyes. "It was a shock, hearing that Laura is gone, I don't mind telling you."

"I'm sorry you had to find out like this."

"How did you find out?"

Derek shakes his head, face still pinched and ashen. It's obvious that his sister had been a favourite with Mike, maybe even more.

"It's a long story," Stiles hedges. "Listen, Fury and the Cap are gone. Maybe we should leave, too, before we get in real trouble."

"You don't think having to sign a level six non-disclosure agreement under duress counts as trouble?" Derek says hollowly. "I worry about your priorities, Stiles."

"Yeah, yeah, it still keeps me up at night," Stiles brushes him off. "Let's collect our shit and get out of here, okay? I can leave you at the next dive, s'not as if our TV at the hotel doesn't have cable. I'll be fine."

"I won't let you get back by yourself," Derek rises, shoulders tight yet slumped as if the weight of the world rests on them. "Although we could meet up later, Mike. If you still want, that is. I'll understand if ..."

"Shut the fuck up, Hale. I have your number, I'll text you later. God, what a mess."

Stiles busies himself with picking up the trash and wiping away spilled sauce while the men hug it out. He feels bad about it, but it's a relief to leave Mike and his grief behind, the muggy summer evening still better than the thick, cloying atmosphere of disbelieving horror and sadness.

"I'm sorry that you'll be stuck at the hotel alone," Derek sighs as they stumble down to the subway. "Mike shouldn't have found out like this."

"Nah, it's cool, dude, he would have found out eventually," Stiles hurries to say. "Besides, you have friends, which, great, honest, you should talk to them. Catch up and get drunk and whatever else you
haven't been able to do since coming to Beacon Hills. It'll be good."

"Yes," the werewolf agrees softly. "I think it would."

At the hotel, Derek comes up to the room to change into fresh clothes. He also assures himself again that Stiles will really be alright.

"Dude, just go," Stiles says gently. "It's okay to be afraid. Telling them will be hard, but they deserve to know, don't they? And before you feel guilty for leaving me here, forget it. You really don't need me there, and it's totally none of my business in the first place, anyway."

His heart pounds when he steps up into Derek's space and imitates what Peter and Derek have done before their departure. Derek's breath hitches when their cheeks touch. His stubble scrapes over Stiles' skin and for a second Stiles forgets how to breathe.

"I've got your back, though," he tells him, and means it. "Whatever goes down, me and my dad are here. If it goes badly and you need us, call or text. Okay?" Carefully, so very carefully, Stiles rubs his cheek once more against Derek's and then steps back.

"Okay," Derek murmurs, pale eyes searching Stiles' face. "Thank you."

"Not for this, Sourwolf."

Derek eventually leaves and Stiles stays behind, worried and exhausted from so many emotional ups and downs. Answering Scott's text from the morning seems like such child's play now and is done in less than a minute. It takes much longer to find the courage to call Melissa and unload his scrambled feelings about Scott's unexpected message on her, but once he's finished he's glad that he's done it.

"I'm so sorry you feel this way," she tells him softly. "I'm his mother and I love him, but my son can be stupid occasionally. Don't let his new friendship with Isaac drag you down. You can talk about it when you come back, there's no need to ruin your holiday over it."

"What if he doesn't want to talk about it?" Stiles asks, throat tight.

Melissa sighs. "That bad, huh?"

"Dunno. Feels like it sometimes. Or rather all the time, Stiles adds wordlessly and shrugs, even though she can't see him.

She surprises him when she replies, "Then it's not the end of the world, honey. People grow apart and make new friends all the time. It's part of growing up. If you're worried that your cute little nose and disgustingly healthy juices are no longer welcome just because you and Scott don't talk, you can think again. You're my boy, whether Scott likes it or not."

Stiles isn't convinced, not really, but hearing the words still eases the pain in his chest a little.

They chat a little longer about the city and their first adventures. It's a shame that Stiles can't tell her anything about meeting Captain America but even then she's almost late for her shift because she asks so many questions. After the call, Stiles orders food and surfs the channels until he can't keep his eyes open any longer.

oOo

The first thing Stiles does after waking up early the next morning is checking Derek's bed. He half expects it to be empty - he never woke up during the night - but the werewolf is there, out for the
count and looking impossibly relaxed and vulnerable in the early sunlight. Stiles observes him for a few minutes, just takes him in, and wonders how the talk with his friends went, and if he even has friends anymore.

It's a strange feeling, knowing that there are people who have loved the two remaining Hales, helped them out of their shell, out of the trauma, and that the Hales let them. It's even stranger to know that it's been only half a year since everything went to hell for them ... again.

He sighs and rolls onto his back, dragging his phone with him so he can check his messages. Thankfully there are none from Scott or Isaac, which relieves him more than he wants to admit even to himself.

*Facebook looks strange today,* he thinks and squints a the screen. *Why do they always have to fuck with the layout?*

There's a new friend request and for a second he entertains the notion that it could be Steve, even though that's laughable. The poor guy won't be ready for modern technology for a while yet, maybe not ever, not to mention the terrifying vastness of social media.

"Tony Stark?" he mutters and squints even more. "Very funny, dude."

He clicks on the name anyway and stalks the guy. Whoever impersonates America's most prominent tech genius was thorough; there are photos of him and Pepper Potts at functions, shots of his thousand and one Iron Man suits, his cars, his office, some kind of robot arm which he lovingly calls Dummy, and many more. Some pictures are so personal that Stiles feels kind of creepy looking at them.

Next comes the wall. It's plastered full with snarky comments about rich and influential people, funny memes and sometimes shout outs to support this or that charity event. All Stiles has ever seen or read about Tony Stark is disturbingly congruent with what he finds here.

"It's too early for this shit," he mutters and sits up. He needs a round in the hotel's gym, a shower, breakfast and a mean green juice.

One and a half an hour later he sits alone over breakfast and chews on his lower lip while he stares at 'Tony Stark's' facebook page. Suddenly the icon for 'accept friendship' changes to 'friendship accepted', the 'subscribe' setting activated.

"What the hell?" he exclaims and nearly throws his phone against the artistic breakfast roll tower. Next, there are popping up new notifications, most of them telling him that 'Tony Stark liked your photo'.

"I swear to god-"

A message comes up.

*You were too slow, kid. Better get used to typing fast when you're dealing with me.*

Stiles narrows his eyes. He thinks for a moment and then his fingers fairly fly over the screen of his phone. Despite his haste he makes sure to use proper grammar, just in case.

*No way are you really Tony Stark, he types. You've got like a bazillion things to do, why would you even talk to me?*

*I like trolling, what can I say?*
Stiles snorts.

*You've just engaged with the troll master, buddy.*

*Prove it.*

Cackling, Stiles accepts the challenge and gets to work, breakfast forgotten.

oOo

He's still at it when Lydia and her mother join him at his table.

"What are you doing?" Lydia asks and stares at his furiously typing fingers.

"Troll war with a guy who claims to be Tony Stark," he explains and hits send.

Only seconds later an answer appears and he shows it to her.

"Adequate, but by no means titillating," she says dismissively. "I'd have expected more."

"For not really being Stark, he's pretty sharp," Stiles defends his trolling buddy. "And he's getting better, maybe he's just warming up. I guess I have this day covered, I don't need you to entertain me."

Lydia smirks. "Good to know that your world no longer revolves around just me."

Stiles grins. "One day you'll wish it still were so. How was it yesterday, by the way?"

"Boring math, slightly better than average food, great show. It was okay considering our less than stellar Sunday," she shrugs. "Today's hopefully a little more challenging but if not, there's always dinner and a carriage ride around Central Park."

"You're invited, of course," Mrs Martin adds. "We're going for Spanish tonight."

"*Tapas, ay caramba.* Count me in and let me know where to meet you." Stiles' stomach gurgles. "Aaaand it's time for one more helping of hash browns and baked beans. You coming?"

"I don't know where he puts it," Lydia sniffs but gets up as well. "I'll get you coffee and a bagel, mom."

When they return from the buffet, Derek and the sheriff are sitting at the table, both squinting a little blearily at the empty cups in front of them. Stiles sets his plate down in front of his father and marches right back to get two more for Derek and himself.

"I knew it was a bad idea to let you kids stay out all night," he snorts and shovels beans into his mouth. "When did you get back?"

"Around four," John mumbles, picking at his hash browns. "Remind me to keep away from big cities at all costs, son. I mean it. I'm too old for this shit."

"What happened?"

"I'd rather not talk about ... but I think the story made headlines, so." John collects himself for a moment. "Corby, my friend from NYPD, invited me to come along on patrol, cleared it with his super and all. We were sent to check out a disturbance call, a bunch of rowdy students partying it up and smoking weed. The usual, or so we naively thought."
"So far, there's nothing particularly traumatizing to your story yet," Lydia comments and sips her coffee.

"Well, it becomes traumatizing if the apartment is located on the Upper Westside and the filthy rich party kids have no concept of morality." John makes a sound that's suspiciously close to a whimper. "They thought we were strippers when we arrived and tried to loosen up our act with laughing gas. I managed to avoid them but Corby got a full dose when he handcuffed one of the perps and laughed like a hyena until back-up arrived. Those demon kids found it hilarious, of course, even when back-up arrived and dragged them off to the station and sat them down in holding cells. Some of them were only wearing adult diapers. And glitter. So, so much glitter."

Stiles is close to howling with laughter and Lydia and Mrs Martin are giggling hysterically. Only Derek wears a face as if someone's three-legged, beloved dog died, all compassionate and frowny. It's hilarious.

"Not only did I have to help taking statements, afterwards I was held for questioning myself because the kids' satanic über-parents decided to show up in the middle of the night and raise hell because we arrested their precious, innocent angels. The chief of police wasn't amused and ordered me to stay in the city until this matter is solved."

"Crap," Stiles chuckles. "Somebody filmed it, I know they did, and I wish I could see it."

His phone beeps and he picks it up.

_Wish granted._

He has barely read the text when a video suddenly starts playing by itself. It's shuddery and less than well-done, but it shows exactly what his father has just told them, complete with shrieking laughter, shouts and slurried, rowdy singing.

"Holy crap, Lydia!" He pulls her close and gapes at the tiny screen. "Someone hacked my phone! This is source material! Oh my god, he really puts that mask over his face ... crazy bitches."

She stares at the unfolding chaos in the mentioned Upper Westside apartment, for once speechless. Then they start laughing madly as the chaos gets worse and worse. At one point, a whole tin of body glitter goes flying, making everybody look like Edward Cullen, even his exasperated father.

"Do I have to worry about this turning up on youtube?" the sheriff sighs, heaving himself up to finally get a cup of coffee.

Stiles smirks. "Absolutely. On the bright side, asshole people won't be able to delete evidence. It's not my fault one of these idiots decide to drunk-mail a stranger." He closes the video and sends a heartfelt _Thank you, creeper dude!!!_ to 'Tony Stark'.

_Don't thank me yet_, is the instant reply. _Shit's going down in 3-2-1 ..._

His dad's cellphone rings and they all listen in as he hums at whatever the caller is saying. At last, John grinds out a terse, "I'll be there, sir." and hangs up.

"What's up?" Stiles asks a little nervously because if some strange, snoopy dude hacks his phone (and that of his father) to the point of being able to predict who's going to call and when, it deserves getting nervous over. He's got no interest in getting into real trouble, thank you very much.

"I have to go back later, some kid's father is a prosecutor and apparently he's not happy about the drug and assault charges."
"Fuck. I'll come with you," Stiles says, all mirth gone.

"I'll come too if you don't need me, Mrs Martin," Derek says roughly, rubbing a hand over his overgrown stubble.

"That's quite alright," she replies graciously. "Please call if you need help, John. I have several good lawyer friends in the city who'd love to go against a bad apple. I'm sure they'd even do it *pro bono* if the exposure is great enough."

"Thanks, Natalie, I appreciate it."

Stiles' phone beeps yet again, the screen flooding with opened articles about last night's disaster.

"Maybe a lawyer isn't the only thing you need," he says wryly and shows the others one of the flashier pieces of writing.

Lydia and her mom are horrified yet amused while Derek's frown only becomes more pronounced.

"No kidding. I'll need a bullwhip and a footstool to keep my deputies in check," John replies dryly. He drains the last of his coffee. "They'll never take me seriously ever again."

"They will if you take out the cattle prod," Stiles smirks, unable to help himself. "Probably. When do you have to be there?"

"As soon as possible."

Stiles nods. "Understandable. A young man's future and his family's reputation are at stake. How 'bout we go looking for a frozen yoghurt place after you're all done with breakfast? I've got the worst craving all of a sudden."
As always, much thanks for your kind and funny comments. I live for them and it makes my day when people tell me that they enjoy my little story. :)

And now on the new chapter, hope you like it!

It's over two hours later when the three men finally stroll up to the NYPD main building. Derek and Stiles' father look considerably more awake and Stiles lovingly cradles a huge half-eaten cup of frozen soy yoghurt with five different toppings in his hands.

"You can't eat in here," a guard at the metal detectors calls.

"Aww, really?" Stiles pouts. "But we're expected."

"John Stilinski," the sheriff supplies. "The commissioner awaits me."

"Throw it out and you can come right through," the man says impatiently.

John works hard to suppress his smile. "This thing cost a fortune, he'll eat it even if it gives him brain freeze."

"It's not a good idea to keep Commissioner Burlock waiting," the guard warns.

They shrug and head back out, taking their time helping Stiles demolish the sweet treat. Once they're back in, a portly and obviously furious man in an expensive suit is waiting right behind the security guards.

"You call that ASAP, Mr. Stilinski?" he asks over the surprised din of visitors and officers, motioning them in front of the line so security can check them in. "Is this some kind of power play? Because I assure you that you won't like how we play these games here."

"It's my boy's first time in New York," the sheriff replies coldly. "Surely you understand that he comes first, especially since I haven't been, in fact, arrested yet. And no, I won't let him wait out here. You're lucky he likes the force enough not to raise a fuss."

"We'll discuss this in my office," Burlock replies just as coldly and leads them towards an elevator that brings them up to the top floor.

As they enter Burlock's office, a man and a woman rise from their visitor chairs and greet the newcomers with stiff nods. A third person, presumably their son, remains sitting and simply waves in their direction. It's the guy with the adult diaper from the video 'Tony' has sent to Stiles, only a lot more dressed and with way less glitter in his hair and on his face. Other than that he looks incredibly stoned and his mood seems to be on the giggly side of mellow.

Despite the trouble he's causing his father, Stiles finds that he sort of likes him because he doesn't look like a vindictive guy. Also, he's still glittering like Edward Cullen in direct sunlight and it's kind of hilarious.
"Yo, sheriff," stoner guy calls and snickers. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Hello, Brad," John replies mildly, raising his hand in reply to the young man's enthusiastic wave.

"Landon, Amy, you already know John Stilinski. With him are his son ..."

"Stiles," Stiles supplies pleasantly and with a shit-eating grin.

"Stiles, and Mr Hale, apparently a family friend."

"I'm not sure this is appropriate," Brad's mother says derisively. "Can't the boy wait outside?"

"I'm a minor and therefore under parental supervision," Stiles says with such a straight face that his father snorts. "My dad takes my safety very seriously."

"That's cool, man." Brad raises his fist for a fist bump. "New York is a jungle."

"Hale and all the officers in this building can watch over him," Brad's father dismisses. "This is an ongoing investigation and you are not part of it. There's the door."

Stiles shrugs when his father nods slightly. "Alright. Come on, Derek, let's go look if the coffee here is as bad as it is at home."

They leave John for now and check out the kitchen where, to their surprise, an elegant espresso machine is awaiting their pleasure.

"Do you want to do the honors?" Stiles asks and watches as Derek deftly mans the thing. "You totally worked in that coffee shop you showed us yesterday, didn't you?"

"Mmh," the werewolf comments without actually admitting to it. "Go see if they have that soy milk crap you like in the fridge."

Over the hiss of the milk foamer they don't notice the commotion at the elevator. Only when a shadow falls over Stiles' just finished latte macchiato and an eerie silence settles over the whole floor do they look up.

"Hey kid. Mind handing me that one? Pepper wouldn't let me have any more at home."

Speechless, Stiles hands his glass over, gaping at the man before him. Derek next to him is just as speechless, though he manages to keep his jaw from dropping.

"Thanks, you're a life saver," the guy says and gulps the whole, piping hot thing down in three swallows.

"You're ... are you actually Tony Stark?" Stiles manages.

"Last time I checked, which was around ten if you have to know, I was. You can ask JARVIS, he's in charge of my regular DNA check-ups. Gotta be careful with all these super-villains out and about." Stark takes his smartphone from the breast pocket of his million dollar suit and smartly asks, "JARVIS, am I still me?"

The phone screen lights up and a disembodied, cultured voice replies, "Yes, sir. The results of your most recent lab analysis are within accepted parameters."

Some cops in the crowd murmur quietly to each other.
Stark straightens his tie. "Well, it's been interesting not-talking to you, but I've got bigger fish to troll. If you'll excuse me, there's a police commissioner to aggravate."

Without another word, he turns on his expensive heel and strides to Burlock's office. Stiles scrambles to follow, tugging Derek with him. A whole slew of officers are hot on their heels, all of them gleefully expectant and with at least a dozen phone cameras out to document the meeting.

"What is the meaning of this?" Burlock bellows as Stark dramatically throws open the door and strides into the office without waiting for an invitation. "Stark, what do you want?"

"Nothing too outlandish. I just want to make sure you won't let this kid's father take the fall for someone else's kid's stupidity."

"Hey," Brad whines. "It was a party, okay? Everybody parties, it's, like, required from students."

Stark rolls his dark eyes and waves him off. "Yes, yes, I don't care what brand of diaper you prefer or how much you smoke. But I do care about putting the blame where it doesn't belong. Simply put, I have plans for Stiles here and for that I need his father to not be in trouble."

John gives Stiles his best *what have you done now* look.

Stiles shrugs, just as clueless as his father.

"You don't get to decide about that," Brad's father spits. "I'll call my lawyer and inform him of this farce!"

"You do that," Stark says, smirking. "Greet him from Pepper while you're at it and let him know that she'll blacklist him from every major event for the rest of the year if he dares to take your case. Same with your other cronies, dude."

"How dare you-"

"No, how dare you? You're wasting everybody's time here. While we speak, my company made around fifty million quid, give or take a couple. It could've been a hundred if I'd been able to work on my newest invention. Which, again, doesn't make Pepper happy, but what do I know? She's just my CEO, and the richest woman in this country."

Both Landon and Amy pale.

But Stark isn't finished yet. "Why don't you try doing things the normal way for once? Slum it up a little, have your boy know that there are consequences to his actions and all that jazz? A little jail time won't hurt, I'm sure, although he should probably get rid of that glitter beforehand. Some guys in there are rather fond of sparkly fairies."

"Iron Man is telling me to go to jail, pops," Brad grins dopily. "Awesome. Can I?"

Burlock looks like he's bitten into a very sour lemon. "As your father said, Mr Stark doesn't get to decide how the police handle this investigation."

"But you do? I thought there were regulations that every citizen can look up? Because I did look them up and found several discrepancies to what's actually happening here. Where's the proper procedure? Where are the involved officers' reports?" Stark replies, idly playing with his phone. "I'm pretty sure they all have something to say about how you're handling this rather open and shut kind of case. If not to you, then to certain talk show hosts. Or maybe I should skip the talk shows and simply give the media the video from last night? Or better yet, Wikileaks and Anonymous. Tip them
off about what's going on behind closed doors and point them in your direction? It's time for a new, little scandal anyway. New York is so dreadfully boring right now."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Wouldn't I?" Raising an eyebrow, Stark turns to Brad, who still looks a little star-struck. "Here's some well-meaning advice for you, kid: never, ever upload your videos on youtube, it'll always come back to bite you in the ass. Unlike witness statements, they show the buck-naked truth. For life."

"Okay, Iron Man."

"Brad, you won't say another word!" his mother hisses. She glares at Stark. "I'll drag you to court for influencing him in his state!"

Shrugging, Stark inspects his fingernails. "And I'll drag you to court for slandering an innocent visiting cop. If you have to bug someone, bug the cop who actually tried to arrest your son. He's still sleeping off the laughing gas, by the way, and will have to be checked over for neurological damage before he can go back to work. If you're clever, you'll offer to pay for his treatment. I heard that's all the rage with the jury nowadays. Your weed kid might even get out of serving a prison sentence, wouldn't that be rad?"

Brad's mother's whole face turns red. "Don't tell us what to do! My son is an innocent victim!"

"Okay, and with this intelligent repartee this conversation is now over." Stark pointedly rolls his eyes and points first and Stiles and then his father and Derek. "People who're not related to the party boy or the commissioner: follow me. I'm hungry and I demand entertainment."

Derek is the first to follow. He shrugs and leaves after Stark without a word. John is the next to go, face carefully bland. Stiles saunters out last, though not without fist bumping Brad again.

"It's cool that you won't let my dad get in trouble," he says. "I rather like him out and about."

"Are you kidding? Iron Man was here and actually talked to me, it's totally worth it!"

Stiles sighs dreamily. "Right?"

They grin at each other while Brad's parents utter outraged curses.

When Stiles gets out of the commissioner's office, someone tells him that the others are already in the elevator and well on their way out of the building. Stiles gleefully makes the most of it and snoops around a couple of desks before he jogs down the stairs, counting the floors as he goes and casually greeting the occasional cop crossing his path.

"Didn't you listen when I said I'm hungry? Get the hell in here," Stark complains from the backseat of a black limo when Stiles lopes out of the main door and onto the street. "And tell your broody friend to stay away from the fridge. He's eaten all my lime slices, the heathen."

Derek is completely unrepentant and John nurses something that looks a lot like Long Island Ice Tea.

"Dad," Stiles warns as he clammers into the car.

"Let me. This morning was traumatic on so many levels," the sheriff replies with a head shake. "The most worrying part isn't even getting run over by politically motivated police injustice, but what you want with my son, Mr. Stark."
"Call me Tony, all of you." Tony loosens his cravat and makes exaggerated grabby hands at Stiles. "As to what I want: your kid met Captain America yesterday when even I haven't met him yet and I want to know everything about it. Show me."

"You what?" John asks, aghast. "What the hell, Stiles? Can't I leave you alone for even one minute?"

"It was a whole afternoon, and no. Also, Derek met him too, but I don't see you harassing him," Stiles snarks as he hands his phone over to Tony.

"Derek doesn't have a selfie with Captain America," Tony says as if it's a huge crime. He shows said selfie to John who promptly gets his drink into the wrong pipe and coughs until his eyes water.

"Just so you know, we had to sign a level 6 NDA," Stiles points out. "I'm not explaining to Director Fury how my dad got to know about it."

"So? He lets me sign ten of those in a week." Tony throws the phone back to Stiles. "You've got some nice videos on there, by the way, very teen horror. JARVIS, is this fake?"

The cool, slightly British sounding voice answers at once. It's a little disturbing to hear it coming from Tony's breast pocket. "No, sir. The material indicates that this is an original filming."

"Great. Can I meet the monster dude?"

"Oh my god, no," Stiles groans. "Forget that you even saw it. Nobody should know about this."

"Uh, nope. The only human capable of shifting forms that I know of is Bruce Banner, and he's huge and green and very, very angry. If this guy is legit, I'll fly over tonight, no biggie."

Stiles looks helplessly at Derek. "Dude, you can't let him go there. What if the alpha douchebags flatten him? I don't want to live in the town where Iron Man was maimed."

"And what do you propose I do to stop him?" Derek retorts with a raised eyebrow. "If he wants to meet Scott, let him."

"Scott, interesting. JARVIS, background check for Beacon Hills, California. All the Scotts on my screen, pronto."

"Already on it, sir."

Stiles facepalms and his father gently pats his back.

"You've met your match," he consoles him, and, after a look at Tony's self-satisfied smirk, amends, "if not your master."
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I know I'm repeating myself, but THANK YOU for so many helpful and nice comments. Me is happy, and hopefully you'll be happy too with the new chapter. :3

The car stops only a few minutes later and Tony ushers them out.

"Hey, kid, don't feel bad that I duped you. I told you I was the troll master."

Stiles fidgets and fights against a scowling pout. "It's not that." At Tony's raised eyebrow, he sighs. "Okay, not only that."

"Then what is it?"

"I can't believe that Scott trumps Capt- You Know Who," Stiles bursts out. "For real, dude! Five minutes ago you were all over how we met him, and now he's already forgotten? I mean, I have ADHD, but not that bad."

They stare at each other for a second.

"Alright, point," Tony admits at last, steering him towards the entrance of an Ethiopian restaurant. "Monster guy can wait."

A waiter leads them to a private dining room where lemon water and tea are already on the table.

"Order whatever, I don't care. I'll have my usual. JARVIS, record what the kid and Hale are telling us about Rogers."

"Recording started," JARVIS announces.

The sheriff is too flabbergasted to protest and Stiles frankly doesn't care. He's more concerned about how calmly Derek is taking the fact that Tony Stark of all people now knows about werewolves. At least kind of, which is still bad enough.

He narrows his eyes at Derek's suspiciously cool visage and gets yet another raised eyebrow for his trouble.

_How can you be okay with that?_, he mouths at him when Tony's head is turned for a second - and chokes at the equally soundless reply.

_Better Scott than me._

"Stop with the ninja talk, it's not as cute as you think it is," Tony tells them and drums his fingers on the table top. "Less eyeballing and more talking so we can get food."

Derek relaxes and Stiles decides to go with the flow for now and save the freaking out for later, when it's more private and less immediately threatening.

It's a good decision, too, because the mood lifts considerably once he begins gushing about how they
managed to sneak into the Met while Fury was in for a check of the new Captain America exhibition. And after explaining in exhausting detail how Steve Rogers was in person and what they talked about, Stiles crows at the many offered vegetarian dishes on the menu and decides on a starter plate that offers a taste of several different things.

When they have all ordered, Tony frowns and looks imploringly at them.

"Okay. I get that you're probably used to seeing weird shit, considering your monster friend and now the Capsicle and Fury, but why aren't you freaking out? About me, I mean. I'm damn freak-out worthy, if I may say so myself."

"I was appropriately stunned, okay," Stiles says, and, because he's just as much of an asshole as Tony Stark, adds, "though not as much as when we met Steve."

"Steve," Tony scoffs.

"I'm sure it's nothing personal," John says dryly. "Meeting a supposedly dead guy who's also a real, honest to God superhero will do that to him."

"I'm a superhero, too," Tony sniffs. "Still working on the dead part, but I'm not really in a hurry to get there."

"Nah, being dead is totally overrated." Stiles smirks at Derek's pained eye roll.

Three waiters swarm into the room and place plates with appetizers onto the table. Even though Stiles has eaten a hearty breakfast, had a green juice and a huge frozen yoghurt he tucks in with relish.

"Dude, I could get used to this. Too bad Beacon Hills only has Chinese, Thai and Italian. We should start a petition."

"Leave room for your main dish," his father admonishes. "And wait until dessert before you make rash decisions. The mayor is still a little rattled from the last petition you championed."

Stiles pouts. "It wasn't a rash decision to petition against that meat farming factory. Do you know how much water it takes to raise and feed pigs? Too much, especially with the draughts in our state. It's not my fault people agreed with me."

"The mob wasn't needed," John reminds him. "And neither were the torches."

"Yeah, well, I don't have control over the masses. Yet. We can be glad they even got involved in the first place. Otherwise we wouldn't be Beacon Hills now, but Pig Town. Not to mention that we'd have to live with the stink, and the preserve would be lost, too."

Snorting, Tony tears into his bread. "Well, Pig Town does have a certain ring to it, but I like how you roll, kid. Pigs are boring, unlike trees. What's your GPA?"

"4.0," Stiles shoots back.

"Not bad, although our esteemed educational institutions aren't the most reliable interpreters of human intelligence. Too much uniformity and too much crap in the feed lots. Makes the kids dumb and dull."

"Kids aren't animals," John sighs.
"I wouldn't be so sure," Derek counters and steals one of Tony's samosa-type starters.

"Har-har, very funny." Stiles retaliates by stealing a glob of Derek's spinach-y lentils. "I don't even know why I don't hate you."

"He's hot," Tony supplies as he helps himself to John's food. "And he doesn't talk too much." He looks pensively at Derek. "It's like talking at a living wall. I find that soothing, though sometimes input is appreciated."

"Thanks. I guess." The werewolf doesn't look so much thankful as he looks done with Tony's egocentrics.

"Don't brood, sourpuss, it's a gift. Genius needs a counterpoint to shine. Haven't you seen Sherlock? Doctor Who? What about The Mentalist?"

Stiles breaks out into a fit of giggles and laughs until his eyes are watering. His father, too, huffs in silent amusement.

"You know all about it, of course," Tony continues, unperturbed. "Who's the better Sherlock, Capsicle fanboy? Cumberbatch or Miller?"

Stiles gets a grip on himself and says, "Cumberbatch, although Elementary rocks if you don't actually view it as Sherlock Holmes."

"Which Doctor?"


"All of them. Also Hell On Wheels, Game of Thrones, Breaking Bad, Gossip Girl and Itsy Bitsy Spider. I watch while I work and I work a lot."

"Dear lord," John mutters.

Derek just stares at them as if unsure what the conversation even is about.

Tony takes a drink. "I know, I know, not everybody has my work ethic. How's your work ethic, kid? Staying up a lot at night? Digging until things make sense?"

Stiles thinks about his researching sprees, supernatural and otherwise, and shrugs. "Yeah, I guess. My browsing history is a wonderland."

"Well, isn't that promising. What do you say to interning for a day? I could use someone not dull in my lab because there's that one project that's so boring that I'd rather mill my skull open than work on it, but Pepper insists. She also won't let me use one of her assistants, which, unfair. I'm paying their compensation and everything."

"Stiles, no," the sheriff says before Stiles can turn his puppy dog eyes on him. "We're here to support Lydia, not to gallivant around with strange billionaires." He rubs his forehead and sighs. "How is this my life?"

"Lydia only really needs us during the finals and Deaton won't mind if I don't visit all of his contacts. I could totally intern tomorrow," Stiles begs. "It's Stark Industries, dad! Do you want to be responsible for the trauma if you won't let me have this chance? I have to write college applications soon, you know."
"It's better than auditioning for a boy band," Derek states. "Less embarrassing, at least."

Tony claps his hands. "Wonderful. Be at the tower around noon and prepare for a night shift."

"Wait a minute," John protests. "I didn't say he can."

"But you will because you can come along and play with my cars. Or my whatever, I don't care. Beats playing with the commissioner any day, eh? You too, sourpuss." Derek perks up at that and Tony smirks. "That's right. If you behave well, I might even let you race in the basement."

"You're going to hell someday," John groans which is as good as a yes.

"Possibly, but I heard Satan is always open for a good deal. Now where's the main course? I'm starving."

The food arrives promptly and they dig into it. Stiles feels energized in a way he can't describe. He's happy, but not only for himself but because through some pretty incredible stroke of luck he can share his happiness with those closest to him and it's amazing.

After dessert Tony swans off with barely a goodbye and Stiles, Derek and the sheriff decide to tick off the next stop on Deaton's little list.

"It's cool that you're cool with my stuff, but won't you be bored?" Stiles asks guiltily. "We can do something you like, dad. You deserve it, and it's your turn anyway."

John ruffles his hair. "I'll be happy with a cup of coffee and a shady corner. People have given me the side-eye ever since we left the hotel."

It's true enough; a lot of New Yorkers recognize him from the news and grin brightly. One guy with dreadlocks and huge tunnels in his ears even claps him on the back while welcoming him to the city. It's fairly embarrassing for John, but on the upside there is free coffee and cake at the café they choose for a small break.

"I'll just stay here," he says, eating a plump strawberry and gifting the smitten lady behind the counter with a half-smile. "You go on to your witch doctor or whatever he is."

"We don't have to hurry. We can wait for you," Derek offers. He licks milk foam from his upper lip and doesn't notice what it does to the group of girls a few tables over.

"No, no, this is perfect," John insists. "I have my kindle, I'll read for an hour or so and meet you when you're done."

"Would you rather stay here?" Stiles asks the werewolf, but Derek declines.

"Moving is good," he says. "Distracts me from thinking."

Stiles understands that all too well and simply nods. "We'll see you later, then, pops. Try not to get arrested. Or maybe you should, if Tony is so keen on a distraction."

"Very funny. Now shoo."

The apartment of the witch doctor isn't too far away but they have a little trouble finding it. That is, until Stiles stops to think for a minute. He can feel magic skittering over his exposed forearms and suddenly knows how he'll have to approach this problem.

"I guess this guy's not as keen on being found as Cordula," he says and squints at the irritatingly
"Not many magic folks are," Derek replies. He's tense and scents the air. "I smell ozone."

"I hope that's a good sign because at this rate we're going to be late for dinner." I find the door, I find the door, I find the door ... Stiles pours every ounce of belief he can muster into his mantra because fuck it, there has to be a door, thank you very much.

“It’s a bit spooky how you’re doing that,” Derek remarks when they suddenly spot a doorway with the number 79B where they hadn’t seen one only moments before. He carefully touches the knob but nothing happens. "I wasn't sure you could."

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” Stiles says and rolls his eyes. “Maybe you should let me-”

Derek steps aside immediately. “Yes.”

“Before I touch this door, let's check the stats: do you smell creepy things? Like a mummified old guy or something equally disturbing? Or is there poison in the wood? What about electricity?”

“No to everything. I’m not sure how much help I am right now, though. There could be a nasty curse on the door,” Derek replies with surprising openness. “Witches are a blind spot for weres. Always have been. We’re not much for magic.”

“Is that a rule?”

“No, just nature.”

“In that case give me your paw.” Stiles pulls the sharpie Deaton has recommended from his pocket and uncaps it. “Hold still.” He takes a couple of minutes to draw a fancy eye on the back of Derek’s hand, all the while trying to ignore the warmth and the surprising softness of his skin. “Now you'll be able to see through magic. I’ll paint me one, too. See? It’s a matching set.”

Derek goes still, red-tinged eyes on the door. Following his line of sight, Stiles flails at the screaming red symbols on the old wood.

“Oh my god,” he exhales, “I take it back. This is spooky. Jesus.”

“Are you going to knock? We have no idea what those signs mean. Your arm might fall off.”

“I'll only do it because Deaton recommended him,” Stiles snorts but lifts his hand and gamely raps against the wood. “What do you think? Old and frail or badass like Fury?”

Before Derek can answer, the door opens and an effeminate looking man with dark and longish curled hair and pirate-style clothes stares them down.

“Told you it took you long enough,” he says by way of greeting, turns on his heel and goes back inside.

Speechless, they follow him, mindful to close and lock the door behind them. The man doesn’t offer them a seat or refreshments, just stops in his living room slash work area and stares at them.

Stiles is far less uncomfortable than he probably should be. Harris, Deaton and even Derek have hardened him against judging, disapproving glares.

“You brought a protector and didn’t think to warn me,” the man finally says when it becomes apparent that Stiles is happily devouring his strange stuff with his eyes. “Consider it a lesson in courtesy to warn your hosts beforehand.”
“Cordula said something like that yesterday, but I don't have your phone number. Sorry.” Stiles sidles up to a jade bust of a fat goddess and tilts his head. “Is this some kind of etiquette among witches?”

“Yes,” the man says bluntly. “Although you’re not really a witch, and annoyingly wet behind the ears, so allowances have to be made, I suppose. Still, remember to call if you bring a protector. Some security spells are specifically cast to keep weres out.”

“Alright, thanks. Though he isn’t my protector. He’s a …” Stiles glances at Derek who stands stiffly by the door. “He’s a friend. His name’s Derek. I, uh, I kind of did something so he can see through magic. Sorry if that’s super offensive or anything. He was just worried.”

“What did you do?”

Stiles shows him the eye on the back of his left hand. “Just the gift of sight, kind of. I saw it in a video game once and it seems to work, which is seriously awesome.”

The man’s frosty glare thaws and he curiously comes closer. “Interesting. Alan told me that you’re inquisitive and possess a keen mind. I didn’t quite expect this, to be honest. My name is Marcus, welcome in my home.” He gestures for Derek to come closer. “Please excuse my rudeness. Unknown sparks or witches in one's home are usually cause for concern. Whenever we socialize, we do it with a lot of open exit routes.”

Stiles shrugs uncomfortably. “Nah, it’s alright. I haven’t read all the books Deaton has given me yet and there are more from Cordula. I’m sure there’s some kind of etiquette guide among them.”

“Knowing Alan, he won't have given you one,” Marcus smirks, “but I have one here if you trust me not to lead you astray.”

“You're the type for that, aren’t you?” Derek asks dryly and Marcus’ smirk broadens.

“You can smell that, can’t you?” Marcus’ eyes rake over Derek’s body but his appreciation only lasts a second. “It won’t do any good, in any case. You know too many nice people who’d set you straight. Not that I'm keen on anyone’s good opinion but quarrels about such things are always so tedious and rarely accomplish anything.”

Snorting, Derek finally loosens his stance and walks over to the overflowing book cases where Stiles has to work hard at not touching anything.

“That doesn’t mean he’ll be nice,” he warns.

Stiles pouts. "Gee, thanks. I'll have you know that I can be nice."

Derek’s answering smirk is telling, though not as cutting as it could have been.

“Being nice is overrated,” Marcus says dismissively. “Knowing when to be nice, now, that’s the real deal. In our world, it’s all about toeing the lines and expending as little effort as possible for maximum results. All this,” he encompasses his apartment, “is expensive. One ritual healing for a customer costs hundreds of dollars if it’s a difficult case, and believe me, there are difficult cases.”

“What has that got to do with being nice?” Dereks asks and sniffs along the spine of a large leather book.

“Usually I try to cut costs for the unlucky bastards who really need my help, but that’s not possible without making the lesser cases pay more for my services. Thankfully, most of them can afford it.”
“Also, you’re clearly a hedonist,” Stiles grins and points at the many high quality art prints, antique looking sculpts and Marcus' vintage design furniture.

“A body has to eat and be pampered,” Marcus agrees easily. “I enjoy bettering other people’s lives, but not at the expense of my own. We all deserve to experience grand things and find happiness as often and in as many different ways as possible. If that means Egyptian cotton sheets or ridiculously expensive coffee or a long holiday in Hawaii, then so be it.”

Stiles is a little in awe but not for long. Marcus sits him down onto the couch and plies him with yet more books and handwritten journals.

"You seem worthy enough for these. I put my contact data in there, so use it," he demands. "I also expect you to learn something new at least once a week and to keep a journal about your efforts. Let Alan decide on your abilities, but do us all a favor and challenge yourself as often as possible. Your little gift of sight spell is a good start."

"I will," Stiles promises. "Oh, hey, before we go ... can I take a photo of your awesome workshop? I won't upload it to Facebook or anything. It's just for myself and maybe a couple of friends who're in the know."

Marcus waves a dismissive hand. "Be my guest. My apartment is rather thief-proof, no-one would find anything of interest if they even managed to break into it."

"Great, thanks." Stiles shoots his photo and takes one of Derek with his grumpy face next to a gargantuan book case which is stuffed to overflowing with books, scrolls and esoteric knick knack.

After that they take their leave and collect the sheriff from the little café, where the still smitten owner has doped him up on coffee and sugar.

"That's it, no meat day for you this week," Stiles says sternly. "Also, you're going to the gym with me before we go to Stark Tower tomorrow."

"You're the devil," John declares without much heat.

Derek looks at his phone. "It's late, we should go."

Stiles and his father agree; it's never a good idea to keep a woman waiting, especially if there were two women with the last name Martin.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I won't be able to post tomorrow, so I decided to post tonight and continue on Saturday. Not much is going on, except some 'vengers. :)

Lydia is, for once, absolutely speechless.

"Tony Stark himself busted you out of NYPD," she eventually says, disbelief coloring her voice. "And then he invited you to intern for a day after finding out about Scott."

"I was powerless," John sighs. "That guy has unholy technical abilities, charisma, and money."

"Why would he invite you to intern for a day, Stiles?" Lydia asks, her countenance visibly shaken. Stiles isn't even annoyed at how scandalized she sounds; he can barely believe it himself. Deftly he flips through the pictures on his phone and shows her the one with Steve.

"Maybe because Derek and I stumbled across that guy here."

"Is that who I think it is?" she whisper-shrieks.

"Yeah."

Lydia gapes at the photo. "No way. It doesn't compute. How?"

"No idea. It's so secret it isn't even funny, but I swear it's really him. Stark somehow got wind of it, contacted me, learned that dad was in trouble and decided to help out for whatever reason."

"He wanted the juicy bits first, the gossip queen," the sheriff mutters. "And apparently your brain waves crossed when you two met."

Stiles shrugs weakly, though also a little proud. "I'm glad he did, no questions asked."

"He went straight for a favor," his father reminds him, "and I'm still not completely okay with that."

Stiles and Lydia ignore his protest while Mrs. Martin pats his forearm and smiles understandingly.

"You'll get into any college you want now, you know that, right?" Lydia composes herself and looks sternly at him. "So don't you dare botch up this opportunity!"

"I'd never," Stiles smiles and ghosts an exuberant kiss onto the back of her hand. "He wants me there all afternoon-"

"If he doesn't kick you out after an hour or two," Derek interjects. "Which is entirely possible. We know you. You know you."

Stiles throws a piece of bread at him, making Derek dodge and smirk. "Shush, you fur ball, you. You don't get to sass me until we had a talk. The Talk, with capital letters. You know the one."
"Can I be present for that one?" Lydia asks.

At once, Derek's smirks morphs into an apprehensive scowl, but a short glance in John and Natalie's direction doesn't offer any help. If anything, they look just as severe as Stiles.

Stiles stares at Derek until he squirms a little. "Tonight, so don't even think about running." Then he changes the subject and says, "As I was saying, Tony told us he wants me there all afternoon and possibly into the night, so I won't be able to come and do whatever you have planned tomorrow."

"It's good that you aren't sorry about that. If you were, I'd have to hit you," Lydia tells him snippily. "We'll find something to do; you're not that essential to my happiness."

"I, for my part, won't hang around there all day," John says. "It's my turn to take you all out, anyway. Might be cozy with just us three. Or four, if Derek wants to come."

Stiles grins. "I can't speak for him, but Tony offered to let him play with his precious cars. So, maybe not."

Derek looks only a little guilty, which makes the others laugh.

"Please tell us all about how your internship went when you're done," Lydia's mother says as they calm down. "I'm very curious about Mr. Stark's work. There isn't much in the media about him anymore."

"Don't bother, it's just a front. Mom really has a giant girl-crush on Pepper Potts," Lydia smirks. "If you get to meet her, ask her for an autograph or a photo. That'll make mom's year."

"I'll try, but no promises." Stiles snags a piece of eggplant from her plate. "You know my track record with beautiful redheads."

That he can say it without hurt feelings is a testament to how far he has come in such a short time. Between feeling hurt about the distance between Scott and himself, upending his whole home life and learning about magic there was little time to obsess about people.

As the others stuff themselves on hot and cold tapas, Stiles photographs himself with a plate and sends the picture to Steve. He doesn't get an answer, instead his phone rings a few minutes later and he's unexpectedly talking to him.

"You're evil," Steve say without greeting. "What is that stuff? It looks really good; much better than the stuff they bring in from their canteen."

"Tapas," Stiles replies. "Spanish food, very good. You should put that on your list."

Steve is silent for a moment. "Done. Fury won't let me have a phone book, or I'd just order something. I hate being grounded. Right now I don't know why I ever agreed to this. It's driving me mad."

"I hear you. If I were still in New York when you get to go out, I'd invite you out so hard, dude. We could go and eat all the food. New York dogs and Mexican and Ethiopian and more Thai and Italian and Greek ..."

Laughing, Steve interrupts him. "Sounds great, but please stop. I'm so hungry, I'd be happy already with some of the things on your table."

Stiles has an idea - an idea that'll get him into so, so much trouble, but the poor guy sounds so lonely
that he just can't not do it.

"Is there any chance that you can give me your address?" he asks and scrambles for his sharpie when Steve actually gives him one. "Uh-huh, I got that. Though I don't believe Fury just let you have it, which would raise the fun level from ten to about five hundred."

"He didn't, I have an eidetic memory," Steve explains. "I saw the street signs and memorized the number on the mailbox."

"You old fox, you." Stiles waves down a waiter. "Give me an hour or so, I'll see what I can do."

They hang up and Stiles hasn't even opened his mouth to order one of everything on the menu, when his phone rings again. His eyes bug out when he sees who it is, pre-programmed with picture and everything.

"Heeey Tony," he says loudly to let the others know.

His father rubs a hand over his face and Lydia looks a little gobsmacked.

"What did I do to deserve this?" John asks wearily.

Stiles mouthes, "Sorry" at the waiter and asks him to stay for a minute.

"Tony, what's up?"

"You were talking to Steve," Tony sniffs.

"And you were listening in on private talk, you creeper. Not to mention you programmed yourself into my phone."

"I like being prepared. So, why do you need Rogers' address?"

Stiles grins. "You're clever, you'll figure it out."

Tony mumbles something into his goatee for a second and then says, "If you want to send him a care packet, you should do it right. That man has the metabolism of a grizzly bear. Hand me over to the staff."

Stiles wastes no time asking how he knows where he is and gives the waiter his phone. Settling back, he watches as Tony apparently gives the floored guy what appears to be a huge order of take-away. Once that's done, he gets the phone back.

"All done, I'm awesome, no need to thank me," Tony says haughtily. "By the way, I told them to sign the card from both of us. See you tomorrow, kid. Don't be late and bring me a triple mocha latte from Starbucks." He hangs up without waiting for an answer.

"You and Tony did not just buy a ton of food for Steve," Lydia says hoarsely. "I swear to god, you're killing me, Stiles. Now I want to see Steve's face. I bet he's adorable."

Stiles squeaks as the sheriff ruffles his hair affectionately.

"That was scary, but nice," he praises. "And it's a plus that I don't have to foot the bill."

"I'd have footed the bill," Stiles pouts. "It'd have been worth it."

"I'm sure that your special friend will still be happy about it," Natalie soothes. "Now, who wants the
Later, after brushing their teeth and cleaning up, Stiles, Lydia and Derek sit together to have The Talk.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Derek says tiredly. "Stark found out about Scott and you know as well as I that there are no take-backs with that man. Freaking out would have accomplished nothing, except tempting him or Fury to haul me to a lab and poke me like a lab rat."

"Yes, that would've been impractical," Lydia agrees. "Still, I thought you saw McCall as a pack member. Stiles told it as if you didn't even try to defend him."

Derek sighs and lowers his eyes. The corners of his mouth turn down slightly. "Between the two of us, Scott is less likely to be shot on sight. And as I said, Stark is unlikely to let something like this go. Would you prefer that he knows about both Scott and I, and maybe Isaac too? I can't risk the pack like that. I have Peter and your families to think of, not to mention the rest of Beacon Hills."

Stiles relaxes when he hears that. "Plus we really don't want the Alpha pack to know that we spilled the beans to Iron Man. I get it. But dude, your poker face is scary awesome. You didn't even twitch!"

"Inside I was cringing," Derek assures him dryly. "And you flailed enough for all three of us."

Lydia doesn't even try to hide her grin but she does pat Stiles' knee.

"As to why I was able to stay calm ..." Derek's pained gaze captures Stiles', "let's just say that Laura and I had to get good, fast, or be found out and hunted down. After the fire, we had to stop at a gas station on our way to New York and a group of hunters sat two booths away from us. It was literal hell, not knowing whether they'd recognized us and if they did, when and how they'd kill us. Thankfully we got away without rousing their suspicion."

"Oh my god." Stiles blanches and then curses himself. "Fuck, I can't believe I didn't make that connection. I'm so sorry."

"Even you can't think of everything all the time," Derek replies, still sounding downtrodden, but resolute. "Otherwise you'd have deleted the video of Scott long before Stark got his hands on it."

"I kinda forgot it was even there, what with the real thing running around 24/7. It's from way back when he was still learning how to even shift," Stiles admits sheepishly. "And also, nobody but Tony could've determined in a second whether it's real or fake. Anybody else would've bought my bullshit about it being a special effects video."

"True." Lydia sighs. "Still, you should delete it, in case you lose your phone, or it gets stolen."

"I already did, though Tony possibly has a copy by now."

"Possibly?" Derek snorts.

Stiles puts his face in his hands. "I'm sorry, that was colossally stupid. Zero points for forethought and disaster management."

"To be fair, it wasn't foreseeable that you'd meet Stark at all," Lydia comforts him. "Or that he'd be interested enough to snoop through your phone. For all he knew, you were just two ordinary guys who had a stroke of dumb luck. It should've ended there, but it didn't. That's not your fault."
"It's a little bit my fault," Stiles mumbles. "I challenged fate."

"You're a dumbass," Derek tells him.

"Yes, he is." Lydia stands and smoothes down her nightie. "Since The Talk is over now and there is no bloodshed imminent, I'll go to bed. Try not to find more trouble, Stiles, or I'll have to hurt you."

"Yes, my queen."

She smiles sweetly, meanly. "Good night."

Stiles waves her off, head still in his hand. When she's gone he looks at Derek, chewing nervously on his lower lip. "If there's anything I can do to somehow make it up to you ..."

"You could try being less of a trouble magnet," Derek replies and tilts his head a little as if considering him. "But I've got little hope for that."

"Me too," Stiles says miserably. "I'm the worst."

"Don't flatter yourself." Derek's lips twitch a little. "You're not even in my top 100."

oOo

The next morning, a surprisingly large number of people brave the treadmills and weights in the hotel gym. Derek warms up quickly and goes off to work with the free weights while Stiles and his father first run a couple of miles and then find a trainer to spar for half an hour. The guy is short, looks suspiciously like ex-military despite his casual gym clothes, and fights like a demon. He's always that half second faster, always a little quicker at thinking, and it's driving Stiles around the bend because he knows without a doubt that Clint is capable of so much more than he's showing.

During a small break he catches Derek's eye and waves him over.

"What's up?" he asks, mopping sweat from his bare chest. "Are you in trouble?"

"No." Stiles points at the trainer who's busy sidestepping his dad. "But that dude is scary good. Can you sniff him? Is he a werewolf or some other thing that goes bump in the night?"

Derek shrugs, throws his towel in Stiles' face and strolls onto the mat.

"Care to take me on, too?" he asks casually.

Clint sizes him up. "Why not?"

They begin to circle each other, the sheriff forgotten, and test the other's mettle. Clint is the first to strike, only to be pushed back. Derek tries next and is rebuffed just as easily. Slowly they dare more, come closer and hit harder. Clint is fast and ruthless, although he's visibly surprised by Derek's endurance and craftiness. More than once he's flung through the air and onto the mat. He's not a delicate flower, though, grabbing and throwing with gusto himself. He looks like a Tasmanian devil on a war path.

"Hey boys," a cool, female voice interrupts Stiles and John's watching. "He belong to you?"

Stiles can't believe his eyes. In front of him stands one of the most beautiful women he's ever seen, including Lydia and Pepper Potts. She's short and slender but has curves that make people with any kind of sexuality drool. And her red, curly hair ... Stiles is in heaven.
"Who?" he stutters. "Clint or Derek?"

"The big lug. The shorty is mine."

"Then yeah," Stiles averts his eyes when his dad mimes at him to stop visually gobbling her up. "Sorry, I was staring, I know. Sorry."

Her full lips tilt in amusement. "It's okay, you're cute about it. So your friend's name is Derek. What's yours?"

"S-Stiles. And this is my dad, John."

"Natasha."

They nod at each other and the sheriff gives Stiles an approving nod. What with the NYPD disaster and the news coverage he's not keen on people recognizing him because of their rather unique last name.

"He is good," Natasha says after a couple of minutes. "Although his style could use some work. He wastes too much power. And time."

"He's a regular street tank," Stiles snorts and cringes as Derek rakes his thankfully claw-free fingers over Clint's stomach. It's still hard enough to send Clint spinning and then to his knees. Clint recovers quickly, though, and jumps at Derek which is never a good idea, not even during play-fighting. Amazingly, Clint manages to hang on and squeeze the air from Derek's torso. "Think something like Aikido would suit him?"

"Aikido?" She snorts. "Please. If he's a true fighter, JKD is the best."

"Jeet Kune Do, huh?" Stiles considers it, seeing snippets from a late night documentation flicker through his mind. "That's a good idea, actually. Bruce Lee was awesome, I dig that his style evolved all the time. Pity that we don't have a studio nearby. I looked."

"Jesus," John sighs. "Don't give him ideas, Natasha. He's got enough already."

Natasha only smiles and calls a stop to the fight. "Well done, boys. Clint, honey, it's after ten. We have to go."

Clint rubs his bruised stomach and grimaces. "Time flies when you're having fun, eh?" He offers Derek his fist for a bump. "Good fight, mate."

"You, too."

Throwing his arm around Natasha's shoulder, Clint calls out a cheery, "See ya, guys!" and together they walk out of the gym.

"We should get to breakfast, too," John says. "Only one more hour until Lydia and Natalie are off."

"Not a werewolf," Derek says quietly on their trip up to their rooms. "He smells like a hunter, minus the wolfsbane. She does, too."

"Somehow I'm not surprised and that worries me a little," Stiles quips. "Any hostile vibes?"

"No."

They clean themselves up and dress in the best jeans and shirts they've brought to New York. The
suits will stay in the wardrobes until Saturday but the sheriff is relentless over their visit to Stark Tower.

"We have to at least make an effort," he says and saves Stiles from a nasty orange juice spill. "Try not to let your baked beans eat your shirt."

"I'm suddenly nervous," Stiles whines. "I don't think I can eat."

"We'll get you a smoothie on the way, then." John takes his son's plate and shoves it towards Derek.

"You're just interning," Lydia says, exasperated. "The worst that can happen is that they won't give you the paper to prove it. Or do you honestly think Stark is going to let you handle his welding torch?"

"Actually, that's what I'm afraid of," the sheriff mutters around a bite of avocado.
Finally Stiles has his internship with Tony and I hope it's as much fun as you were expecting ... although I guess a few of you will want to kill me when you're done reading :)

Also, thanks again for your great comments! It's so enjoyable to see you (and keep you) guessing, hehe. You're the greatest!

After breakfast Lydia and her mother leave to win the next round of the math championship - Lydia is fourth in the ranking and doesn't plan to do better until the semi-final competition. The sheriff buys Stiles a green smoothie and even gets them all off the taxi a block early so they can buy Tony's triple mocha latte.

"After that thing with Corby I didn't think I'd enjoy New York again, but it's actually great," he smiles, looking bemusedly at the flashing billboards and countless posters.

Derek's arm suddenly shoots out and grabs a scrawny man around the neck who'd come a little too close.

"What are you doing?" John asks.

"Pickpocket," Derek states and shakes his captive for good measure. The man looks like a rat that's about to wet itself.

Stiles smirks. "I'd wondered when one would be stupid enough to try it."

"I'm not a-," the man protests, but after Derek shakes him hard enough to rattle his teeth, he cries, "Alright, alright, I am! I can't breathe!"

Around them people begin to look.

"He took something from that lady's purse," Derek says, pointing at an older blonde. "It's not on him anymore, there's at least one other thief with him. But he has three wallets in his possession that are not his."

"What?" the woman shrieks and hits the pickpocket with the mentioned purse without even looking what was stolen. "I'll report you! Officer! Officer!"

The small man fights against Derek's grip but only manages to tire himself out. In less than a minute two officers on horses are at the scene and take over. They take Derek's statement and phone number while the thief barks and wails to no avail; they drag him away to the station, the irate woman following on their heels.

"Well done, Superwolf," Stiles laughs as they walk into the lobby of America's greenest building. "I'd give you Tony's coffee as a treat but then he'd probably kill me. And you as well."

"Stiles Stilinski, John Stilinski and Derek Hale to see Mr. Stark," John says, already weary from the
drama. The receptionist glances up, picks up her phone and exchanges a few words with the person on the other end. "Please wait over there, our chief of security will issue your badges."

A large man by the name of H. Hogan, according to his name tag, sternly hands them the badges mere moments later and tells them in no uncertain terms to wear them at all times, or else.

"Thank you, Happy, I'll take them up myself," a tall, slender red-headed woman says as she approaches them and offers Stiles her perfectly manicured hand for a shake. "Hello, Stiles. John, Derek. I'm Pepper Potts, Tony's CEO. Please follow me, he's impatient to get to work."

As they walk along a corridor, Pepper plucks the coffee from Stiles' hand and takes a sip.

"Mmh, exactly what I need before the board meeting," she smiles. "Though macadamia syrup would've been great. Please do me a favor and tell Tony that he has to earn his next coffee run."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Pepper is just fine. I fully expect you to cry on my shoulder at one point so there's no need to stand on formality." She stops in front of a large elevator and first swipes her ID over a reading panel and then submits to a retina scan. "JARVIS will take you to Tony's lab. If you need anything, be it food or a first aid kit, just tell him. If you want to leave, our chief of security will escort you out of the building." She smiles warmly at Stiles. "But most of all, have fun. Your paperwork only needs my signature and I'd say you have earned it if you can stand to be around Tony until dinner time. Deal?"

"Deal."

She glides away on her three inch Manolos and the men ride up nearly fifty floors in awed silence.

oOo

When the doors of the elevator open, they look right into what seems to be a robotic war zone. There are robot parts everywhere, some moving but most not, cables hang like lianas from the ceiling, and there are slowly twirling holograms hovering over strategically placed, mostly empty work tables.

“Oh my god, this is seriously awesome!” Stiles exclaims and steps forward, touching the nearest robot - which whirrs to life and touches him right back with a rotating arm. “Uuuh, wicked!”

“Dummy! Get your lazy ass back here!” a voice hollers through the hall and the robot turns on its wheels and rolls away. “You too, people!”

“You don’t actually own us!” Stiles hollers back, grinning.

“You don’t actually own us!” Stiles hollers back, grinning.

“Yet! Give me a week and then let’s see how un-owned you are!”

“Don’t make that a challenge,” the sheriff says to Stiles. “Please.”

They pick their way through Tony’s chaos and assemble around the station where he’s morosely spinning around the hologram of something that looks a lot like an overgrown dragonfly.

“Is that the thing that makes you want to mill your skull open?” Stiles asks, bending down to see the details.

“That was yesterday. Today I wanna saw my head right off and pitch it into the scrap metal press.” Tony makes a gimme motion without looking at Stiles. “Coffee. Quick. Coffee is my fuel.”

“Pepper nabbed it,” Stiles shrugs. “Said you have to earn the next run.”
“And I suppose you just gave it to her.” Tony finally turns and narrows his eyes at him. “Of course you did.”

“She is gorgeous and I’m not stupid enough to get in her way.” Stiles comes a couple of steps closer and pokes at the hologram. “Now what is that thing even supposed to do?”

“They want a drone, can you believe it?” Tony moans. “Can there be anything more boring? Drones are a really done thing. It’s so done, it’s as dry as the Sahara. It’s unbearable.”

“And what is it for? Surveillance? Micro bombs? I thought you didn't do weapons anymore.”

“I don’t, except for myself and sometimes SHIELD, lazy bastards. But this is not such a one, that’d have at least been a little fun. This is just surveillance. As I said, boring as all hell.” Tony tilts his head in every which direction until his neck cracks disgustedly and then orders JARVIS to show Derek and the sheriff his car park. “Open all the doors and let them out to take a turn through the park house. There's no need to let everyone suffer. That’s a good AI.”

“As you wish, sir. If you’ll follow me, Mr. Hale, Sheriff Stilinski. The car park is underground.”

Lights start blinking on the floor, leading the two men back to the elevator.

“Don’t have too much fun without me,” Stiles says and waves. “Take lots of pictures in manly cars for me and Melissa.”

“And take at least one of grumpy cat in my newest design, JARVIS will show you which,” Tony adds. “Pepper might want him for an ad or something, I wasn't really listening to her last night. I never know what she sees in other people.”

Derek sneers. “Good luck. I’ve got bad lens flare.”

“Not with my cameras, you don’t. Now be gone, I’ve got this piece of utter ennui to finish.”

The two men follow JARVIS’ direction and not a minute later the elevator closes and Stiles and Tony are alone with the flickering hologram.

"Pepper will sexile me," Tony moans. "There's no way I can do this. My brain refuses to lower itself to this level of menial boredom."

“At least you’re not at the this-is-shit stage. It might be salvageable.” Stiles chews on his lower lip for a moment. “Uhm, can I tell JARVIS to do something?”

“Yes, yes, give him work to do.”

“Okay, JARVIS: Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner cartoons, please. The old ones.”

A screen nearly silently rolls from the ceiling and an invisible beamer begins playing cartoons.

“What is this? I said I watch a lot of TV but right now I can’t afford to have a good time. Pepper will kill me, or worse, give me more of that crap work to do if I have fun doing it.”

“Shut up, you’re just in a rut.” Stiles points at the screen where Coyote receives an ACME parcel. “Fun is just what you need. Seriously. This has so many possibilities, I can’t even.”

He’s got Tony’s attention now and they wordlessly watch a couple of cartoons.

“You want me to make these stupid drones into ACME parcels,” Tony says after ordering JARVIS
to freeze the cartoons. “You basically want me to prank criminals.”

“Youp.” Stiles spins on his chair. “Because standard functions will only work in standard situations. And they're still not weapons. Not on the scale you're used to.”

“Nice touch, but around ninety percent of all cases are standard,” Tony points out.

“And the other ten percent are non-standard cases. Believe me when I say that the odds can be a bitch to handle. Literally, sometimes.”

Tony proves that he’s really that intelligent because he immediately thinks of the little video Stiles has made of Scott’s werewolf transformation. “Are there more of monster guy’s kind out there? You do mean monster guy, don’t you?”

“Yepp. Though I can’t say whether they’re into political terrorism or not. With the right incentive … who knows? But monster g-, uh, Scott, isn’t dangerous. Just dumb.”

Tony considers this. “Have you heard of the Tesseract? No? It’s a small cube with a huge energy output. Alien tech, if you can believe it. Now that I know that there aren't only aliens out there but supernatural people as well, maybe it is time to take non-human adversaries into consideration.” He lazily spins on his chair and pulls up a holographic touch screen with his design plan. “What exactly do you have in mind? What are we even up against?”

“Weeell, what basic functions do you have planned? Let’s go from there.”

Another half dozen plans pop up, complete with moving simulations, and Stiles immerses himself into Tony’s work.

oOo

“Are you still at it? I’ve brought food!” Pepper calls through the work shop. When she comes up to the work table, she stops short and gapes at the dozens and dozens of open holograms. “What happened?” she asks Stiles, already half panicked. ”Did he get his hands on the scientists' coffee again?”

“No coffee, just creative juice,” Tony says impatiently. “Give the kid his falafel, his growling stomach is distracting me.”

“It’s after four, I’m allowed to be hungry. I only had a smoothie this morning.”

“Mmh, smoothie. JARVIS, I want one. Make it sweet.”

“And green,” Pepper adds before Tony can specify. “You need vitamins if you won’t get out into the sun.” She hands Stiles a bag with several wrapped sandwiches. “The one with the X is a shawarma. Your dad and Derek are down in the gym. I’m afraid Clint and Natasha have found them.”

“They’re here?” Stiles asks, fumbling with the wrapping paper of his pita bread. “Red-headed hottie and short military guy?”

“You’ve already met them,” Pepper says flatly. “When?”

“Just this morning at the hotel gym. Clint sparred a little with Derek. Why? What’s up? Are they spies or something?”

Tony takes the shawarma and sniffs it. “Try spies and something. Whoa, the guys were a little liberal
with the chilli, eh?"

"Why is Nick doing this to me? They're civilians, for god's sake," Pepper sighs. "He'll kill us all eventually, and just when I finally had some kind of routine going. Great."

"No, he won't. He needs me and my little Wileys and he knows it."

"Wileys? Do I even want to know?"

"You wanted drones, remember? And now I'm giving you drones." Tony unwraps his food and takes a huge bite. Garbled, he continues, "Only they're much better than what everybody wanted … as usual."

"You'll have to prove it," she replies but kisses his cheek anyway. Her eyes roam over the plans. "Is that … did you really call that one Roadrunner?"

"He'll be a fast little bugger," Tony says smugly and swallows. "Mean, too. You can give the kid his internship paper thingy, he made me watch Roadrunner cartons and basically told me to ACME our enemies if they actually manage to detect or appropriate the surveillance drones. I think I want to keep him."

Stiles preens and fist-bumps Dummy.

Pepper pulls one of the holograms closer and inspects the design. "Well, you did say that you want to de-escalate our portfolio. I like the size, though smaller ones might be better for certain missions."

"Doesn't matter, I can scale them however you like."

"Good, but calling in Bruce Banner for the biochemical part … I don’t know. Do we even need him for this? Last I heard he’s hiding somewhere in China. Should we really drag him back?"

"It’s India now, actually, and yes, we need him, because he's the best. Stop feeling sorry for him. I’ll give him work to do and a place to live and he’ll like it."

Tony drags Pepper into his lap and shows her the moving sketch of a dragonfly-like drone that trundles to the floor, is being picked up by a man and reactivates upon contact by dousing him with sleeping gas and binding him with silvery nano-wires. It looks spookily like a cat-sized spider at work.

"What do you think? This should appease the war-haters a little and afford our forces more opportunities for interrogation."

"You mean the general populace, and yes, that’s a good thing." She kisses Tony again and gets up. "I’m not sure how many of your designs are actually good for the field, but there are so many of them, some of them are bound to work. Why don’t you start building something and I’ll finish the paper work for Stiles. JARVIS, please set an alarm for seven and remind me to order dinner for our guests."

Right at that moment Stiles’ phone rings, tearing him out of his feeding frenzy.

"Hey Lyds, what’s up?" he asks after putting his falafel sandwich down.

Lydia’s voice is exasperated. "This was the most boring day so far and I’m in desperate need of entertainment. One can only watch so many shows before that becomes dull. Do you know what your dad has in mind? We're ready to do whatever, as long as it isn't math or theatrics."
“No, he’s actually somewhere at Stark Tower with Derek and two actual kick-ass spies. I’m not sure how soon he can get away.”

“I don’t think they’re going to let him and sourpuss get away,” Tony informs him, already tinkering with little parts and a screwdriver. His half-eaten shawarma lies forgotten on a side table.

“But I’m in New York for Lyds,” Stiles says. “And dad promised to do something with her and her mom tonight. We can’t just ditch them.”

Pepper sighs. "I'll try to convince Clint to back off. He'll hate me; just what I needed after my day."

"Don't bother, Pep. Kid, just invite your girlfriend and her mom over,” Tony says nonchalantly as if it were normal to invite strange people to his place. "I'll have Happy and JARVIS loom, it'll be a party."

"What?" Stiles' mouth drops open. "Oh no, that's not necessary. Seriously, dude, we're not angling for an invitation."

"It totally is. I've still got a few more hours with you, people I know are keeping people you know hostage, the least I can do is to invite the rest of your people to make it up to you."

Stiles looks at Pepper, a silent plea on his face.

She sighs again, very gustily this time. "Alright. Put me on the phone with them, they'll have to submit their data to our security team."

Fumbling, Stiles hands her his phone.

"Oh, and order French for dinner, honey. Vegan for the kid and his dad. For the others too, apparently," Tony calls, crowing in triumph when a little part slides home and he manages to screw it on. "Eight will be fine."

"I hate you," Pepper mouthes at him. Tony blows her a smarmy kiss. "Hello? This is Pepper Potts from Stark Industries. With whom am I speaking, please?"

She wanders off and Stiles gapes at Tony.

"Dude. You're the greatest, and you're officially insane."

"Tell me something I don't already know." Tony throws him a tiny screwdriver. "Here, let's see how good you are with your hands. If you manage to not fuck our Mark I up, I might let you return for a real internship."

Stiles doesn't have to be told twice. He's not that great with machines (or even his own car for that matter), but watching Tony work is inspiring and it is immensely satisfying to screw little parts together, connect wires and springs and whatever else needs connecting and have it approved by him. To have it used in a completely new creation and see it move when Tony tests it.

During one such test run JARVIS interrupts them with a live surveillance feed of the gym and asks Stiles to go downstairs.

"I'm sorry, sir, but it is urgent. I feel that an intervention might be needed," he says calmly. "Sheriff Stilinski and Miss Romanov are aiming with guns at each other. There's also blood, though I couldn't detect any fatal wounds."
"Shit, what happened?" Stiles asks, already scrambling up and towards the elevator.

"I believe Sheriff Stilinski termed it 'wolfing out'," JARVIS tells him.

"Fuck."

Tony is hot on Stiles' heels as they barrel into the gym at top speed.

"Down with your weapons!" Stiles screeches as soon as he sees Derek and Clint's bloody chests. "What the fuck is wrong with you people!"

"He started it," Natasha retorts, unperturbed and without taking her eyes off of Stiles' father who's covering Derek with his body and aiming right back.

Stiles has no idea how he got his service weapon through airport security, but right now he's thankful as fuck for it. He ducks into the boxing ring and positions himself in front of a seriously pissed off werewolf and an even more pissed off father.

"Away with the gun," he repeats, fighting against the bile in his throat and his hammering heart.

"Or what?" Natasha asks, faintly amused.

Stiles grinds his teeth and Derek behind him growls harshly. Slowly, he takes the packet with mountain ash from his pocket, opens it deftly with one hand and quick as lightning blows the contents at Natasha and Clint. A dusty, almost smoky circle forms around them, just as Natasha fires.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Guys, you're awesome. I'd feel sorry for the cliffhanger if you hadn't made it so enjoyable for me. Your comments had me laughing out loud! :) To make up for the tease, this chapter is kinda long-ish again and hopefully satisfies your thirst for more. Please let me know what you think and keep guessing, but most of all I hope you'll keep enjoying the story :3

"NO!" several voices shout as one.

"Ow, fuck!" Natasha hisses right after and clasps her left upper arm.

"Are you alright?" Clint asks tightly while he swiftly takes her weapon and aims it at Stiles.

The sheriff looks done with the pleasantries as he targets Clint, the barrel of his gun pointing right at his forehead.

"Yeah, the bullet grazed my arm," Natasha grits out. "But it was a ricochet, no return fire."

Clint broadens his stance, frown growing even darker. "Impossible from that angle. Maybe we should incapacitate them."

"Yeah, no, I wouldn't do that if I were you," Stiles informs him. "The next might go into you, not just leave a mark."

"Stiles ..." John asks in a clipped tone. "What have you done?"

Seething, Stiles feels his anger going from fiery rage to icy wrath. "Just found out that mountain ash works against humans, too," he informs them coolly and catches Natasha's eye. "Therefore, fuck you, lady. Nobody points a weapon at my dad or my friends and gets away with it."

Natasha stares at him for a long, uncomfortable moment before she inclines her head slightly. "Fair enough."

"Well, well, if that wasn't interesting," Tony drawls, gingerly stepping between them and collecting the firearms. He has to wrestle a little with Clint before he surrenders his gun. "Looks like I don't have to visit your monster guy after all, kid, since you've conveniently brought one with you already."

"He's not a monster," Stiles snaps.

"And what would you call someone with such a face?" Natasha asks in a carefully bland voice.

"I'm a werewolf," Derek growls and flashes his red eyes at her. The scratches from his fight with her and Clint are already healed and he rolls his shoulders. In a way, it's an even better 'fuck you' than Stiles' because the other two are human and will have to deal with their wounds for a while.

Tony stares at him, wide-eyed and speechless, but it slowly morphs into an expression of unholy
"Are you serious?" he asks, inching closer. When Derek's face turns back to normal, he crows excitedly. "You and monster guy in your home town both? How? When? Why? What can you do? What can't you do? Is it contagious? I bet it is. How is it transmitted? Do you-

Pepper storms into the gym. Upon seeing the blood on Derek and Clint she shrieks, "Oh my god, what happened? Do we need a med team?"

"Yes, please," Natasha says through clenched teeth. "Stings a little. Might need stitches. And painkillers."

"Me, too," Clint mumbles, suddenly paling. "Shit. Will this turn me, Hale?"

"You wish," Derek says, dead-pan. "Have fun with the scar, though."

They glare at each other. Tony pokes at Derek's naked biceps and the werewolf lets him with exasperated tolerance. Stiles can tell it's more to piss Natasha and Clint off than genuine patience, though.

"Can somebody please tell me what just happened?" Pepper's voice is shrill.

"Natasha tried to shoot Derek," Stiles tells her.

"And the kid threw this black stuff at us," Natasha counters. "I don't know how, but it made my bullet ricochet."

Tony opens his mouth.

"Don't say it," Stiles warns. "Not until those assholes apologize to Derek and my dad."

The billionaire looks like keeping his quip to himself might kill him.

"You know that Fury already has you on his radar, right?" Clint warns. "Why do you think we contacted you at the hotel? That little stunt just made your life so much more difficult."

"As opposed to losing my dad to some trigger-happy idiot?"

Natasha rolls her eyes. "I wouldn't have shot him. I was aiming at the wolf man."

"Who was covered by my dad and who'd have mauled you after the first shot. Jesus, are you really that stupid?"

Natasha does not look happy about being called stupid and Stiles gets the impression that she's just as spoiled as Lydia, in her own way.

John steps forward and puts an arm around Stiles shoulders. "Can we stop with the insults now? Nothing happened and they got their just desserts, don't you think?"

"Ooh, I know that look," Tony sing-songs. "Not just enough, eh? Can't say I blame the kid. You attacked guests in my house, which is a big no-no. I tolerate you because Coulson and Fury vouched for you, but I think it's better to revoke the standing invitation for now. JARVIS, get on with it."

"Done, sir. Access to sensitive parts of the building have been revoked for Clint Barton and Natasha Romanova and all their aliases," the cool voice confirms.
"Goodie. Now piss off, get cleaned up, and only come back if you're prepared to grovel."

"But he started it!" Clint protests, looking as if he honestly can't believe what Tony has just done. "He grew fucking claws! Like Wolverine!"

Derek crosses his arms, unimpressed. "Because you nearly broke my neck. Stop whining."

"I'm not whining, you just startled me."

"Dammit, I need a drink," Pepper declares. "And then I'll watch the surveillance video again. Clint, Natasha, come with me, please. I think it's better to break it up now."

"You're not staying for dinner!" Tony calls after them.

oOo

After the scare in the gym, Stiles waits for Derek to shower and dress. Tony stays as well and plays with the mountain ash in the little zip bag.

"So this is really just mountain ash?" he asks, eyeing it intently. "No magic stuff from outer space or another time?"

"You wish, eh?"

"Of course I wish. It'd make my life much easier. I think." Tony hands the little bag over. "Do that thing again. Make a circle. Or better yet, make something blow up."

"Why aren't you freaking out? Even I freaked out when I found out that I could do things with this stuff. And also other stuff, but eh. I've just started my training, so whatever."

"I would if it was me being able to do the freaky stuff. But it's you, so I'm allowed to skip the freak out and go straight to curious."

"More like obnoxious," Stiles mumbles but grins. Pure relief courses through him at the realization that Tony won't kick him out - or worse, hand him over to Fury or whoever was in charge of not quite normal human beings. "Okay, here we go." He pinches a little of the powder and makes it fall down in a triangle. "Funnily enough, it's getting easier every time. I thought this would be hard."

"Well, you say fooling around, other people call it training. Now a star," Tony commands and Stiles obliges.

When Derek finally comes back, Stiles has managed a little Iron Man with the mountain ash. Tony films it all with Stiles' phone and he's not shy about sending the video to Captain America.

"Oh no, now he'll think I'm a freak," Stiles frets.

Tony throws him an are you serious, bitch face and even Derek rubs his forehead with his hand in exasperation.

"Okay, that was stupid, but you're aware that the freaky pirate-guy screens his messages, yes?"

"If you're implying that I just got you in trouble, kindly remember that Fury sent Black Widow and Hawkeye to spy on you first. And that they successfully found not only sourpuss here out, but you as well."

"Their faces were hilarious," Derek shrugs. "Your AI showed me the footage. Nice multifunctional
shower glass, by the way, Stark."

"Thank you, I try to be exceptional at everything I invent."

"Are you saying this was worth it, Derek?" Stiles can't believe it. "Dude, what if they vanish you?"
Agitated, he gets up, calls the mountain ash back into his fingers and flings it at the werewolf,
catching him in a star shaped trap. "I don't want you to get vanished, okay?"

"They won't vanish me," Derek says calmly. "Besides, it kind of is worth it. Think about it."

Gaping at him, Stiles freezes. Then he throws his hands up. "This is an even worse plan than just
letting the alpha pack come into Beacon Hills. And here I thought nobody could have worse plans
than Scott."

"We haven't got much to lose at this point," Derek reminds him. "We're alone, and they're five. We
need help."

"Okay, yeah, true. But please tell me you didn't provoke them." Stiles balls his hand to a fist and the
star shrinks around Derek so he has to stand very straight to not set off the barrier. "Because if you
did, I'll throttle you. With my bare hands."

"I didn't." Derek sighs. "But they noticed quickly that they could push me, and they pushed too far.
Had I not shifted, the man, Clint, would've broken my neck. I told you that they both smelled like
hunters and now we know why."

Hearing that, Stiles feels no remorse at all that Natasha got hit by her own bullet. He has no patience
or forgiveness left for attractive people who try to kill his friends and family.

Derek obviously agrees with him. "What's done is done. Don't you think we should at least get
something out of it?"

"Like what? Do you want to talk SHIELD into cleaning up for us?"

"The way I see it, they owe us one."

"Whoa, whoa, time out," Tony calls and gets up. "This is getting heavy, fast. Kid, how old are you
again?"

"Seventeen," Stiles replies, rebellious. "Doesn't mean I'm not good at plans."

"Easy, tiger. Just trying to catch up. Let's speak clearly for a moment, because knowing about
SHIELD is one thing, attempting to strong-arm SHIELD into some kind of agreement is quite
another. I should know, I have to deal with their lawyers all the time, and they're not the worst of the
bunch."

Stiles jaw sets mulishly and he knows that the others can probably see the storm brewing in his head.
"Oh yeah? Just watch me."

oOo

On their way to the living area where the sheriff is waiting for them, Stiles' phone rings. It's Steve,
and he's audibly flabbergasted.

"Stiles, I just watched that mini-movie on the telephone. Impressive, the technology of this age, but
tell me, did that - was that really - what did I just see?"
"Nothing, just a little bit of playing around," Stiles sighs, suddenly tired. "Tony shouldn't have sent it. I'll be in so much trouble. Derek, too."

"Why?"

" Haven't you heard? Fury's got his eye on us."

Steve snorts. "How could I forget. So, do you need help?"

"Do we need ... no, not yet. Anyway, I'm more worried about you. I guess the monkey parade is about to start soon. You should chill out, eat the rest of the tapas and catch up on movies, not help random nobodies with their problems."

"The food's gone. It was delicious," Steve informs him. "But most of the movies are uninspiring. Why are the women so neurotic in them?"

"Punishment for centuries of oppression," Stiles guesses.

"Huh, yes, that might actually be true." Steve pauses thoughtfully. Then he says, "Come on, give me something. I'm bored. All Fury lets me do is read and train and talk to his mental health people. A little action would be nice. I feel like I still haven't come down from battling Red Skull and his goons."

Stiles feels awful for even contemplating it and has to work to get the refusal through his traitorous lips. "That would be great on so many levels," he admits, "but your scary boss would kill us. It's got nothing to do with national security and it's mostly our own fault, anyway."

"It's not," Derek growls.

Apparently Steve has heard him because he promptly asks to speak with him. Stiles, against his better judgment, yet again hands his phone over and falls into step next to Tony.

"Sorry for crashing our fun time," he says and means it. "Someone out there hates me."

"I know the feeling," Tony hums, not looking bothered in the least. "Beats boredom any day, though. Do you think it'd be terribly childish if we built a drone with a spring fist? I have the sudden urge to sock some people in the face by proxy."

"Can we use photos of Clint and Natasha?"

"Sure, but why them when I have a perfectly good mug shot of Fury lying around?"

They deliver a quietly talking Derek to John, who watches a sports match on the biggest TV screen Stiles has ever seen, and return to the workshop, where Tony directs JARVIS to assemble one of his older land-measuring drones. He lets Stiles help whenever he needs an extra hand and barely thirty minutes later they have a small, seemingly excited robot zipping back and forth. Its huge eyes take everything in and tiny arms carefully touch reachable metal parts and cables.

"We'll call him Socky," Tony decides and presses a file full of photos at Stiles. "Take this, Happy is just bringing your girlfriend and her mom up to the den."

Stiles can't help himself; as soon as he sees Lydia in the doorway he comes up to her and engulfs her in a bear hug.

"My life is awful," he groans and buries his face in her hair. "French cuisine and mega-cool mini
"You're making no sense, Stilinski," Lydia chastises but doesn't push him away. "A life with French

"Tell that to whoever is out there to get me." Stiles lets her go and pulls her further into the room,

They all shake hands and Tony flatters Lydia's mom with an appreciative smile.

"Mainly because I get Antoine to cook here and I get to nibble," Pepper snipes back from the

"He's kind like that," Mrs. Martin says, smiling shyly. "It's a pleasure and an honor to meet you, you

She and Pepper wander off towards the bar, where Happy pours them each a glass of wine.

"So," Lydia says after she's looked her fill, "how did you spend your afternoon?"

"I should confess," he says.

"Absolutely," Tony agrees with a straight face. His dark eyes don't quite look at Stiles.

"I'm terrified."

"The price of having exceptional women in your life."

Lydia cocks her head. "Cute. Now what did you do that you feel you have to confess? Did you

"Uhm, no."

"Then it can't be that bad. Spill."

They sit her down, put a tall glass of ginger ale into her hand and tell JARVIS to replay the

"Just for the record, it was kind of a life or death matter for a second," Stiles says when the video is

"He's talking about the director of SHIELD," Tony clarifies. "SHIELD is a super-secret major

Lydia drains her ginger ale and takes Derek's as of yet untouched beer. The werewolf is still talking
to Steve and just waves at her to have at it.
"Only you, Stiles," she sighs, taking a sip. "This'll end in alcoholism if we don't get a grip. I'm too young and brilliant to go down like this."

"I'm not drinking," he points out. "And you'll stop after this one because you've got quarter finals tomorrow and need to win."

"Don't worry on my account," she huffs. "The whole thing is more trouble than it's worth. I thought there would be competition. Instead I have to play mega-dumb so the big boys won't cry on national TV. It's embarrassing."

"Oh, you're talking about the math championship," Tony drawls and drinks from a glass of green juice. "Dreadfully boring. I was asked to supply a few equations but the board rejected them. Too difficult for the finals, they said."

Lydia offers her bottle for a salute. "I wish they'd approved them. Anything would be better than their lackluster high school algebra."

Tony takes a StarkPad from a side table, switches it on and tells JARVIS to put the rejected equations on the screen.

"I can't see you languishing like that, girly. Here, knock yourself out. It should entertain you until dinner is served."

In not even thirty seconds Lydia has gone to a place where only math geniuses go and rapidly pokes with a stylus at the screen. Stiles hears her mutter excitedly under her breath.

"You sure have a knack for making my friends happy," he says, smiling. "Thanks. She was really getting frustrated with the competition and she had a shitty start here already for a handicap. Dad's just happy about your huge TV and I guess Derek found a new buddy in Steve. I didn't know he could talk that much all at once."

"Different people satisfy different needs," Tony says wisely and then ruins it by demanding that they finally put Socky to work.

In a matter of minutes, they've clipped the photos to large, feetless whiskey tumblers and then put the tumblers in a neat row on the floor. Socky rolls along, camera-eyes fixating on the targets.

"Sock 'em good!" Stiles calls and with a funny, little squeak a fist bursts from Socky's corpus and hits Nick Fury right in the grumpy mug.

Tony howls with laughter. "I agree with Hale. This was worth it!"

Next is Clint. Socky's swing is so hard that the tumbler spins round and round, dragging the photo with it. Stiles and Tony high-five each other while laughing tears.

Once Natasha's tumbler got socked as well, Socky moves on to Derek and hits him against the ankle. When the werewolf doesn't budge, he lets out an offended chirp and zooms over to Mrs. Martin, who gives a seemingly satisfying yelp.

"And on that note we should take the children to dinner," Pepper says dryly, taking both glasses and putting them back onto the bar. "Do you think your daughter will kill me for taking away her math?"
Here you go, have fun with the shorty. It's not exactly action-packed, but there's still a lot going on. I think. :)

And again, I thank you for your hits, kudos and many wonderful comments. About two thirds of this part of my series are done now. Unfortunately it's NaNoWriMo time now and I'm participating, so new stuff will take a while to be written and polished. My novel unfortunately comes first (please don't kill me, lol).

Still, have fun, and be assured that the finished part 1 of TMINY can kind of stand alone for a while. :)

Lydia doesn't kill Pepper, but during the first ten minutes of dinner she's notably put out.

"Don't pout," Tony tells her as they've served themselves their starters. "I have more to entertain you all through your next school year, though I have to warn you that you might find yourself in a consulting contract if you manage to solve certain equations, and I won't tell you which those are."

"Speaking of finding yourself in contracts ..." Pepper smiles at Derek. "JARVIS brought a couple of photos to my attention that show you with our newest Stark car. He suggested approaching you according to measurements and features and I must say that I agree. You'd make a great model. If you're free during the next days we could make something work. Our PR department is certainly interested."

"Thanks, but no thanks," Derek says at once. "Publicity is not my thing."

"Yeeaah, about that ..." Stiles leans back and gives Derek a look. "Did you or did you not tell us an hour or so ago that we could do with some help? And didn't another certain someone also tell us that it wasn't a good idea to try to twist a certain government department's arm without leverage?"

"What does that have to do with silly advertisements?"

Stiles rolls his eyes. "Dude, it's about visibility. This is your leverage. If you're in the public eye, they can't make you disappear so easily."

"Still easily enough," Tony interjects, "but at least people would ask questions. Especially when you work for Stark Industries."

"I bet you wouldn't even have to smile," Stiles wheedles.

Pepper tries and fails to hide her laughter when Derek's frown grows even more pronounced. "Smiling would completely destroy the cool our Stark cars try to bring to the street. How about you come to our studio tomorrow and I'll have one of our photographers make a portfolio for you? If you have fun, you stay and pose a little with the cars, and if you don't, you've still got a free portfolio and lots of great coffee out of it."

"It'll be fun and you get to do something completely not werewolf-related," Stiles adds. "Be normal
"Being a model is not normal, Stiles," Derek counters.

Stiles just snorts. "Please, as if people haven't tried before to tap that before. Besides, it's the quarter finals tomorrow, I'll stay with Lydia. You could even go and meet your friends afterwards or whatever. We've already hogged so much of your time, it's not a big deal. You should have a day off from our craziness."

John, who hasn't said much since the confrontation in the gym, looks kindly at Derek. "Stiles is right, son. You might like it, but even if you don't, it's an experience that could look good on your resume one day. Or at least on your bank statement."

"Please," Pepper says and blinks sweetly at Derek. "Our company is huge, we're always in need of fresh faces to represent us. And I guess I can openly say that you have a certain something."

"And my being a werewolf wouldn't hurt you?"

"I don't see how it could," she replies. "Assuming that you werewolves normally hide, and assuming that you're not linked to politically radical groups, there shouldn't be a problem."

"There are hunters," Derek says quietly. "Humans who hunt and kill us for what we are. Sometimes even for sport. I'm not sure how showing my face on billboards and in ads and what have you will help me stay alive. I'm kind of notorious in their circles. My family was ... we were well-respected and well-known among the humans of Beacon Hills, even if they didn't know that we were werewolves. Hunters killed them anyway. And they're still trying to finish the job. Me being slaughtered like a pig won't be good press for you."

"Oh my god, is that true?" Pepper asks, horrified.

Stiles, Lydia and John nod; there's no way to sugarcoat the truth.

"Beacon Hills is a nightmare right now," Lydia's mom says and puts her fork down. "I only learned a couple of days ago just how bad things really are." She turns to Derek. "If I had any right to give you advice, I'd tell you to pack your bags and go. You deserve better than that. No territory can be worth that."

"Seconded," Stiles says. "But maybe we shouldn't talk about this during dinner. Would be a shame to lose our appetite, because this stuff is great. Right?"

"Too late." Tony is already typing on his StarkPad, pulling up newspaper articles and pictures. "Yikes, now I know why JARVIS dallied with the report about you all. Your body count is impressive. Now I want the whole story, as experienced by you. Pepper can decide then if having your manly stubble on our billboards is worth the hassle."

Stiles exchanges wary looks with his father and friends. He has the gut feeling to go with it, to include Tony and Pepper into their small circle of intimates, but he won't say anything if one of them isn't okay with it.

"Go for it," his father finally says and smiles crookedly at Tony. "But give the kid something to work with, a pin board or something. Otherwise you'll get a headache."

"He can use JARVIS." Impatiently, Tony gets up with his plate, wanders back into the den and plops down onto the couch. "Get in here!" he calls. "Bring your food, the other courses are in the kitchen!"
Nobody tries to contradict him, not even Pepper who made sure they all sat at the dining table earlier. She curls up next to Tony, full plate on her lap, and the others settle down around the couple.

Stiles needs a minute to collect himself. "Uh, okay. Apparently I'm doing this ... again. JARVIS?”

"Yes, Mr. Stilinski?"

"Do you have a presentation mode?"

"Certainly, sir. Just let me know what you need."

It takes a little while for Stiles to assemble maps, reports, pictures and to also figure out how he can visually connect the things he wants to connect. Once he understands JARVIS, however, he's in his element ... especially since he now has access to all the closed police files.

"Eat, eat," he tells the others when Lydia calls for him. "I'll just finish these last layers. My story is shit, but that doesn't mean your viewing experience has to be, too."

Ten minutes later he's ready and leads Tony Stark and Pepper Potts through the mysterious and brutal happenings of Beacon Hills, California. Apparently his presentation is so good that Tony calls, "Save it, JARVIS!" after he's finished and, completely out of the blue, pulls Derek into a short side-hug.

"Pep and I have a thing for underdogs," he states. "So you'll come here tomorrow, get your hot bod photographed and sign your contract, and then you'll tell me everything you can about those hunter guys."

"Don't be stupid," Derek says stiffly. "Why would you want to do that? Your car will sell just as well with someone else's face behind the wheel."

"Of course it will. But we want your face because these people deserve a kick in the pants."

"They might try falsifying my records or sticking criminal charges to me."

"They can try but they won't get past JARVIS. And JARVIS has a mean right hook," Tony shrugs. "Now stop arguing and eat your sirloin steak, grumpy cat. I'm a philanthropist, so you better get used to being treated like a damn human being. Even if you're not fully human."

Stiles smirks into the last of his vegan asparagus risotto. "I'll make sure he turns up in the morning. This address?"

"Yes, we've got everything under one roof." Pepper takes the StarkPad and makes a few notes. "Happy will escort Derek and take care of his needs. Unfortunately I'll be in meetings all day, otherwise I'd have come."

Now Lydia and her mom smirk, too.

"Can we see the pictures?" they ask and grin at Derek's thoroughly flustered face.

Tony waves and Socky whirs forward, socking Pepper in the shin.

"Ouch! What was that for?"

"Just looking, no touching," he says sternly but looks oddly vulnerable.

"You know I'd never," Pepper coos and kisses Tony's cheek. "He's a little too young for me, don't
"Could you stop objectifying him, please?" Stiles huffs and plops down next to Derek.

"Why, are you jealous?" Natalie teases.

"No, I'm an equal opportunity virtue defender," Stiles shoots back and exchanges his empty starter plate for a huge helping of cold potato gratin. "And no adhesion contracts either. I'll check."

The group cracks up with even Derek smiling a little, and they finish their meal in a much better mood.

After dinner, Tony shows off all the designs he and Stiles have come up with and entertains the group with holographic demonstrations. Pepper laughs until she has the hiccoughs but she also makes notes and rewards Tony with praise and kisses if something particularly catches her fancy.

"All of them do surveillance, I'm impressed," she smiles as the last of the bots fades away. "But I think I like their extra features even more. We should keep the majority, see where else they might be useful. The DoD is never going to contract all of them, anyway."

"Because they can't afford it," Tony says smugly. "The field testing and paper work will take a while; make sure that this doesn't leak before we're ready."

"Business as usual," Pepper agrees. She looks at her watch. "Oh dear, it's so late already." She gets up and takes a clipboard out of her large handbag. "I promised Stiles to sign his internship report before he leaves."

Tony grabs it, reads it over... and rips the paper from the board, making a handful confetti out of the thick sheet.

"Hey!" Pepper cries. "Wha-

"We won't give him the usual crap piece of paper," Tony says and makes grabby hands at the StarkPad. "I'll write him something myself. Kid saved me from a messy death at your hands and basically gave me the best day ever since inventing my armor. I mean, cartoons, werewolves and magic! Also, Romanova and Barton caught off-guard. Need I say more?"

"Not to mention whatever you earn with your little spy bots," Lydia adds dryly.

"Exactly." Tony starts typing like a madman. "I'd say that's worth at least a standing invitation for a real internship, fully sponsored. Finalized now. JARVIS, print and deliver ASAP."

"Yes, sir."

A few minutes later Happy brings in the new print-out and an expensive looking fountain pen and eyes Stiles curiously. It's obvious that he's read whatever Tony has written.

With a flourish, both Pepper and Tony sign the papers and hand them over with festively grave faces.

"Wow, thank you," Stiles stammers. He glances at the imposing letter head and the many paragraphs Tony has written without really seeing them. "I actually don't know what to say."

"Which has to be a first," Derek says, making the others grin.

"You're welcome," Pepper smiles gently. "As Tony said, you were a great help today and I trust him
when he says that you might have a future here. Maybe we'll see each other again as soon as you're finished with High School. I'm looking forward to finding out."

"Now, who wants something profoundly unhealthy and illegal for kids to celebrate?" Tony asks. "Look the other way if you've got a problem with it, sheriff, this is non-negotiable."

"One beer," John beams and proudly hugs the stuffing out of his son. "He earned it."

The adults drink wine and scotch, Lydia and Stiles nurse a grapefruit microbrew, and then Tony generously sends for one of his company cars to take them back to the hotel. Saying goodbye is hard for Stiles; despite only knowing Tony and Pepper for such a short time, and despite them being a good deal older than him, he likes them tremendously.

"Derek will have a good time tomorrow," Pepper tells him as they shake hands. "I put you on the visitor list, though, in case you want to keep him company."

"If he's being a scaredy wolf, I will, thanks."

Then they're finally on their way, dazed and tired.

In the semi-darkness of the car, Stiles looks at Lydia. "I can never repay you, ever," he says reverently. "Without you and your mom, I wouldn't have had the worst yet best day of my life ... after mom."

His father squeezes his hand for a moment in agreement.

"We had one hell of a day, too," Lydia reminds him. Natalie and Derek nod silently. "And it's all thanks to you, so I say we call it even."

The driver stops right in front of the hotel entrance and lets them out. The employees hasten to open doors for them and call the elevator, but no-one in the group is inclined to share gossip with them.

Stiles scrubs the metal dust from Tony's workshop off and brushes his teeth before shuffling towards his bed. He blinks when he sees Derek sitting on the edge of his own bed, hands clasped and watching him contemplatively.

"What?" he asks self-consciously. "Do I have toothpaste on my face?"

"No," Sighing, Derek averts his eyes. "It's just ... these last days were ...." He tries to find words but, upon finding none, closes his mouth. "I can't get my head around it."

"Yeah, I know, right?" Humming with bliss, Stiles flops onto his mattress. "Awesomeness aside, I'm so sorry how Mike had to find out about Laura. How did it go with your friends? Are they very angry?"

"It was bad," Derek admits. He wrings his hands. "They loved her a lot. But they aren't really angry, more distraught and sad. They understand, mostly."

"Must suck not being able to tell them what really went down." Stiles rolls onto his side and observes Derek's scruffy, slightly pinched face. "But maybe that's not a bad thing. Ignorance can actually be bliss sometimes, right?"

"Yes. They don't have to know what really happened to grieve for her." He raises his luminous eyes. "I don't think I ever thanked you for all your help," he says hoarsely. "I should have done that sooner, for many things. Even for this. Even if it ... it really was bad. But it also helped. So thank
you. For convincing me to come here. For letting me meet my friends on my own terms. Somehow you made it bearable."

"Not to mention I landed you a fucking great job," Stiles teases and breathes a sigh of relief when Derek's taut shoulders relax a little. "Honestly, I'm glad, dude. Maybe it makes up a little for all the shit I pulled when you first came back."

Derek lies down as well. He's staring at the dark ceiling as he says, "You more than made up for it already."

"Say that again after the photo shoot. It might land me in the red again." Stiles' smile gets wider and his eyes flutter shut. "But I think not. Night, Sourwolf."

Sighing quietly, Derek also turns onto his side, his eyes heavily lidded. He looks almost peaceful. "Sleep well, Stiles."
The next morning begins with another annoying text message from Scott and a tentative round in the gym. Stiles is wary until he's sure that Clint and Natasha won't accost them, and then gives his all during a spar with his dad. The exercise is followed by a very healthy breakfast. Everybody, even Natalie, drinks a green juice though Lydia also chugs a small pot of green tea, laced with freshly pressed grapefruit juice to get going.

"Coffee will kill me at this point," she groans. "I was awake all night, turning over Tony's equations. He's evil and a genius and I think I might be in love with his brain."

"Oh, good. If Pepper gets to keep the rest of him, she won't kill you for poaching," Stiles replies. "Much."

John slurps down the last of his coffee and looks at his watch. "I hate to say it but it's time to go. Did you message Melissa yet?"

"Yeah, I sent her a couple of pics of the gym and our breakfast buffet. She said she wants to come with, next time." Stiles shows the others the selfie Melissa has sent. It shows her at work, in scrubs and pouting. "So, are you ready for the big city all on your lonesome, Derek?"

Derek, who hasn't said a word yet, sighs. "I guess."

"Stepping out of your comfort zone made up of blood and terror will be good," Stiles says brightly. "But if it isn't, send a message or call and we'll come get you and finally get you that New York hotdog."

"It's not that." Derek lowers his voice a little. "It's my eyes. I'm worried that the photographers will notice that something about me is off. Stark said they have special cameras, but what if it's not enough?"

Stiles shrugs. "Laugh it off. Or wear contacts. Can you wear contacts? Or do they dissolve like they do in Twilight because of the vampire venom?"

"I'm not a vampire. I just hate contacts."

"Time, kids," the sheriff reminds them. "Up with you, our taxi won't wait."

Lydia gets up with a deep sigh, considers the last of her tea and empties the cup in one big gulp.

"I'll be your gopher," Stiles offers and melts a little when she grasps his arm and leans her head against his shoulder. "Whenever you need coffee or sugar, just let me know."

They part ways in front of the hotel. Stiles, the sheriff and the Martins pile into their taxi while Derek elects to walk to the next subway station.

"I was serious, you know," Stiles says, hand already on the open door of the car. "You need us, you call." The expression on Derek's face is hard to interpret. On a weird impulse, Stiles leans forward and brushes his cheek against Derek's stubble. "Have fun being objectified and exploited by a multi-billion dollar company, Sourwolf."
A shy half-smile flits over Derek's lips. "And you being Lydia's lackey."

Grinning, Stiles gets into the taxi and buckles himself in. "Alright, mission accomplished. Now, what did you say about crying dudes on national TV, Lyds?"

"Today they might almost stand a fighting chance," she mutters. "I'll kill Tony. Virtually, if I have to. His security team seems to be good, unfortunately."

Lydia rests her eyes until they arrive at the convention center and drags her feet all the way to the competition hall. She didn't exaggerate; there are cameras in every corner, studio lights dangle from the ceiling and hang on the high walls and there's a long buffet table at the side, filled with drinks and snacks for the participants.

"Wow, this is kinda scary," Stiles admits. "I get fidgety just knowing that there are cameras everywhere."

"You get used to it after a while. We sit over there," Mrs. Martin explains as they walk Lydia to the front. "Family and friends got tickets for the finals." She kisses her daughter on the forehead and reminds her that they're just behind the cordoned off area. "Around one they'll break for lunch, barring unforeseen interruptions. The food here is okay, but we usually go out so Lydia can have something fresh."

That is fine for both John and Stiles. They settle in and wait for the show to begin. A lot of people come in, sitting down around them and talking in excited murmurs. Quite a few look like typical college professors, male and female, but some have the sleek look of a head hunter or corporate spokesperson.

Stiles furtively takes note of them without being suspicious about it and plays with his phone until the moderator announces that they are on air. He'd have loved to annoy Tony but doesn't want to come across as clingy or overly friendly.

As expected, the show is kind of slow for someone who understands math well enough but doesn't have any love for it outside of school. There are even two groups at once battling it out to hurry the proceedings along, but it's still a drag.

Stiles, who doesn't really understand what the equations on the big blackboard even are, entertains himself with watching how the contestants squirm. Most of them are nervous, and he feels for them, but he has no love lost for that one douchebag in Lydia's group who struts up front like a peacock and arrogantly slashes through the problem as if that'll tell the jury how unworthy the others are. It's a great pity that he wins the round; Stiles would've loved to see him go home thoroughly embarrassed.

Finally it's Lydia's turn. Stiles, John and Natalie cheer for her. So do a few other people. It's heartening to see how the support perks her up; Stiles thinks that they might be members of a forum Lydia is in.

The moderator gives Lydia her problem and sets the timer. Even though math is mostly boring gibberish to Stiles and his dad, they're literally chewing on their nails as Lydia works through it. Her penmanship is a little less neat than they're used to and she has to take a breath every couple of minutes, but she solves it without mistakes or aid and smiles broadly when the jury members nod at her.

"What a beautiful solution to this problem. Full marks from the jury! Currently you're first in your grouping, Lydia," the moderator booms and sends her back to her seat after the applause has died down. Paul, her opponent, seems to bear it with equanimity.
Now that Lydia's place is secure for the time being, Stiles takes out his phone and sends a message to Derek.

_You there yet? Did they put you into hair and make-up already?_

Surprisingly, Derek answers after only a minute.

_No make-up, just hair and wardrobe. They gave me a tan leather jacket and aviators. If I flirt, the woman there might let me keep them._

Stiles has to bite back a snort of laughter.

_Did you pass the lens flare test?_

_There was a little flare during the test shoot but they adapted. Our friend was right, their cameras are top-notch. Gotta go, real thing starts._

_Have fun!_

"Is he still alive?" John murmurs.

"Yepp, and out of his black clothes, apparently. This I gotta see." Stiles opens Facebook and only frets a little before he types a message to Tony.

_Grumpy wolf was made to wear colours; you'll make sure we get to see this, in case he bails on you, right?_

Tony replies by sending a picture of himself at the set, a sleek, flashy car and a casually leaning Derek in the background.

_Way ahead of you, Magic Boy. There'll be no bailing because I told him he gets to keep the car. Talk about a dog with a bone._

Stiles inhales his spit in surprise and coughs to get his windpipe free. Concerned, the sheriff pats his back and makes him drink a little water, until Stiles can breathe again.

"What is it?" John asks. "Do you need to leave for a minute?"

"No," Stiles croaks. "Tony just surprised me." He shows his father the message and smirks at the ensuing groan. "I know, right? As if you don't pull him over enough for speeding already."

People around them begin to shush them and so they fall silent again, still flummoxed by Tony's cavalier attitude towards money. Thankfully the first part of the quarter finals ends soon after and they flee the hotel for some quality time in a little restaurant one block over.

By then, Tony has forwarded a few shots of Derek next to and in the car.

"He really is awfully photogenic," Natalie says with a sigh. "It's a pity that he's had such bad luck with women in the past. They'll eat him up."

The sheriff is dubious. "With that face?"

"That face makes ovaries raise the white flag," she informs him dreamily. "I shudder to think what would happen if he smiled. Perhaps instant bliss, if you know what I mean."

"Ugh, mom!" Lydia glares at her mother. "Why? Can't that wait until I've slaughtered that disgusting
Averell Porthmore? I really hope they'll draw him for my match."

"With that name, I'll help," Stiles says. "He obviously deserves it. His parents, too."

"Calm down, kids. Derek's just a boy, nothing special about that. Let him have his moment." John pauses. "Though if he's good and lets me have a spin in that new car every now and then, I might forget to ticket him for his speeding."

"Daaad."

"A careful spin, Stiles. Let a man have some fun."

Their food arrives and for half an hour they busy themselves with almost too spicy, wickedly delicious Indian food. Halfway through the meal Stiles asks Steve if he wants some and is heartened by his reply that he'll get to go out later and try something new.

"I wonder if he'll learn to text sometime soon," he tells the others after hanging up.

"Not this afternoon, I'm sure. Maybe you should put your phone on silent," his father replies with a faint smile and they all chuckle good-naturedly.

Then it's back to the championship and to cheering for Lydia. With the four weakest participants having been swiftly kicked from each grouping of eight, the tension in the air is almost visible. People give each other the evil eye and for the first time in weeks Stiles becomes aware that there's actually a lot of money involved. Lydia had told him so right in the beginning but then it had never come up again.

"She can do it, she's got the highest marks in her grouping," Natalie mutters nervously. "She's just having a difficult day."

Stiles bumps his shoulder against hers. "Of course she can. And she will. She's had worse days and came out on top."

"You're right," she agrees and sits up straight as the host opens the second half of the proceedings. "If she can survive Beacon Hills, she'll manage this just fine."

This part of the competition is worse than the first because the pairings are randomly drawn and get much harder problems. And not even the same problems; Nathalie explains that both are of the same type and have the same number of steps to the solution if conservatively done.

"It's to prevent fraud," she whispers, "and to add an element of urgency to the competition. The trick is to either use less steps or be faster than the other."

"But why not simply use screens?" Stiles wonders. "Wouldn't that be fairer and easier?"

"Of course, but the organizers think that doing it this way will make it a little more dramatic. The kids have to work against the clock and each other and they want the contestants to know that."

"Wow, harsh. This stuff seems hard enough to me already."

Natalie smiles a little crookedly. "Lydia is used to the attention. I'm more worried about her wakefulness, to be honest."

"Nah, she had enough green tea to keep an army awake."

Still, despite saying the words, Stiles just knows that it's going to be nerve-wracking, and he's right.
Only sixteen people are left and it's getting serious, fast. Suddenly it's a bit scary that only eight of them will reach the semi-final, not even all of them high-schoolers, but college students and even two grad schoolers.

"They're so fast," he whispers as two boys race through their equations. "Holy cow."

"Ssh, Lydia's next," his father warns as they applaud for the smug winner.

"And she's really up against that Averell Porthmore," Natalie adds. "What a coincidence."

The staff wipe the blackboards and write the new problems down, Lydia and Averell get another minute to think it over, and then the bell rings. While the boy starts writing immediately, Lydia takes another moment, head cocked and chalk raised daintily, but when she gets moving, she moves. She blows through numbers and symbols and all the parts that Stiles doesn't have a hope of ever understanding and finishes in only five lines.

The bell rings. The audience and even the jury seem stumped. Whispers start and the judges put their heads together to discuss her results. Averell, who by the looks of it isn't even halfway through, looks livid.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, I know that this chapter is kinda short, but I thought it fitting to end it there. It's only two days until the next update, so I hope you're not too disappointed. :)
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Here you go, chapter 20 already! Man, this is going to be over too fast :( This time, there'll be a lot of Magic! Stiles, so have fun!

"She cheated!" he cries over the excited din in the hall. "There's no way she could have done that. Someone gave her the answer!"

The jury, of course, is not impressed by that statement.

"Mr Porthmore, you're treading on thin ice," a woman informs him sternly.

"She wasn’t that good until now!" Averell insists.

"The result is valid!" a portly man announces and the audience explodes into shouts and uncontrolled chatter. "Lydia Martin is in the semi-finals!"

Lydia inclines her head regally and purses her lips. Her expectant stance helps to calm the masses down and one by one the cameras pan back to her.

"Thank you," she says when the hall is silent again. "I'd be honored to accept my placement, but I feel that I have something to prove before I can do that." The boy next to her sneers nastily. "We all know hard it is to overcome suspicion in these situations. Therefore I'll solve another problem to prove my worth. You may chose the problem, as long as it has the same level of difficulty. I don't care what it is or who gives it to me, but I want this accusation done away with before the semi-finals begin."

"It's a trick," Averell says immediately. "The next one's just as rehearsed."

"Alright, fair." Lydia favors him with a sweet smile. "Why don't you give me one? You as the supposedly wronged party should be above suspicion." She waves her hand at him. "Go. Pick someone to help you and bring me a problem. Are ten minutes okay for everyone?"

The host is stumped but agrees readily enough after a short conference with his producers. Considering his gleeful face, they're very happy with that piece of unexpected drama.

"Ten minute break, everyone!" he calls. "Get that problem ready!"

Averell throws Lydia one last venomous glare and weasels off to the rows of college professors, who’re already muttering to each other. Lydia merely flips her hair back and looks expectantly at Stiles.

"I'll get her some water," he says to his dad and Natalie. "Be right back."

Off the stage, he hugs her and whispers, "What the hell was that? That was awesome! How did you do it?"

She takes the water from him and drinks. "I don't really know. Suddenly it just clicked and all I had
to do was write it down. It actually killed me to use five steps. If I didn't have to document everything like regulation says, I'd only have needed three."

"Do you think it'll work with that douchebag's problem, too?"

"I don't see why not. It's math, not magic. Now go away, it seems he actually got someone to help him with his little tantrum."

Back in his seat, Stiles waits with baited breath for the recording to begin again. In front of the camera, a crew member writes the new problem down. It's so silent that Stiles hears the blood rush in his ears.

As before, Lydia gets a minute to look. She stares at the numbers and symbols as if in a trance and then, after snapping out of it, speed-writes the solution down in only a few steps.

The professors in the back row start applauding, with the audience following suit. The jury takes another ten minutes to verify the results, but when they confirm what the professors already know, all hell breaks loose. Averell Porthmore stomps from the stage and the cameras pan over the unruly onlookers. Important looking people come forward to shake Lydia's hand and exchange a few words and the host milks it for all it's worth.

It seemingly takes ages to get the audience back under control. Stiles makes use of the time and texts Tony what's happening.

*I was watching*, he replies immediately. *Girl's got a serious brain on her. If my equations unlocked this achievement, I call dibs. She can get her Field Medal while working for moi just as well. Also, playmate for Dr Banner. In the non-sexual context, of course.*

*Good luck with that*, Stiles sends back, a little weak-fingered. *Last I heard, she wasn't ready to be tied down.*

*Last time didn't involve me and my empire of awesome. Speaking of which, our mutual fuzzy friend asked a certain someone over and actually got One Eye to agree. If you want to nourish your man-crush on Steve, you'd better get your ass over here. I heard they had plans to order Mexican, which I'm totally on board with.*

Giddiness bubbles up in Stiles' chest.

"Dad!" he hisses and shows him the texts. "Did we have plans for later?"

John takes his time reading, his eyebrow raising higher with every sentence.

"No," he finally replies. "But even if we had, do you really think I'd make you miss this?"

"What is it?" Natalie asks and gets the texts shown as well. "Oh my god. Of course we don't have plans." She fans herself. "I'm sorry. Is it stupid to feel a little like being invited by royalty?"

"No," John assures her. "At least not with Pepper."

*I heard that*, Tony texts. *Tell your old man that there'll be no dessert for him.*

Stiles chokes on his laughter and types back.

*Will do. See you later, Master of Awesome.*

The wait for the end of the event seems endless, especially with professors and corporate minions
making sure to meet Lydia and hand her their cards, but at long last they make it out onto the street.

"I'll hail a cab," the sheriff says over the noise of several hundred people talking at once.

Stiles notices a black, gleaming car slowly rolling along the curb. It has a STRK 104 license plate and very pointedly stops directly in front of them.

"That, uh, won't be necessary, I think," Stiles tells the others and manages to catch his dad on shirt sleeve. He gingerly bends down and the driver lets the window slide down with a soft buzzing sound. "Excuse me, are you here for us?"

"Yes, Mr. Stilinski. I was asked to bring you to Stark Tower, if you're amenable."

"Uhm, yes. Thank you. It's just ... unexpected."

The small smile of the impeccably dressed driver is telling.

A couple of minutes later they zip through the city, deftly weaving through traffic and politely but resolutely using bus and taxi lanes. Lydia clutches Stiles' hand, wide-eyed and a little terrified of all the attention she's been mobbed with.

"It's all good," he tells her. "Whatever comes next, this is your day."

"I know," she whispers, looking up at him. "But I'm afraid that it'll be only this day."

Stiles knows exactly what she means.

oOo

"There you are!" Tony exclaims impatiently when the driver stops deep inside the parking deck of Stark Tower and helps Mrs. Martin out of the car. "Hurry it up, folks, or you'll never forgive yourselves."

Urgently, he ushers them away from the army of parked office cars and into an elevator. They go up several dozens of floors again and stumble into a scenery out of a theatre nightmare. There are clothes and people and noise everywhere.

"This is The Imagery, Pepper's name, not mine," Tony explains. "We have all of our photo stuff here. Offices, cameras, models, wardrobes, way too many hair things, and whatever else these people need. Again, Pepper's domain, not mine. Anyway, since we've got a special guest today, One Eye ruled that we have to do our pics ourselves. Yay, us. Come along."

Unerringly, Tony leads the small group through a veritable beehive of activity. At least twice Stiles thinks he recognizes a really famous face, and there are a lot of open doors where people shout what they want their models to do and shoot pictures with large cameras while even more people stand at the ready to powder noses and make sure the clothes are wrinkling just right.

"In here," Tony finally says and stops in front of four very bland, very large guards. "One fingerprint scan and ID check for everyone except me and we're good to have some fun."

The check takes almost ten minutes, even with the high-quality tech the guards possess, but finally they're allowed through the door ... and into a semi-dark photo cave where a sleek, slightly futuristic car is displayed on a podium, bathed in a lone cone of dim light.

Stiles' eyes need a minute to adjust to the low lights. The stuff the photographers and wardrobe
people have used on Derek is shoved against the far walls, leaving the floor as bare as possible. Only a couple of cable canals pose a slight security hazard.

"Over here," Steve calls from nearly behind the car. Stiles sees his shadow rise (and rise), followed by a shorter shadow. "Great that you could make it. I was afraid you'd be annoyed at me for just showing up."

He greets Mrs. Martin and Lydia with all the gentlemanly courtesy he's capable of and heartily shakes Stiles and his father's hands.

"Nah, it's good to see you," Stiles says. "So, what's this I hear about taking pictures of you?"

Steve laughs and slaps his back. "Knock yourself out, but only if I get to do a few of you, too. And I'd really like to see what you did with that black powder."

"After you've probably seen what Derek can do, it'll be boring."

"You're many things, but you couldn't ever be boring," Derek returns with a slight smirk.

"Before we start, where did Fury go?" Tony asks suspiciously. "JARVIS?"

"Mr. Fury called Miss Potts. Security accompanied him, they're currently drinking coffee in Miss Potts' lounge. According to her calendar, she'll be late for her next meeting."

"Damn that man," Tony curses. "Amuse yourself for a minute, kids. I'll be back soon-ish. JARVIS, I want a trace on every goon he's brought with him, and tell Pep to get going. That bastard is not costing me any more money."

"Already done, sir. Ejection only requires your order."

Muttering, Tony storms out of the studio, leaving six befuddled people behind.

"Ookay." Stiles hefts up a large camera. "Should I start?"

They spend at least an hour having fun with the camera. Stiles shoots pictures of everybody in and around the car, pairs them up and snaps several photos of each of them with Steve. After him, Lydia takes over. She goes for the quieter scenes: Derek in the car, Steve in the car, one in the car and the other leaning against it. They're almost artistic which is no surprise with her eye for fashion. But she also takes quite a few good ones of Stiles' dad and her mom. At last, Derek commandeers the camera and snaps away.

"Dude, those are really good," Stiles says after they've hooked up the camera to a conveniently placed laptop. "Did you study this stuff or something?"

"A little. I went for a degree in architecture before coming back to Beacon Hills," Derek admits. His eyes linger on a photo of Lydia and Stiles. "You look good together." He switches to one of Steve and John. "You're all photogenic. That's rare."

"I look like a little kid, but whatever." Stiles takes his mountain ash out. "I promised the Cap to show off my trick, so if you want ..."

Even though John and Lydia have already seen the show, they gather around in the light cone and smile at Derek's long-suffering sigh.
“It’s for education,” Stiles says. “Not exactly science, but good enough, eh?”

“You’re not the one trapped in whatever form of circle your brain comes up with.”

“Chill, Sourwolf. I know that Steve and you will get Mexican after this and I’ll even throw in a couple of buckets of coconut ice cream from Whole Foods.”

“Mocha chocolate,” Derek grumbles and rolls his shoulders. “Get on with it.”

Stiles takes the mountain ash from his pocket and shows it to Steve and Natalie. “It’s just mountain ash, nothing special, but since I’ve got a spark - that’s what our vet slash witch doctor said - I can will it to do things. Watch.” He throws a small handful of ash and it settles in a flowery shape around Derek. “Try to get out.”

Derek shows his claws and deliberately presses against the barrier. It glows hot and bright at the contact points.

“Whoa! You really look like this!” Steve calls and takes a step back. "Somehow I thought Stark was only messing with me."

"No, that’s a real werewolf for you,” Stiles replies cheerfully. "Shame on you for not showing him sooner, Derek."

Derek rakes his claws against the barrier where Stiles’ head would be and snarls.

"Can you really not get out?" Steve asks, visibly concerned. He reaches out, right over the barrier. “Try to touch my hand.”

Derek complies and lays the flat of his clawed hand against the resisting force of Stiles’ circle. Steve mirrors him from the other side. Where their palms hover over each other, sparks fly.

“Hold on,” Stiles says, suddenly excited. “Let me try something. Derek, try to get over the line,” he instructs. “Give it your all.”

Derek is a good sport. He lets his eyes flash red and teeth show and throws his whole weight against the barrier. He growls when it won’t budge and finally gives up with a loud huff.

“Now you pull him over, dad. Try it.” Stiles shoos his father forward encouragingly. “I’m trying something out here.”

The sheriff shrugs and reaches into the circle, grabbing Derek by the forearm and pulling with all his might.

“I can’t,” he gasps as he leans against Derek’s weight. “This is crazy! Feels like he’s glued to the line!” He stops pulling, breathing hard and a bit sweaty. “I’m starting to get worried about this, Stiles.”

“I think I’m on to something,” Stiles replies and sends Natalie next so she can try it out for herself. Her astonished cry at her failure is funny. Lydia is next, and then Steve tries to use his considerable bulk to help Derek out of the circle.

“Incredible. He just won’t get over.” His open, blue eyes look Stiles over. “What did you call your ability? A spark?”

“Not exactly. Apparently I have it, but that’s not what I do. I just … will things to happen. And right
now there’s something I need to figure out.” He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. *Steve can pull Derek through,* he thinks, over and over again. *Steve can pull Derek through the barrier.* “Alright. Go again, all of you, the Cap last. Try to pull him over.”

This round is faster because John, Natalie and Lydia give up as soon as it becomes evident that Derek isn’t able to step over the line of ash.

When Steve grasps Derek’s arm and pulls, however, there’s a short shower of sparks and suddenly the bewildered werewolf and super soldier stumble over the ash line and fall down in an ungraceful heap.

“What … what did just happen?” Derek asks, stumped. His wolf features melt away and leave a lost-looking, young man behind. “How did you do that?”

“I wanted it to happen.” He opens the line and sends Derek back into the circle. “Next round is our control experiment and I won’t tell you who’ll get him out this time.” *Natalie,* he thinks and fights a giddy shout. *Natalie brings him over the mountain ash. Steve can’t.*

Again everybody tries and Steve’s eyes widen when he isn’t able to pull Derek over anymore. Natalie comes right after him and only tugs gently on Derek. Both are showered in glittery sparks when he walks over the line.

“This is incredible,” Lydia says, awed. “Does Dr. Deaton know you can do this?”

“He will soon enough, I guess,” Stiles answers, rubbing his clammy hands. “If you still want to play, I’d love to try something else out.”

Everybody is game and Stiles sends his father into the circle.

“I thought humans can’t be caught in a circle?” the sheriff asks, shuffling uneasily in the tight space.

“You won’t be able to get out, now,” Stiles tells him and believes it with all his might. “I managed to ricochet a bullet, I’ll manage to trap you. Try to come here.”

John tries and, which must be a first for a thoroughly astonished Derek, can’t get out of Stiles’ circle. “Oh my god, this is creepy,” he announces. “It’s like walking into an invisible wall.” He touches the barrier all over, like a pantomime, and presses. Lights flare up along his way. “It’s won’t budge, not even a little.” He looks over to Derek. “I’m so sorry your family had to go through this,” he says sorrowfully. “Such a wicked way to trap them.”

“Yeah.” Derek clears his throat and shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “They could’ve done with someone like Stiles.”

The mood takes a sudden nosedive and Stiles hurries to distract the others. “Okay, now all of you try to pull him out. Same as before, I won’t tell you who can do it.”

The experiment repeats itself. No-one can pull the sheriff over the ash until it’s Derek’s turn. With a tiny lift of one corner of his mouth, Derek acknowledges the nod at the reversed roles and the group finally settles down.

Steve is the first to speak. “Not only Derek’s family could have used your talent, Stiles. If I think how easily we might have caught the Red Skull back then, history might’ve gone a whole lot differently.”

“Scary thought,” Lydia says and swallows dryly. “Kind of makes me want to scream.”
“Please don’t.” Stiles gently nudges her with his shoulder.

The door to the studio opens and Tony stalks through.

“I knew it. I missed everything,” he complains and picks up the camera to have a look at their photos. “Is that your ash, kid? Did something fun happen?”
“Hey guys, sorry that I’m late. NaNo is kicking my ass and I’m kind of exhausted. (It's still great, though.) If you find more typos and mistakes than usual, that's the reason. Please feel free to message me so I can make corrections.

I hope you'll still like it!

“As a matter of fact, it did.” Steve unfolds his crossed arms and steps into the circle. “Stiles is a magical trapper.”

“Well, that much I already know.” Tony follows Steve’s wordless bid to join him and sighs. “Come on, amuse me. Fury sucked all the life out of me and made me pay for all of our food. He’s such a cheapskate.”

“He’s on a government budget, what did you expect?” Steve steps out of the circle and winks at Stiles. “By the way, when will we eat?”

“In about thirty minutes, Captain Eats-A-Lot.” Tony finishes looking at the pictures with record speed and moves to put the camera back onto its table.

Only to discover that he can’t move.

“What the hell is this?” he asks, more surprised than angry. “Did I offend with my absence?”

“No,” Lydia smirks, “it’s simply your turn playing mouse in the trap.” She stands in front of Tony and offers him her hand. “Try to come over.”

Tony hems and haws for a few moments, clearly not too keen on actually taking her hand, but at last he tries - and finds that he can’t cross the line. None of the others can pull him over, either. Only when Steve gets a clue and ropes Derek into helping him are they able to drag Tony out of the circle.

He dusts off his hands. “Okay, wow. That was unexpected. And way scarier than I did expect. I would call you Mouse Trap from here on out, kid, but that’s undignified. Also, I want you on my good side, so. Ideas?”

“He won’t get a nickname until he’s old enough to drink,” John says grimly.

“Why not? The Cap is barely old enough to drink and I call him Capsicle.”

“You haven’t called me Capsicle,” Steve objects, frowning and crossing his huge arms.

“Not to your face, I haven’t.” Smugly, Tony points at him. “That’s what you get for crash-landing yourself in a huge ice cube, buddy.”

“It wasn’t on purpose. God, Howard was never so obnoxious.”

Tony waves him off. “He never tried, then. Also, I didn’t get kidnapped in Afghanistan on purpose,
yet here we are, traumatized beyond belief and bickering over the kid’s superhero name. You better believe that Fury has his and several other eyes on him now.”

“As I said, he’s too young.” Also crossing his arms in front of his chest, John stares Tony down.

Tony stares back. “You know, if the hallmark for being allowed to get a superhero name were horrible, life-altering experiences, we’re all eligible. He just started a little younger than Rogers or myself. If it fits, don’t argue.” At John's glower he raises both hands. "Just saying."

It’s depressing how true that actually is but suddenly Stiles isn’t quite as desperate for this bit of fun. Lydia next to him squeezes his hand in understanding.

“Anyway, the good news is that Pepper was able to pawn off her last board meeting off to someone else and will join us for dinner,” Tony continues, effectively ending the downtrodden and in Steve's case rather cross silence. “In about fifteen minutes this floor will clear for a large break and we’ll move to the private part of the tower.”

“What about Director Fury?” Derek asks warily.

“Not invited,” Tony shrugs, “but he got Pep to agree to let Coulson attend instead. They’re friends, God knows why. Coulson is as interesting as a piece of twice baked toast.” He eyes Steve speculatively. “I don’t think he knows who he’ll be minding tonight yet. This will be fun.”

Put out, Steve rakes a hand through his hair. “Stark.” That single word expresses a world of frustration.

Stiles feels sorry for Tony; he's on the receiving end often enough. Although he has to admit that Tony is going out of his way to aggravate the Captain. It's as if he can't help himself and Stiles wonders a little inappropriately if the billionaire is actually pulling Steve's pigtails.

Derek's raised eyebrow makes him twitch and grimace.

"Yeah, I went somewhere where I should never venture again. At all," he mutters. "Their babies would be irresistibly beautiful snark monsters with superpowers. I'm terrified. And maybe a little turned on."

Derek chokes, half with disbelief and half with laughter, alongside with Lydia.

Steve continues, oblivious, "I don’t need a minder. I already told the director that I’ll work for SHIELD."

Tony twirls a large powder brush between his fingers. “Don’t fret, Ice Ice Baby, it’s not a slur against your character. With only one eye Fury simply has to watch his little minions extra hard.” He smirks and dabs powder on Steve's nose, causing him to sneeze loudly. "Bless you, and bless America. They'll have a lot of great jobs for you. Note my sarcasm, please."

"Noted, sir," JARVIS says.

Steve’s brows knit together in a frown and Lydia rolls her eyes. Stiles didn’t think it was possible, but Tony’s brain-to-mouth filter seems to be even worse than his own, with a healthy dose of cutting sarcasm thrown in that he can only afford because he’s rich. And Iron Man.

“Hey, I’m his minion too.” Tony pats Steve against his impressive chest and wanders over to the car. Its doors are folded upwards like bird wings and the buttery soft leather seats shimmer softly in the light. “Right now I’m just the guy building the getaway cars and gear but who knows when that’ll
change. Now come and have a look at my Easter eggs. Inspectors will never find them, the losers.”

While Tony and Derek talk about the special features of the car, the sheriff and the Martins listening with interest, Stiles collects his mountain ash and stashes it back into his messenger bag.

“Hey,” Steve says and smiles crookedly. His bad mood seems to have evaporated, leaving him mellow and friendly once more. “In case you’re angry at your dad for basically telling you no to the superhero thing … he means well. My friend Bucky used to be the same. Always told me not to stand up to bullies so much because all it’d give me would be a split lip and bruised ribs.”

“I saw the exhibition and I know a shit ton of facts about you. You never listened to him, did you?”

"No, I didn't." Steve's smile gets a little warmer. "I always thought I had to run and help others. And sometimes that was even true. I had to save a dame from a would-be rapist when no-one else wanted to step in. And I had to try to chase the big guy off that decided to rob a single mother of two. But other times I just did it to feel validated, and that was stupid. I don't want you to fall into the same trap. Don't let your pride get in the way of your health. I can see that it'd kill your father."

"I know," Stiles replies honestly. “And I’m not angry. I mean, it’s cool to have a useful talent or whatever, but where I live, I was only a human among werewolves. Not strong or very good with anything except research maybe. It’ll take a while to get used to being able to do … things. And I'm rather attached to my limbs and the gooey stuff inside.”

Steve shakes his head, not even trying to suppress his fond smile. “21 is still very young to commit to saving the world.”

Quirking his own smile, Stiles looks at him. “I’ll probably need at least that long to learn enough so I won’t get killed on the streets in Beacon Hills. But dude … even if I can’t do much yet, I’ll help if I can. Small stuff counts, too, right?”

Steve looks almost tenderly at him, as if he’s reminded of something bittersweet. “Sometimes the small stuff is all that’s needed.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Cool.” Flushing a little, Stiles ducks his head. “So, do you know when Fury will let the Captain America bomb drop?”

“Honestly? I think at the moment he’s rethinking the whole thing. I’m not privy to anything yet, but he’s kind of tense. On the look-out. I’m not sure what that means.”

“Obviously I don’t know you very well yet, but if it’s not going to be announced at all, you’d like that, huh?”

Steve grins and squeezes Stiles’ shoulder. “You know me well enough, then.”

“Okay, folks, JARVIS just told me that the floor is clear. Let’s get out of here, dinner awaits. I could eat a cow,” Tony calls. "Last one in the elevator is a chicken."

Flanked by security detail, they troop into the elevator (John is last and clucks good-naturedly, making the whole group chuckle) and ride up to Tony’s personal floor. Pepper greets them at the door and introduces them to an unremarkable, middle-aged man in a nice suit.
Coulson shakes hands with everyone and gets a little more than slightly flustered when it’s Steve’s turn.

“Captain Rogers, it’s an honor to meet you,” he says. "I have all of your collector's cards, maybe you could sign them for me? Only if you aren't busy, of course. I know that Director Fury has you on a tight schedule."

Behind Steve’s back, Tony and Stiles smirk at each other. Only a few minutes later, their food comes through and they sit down at the table to share salads, enchiladas, fajitas, and nachos. The non-vegan portions are clearly labeled and it does nothing to keep either Tony or Coulson from trying to steal the vegan meals.

“Hey, I drink at least one pint of green juice every day just to clean out the last of the palladium from my body and I’m not getting any younger. I need this,” Tony argues when Lydia threatens to stab him with her fork. “I’m your friend, honestly.”

“If it’s about food or money, there is no friendship,” she tells him, but lets him have one of her enchiladas anyway.

"If only you knew how true that is," Tony replies and scarves a huge bite down. "Mmh, refried beans."

“You don’t eat meat?” Steve wonders. “Why wouldn’t you? In my time, people would’ve murdered for a bit of beef.”

“Nah, you can have it.” Stiles bites into his fajita and hums. “We’re doing this for health.”

“Besides, raising animals isn’t what it used to be,” Lydia explains. “Most of the meat and dairy today is contaminated with aggressive germs and medication. Depends on where you buy it.”

Stiles adds, “And the animals aren’t even fed right and most of them never see grass or sunlight.”

“A horror for everyone involved, except the money makers,” Lydia finishes and puts her fork down to nab a few nachos from the bowl and eat them with huge scoops of guacamole.

Steve warily eyes the meat on his plate. “Uh, okay.”

“Sorry, we didn’t want to spoil your appetite. Tony probably ordered from a good place,” Stiles says apologetically. "Not that you have to worry, I guess, what with the serum and stuff."

“Of course I did," Tony replies. "Grass-fed beef all the way, Capicle. Stark Industries supports this kind of thing. Besides, Pepper and my docs made me switch to organic when this thing with the palladium poisoning started, so I know where the kids come from.”

"Damn right I did," Pepper says and steals the last of Tony's chicken. "Don't pretend that it didn't help."

"That's the worst part. It helped," Tony sighs dramatically.

While they talk about food and healthy living in modern times, Derek silently eats his way through the rest of the meat dishes and the discussion becomes moot. Coulson appears nearly amused to Stiles and even takes Tony up on his offer to make dessert smoothies for everyone instead of dishing out the margarita cake.

After dinner they sit on the terrace in the late sunshine and enjoy glasses of lemonade and mellow
conversation. Pepper exclaims over the pictures from the photo shoot, already making plans with her head of marketing how to best use them. Coulson drifts around, getting acquainted with John and Natalie. His voice is even and his questions aren’t intrusive. If anything, he’s almost too polite and considerate - it immediately sets Stiles on edge.

“You see it, too, don’t you?” Lydia asks quietly as she nurses her drink.

“Yupp. Backbone of steel. Balls too, I’d guess.” Stiles catches Derek’s nod from the other side of their lounge suite. “He works for SHIELD, he must be good.”

“Why do you think Fury sent him?”

“To sound us out. We sent his spies packing and Tony doesn’t like Fury much. I guess Coulson’s his best bet to liaise right now, what with him being Pepper’s bud and all.”

Coulson finishes his talk with the sheriff and Lydia’s mom and meanders over to Derek and Steve.

“May I join you?” he asks and actually waits to sit down until Derek nods. “Thank you.”

“Can I ask you something?”, Stiles blurts.

Coulson smiles tolerantly at him. “Of course.”

“What do you do? What is your job, other than being Fury’s eyes and ears?”

“Are you asking for my job description, or my abilities?” the agents asks patiently.

“Both, I guess. You're only the third honest to God real kick-ass spy I've met, and the other two were kind of dicks.”

“I know, and I apologize. I trained them better than that.” Coulson considers his answer for a moment. "I’m a senior agent at SHIELD, which means that I oversee several small teams, plan and lead missions and take care of my people’s needs. In case there is no mission or no need to take care of, I passively or actively collect intel.”

“Meaning you’re always on the clock,” Lydia sums it up. “Must be a killer for your private life.”

“How large are your teams?” Stiles asks. “And how many do you have?”

“The size of my teams depends on the mission, of course. They can be as small as two and as large as fifteen, although that’s the absolute maximum for the kinds of mission I run. And as to the number of teams I oversee: usually I have two to three at any given time and never more than four.”

“Sounds exhausting.” Stiles pulls a face. “When I grow up, I definitely don’t want to be you. No offense.”

Coulson’s bland smile gets a little more real for a second. “None taken. I suspect your talents lie elsewhere.”

“People wrangling is not my strong suit, no,” Stiles sighs and thinks about the grief Scott has given him since the bite. “But Steve might come close.”

“Only in the field,” Steve demurs. “I like tactics, recon and planning, but I hate the paperwork.”

“Who doesn’t?” Derek agrees.
“What about you, Mr. Hale?” Coulson asks. “What are your strengths?”

"Whoa, open attack there, Agent?” Stiles flails.

"No, that’s alright.” Stiles hates the little tinge of bitterness in Derek’s voice as he replies, “He can know that it’s definitely not leadership skills. Or fighting skills.”

“You fight just fine,” Tony calls over the terrace. “In case you forgot, you gave Barton a nice new set of scars, sour puss.”

“Besides, you already think about taking martial arts lessons,” Stiles adds. “Those will help. And leadership isn’t something you’re born with.” He glances at Steve. “Or is it?”

“I don’t think so. Some people have the charisma to be natural leaders, but that doesn’t mean they care about their people or are good at strategy.” Steve knocks his knee against Derek’s. “It’s hard now, but you’ll get better. Or did you think I managed to rescue a couple hundred men with my superior acting skills?”

“You didn’t?” Stiles gasps and flails. “Perish the thought! The legend is ruined!”

Steve laughs about his antics. “Of course not. I hung around more tactical meetings and debriefings than I can count before I went out and did something useful. What I’m trying to say is that I didn’t get there out of the blue. Maybe I have a good mind for leadership, but that’s worth nothing without knowledge and experience. Or people who’re willing to support you.”

“Well said, Captain Rogers.” Coulson takes an envelope out of his inner breast pocket and offers it to Derek. “In the spirit of supporting you, Director Fury decided to give Mr. Hale access to the building, in case he wants to join you for training. It didn’t escape the director’s knowledge that your usual partners aren’t quite on your level.”

Steve shrugs. “No-one really is.”

Derek takes the envelope and pulls out a white key card.

“You know that they’ll tape your performance, if you go,” Stiles informs him. “And maybe tag you like a pet.”

“There won’t be any filming or tagging if he comes,” Steve says sternly. “Not on my watch. Tell Director Fury that, Agent Coulson. Otherwise you can take the card right back to him.”

“You have my word,” Coulson assures them. “No filming, no tagging, not even other people. We’re aware that Mr. Hale and his friends leave on Sunday, but since you seem to get along well, why not make use of the time until then? It’d be mutually beneficial, after all.”

“In that case, thank you,” Derek says and tucks the card into his wallet. He turns to Lydia and Stiles. “I could go tomorrow if you don’t need me.”

“I’m good,” Lydia tells him. “Have fun getting your ass handed to you.”

“Good. I’ll have a car pick you up.” Coulson taps out a message on his phone. “What time?”

Steve shrugs. “I start early, but I know that your hotel is across town. Is seven okay? Then we can start around eight.”

“Yes.” Derek takes out his phone as well and sets an alarm. “I’m looking forward to it.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I just noticed that almost every author here has chapter summaries. Is it very weird that I don’t have that? Do you think I should have summaries? (It wouldn't be a problem per se, I just find it difficult to decide which part is a cool and poignant sample.)

Anyway, thanks yet again for your thoughtful and fun messages! For you guys who mentioned Clint and Natasha, I guess this is for you! :)

The rest of the evening passes in an easy flow of conversation, drinks and snacks. The weather is absolutely beautiful and Pepper once more takes out a camera, though it’s only the one on her phone, and snaps flattering pictures of her guests in the golden evening sunlight.

“I don’t know,” she says, pleased with her snapshots, “somehow it feels like we’ve been friends for a while already. It’ll be good to see your faces and remember the good times when things get rough around here, truly.”

“As they undoubtedly will,” Tony agrees dryly. He and the other adults settle down on the sofas. “Things always go pear-shaped in New York.”

“Tell me Phil, do we have to get ready for something big in the near future?” Pepper asks jokingly.

“I’m afraid that’s classified,” Coulson replies with that infuriating, slight smile. “But be assured that SHIELD will inform you in case something comes up.”

“Of course they will.” Tony throws his arm around Pepper’s shoulders and sniffs. “Are we done with the serious talk now? I want to see a couple of Cap’s old movies and throw popcorn whenever the patriotism gets too much. You in?”

To everyone’s astonishment, Steve is the first to whole-heartedly agree to it.

“Absolutely,” he says. “You have no idea how long I’ve wanted to do this.”

Watching the old propaganda movies is a huge hit with everyone. Steve is endearingly giving his best in all of them, even though he confesses that he hates almost all of his films.

“There were a couple of good ones that I really liked,” he says after a particularly bad fifteen minute reel is over. “The ones where they actually showed the soldiers’ lives. It took people some time to realize that war isn’t glamorous, and then they needed to learn that soldiers weren’t useless when they got home injured. They just lived through terrible things and needed a chance to get back on their feet. Those were hard times.”

“And yet you wanted to enlist badly enough to risk jail time,” John remarks.

“If you think that the propaganda got to me, you’re partially right,” Steve sighs. “I wanted to help. There was nothing for me in New York anyway, except for my mother and Bucky, and when she died and he shipped out … I didn’t care how hard it would be. I just didn’t want him to have to do this alone. I didn’t want to feel useless anymore.”
“Is that why you’re staying with SHIELD?” Stiles asks with a small lump in his throat. Steve’s sentiments hit a little too close to home.

“I suppose so. SHIELD does good work, all in all, and I get to review missions before I accept. That’s good enough for now.”

“And if it isn’t anymore?” Tony challenges, throwing the last of his popcorn at the huge screen in the den. “What will you do then?”

“I don’t know.” Steve smiles disarmingly. “I’ve always wanted to study art. I heard people make good money drawing caricatures of you. I’m sure making a living off that would be a blast.”

oOo

Derek wakes Stiles when it’s time for him to leave.

“Don’t get up,” he rumbles and crouches down next to the bed. “I’ll call when I’m done and catch up with you at the conference center. Alright?”

“Sounds ‘ood,” Stiles mumbles, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. “Be nice. Don’t turn Steve, ‘kay?”

“Okay.” Derek hovers for a second and then leans down to rub his bristly scruff once against Stiles’ warm cheek. “See you later.”

“Hmmmm. Bye, Sourwolf.” A second later, Stiles is already asleep again.

Around eight, John rouses him and drags him down to the gym to get their daily run in. Halfway through their five miles, Natasha and Clint climb onto the treadmills next to them and begin to run.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Stiles huffs. “Go away.”

“No.” Natasha catches his gaze and holds it. “We’re here to grovel and would appreciate it if you’d give us the chance to do so.”

“It’s not groveling if we’re not in a position to lord it over you,” Stiles pants.

“He has a point,” John grunts. “Therefore run first, grovel later.”

Clint and Natasha look at each other, shrug, and then crank up the speed of their treadmills.

At the end of the session, both spies have nearly run as far as Stiles and his dad, which is a little humiliating but not really a surprise. They invite themselves to breakfast and saunter off for a shower and a change of clothes.

“For people who make a living out of not being seen, they sure are persistent,” John sighs. “Sometimes I worry about your knack for attracting weird people.”

“Why? You made me; it has to come from somewhere.”

Despite their banter, Stiles is curious why Fury’s people make such a blunt effort to get back into their good graces. Derek is the obvious answer but he has a feeling that there is more to it than that.

When they step into the dining room after cleaning up, Clint and Natasha have already found their table and sit across from Lydia and Natalie, who’re both very obviously not amused.

“Stiles, I’m not in the habit of entertaining dangerous people anymore.” Lydia narrows her eyes at
him. “Make them leave or I'll scream.”

“They’re here to grovel,” he tells her and slumps onto the chair next to her. “If nothing else, I’d like to see them try. How’s the arm, by the way, Miss Trigger Happy?”

Natasha’s full lips quirk a little. "I'm fine, it's nothing a bit of rest won't cure."

Clint snorts. “I still don’t think Nat did anything wrong. Your guy suddenly became a monster, what was she supposed to do?”

“Not threaten my dad, for one,” Stiles replies. “Or fire in a semi-secured situation. What did you think I’d do? Kill you both with airborne poison or something? While my dad and Derek are around? Come on.”

“Listen, you—”

Natasha puts a gentle hand onto Clint’s arm. “No, he’s right. I overreacted and that shouldn’t have happened. Apparently there are blind spots I need to work on.” She leans forward on the table and something like a small smile blossoms on her otherwise serious face. “I’m not afraid to admit when I was wrong. Please forgive me for threatening your family, Stiles. It won’t happen again, not without a very good reason. And thank you for pointing out my weakness. It’s good to know that the world can still surprise me.”

“Yeah, thanks. I could’ve done without your proviso, but I’ll take it for now.” Stiles pops a couple of grapes into his mouth. "My dad might be a problem, though. He’s the one you actually tried to shoot.”

John looks sternly at Natasha and Clint. “Damn right. Your very good reason better not be the general assumption that werewolves pose a problem. We already have to deal with assholes who think they’re the police and have a right to kill first, ask questions later. Got that?”

To her credit, Natasha neither hesitates nor blinks. She says, “Yes, sir” as if it were completely normal to discuss such things in a spacious hotel dining room where anyone can overhear them.

John’s attention then settles on Clint, who mulishly stares back. "You will not do anything to threaten or harm my family, Hale included, again, or you will personally find out what a pissed off small town cop is capable of. You might also be aware that we have certain friends who would love to lend a hand; I'm sure that'll influence your answer."

At the end of his little speech, Clint looks vaguely alarmed.

"He understands," Natasha says calmly.

"I'd like to hear it from him, if you don't mind," John replies, never taking his eyes off the other man.

"Fine. On one condition." Clint relents and points at both Stiles and Lydia. "I want to get to know them better before I swear some kind of small town fealty and potentially ally myself to unknown weremonsters."

"You're as subtle as a brick to the head. Also, Derek still isn't a monster." Stiles rolls his eyes. "If you want to hang with the cool kids, just say so. We're not too cool to include you in our awesomeness. Because we are awesome."

Lydia and Natasha smirk and even the parents have to smother a smile.
"I want to hang with the cool kids, please," Clint says drolly. "Include me in your awesomeness."

"The hanging is free, but the inclusion will cost you. Since our bodyguard is sparring with Steve, you can do it. Prove your worth and everything before you start sending intel to your scary boss man."

"I also wouldn't say no to a new pair of shoes." Lydia flips her curls over her shoulder, "but since your agency apparently is on a budget, your time will have to do."

"Oh, I like them," Natasha smiles. "Deal."

Once that's over and done with, breakfast is a surprisingly pleasant affair. Stiles grills their new bodyguards for information about their jobs and speculates and whines about their supposed skills (of which they admit to less than a third he's come up with, he's sure) until it's time to leave for the math championship semi-finals. They take a taxi, Clint and Natasha following on a motorcycle.

"I can't believe our week is halfway over already," Lydia sighs as they pass through the busy streets. "After yesterday I'm not looking forward to the circus."

"Well, if you want to avoid people, you could try slowing down a little," John suggests. "I'm not saying you should throw the competition. Just not ... throw it in their faces so much. Might make it a bit more interesting if the outcome is not a foregone conclusion, and keep the vultures away."

Natalie strokes over her daughter's hair. "He's right. Just take yourself back a little if it happens again, sweetheart. If it doesn't ... well, then there's no harm done and they'll leave you alone quickly enough."

"I still want to win," Lydia says and sits a little straighter. "And I'm going to win. But you're right. We don't need that much attention." She turns to Stiles. "Can't you do something about that?"

"I'm just the apprentice," he flails. "No actual magic has happened yet."

"Please, as if that'll convince anyone. You painted on Derek," she counters. "I saw the eye on his paw. There's no way in hell he'd have let you do that without cause. So, magic."

Stiles groans. "Oh my god, seriously?"

"You did some pretty amazing things yesterday. All I want you to do is keep me from making them cry," she says. "It can't be more difficult than doing what you already did."

Stiles knows that he looks doubtful, but there's no arguing with her in her current mood. Sighing, he takes out his sharpie, grabs her hand and turns it over. "Okay, I'll try, but don't kill me if it doesn't work."

Lydia makes a get-on-with-it gesture with her perfectly manicured hand.

Steeling himself, Stiles asks, "So, what is your favorite way to relax?"

She tells him about reading beneath her favorite tree at home. "Just being there on a blanket and with a glass of lemonade," she sighs. "I wish I could go there."

While she talks, he thinks, *Lydia is relaxed and calm* and carefully draws a little tree on her left inner forearm. An even smaller straw hat and a book are lying on the grass beneath it, as if waiting for her to return.
"Oh, that's cute," she praises once he's finished and rummages for her phone to take a picture. "And just in time."

They wait for Clint and Natasha and enter the convention center as a group. Stiles knows that he should be worried by the fact that both have tickets for the finals, but he's really not.

"I'll stay with you, Clint will find a spot overhead," Natasha murmurs. "Excited professors at four o'clock, guys."

"I'll take care of it," John replies and moves to intercept the advancing people. "This is a competition. Please wait until the show is over. I'm sure Lydia will be willing to talk to you then."

Lydia looks torn between flattered and apprehensive.

"We can always smuggle you out if you're not into that," Natasha says with a small smile.

"Not without making it to the final, but I'll get back to you on that afterwards."

The film crew steers them to their seats and they wait for nearly half an hour until everything is ready and the competition can begin. Lydia is in the sixth of eight pairings and has to go up against a willowy, tomboyish college student from Utah who looks like she wants to strangle her with Lydia's own hair. Stiles feels sorry for both of them because there's only one other girl left and the boys circle like sharks around a bleeding penguin.

The first half of the proceedings is as spectacular as a math championship can be. There is one winner who's almost as fast as Lydia was yesterday but earns a penalty for missing a step, then there are two pairs where both contestants need prompts, and, hilariously, one tie. The jury needs almost half an hour to ascertain what went wrong where and declare that a clean slate is needed, and during that time Stiles asks Steve via text message how the training is going.

As usual, Steve calls instead of texting back.

"Hi Stiles. It's going great. Derek and I ran all over the building, twice, and then sparred a little. I gotta say I'm impressed. His healing is way better than mine and his stamina is amazing. He wants to learn close combat, so that's what we'll be doing for another hour or two, if that's okay with you all."

Stiles grins. "Yeah, we're fine. It's cool that you're having fun."

"How is Lydia's contest going? Was it her turn already?"

"Nah, two dudes managed to tie and have to go again." Stiles sees the boys talking with the jury. They seem to have a good time, despite the situation. "She's up after break, sometime in the afternoon. You can keep Derek until then."

Laughing, Steve thanks him and tells him to greet the others before hanging up.

During the break, they decide to stay in and gang up on Clint and Natasha again.

"We met Agent Coulson yesterday," Stiles begins. "He said that he handles a couple of teams. Are you in one of them?"

Natasha samples her food, shrugs at the taste and tucks in. "Sometimes," she says. "Depends on the mission. Coulson pairs us according to skill, not necessarily who's best friends with whom."

"Ooh, I bet that sucks sometimes." Stiles whistles sympathetically.
Clint snorts and steals a couple of fries from Stiles' plate. "It sucks more often than not. Takes the word professionalism to a whole new level."

"True," Natasha agrees. "You either get along or you kill each other. For most of us survival is more important than getting one over some asshole."

"Not for lack of trying, though," Clint points out. "I'll have to tell you about Orley sometime."

"I'm still half convinced that this is some kind of pitch, but I have to say you're not really making a case for yourself." John viciously stabs a mushroom with his fork. "Sounds like a pretty shitty work environment."

Natasha shrugs. "It's only shitty when we actually work. But even then we get to play with cool gadgets ten or fifteen years from public use, regularly piss people off who deserve it, and earn good money. The adrenaline kicks are for free and boy let me tell you, our medical is stellar."

"You forgot to mention the part where you kill people and sometimes are mortally wounded," Lydia counters. "For that, a stellar medical is the least your agency can do, hm? Not to mention the therapy your whole lot must need."

"Yeah, okay, there's that. Nobody likes a shrink. But on our time off?" Clint crams another handful of fries into his mouth. "All we have to do is stay in shape, learn useful new ways on how to ki- ah, incapacitate people, and try to spend our hard-earned money on frivolous things."

"Oh, please, Barton. The last frivolous thing you bought was a Prius," Natasha mocks.

"What? It's good for packing a lot of ammo and shit. Nobody ever suspects a Prius, therefore you don't get to diss the Prius."

Shaking his head, John finally eats the stabbed mushroom. "Remember, not until you're old enough to drink," he tells his son. "Although we should maybe talk about our cars and what to put in them once we're home. Do you guys have some pointers?"
I love this chapter and I have to post it on the day after one of the most horrible, reprehensible terrorist attacks Europe has seen in a long, long time. My heart is with the families and friends of the victims in Paris.

When it's Lydia's turn on the stage, the whole audience falls silent. Suddenly a lot of phone cameras are filming and one or two spectators are ducking low and inching forward to better see what's happening.

"I hope she gets herself together. It's enough to have videos from yesterday all over Youtube, we don't need any more attention," Natalie murmurs, tense and worried.

Natasha motions for them to be silent and points at the many interested people seated around them.

"It'll be fine," Stiles assures her.

On stage, Lydia and her opponent get their problems and pointers. This time they're the same equations and the boards are divided by large screens. As all the other times, they get a minute to look and Lydia's eyes bore into the numbers as if drawn by a magnetic force. She has chalk in her left hand and her right hand is resting on the little painting on her forearm.

By the time Lydia emerges from her contemplation, the girl from Utah is already writing furiously. The sound of her chalk hitting the board can be heard to the last row of seats.

"Is she alright?" Natalie whispers.

Stiles worries his lower lip. "Maybe she's too relaxed ... come on, Lyds, people can't see into your head. You need to write things down."

As if on cue, Lydia starts writing as well. Not as desperately as yesterday, but she's gaining on the other girl fast and apparently using a solution that most people in the audience aren't familiar with. Stiles, who times her, notices that she's only a little slower than yesterday while actually writing down more lines.

The bell rings at her sign that she's finished, causing the other girl to curse colorfully and throw her chalk in frustration.

"So much for not attracting attention," John mutters and rubs his hand over his face.

For a short while, it's pandemonium. People are already uploading their videos as the host tries to bridge the vacuum as the jury takes nearly ten minutes to validate Lydia's solution.

Stiles phone lights up with a text from Tony.
My equations or no, I'm calling dibs. Tell Wonder Brain that Pepper wants to talk to her, maybe over sushi?

Let's get her out of here first and see if she needs alcohol, Stiles writes back. My guess is yes.

You can drink anywhere but I know just the place. Happy'll take you there.

The jury announces that Lydia has reached the final and commend her publicly for her innovative solution. Natasha and Natalie clap for her but Stiles is lost in thought. Not for the first time he wonders why Tony Stark of all people is being so nice to him and his friends.

His dad, who reads over his shoulder, grabs his neck and squeezes comfortably. "You better tell Derek and Steve what's going on. I'm sure they'll want to congratulate Lydia, too."

And suddenly warmth spreads from Stiles' chest into all of his limbs. How cool is that, being allowed to invite Captain America and Iron Man to share their happiness? Especially when they're not Captain America and Iron Man, but Steve and Tony, with the lovely addition of one beautiful Pepper Potts? Suddenly it doesn't matter quite so much why Tony has taken an interest in them, the only thing that matters is that they're all having a good time and, at least in Stiles' case, the best summer of their lives.

oOo

The sushi place Tony has commandeered for their little party is much smaller than expected, but the owner knows him very well and is all bows and wide smiles for the handful of guests.

"Restaurant closed just for you, Stark-san," he says as he leads them into a private room. "No press or fans allowed. Order everything you want, we make fresh. Sake?"

"Yes, please." Tony holds the chair for Pepper and Steve does the same for Lydia's mom. Natasha slaps Clint for trying to be a gentleman and Lydia profoundly doesn't care much about anything. "Also beer, you know which one, and a few appetizers."

"Non-alcoholic for those two," Derek adds and indicates Stiles and Lydia.

"Yes, yes, sourpuss," Tony says dismissively. "Say, where did you leave Fury's guards? I expected at least one irate phone call and eight hulking black-clad apes. If Coulson manages to crash the party, why not them?"

"Tony," Pepper chides gently.

"Alright, I expected twelve, because Fury is a paranoid hard-ass."

Steve lifts his shoulders and smiles apologetically, while Coulson looks faintly smug. "There were actually sixteen and we might have given them the slip."

"It was good stealth training," Derek agrees. "Much faster than waiting for Fury's okay, too."

Natasha eyes him with interest and Clint smirks. Stiles gets the idea that evading their handlers is a favorite pastime for people with way too many knowledge of how to wreak havoc. It would be cool if it weren't so inherently scary.

Groaning, Lydia wilts in her chair. "Why do other people always have all the fun? I don't know why I ever thought winning this championship would be a good idea. Who gave those people cameras and microphones? I'm exhausted."
"Because you want the money for college, sweetheart," Natalie soothes and strokes Lydia's back. "Princeton or Cambridge don't come cheap. It's only one more day and then you don't have to talk to anyone if you don't want to."

"Ah, not true unfortunately," Tony says and pops the cap off his beer bottle. "You signed a contract which means the producers have a right to expect you to give interviews and, I quote, act in a manner that represents and benefits the championship even after the current championship ends. JARVIS hacked the raw footage and I must say that, while your daughter is very photogenic, her talents and time would be wasted on the media, not to mention a classic college education."

"Which is why Tony asked me to help him call dibs," Pepper adds, smiling encouragingly. "Mathematics are an integral part of engineering and since Tony is experimenting with new resources, I agree that having an unconventional mathematician on board could be very beneficial."

A swarm of smiling waiters comes up to their table then and places small plates and bowls with starters in front of them. Steve, Derek and Clint are the ones decimating the ones with meat, the rest of their group munches happily on the veggie fare.

 Afterwards, they order everything from the menu that looks even remotely interesting and laugh about Steve's alarmed face.

"Raw fish? I had really bad food poisoning once when we were out of wood for the stove. Never again."

"I don't like it much, either," Natalie confesses. "The texture is weird."

"And I just find raw fish disgusting." Stiles shrugs. "But this place has a ton of veggie sushi. I'm in heaven. And yes, dad, you can have some with scrambled egg."

"So, what is that you want to propose to Lydia, Stark?" Steve asks. "Except riches and all the fame she can handle?"

"What I want," Tony says with an obnoxious air of entitlement, "is her in my personal think tank. How that's going to happen is between her and Pepper."

"We tentatively thought about offering you a full scholarship to any college or university you want, coupled with your personal research facilities and adjustable funding," Pepper explains. "Ideally, half of your time would be devoted to your school and the other half to Stark Industries, or wherever Tony thinks he can help you further your abilities. Secondary points like who gets custody of what brain child would be negotiated later, with a legal representative of your choice. You'll find that Stark Industries is very fair in terms of copyright, patent management, and related legal issues but we always encourage partners to form their own opinion."

"That ... sounds like an awesome proposal." Stiles whistles. Everyone else around the table agrees. "Damn, Lyds, please say that you'll at least think it over."

"I will if Pepper promises that I'm not dreaming," she says quietly.

Pepper smiles and grasps her hand. "You're not. We know that this is a lot to ask of someone your age. Take your time, enjoy the rest of your holiday. I'll send you a more detailed plan later so you have something in hand you can discuss with your family and friends."

"Thank you. I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing but eat something," Tony urges. "You'll need your strength when you and Spark Boy
come visit me during the next holidays."

The sheriff very nearly spews his sip of sake over the table. "They what? Since when are they coming to visit you?"

"Since five seconds ago. I'm good at thinking on my feet." Tony waves his fork around distractedly. "I want to work, Pepper wants me to work, and I can tell that the kids and even sourpuss here also want to work. It would be a working holiday. That's a thing, right? A holiday where people work? Pepper, is that a thing? If not, call legal, I want that patented."

"Oh god, and off he goes," she sighs and rubs her forehead. "Yes, Tony, a working holiday is a thing, we just don't call it that. Leave all of that to me and eat your sushi."

"But-

"No buts. Let them eat and try to invite them later, after you've thought it over." She pushes a small dish with pickled ginger next to his plate. "Not everybody is as flexible as you are with their time, keep that in mind."

"You're no fun. All of you."

"I am fun," Clint protests. "But you never invite me anywhere, Stark."

"Because you tend to chase people off with that resting bitch face of yours," Tony sniffs. "Or put holes through them."

"That was one time, and the guy was a psycho! This is how you repay my kindness."

"The point is that I can't take you anywhere, Barton. You're giving me a bad rep." Tony dips some ginger into his wasabi. "Except the sports bar. That's always fun."

"Yeah, because I win at darts."

"I win at darts, too," Natasha says casually. "But you don't take me to bars. Should I feel insulted?"

Tony and Clint look at each other and refuse to say another word.

"What is a sports bar?" Steve asks. "Do people actually go there and do sports? Do they do sports drunk? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Nah. It's like any other lame bar except with a huge TV screen and a couple of dart boards and pool tables. Watching sports makes lazy guys feel good about themselves. We'll go sometime if you like. Barton can win the money for our drinks."

"Hey! I always win the money for our drinks."

"And now you'll have to win a little more. I have it on good authority that the Cap can't get drunk."

Clint groans.

"Not easily, at least," Steve shrugs. "Same as Derek. 's nice not be the lone teetotaler anymore."

"Other than the hunters, this is really the only thing that makes being a fur face thoroughly not cool," Stiles says and throws a shit-eating grin at Derek. "But whatever, being human is totally cool."

Stiles surreptitiously looks at the beers Steve and Derek are holding.

"Should I, or should I not?" he asks Lydia and low-fives her when she merely smirks.

Two beers later, Steve and Derek are hammered and talking smack with each other. Steve's old-school slang is hilarious and Derek apparently gets a little handsy when he's not in full control of his faculties because he has one arm around Steve and voluntarily presses up against him.

Pepper and Coulson have a hard time keeping them from sweeping the delicate plates and cups off the table.

"Just because you're unusual doesn't mean you can't get a job," Steve slurs earnestly, squeezing Derek's shoulders with one arm, the other gesturing grandly. "Y'know, you remind me o' my men. Howlin' C'mandos. Because you're a werewolf, howling, you get it? But also 'cause you're a good guy."

"I try," Derek says mournfully and pokes at his last sushi roll. "I miss howling. And Laura. Everyone I love is dead."

"Same." Steve takes Tony's half-full beer bottle, gives it to Derek and takes Coulson’s for himself. "Life sucks, but here's a toast anyway. To life, and whatever she has in store for us."

They cheer with that sad earnestness only maudlin drunks can feel and drain their drinks in one swallow.

Tony, who's been speechless until now, but not speechless enough not to film the whole thing, turns to Stiles. "I need to adopt you. I can be mom, I'm totally the nurturing type."

"You're not," Pepper pinches him. "Throwing money at people and making microwaves explode together is not nurturing. If people were plants, they'd die three days in."

"Totally untrue." Tony pulls an offended face. "Besides, making microwaves explode is a time-honored tradition among science-buddies."

"It is not."

Lydia purses her lips. "Well, it kind of is." At Pepper's incredulous look, she explains, "Our physics teacher took the AP course to blow up his old microwave. It was fun."

"It really was," Stiles adds. "We're with Tony on that one."

The sheriff groans. "There won't be an adoption, Stiles. Stop encouraging him. Sober up the wonder twins if you want to be helpful. Agent Coulson has to get them back soon."

"Please don't," Steve murmurs. "I've wanted to get plastered for a lot of dead people. Let me be miserable while I can."

Derek, with his head in his hand, rumbles, "Me, too."

"If the wonder dudes want to be boring, let them," Tony says, a glint in his eyes. "The rest of us can have fun in my laser tag hall."

The offhand comment gains huge favor immediately and suddenly people can’t wait to finish their food and head back to Stark Tower. Even Agent Coulson has a certain glint in his eye.

"You go on without us," Derek tells Stiles as they leave the restaurant. His face is close and his eyes
a little shiny from the alcohol. “I’ll take Steve somewhere no-one will bother him.”

“Be careful.” Stiles quirks a smile at him. “How much longer do you want to drink?”

“Maybe you could check up on us once in a while.” Sighing, Derek rakes a hand through his hair
and musses it. Steve steps up to them and lays a heavy hand on his shoulder. “It might get late.”

“Will do, big guy.”

“You’re a good friend,” Steve says and gives Stiles his best, mellow smile. “Have fun, and sorry for
crashing your friend’s party.”

“Nah, shooting at people will cheer her way more than food right now. You go and bond or
whatever buff dudes like you do together when drunk.”

“Stiles,” the sheriff sighs. “No innuendo, their heads might explode.”

“Take all my fun away, why don’t you?”

Steve grins and tugs Derek onto the sidewalk. “Don’t worry, I’ll protect his virtue.”

“Be careful and call if you run into trouble,” John tells them. “Derek has our numbers and you have
Stiles’. Don’t hesitate, alright?”

“Yes, sir,” Derek rumbles.

“And you all have mine,” Tony adds with a smirk. “Now piss off and get plastered. We’ve got better
things to do than see you off like little girls.”

Coulson’s jaw works a little, but he remains calm and manages to look largely unaffected as Steve
and Derek take their leave and wander away, presumably to find a secluded bar where no-one will
look twice at them. That doesn’t keep him from kicking Tony’s ass at laser tag later, twice, and only
JARVIS’ intervention stops him from actually putting a shiner to the billionaire’s face.

“I told you he was badass,” Stiles tells his father while they nurse post-laser tag cocktails. “And I
think I changed my mind. When I grow up, I so want to be him.”

“I heard that!” Tony calls through his den and he actually sounds hurt.
The Saturday begins much earlier than Stiles would have liked, mainly because Friday never really ended. Since Lydia hadn’t shown any desire to put an end to a great evening, Tony had only been too happy to tickle her mind with equations from his energy portfolio. Pepper and Natalie had spent a good part of the night talking about the contract Lydia would hopefully sign at the end of the holiday, so Stiles and his father were left with Agent Coulson and enjoyed several hours of very productive brain picking.

Stiles had also called Derek every hour to see whether he and Steve were still alive and able to function, deciding at half past one to cut them off and collect their sorry asses before they did something stupid. It was bad enough that they’d managed to climb onto the Brooklyn Bridge in their state in the first place.

“Are you still mad?” Derek grumbles when Stiles lets the alarm of his phone ring. And ring and ring and ring.

“I’m not mad, just sharing my cheery disposition.” Stiles turns on his side and looks at the werewolf. “How’s the head?”

“Fine. No hangover.”

“Was it worth it?”

Derek’s downturned lips lift in a bittersweet smile. “Absolutely. We took pictures.”

“Awesome.” Stiles kills the alarm and sighs. “God, eleven already. Is it okay if I shower first?”

“Yes. I’ll go down to the gym and meet you for breakfast. Or maybe lunch.”

They part ways, though not without a bristly cheek-rub that has Stiles swaying on his feet a little.

“God. You’re a machine. No gym for me today. All I’ll do is drink coffee and somehow cheer for Lydia,” he mutters. “Hopefully without falling asleep.”

Derek smirks. “You’d manage to cheer for her even *while* asleep.”

“I’m full of talents, aren’t I?”

Half an hour later Stiles is sipping his green juice and poking at his buckwheat pancakes. Tony, insomniac bastard that he is, has hacked Derek’s phone and mailed him all the pictures from last night. A lot of them are blurry, but there are a few that look downright gorgeous. Steve and Derek make a handsome pair of bachelors, even stupidly drunk.
Stiles feels only a little guilty when he sets the picture of them sitting atop a Brooklyn Bridge pillar, the gorgeous New York’s illuminated skyline behind their smiling faces, as his phone background.

*Are you watching the math championship today?* he messages Tony. *Not sure whether Lyds will throw it or not. I’m so tired, I don’t know how she’ll manage.*

*She won’t throw it*, Tony responds immediately. *Pepper made her promise last night. She wants her to shine. Can’t say I disagree.*

Stiles smiles at that. *Yeah, me neither.*

Suddenly a piercing scream echoes through the hotel, reverberating through every wall and every floor.

“Oh, shit.” Stiles scrambles from the table, barely grabbing his phone, while the other guests cover their ears and stare with wide eyes at each other.

He barrels along the corridors and right into his father, who’s about to enter Lydia’s room.

“What happened?” he pants.

Mrs. Martin wrings her hands. “I don’t know. She went stiff and then just started screaming, even though she’s wearing the amulet.”

“Double shit.” Stiles squeezes past them and clambers onto Lydia’s bed. “Lyds, are you alright?”

“I don’t know what’s happening with me,” she sobs, painfully out of breath. “Suddenly there were these … faces. So many faces.”

Gulping, Stiles asks, “Dead faces?”

“Lots of them,” she whispers, burying her face in his chest. “But some of them were … they were me.”

oOo

Stiles has literally no idea how they got to the convention center. All he knows is that Lydia needed him to keep her sane and that’s what he has done, and is still doing.

“You’re going to be just fine. We’ll figure this out, I promise,” he murmurs as he and the others escort her down to the cordoned off area for the finalists. “Don’t think about it, leave everything to me.” He wills the dozen little paintings of the sigil on Peter’s amulet he has drawn on her arms and back to do their job with all his might, imagining them as little mages who fend off the specters of the dead with their power.

Lydia’s eyes are wet with unshed tears and her fingernails are digging painfully into Stiles’ arm.

“Don’t leave,” she says shakily.

Oh, how he has wished to hear those words. A year back, he’d have given anything to have her cling to him like this. Now, though, it only makes him sad and angry.

“Not for anything,” he murmurs. “You’ll blow them away, I know it.”

“I can still see them.” Her voice is so quiet that Stiles has trouble picking the words up. “The other mes. They’re here, but not really.”
A cold shiver runs down Stiles’ back. “But no others?”

“No. They're gone."

“Then they can’t really hurt you. Nothing evil gets through my awesome scribbles. Maybe they just want to watch you do something awesome?”

Lydia sighs, visibly clinging to that idea. “Maybe.”

Then it’s time for everybody to take their seats. Derek puts his warm hand around the nape of Stiles’ neck, grounding him and reminding him that he can do this, he just needs to keep his racing thoughts in check.

“She trusts you,” he says quietly. "And we do, too. It'll all work out fine."

The finals begin with a lot of pomp. The host has the last four participants walk along a small runway and lists their previous achievements and strengths. Lydia is gorgeous but much less outgoing than before and people definitely notice. Making jokes about nerves, the host thankfully gives the perfect excuse and after an almost unbearable half hour of introductions and rambling about the prize money, the actual finals finally begin.

For the first round, it's two against two, battling it out for the privilege to compete for first place. Stiles is unable to predict what his friend will do, if she's even capable of doing math after their morning - but Lydia surprises him. She looks at her problem and then stares at nothing in particular before nodding slightly.

And then her chalk flies over the blackboard. Despite her slight pallor and despite her earlier fear she has never looked more in control. She is quick but thorough and lacks the manic quality of her last encounters. The results are still amazing and she visibly sags a little as the audience and even the jury cheer for her win.

The second pairing takes a lot longer to determine a winner, but once the two young men are done, pandemonium breaks loose. Lydia’s rival looks faintly ill, not that Stiles can blame him.

The proceedings stop for a half-hour break during which all of their party drink coffee and take turns stroking Lydia's hair. Derek is surprisingly good at that.

"I had younger siblings," he explains quietly. "I liked playing with my younger sister's hair."

“I'm not nervous anymore,” Lydia tells them when they've drunk their coffee. Her voice lowers. “You were right, Stiles. It’s like the other mes are here to watch. I wonder …”

Stiles gets what she means. “… whether you’ve been with them before and this is the return visit.”

Natalie and John gape at them while Derek’s face is carefully blank.

“Attention please! Five minutes until filming!”

Leaving Lydia’s side is the last thing Stiles wants to do, not with the million questions bouncing around in his brain, but his father’s gentle grip reminds him that this is not about him, and that he has to let Lydia do this.

While the contestants duke out who gets third and who gets fourth place, he writes a message to Peter and tells him what has happened. Peter doesn’t reply, which is no surprise, but Tony’s message is.
Come to the tower when you’re finished. One Eye needs to talk to you all.

His serious tone makes Stiles frown. He shows the message to the others and tries not to protest when Mrs. Martin tells the men that she’ll stay with Lydia through the awards ceremony and join them as soon as they’re able.

“It’s better this way. You go and get everything sorted out. Lydia won’t thank you if you’re wasting time on her account.”

Derek nods. “Stark will make sure you get there safely.” He glances to the right and sniffs lightly. “Clint and Natasha are here, they’ll keep watch.”

Stiles first sends Tony their plan and receives an affirmative and then texts Lydia what’s going on. She only has a minute before she has to go on stage but her answer is blessedly agreeable.

*Ask him to order Caribbean. I’m in the mood for mango curry.*

*Will do, my queen.*

Everybody is on tenterhooks as she gets her last and most difficult problem, and for once it's not because they're afraid she'll fail. Derek and the sheriff are stoic while Stiles and Lydia's mom are all but chewing on their nails.

"She's so fast," Natalie whispers into the pin drop silence. "Is that ... is that it? Is she already finished?"

The host of the show asks the same question and murmurs swell up in the hall.

Stiles can only nod, struck speechless. The whole blackboard is full with numbers and symbols he has no hope of ever understanding and the jury gets busy dissecting her results. Nobody really takes note of her opponent and Stiles feels deeply sorry for him. The young man stands there with the resigned air of a defeated rival. He has no idea that he never stood a chance against his beautiful rival, a human genius with a *other* side.

Stiles sends a small note to whichever deity is listening to do something nice for the poor guy.

"They're still checking," the sheriff says tightly. "Why are they taking so long?"

"With one hundred grand in the pot you'd double and triple check, too," Stiles replies. He pokes Derek's arm and asks him to listen in on the judges' talk. "Especially when they haven't seen that solution before."

Derek tilts his head. "Mmh. You're right. They're going to feed it into their software. It'll be quicker than following by hand."

Despite the delay, all the tension leaves Stiles, and he suspects Lydia as well. She's sitting in her chair, absently twirling a lock of hair around her finger and sipping from a water bottle.

His phone lights up, showing a new message from Tony.

*Your girl is a winner. You've got fifteen minutes, we can celebrate together later.*

It's eerie how well Tony can estimate, because just a moment later the host asks for their attention and quiet and the award ceremony starts. There's so much noise as the third and second place get their rewards that Stiles can't believe people are able top that.
But they can, and they do.

A dozen TV cameras are all catching Lydia as she walks up to the jury last, accompanied by fierce applause, screams, catcalls, and glittery streamers, and accepts her prize. Stiles shoots at least two dozens of pictures, although he knows that every newspaper and online publication will have better shots.

"She looks good with that check," Natalie smiles and wipes her tears away. "Now my little girl can do whatever she wants to do."

The sheriff puts his arm around her shoulders and hugs her silently. He looks just as proud as she does and it warms Stiles to know that Lydia now has someone else to cheer her on. His dad has a huge heart of gold and a lot of love to give and Stiles doesn't mind sharing him with someone so deserving.

"We have to go," Derek says into Stiles' ear. "Let's leave before the exits are clogged."

Stiles sends Lydia a last, obnoxiously cheerful text, reminding her that they won't have fun without her and to milk her fifteen minutes of fame for all it's worth.

As they squeeze through the masses to go outside, Mrs. Martin joins her daughter. If it weren't for Clint and Natasha standing guard, Stiles would've felt uneasy. As it is, he's only exhausted, both physically and mentally. The sight of Tony's black limo is a welcome sight, and the drinks in the bar even more so.

"Only one," the sheriff says sternly and hands Stiles a gin tonic with very little gin and a lot of tonic. "Who knows what else the evening will bring. After this holiday, you won't touch another drop of alcohol for a year, is that clear?"

"Crystal, dad."

They all remember Tony's message and share a discomfited look.

It doesn't get much better once Tony's head of security, Happy, has brought them into his apartment. It's not the billionaire who greets them, but Nick Fury, flanked by Agent Coulson and Captain America.

"Evening," Fury says and stares at them. "Thank you for meeting me so promptly. I'm sorry to disturb your family time but this can't wait."

He bids them to sit, which Coulson, Steve and Derek decline. Stiles and John, however, sink into the couch cushions and look apprehensively from Pepper to Tony. Both shake their heads gently.

"I'll get right to the point since time is money and I have things to do," Fury says. His eye wanders from Stiles to Derek to Steve. "Hale, I want you to consider joining SHIELD."

Stiles' stomach drops to his feet.

"What," Derek says flatly.

Fury raises his chin and looks at him like he's a slow child. "Don't tell me you're surprised. You formed a relationship with the Captain and possess a lot of useful talents. You even managed to get one over one of my best agents. That alone merits SHIELD's interest."

"What he means to say," Steve interrupts, "is that he needs you. We need you. It was good working
with you. I like your style, I know that we can learn a lot from each other and go from there, and I also know that we would work well together as a team."

"Yeah, we ... we would," Derek admits.

Steve smiles crookedly. "This is not a hoax or some stupid, half-cooked idea. I want you in my team because I have the feeling that I can trust you to have my back. And I'd like to have yours."

It fucking breaks Stiles' heart to see all of Derek's thoughts flash over his stunned face. He looks like he can't believe is luck, both good and rotten. But the worst part is the pure yearning in his eyes.

"I ... it's an honor," Derek rasps, swallowing and balling his hands to fists. "I want to. I do. But ... I can't. You know why, Steve."

"Your little furry problem," Fury drawls and steps closer, hands still clasped behind his back. "Yes, I heard about that. There might be a possibility to help you out there. You know my best agents already, it'd be no trouble for them to fly over and assist you."

Derek collects himself and scowls. "No. Absolutely not. I can't knowingly subject your people to this. The people after me are alpha werewolves. One bite can turn humans into werewolves if it doesn't kill them, and make them feel beholden to them. All I really wanted from you were weapons, maybe help with surveillance. Support. Not someone to get their hands dirty on my account."

"My agents are very good," Fury counters, unconcerned. "They'll know to keep their distance."

"It might work, and it might not. The alphas aren't stupid. I wish they were, but they'll likely find you out and attack when you least expect it. It takes just one," Derek says heatedly. "Just one werewolf on their side with all the knowledge and abilities of your agents, coupled with much more strength and rapid healing, not to mention superior senses."

Fury quietly thinks about it.

"I wouldn't take the risk if I were you," Derek presses. "I'm not worth it."

"Maybe not to me," Fury finally says. "But you are to him." He nods at Steve, who shrugs unapologetically.

"In my day it was hard to find good people," he says. "I don't think it has gotten much better since then."

"I'm not worth it," Derek repeats and looks at Steve, obviously willing him to understand.

"Maybe not yet," Tony says, flicking a gum wrapper at Derek's forehead. "But that can be helped. Isn't that right, Fury?"
"Hm." Fury steps a little closer and sizes Derek up. "How dire would you say is the situation in Beacon Hills?"

"Right now? Not very," Derek admits. "They're sounding us out, sending warnings, that kind of thing. Why?"

"Do you think your uncle would mind holding the fort a little longer? For, say, another couple of weeks? Maybe even a month?"

"I'm not sure mind is the right word here," Stiles interjects. "It's not only him there, which would be bad enough. My ... uh, friend and someone else are werewolves too, but they don't get along with Peter. At all. I don't think we should leave it like that for too long."

Now he has Fury's full attention and like the first time at the Metropolitan, it's a disconcerting feeling.

"It's a long story," Stiles deflects.

"I'd like to hear it anyway, Mr. Stilinski."

"I have a presentation!" Tony crows.

"Right now all you need to know is that an alpha is much stronger than a beta werewolf," Derek explains. "The alpha pack has five alphas. Beacon Hills has only me and three betas. Without me, they'd be fair game. I can't leave."

"What about the boy?" Fury motions at Stiles. "Can't he help out? I heard interesting things about him; surely his little tricks will be enough to buy you a few weeks."

Derek looks at Stiles with such guilty longing that his stomach cramps. It's only there for a second, but Stiles decides to run with it.

"I'll call Peter," he announces. "Can you put him on loudspeaker, JARVIS?"

"Certainly," the cool voice replies. "Calling Peter Hale now."

The call goes through and Peter picks up after a couple of rings.

"You're my favorite human, Stiles, but I get the impression that you're a little clingy."

Stiles pulls a face while the others start at Peter's cultivated voice. "You wish. I'm calling because something's come up for Derek."

"For Derek? Interesting choice of phrase. What would that be?"

Glancing at Derek to see whether he wants to tell his uncle himself and receiving a headshake, Stiles takes a breath.

"Several things actually, but one in particular. An agency wants to keep him here for a couple of weeks longer, for training and stuff."
"An agency." Peter pauses so long that Stiles is afraid he'll explode and run amok every second now. "Which one? And what have you done?"

"Not one you have heard of, I think," Stiles replies. A little petulantly, he adds, "As for what we have done, a whole lot of nothing. We kind of stumbled into it, but it's cool. Derek made a friend and wants to stay. What do you say? Can you keep the alpha douche-nozzles out for that long?"

"That depends on whether that agency of yours has contacts to certain elements of our society that might be helpful."

"They actually offered to send some of their kickass people to Beacon Hills."

"Out of the question," Peter scoffs. "Hunters, however, are a completely different ballgame. Why, just the other day I wondered whether Christopher Argent and his lovely daughter could be persuaded to return to the front lines."

"They won't be enough," Derek says, sounding resigned already.

"Of course not. Nor are they or any friends they might bring trustworthy. Your new friends, however, could keep an eye on them and ensure that they'll leave when the job is done."

Fury makes himself known. "This is Director Nick Fury from SHIELD, the agency that has an interest in your nephew. Give me names and details and I'll see what I can come up with."

"I'm afraid that your helpfulness will depend on the resources Christopher can lend us," Peter says. "He's had a falling out with his father, a leader in the hunting community. Without his pull it'll be difficult to find hunters who're willing to leave the good ones standing."

"Right now I'm not sure there are any," Stiles mumbles, drawing up his shoulders and making himself small.

"It is complicated," Peter agrees easily. "Text me your number and I'll get back to you as soon as I can, Director Fury."

"How is it in Beacon Hills?" Derek asks before Peter can end the call. "How are Scott and Isaac?"

"Annoyingly uncooperative as usual," Peter replies, voice performing the equivalent of an eye roll. "They attempt to better their fighting skills and tried to tail me yesterday." His tone gets smug. "I don't think they liked getting trapped in that hardcore BDSM establishment very much, but I could be mistaken. They did stay for the better part of an hour, after all."

Stiles snorts with surprised laughter and the corner of his father's mouth lifts in an appreciative grin.

"Other than that I'm sorry to say that our charming yet murderous friends slashed the tires of your precious Camaro. I don't expect them to show up for another week at least, and by then I'll have an answer from Christopher."

"So Derek can stay in New York?" Stiles asks.

"Yes," Peter sighs with another verbal eye roll. "He can stay, provided that he calls once a day and is prepared to come back at a moment's notice. I'm willing to support him, but not if it means putting my pretty neck on the line for your pathetic ex-friend and Lahey."

"Agreed, Uncle Peter," Derek says maybe a little stiffly, but Stiles can see how pleased he is that Peter actually wants him to stay in contact. "If you need anything, let me know."
"I will. And now excuse me, I promised the lovely Mrs. McCall to watch her house while her severely grounded son is inside. It'll be amusing to coerce one murder pack to go against another while I keep my greatest failure from having fun."

Peter smirks, Stiles knows it, and he doesn't know whether he should be terrified that Derek's uncle got close to Melissa again, or grateful that he's helping her out. He looks at his father and finds him equally torn.

"Sounds like you'll be having a blast tonight," he manages. "We'll see you soon."

JARVIS ends the call and the group looks at each other silently.

"He sounds scary," Pepper says at last and rubs her arms. "I know you said that he's still healing, but are you sure you want him overseeing your affairs, Derek?"

"Yes. He's capable and he deserves the chance to prove himself. He needs it and I do, too."

"Where will you stay?" Stiles asks. "Do you still have your old apartment?"

"Yes, but it's sublet. My things are in storage." Derek shrugs. "I'll find a place."

"Your place is with Captain Rogers," Fury informs him. "I have your key card here. You'll need to come in for a biometric picture and hand scan before your training can begin."

"And he also needs to sign a contract, doesn't he?" Tony idly twirls a pen in his hands. "Detailing exactly what and how much of him you can keep. I'm thinking that blood samples would be too dangerous right now, same with other bodily fluids. And then there's the matter of secrecy. Who'll be informed about his kind? What'll be done with this information? If there are already plans for taking on more werewolves, he should be involved, shouldn't he?"

Fury sighs in exasperation. "Stark, this is not your area. Leave it to my staff and Hale."

"I would, but Sourpuss here is my friend and I can't see a friend being taken in by SHIELD. Not more than absolutely necessary, that is."

"That's sweet of you," Pepper smiles. "Who should we send to represent him?"

Tony smirks and lazily points at Stiles. "Him, of course. Together with myself, because the kid can't think of everything himself."

"We have to get back tomorrow," John sighs. "I'm sure Derek will manage without Stiles."

"Nah." Tony gets up and saunters up to Stiles. Putting his arm around his shoulders, he smiles. "He's on holiday, he can stay, too. Or do you have summer courses? If JARVIS missed them, I'll make him bark like a dog for a day."

"Stark ..."

"Stilinski," Tony returns genially. "Your kid could do with a time-out from your crap. He'd live here, with Pep and I, and could visit his grumpy cat every day. And the Capsicle, too. But most importantly, he could do interesting stuff and brag to his boring schoolmates about his month in New York."

"Tony!" Pepper and the sheriff screech at the same time.

"Kidding, jeez. Two weeks, then?"
John rubs the bridge of his nose. "I can't believe you."

"Me, neither," Pepper takes out her phone and starts tapping on the screen. "Maybe Lydia and Natalie will talk sense into you."

"Why would they? They can stay, too." Tony orders JARVIS to let down a glass screen. Pictures start flashing over the panel. "This is your apartment, Pep will assign a driver to you and we'll set up a credit card because how can you have fun in New York without some cash to burn?"

"We can't accept that," John argues, overwhelmed. "It's way too much."

"It isn't and you can, because I owe Stiles, wait, let me check, aha ... I owe Stiles around twenty mil, final amount pending, of course, so it's the least I can do."

"Twenty what?" Stiles croaks. "Why?"

"The drones, kid," Tony reminds him. "Nice spending money, right? You should start with the spending immediately. Two weeks are short."

Stiles looks at his dad, heart in his throat and mouth dry.

"Oh my god, I can't believe you, Stark." John crosses his arms in front of his chest and scowls. "Buying my kid's love like that."

"It'll be a time-share. Although not really if your people at the station can spare you a little longer."

Sadly, they cannot, though not for lack of trying. There is just too much to do for too few police personnel, especially now that young people go increasingly more often to illegal raves, or into the woods to drink. Adding the threat from the alpha pack and John has to admit defeat.

"If he stays here, I want Derek by his side," he says after ending the call with his second in command. "He won't go out alone, he'll have people tagging him and I want him home in Beacon Hills when Derek gets home, whenever that will be. You'll also make sure that he won't spend twenty thousand dollars in a week, Pepper, because I've seen Stiles' college fund and it's not pretty."

"Uh, John, about that." Pepper wets her lips. "Tony wasn't talking about twenty thousand dollars. Stiles earned twenty million dollars so far ... John? Are you going to collapse?"

It would have been funny if Stiles weren't as floored as his father.

"As amusing as all of this is, we should finalize your plans," Fury says, startling everyone but Coulson. "Is your kid staying, sheriff, or is he not?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose so." John eyes Tony like he's crazy. "But I seriously want someone to monitor him."

"Consider it done," Coulson says. "The same goes for Miss Martin and her mother, should they choose to remain here. I'll also arrange for lessons in self-defense."

"We'll take good care of him, John," Pepper reassures him. "You'll sign him over to me so you can be sure that he'll be well taken care of. We also have a very good financial advisor, I'm sure she'd be happy to have a talk with Stiles."

That decided, Fury and Coulson take their leave and the party returns to the sofa where Stiles chugs down a large glass of water.
"Looks like I don't have to find a job next school year after all," he says weakly once his head isn't spinning any longer.

"And looks like I was right," Tony says smugly. "It didn't take me a week to get your father to sign custody over to me. Consider yourself owned, Spark Boy."

The sheriff groans and buries his face in his palm.

oOo

It's past ten in the evening when Lydia and her mother finally manage to meet them. Flanked by a harried looking Clint and Natasha, both women seem a bit worse for wear, but otherwise well satisfied with the day's results. Lydia accepts their praise and cheer with sweet smiles and tight embraces, lingering the longest with Stiles.

"Did you order my mango curry?" she asks, finally putting her little purse down and stepping out of her high heels. "I could eat a tree."

Stiles and John serve her and Natalie hot plates of the delicious food and then sit down to hear everything about the championship's after show and the people they've met.

"It was incredible," Natalie concludes what must have been half dream and half nightmare. "I didn't expect so many people to be interested in my baby. In a way it was good that she already has a very good offer. It took the stars out of our eyes and allowed us to actually meet people and not potential sponsors."

"Which is why my purse is full with business cards of self-important, chauvinist pigs who think they can gain a stupid bimbo to not only do their work, but also warm their beds," Lydia says dismissively. "What went on while mom and I were being courted?"

"Oh, how to tell her?" Tony asks gleefully.

Pepper slaps him. "A lot, to be honest. Why don't we start with the easy part?"

"What is the easy part?" Tony smirks. "The part where Fury came here and demanded that our sourpuss join SHIELD? Or the part where Sourpuss looked sad enough to melt my ARC reactor and I simply had to offer Stiles a place to stay for another couple of weeks in New York so he wouldn't be alone? Or maybe the part where Stiles called the psycho uncle to make sure that Hale could stay and accidentally managed to get SHIELD involved with your thing after all?"

Lydia gapes at him. "What?"

"It's true. I asked Fury whether it would be possible to invite Derek to become my steady sparring partner and I guess he decided to cut to the chase before you all went back to Beacon Hills," Steve explains. "Sorry about that, by the way. If I'd known that he'd propose a long term arrangement, I wouldn't have said anything."

Derek's mouth curls up a little. "Yes, you'd have."

"Alright, I would have. I'm not as nice as people think." Steve smiles and bumps Derek's shoulder with his own.

"Cute. So, are you staying, sheriff? Stiles?"

"I have to go back, but Stiles will stay for as long as Derek can stay," John replies. "Tony offered to
put you and your mom up as well, if you're interested."

Mrs. Martin regretfully shakes her head. "I'd love to but I have a job interview next week. And I'm not sure I'm comfortable leaving Lydia here on her own." She smiles weakly at Tony and Pepper. "No offense to you, of course, but it wouldn't be right to burden you with the care of my daughter when you're already taking care of Stiles."

Tony rolls his eyes and sighs. "People and their morals. Pepper."

Pepper narrows her eyes at Tony's imperious tone but obliges. "While we were waiting for you, we worked out how to do this for Stiles. He decided to first spend a week with Steve and Derek at the SHIELD quarters and learn as much as he can about self-defense. After that he'll move into the tower, where Tony can show him around and help him decide where he wants to intern after High School. The same offer is open to Lydia; we'd love to have her here."

Natalie looks a little overwhelmed and Lydia radiates breathless anticipation.

"I don't know," she says hoarsely. "It's so far away, and there is her ... her affliction. What if she needs me?"

"I don't want to undermine your authority, of course," the sheriff tells her gently, stroking her arm, "but since SHIELD will have an eye on Stiles, I'm pretty confident that he'll make it back to Beacon Hills in one piece. I also know that he and Derek will do their best to protect her, especially concerning her new senses. You know that. At this point, New York is hardly more dangerous than our town."

"I'd love to stay, mom," Lydia says softly. "Please say I can."

Natalie laughs and brushes a tear from her lashes. "As if I stood a chance against you, sweetheart. But you'll call at least once a day and avoid trouble, or you're coming home at once."

"I promise. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

The Martin women hug and suddenly the tension leaves the room. Weary giddiness takes hold of them, even Steve who apparently can't quite believe that he got his way - and got to stay with them after Fury finished his business at Stark Tower.

Tony breaks out a bottle of ridiculously expensive champagne and finally, finally they toast Lydia and her victory, order even more ridiculously delicious Pizza and dessert and spend the night of their lives with indoor fireworks, music and a lot of laughter.

It is absolutely fantastic to shake off the troubles in Beacon Hills, the failed relationships and the worries about the future and just celebrate the here and now.

oOo

It is hard to let his father go. Stiles has imagined being cool with seeing his old man off, but now that the time has come to actually say goodbye, he finds that his throat is closed off and his eyes itch a little.

"Hey," John sighs, amused. "It's just for a couple of weeks, kiddo."

Stiles stares at his shoes and shrugs. "I know. It's just ... I'll miss you, okay."

John gathers Stiles into his strong arms and hugs him tightly. "Love you, kiddo. Have a lot of fun,
and remember, don't spend all your pocket money at once."

"Love you too, dad. Get home safely and remember to paint the symbol on your car."

"I'll do that first thing," the sheriff promises and lets go to embrace Lydia. Derek is last, but certainly not least, to Stiles' surprise. It's a little awkward, but the werewolf doesn't look bothered at the contact. Stiles is even sure he sees him giving his dad's cheek a phantom rub with his stubble.

After more promises of taking care and behaving themselves, John and Natalie are swallowed up by the many people going through security and Derek, Stiles, and Lydia go back out to see their plane depart.

For an hour, they're undisturbed but then a black limo rolls up to their hide-out at the long time parking space.

"Where to?" the driver asks and Stiles grins.

"What tickles your fancy more, exploring Tony's tower or walking over the Time Square and gawk at people?"

Lydia's smirk and Derek's cautious smile mean the world to him. He takes each by the hand, marveling that they actually let him, and drags them towards their ride and the best working holiday they'll probably ever have.

Chapter End Notes

This is it, folks. The last chapter of part 1 in my Misfit-series. I hope you liked it and will keep an eye out for the next part (which I tentatively titled "A Misfit Working Holiday"). Thank you all soooo much for your wonderful comments, your kudos and all-around awesomeness. I know that the ending is pretty open but then again I'm not one for easy fixes. Once NaNo is over and I have a little more air for fun projects, I'll continue writing. In the meantime, if you know any good TW/Marvel crossovers ... I'm all eyes. It's for science! ;)

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