Have To Put Him On A Shelf

Summary

James’ life was weird. He was born in a HYDRA lab, a clone of an assassin who was actually the brainwashed best friend of Captain America. He was rescued and raised by SHIELD. You might say he has some identity issues. He tried to have a normal life: he went to college, made friends, got a job, all while trying to honor the memory of Bucky Barnes, the man that he might have been, once. That all gets shot to hell when Captain Steve Rogers is discovered in the wreckage of the Valkyrie.

Steve’s life was weird. He grew up skinny and sickly with his best friend by his side. When war came to his country, he wanted to fight, to protect people. He became a super-powered soldier, and a symbol of victory for his country. He fought against HYDRA and watched the love of his life fall to his death. He died and woke up in a new world, where nothing was the same. That is, until he runs into a young man that looks just like Bucky...

Notes

Title is from Alice Cooper's Clones (We're All)

Also, if my timeline is totally crazy, it's just because the MCU is terrible at keeping track of
dates. Remember when they changed Bucky's birth year like 5 different times? Anyway, I did my best.

Thank you for reading!

See the end of the work for more notes.
“Sir, I don’t understand.” said Alexander Pierce as he followed Vasily Karpov down the long hallways of the HYDRA facility. “I thought the Asset never failed.”

“It doesn’t.” snapped Karpov as they rounded the corner. Pierce had to struggle to keep up with the man’s angry footfalls.

They stopped in the doorway of one of the building’s many sterile rooms. Pierce tried to hide his shock at the scene before him.

In the room, techs and scientists bustled about quietly in their usual way, and a few of the burly security guys sulked in corners, like any other spot you might find in HYDRA. However, they all seemed to be ignoring two things. The cooling corpse on the floor, and the bleeding Soldier on the examination table, gasping in pain.

This in itself was strange, the Asset making a sound unwarranted. But Pierce had never seen the Soldier register any type of pain or fear before, and it was strange to see it now. It unsettled him.

Pierce watched quietly as Karpov made a frustrated sound and walked over to the table. He murmured to the Soldier in Russian, as if he were soothing a child, and brushed long strands of hair out of his face. The Asset leaned into the touch, closing his eyes briefly.

Karpov had always been unusually affectionate with the Soldier, sometimes to an extend that made Pierce and others uncomfortable, though it was not their place to question anything Karpov did. Though, Pierce had to admit that it did obtain results. While the Asset was not supposed to have preferences, it was obvious he preferred Karpov over any other handler, and he was less likely to question commands if they were coming from Karpov. He became less robotically complaint and more eager to please. It would have been sad if it weren’t so laughably pathetic.

“You,” Karpov snapped, drawing two of the guards to attention. “Take that out of here.” He said, gesturing to the dead body of what Pierce assumed to be the Asset’s most recent handler. He had been supposed to escort the Asset to its last mission. Peterson, Pierce thought his name was.

“Waste of space…” Karpov was muttering, still absentmindedly stroking the Asset’s hair. “Shouldn’t have let such an incompetent disappointment come near my Soldier.” The Asset coughed wetly, and some blood dribbled out of the corner of his mouth. Karpov made shushing noises as he wiped the blood away.

One of the techs came over to draw some blood from the Soldier, and Pierce wondered if the kid had much left to give them.

The scientists seemed to be more stressed out than usually, a tense air in the room and sweat beading on their foreheads as the scribbled relentlessly on their clipboards. Pierce wondered what Karpov had them working on. If it was some way to fix the Soldier, it seemed odd that their eyes just barely glanced over his prone form on the examination table.
“Sir,” One of the white-coats said, drawing Karpov attention. “The embryo is ready for fertilization.”

“The surrogate?” Karpov asked.

“She’s just in the next room, sir.” The tech said, and Karpov nodded.

“Get on with it, then.” Karpov said, and turned his attention back to the Soldier.

“You will continue to do some much good for the world,” Karpov told the Asset, smoothing his hair back. The Asset whimpered, obviously in a great deal of pain. Pierce didn’t blame him, not with the gaping wound in his abdomen that was still sluggishly bleeding. “You are so important to so many people, and you always will be.”

“Sir?” Pierce asked, confused as to what was going on.

“Alexander,” Karpov said, standing and wiping the Soldier’s blood from his hands. “Walk with me.”

Pierce followed Karpov into the hallway where the man began to pace. “Alexander, I am an old man. I will not be able to lead this organization for much longer. That is why I am going to recommend you as my replacement.”

All the breath left Pierce’s body at once. “I- thank you, sir. It’s an honor.”

“Yes, I know,” Karpov said, unlocking a door. He opened it and ushered Pierce inside. It was an observation room. Pierce and Karpov could see a young woman in a hospital bed with techs and doctors mulling around. Karpov walked over to the wall panel, pressing the audio button.

“We are ready?” Karpov asked, and a doctor looked up and nodded.

They raised the woman’s legs into stirrups as they began some medical procedure. Karpov placed a hand on Pierce’s shoulder.

“Did you know that the Asset’s version of the serum affects the body at a genetic level? It actually binds with the DNA.” Pierce turned to look at Karpov in question.

“The Asset is older than I am, Alexander, and it has sustained damage over the years. It has permanent injuries that constantly cause it pain, and it can no longer perform at 100%, no matter how hard it tries. We have to constantly wipe it into submissiveness, and put it on ice to preserve it. Now, with its most recent injury, it just doesn’t seem like it’s worth saving.”

Pierce wet his lips. “We- we’re terminating the Asset?” It didn’t make sense. The Soldier was HYDRA’s most valuable weapon. Hell, he was the world’s most high-profile assassin.

Karpov clucked his tongue. “We are letting it die. It’s a kindness, really.”

“But, sir-” Pierce started, but Karpov raised a hand.

“Imagine, Alexander, if we had the Soldier from birth. The child would know nothing but HYDRA. Wipes would not be necessary because it would be unerringly loyal. It would be trained so perfectly, the grace and duplicity one of the Red Room’s girls, but with the added brutality of impossible strength of our Asset. There would not be a more perfect weapon.” Karpov sighed wistfully, staring at the medical team.
“One of our scientists, Dr. Kalindi Sharma, is an expert in DNA reproduction. She has extracted genetic materials from the Soldier. Enough to recreate an embryo identical to the microscopic cells of the Asset’s. We are implanting that embryo into the womb of a surrogate.”

“You mean-” Pierce spluttered. “Are we cloning the Asset?”

“Precisely, my boy.”

Pierce swallowed and turned to watch the procedure.

A few rooms away, The Winter Soldier breathed out a word, a name, something that tasted familiar on his lips. It made him smile as his heart spluttered out.

1990

Natalia Romanov knew that she had to prove herself to SHIELD. She should have had to prove herself to Agent Barton as well, and it was beginning to piss her off that he’s been so forgiving with her.

“You don’t have to come along, you know. It’s enough that you just told us where to find the base. You’ve done enough, Nat.”

She hasn’t done enough. She will never be able to do enough. Not for her to be clean.

Barton’s unending trust in her, his optimism and hope, made her feel old. She wondered how long Barton has been in the business, and how much longer it would be before those traits were burned out of him.

Instead of answering, she just swung herself out of the plane. Agent Barton sighed and chuckled, following suit. Natalia gestured for him to stay behind her. She knew the rumors about what lived here. If the Winter Soldier really was here, she wanted Barton as far away as possible. The man’s penchant for finding good in people, in wanting to redeem them would certainly get him killed, and Natalia wasn’t going to let that happen.

The Soldier was like her; ageless, choiceless, ruthless.

The kind of weapon that Barton should be kept safe from.

Barton got the door unlocked, and they headed inside, weapons drawn. The base looked abandoned. Barton cursed. This was the third HYDRA/Red Room base that they had stormed only to find it deserted. Natalia was starting to wonder if there was a mole in SHIELD. She also was starting to wonder if Barton thought it was her.

They split up to search the base. Natalia found nothing but useless files and broken computers. She tossed this all aside, frustrated. Barton may be forgiving, but Fury was not, and if she didn't find something of substance soon, she would be buried so deep that the Red Room would seem like a safe haven.
She heard a rustle at her six and turned sharply, drawing her gun. She followed the sound down the hallway into a small room with an observation window spanning one of the walls. There was a small bed in the room, sized for a child, but there were no other signs that a child could live here. No normal child anyway. The room was cold, with pale gray walls and metal fixtures. It looked like a prison.

Natalia held her breath.

A small body rolled from underneath the bed, lunging at Natalia’s feet. She was thrown off guard, not wanting to shoot a child. She let herself fall backward and the kid bit viciously at her leg.

She hissed and batted the child about the head. “Stop that, otrod’ye.”

The boy stopped for a moment then squints angrily at her. “Nyet!” He yelled, then ducked to bite her again.

Natalia picked the boy up from under his arms and stood, holding him at arm's length. The boy flailed and shrieked, clawing angrily at Natalia, who leaned back, horrified. It was a struggle to hold him. He was shockingly strong.

“Nien! Nej! Non! Nej! Lie! Bu!”

Agent Barton ran into the room, bow drawn. He stopped abruptly at what he saw.

“Nat, what the fuck?” he asked, and Natalia turned to stare at him, wide-eyed.

“I've found a demon.” She breathed, and Barton nodded in agreement.

“Yo, kid, chill the hell out!” Clint snapped, and the boy in Natalia’s arms went limp. He sniffled.

“He can't be more than three.” Natalia told Barton, and he nodded.

“You think he’s someone’s kid?” He asked and Natalia shifted her arms, bringing the child closer to her. The boy wrapped his arms around her neck.

“Kak tebya zovut?” She asked softly, wanting to know the boy’s name. He snuffled and tightened his grip around her neck, though not maliciously. “I'm Natasha,” she added. “That's Clint.” She nodded to Barton. He waved awkwardly.

“Don’ have it.” The boy said.

“Don’t have what, buddy?” Barton asked.

“Name.” Said the boy and Barton frowned, then his eyes went wide.

“Shit.” He breathed, pulling a file from under his arm. “Oh, shit.” He opened it and flips through the pages quickly. “Hey, Natasha, I don’t know if I’m reading this right, can you check?” He asked, and they traded off, Natalia taking the file and Barton taking the boy. Barton bounced slightly, rocking the child. The boy pouted, but leaned into the touch, as if he were starved for it.

Natalia opened the files, going through the pages, eyes scanning over the cyrillic. Her stomach dropped as she read. “Der’mo” She breathed. She had met the Winter Soldier, once, a lifetime ago. She remembered his dark hair, his sad blue eyes. She walked to the boy now, tipping his chin up to look into the deep, sad, blue. He stared back, almost defiant. She looked through the file to find the photograph of the Soldier on ice. She held it up to the child’s face, comparing the two.
“Jesus,” She muttered. She looked back at Clint. “Yeah. This is uh, this is the Winter Soldier.”

They both looked warily at the child.

“Well now what?” Barton asked, and Natalia had no fucking clue.

Coulson, Fury, Romanov, and Barton all circled around the table, considering it’s contents. The boy was there, in a car-seat, asleep. Romanov and Barton both denied having sedated him, but the way he was sleeping soundly was somewhat suspicious. He’s surrounded by files about the Winter Soldier and his… rebirth. No one spoke; all of them suffering a low-grade headache. All of a sudden, Coulson gasped, grabbing one of the photographs from the table. Everyone turned to look at him.

“One second,” He said, then ran out of the room.

Fury pinched the bridge of his nose, not looking at the child. Romanov stared blankly at the table. Barton snorted to himself and looked up. “Hey, hey guys.” He said, and they both turned to look at him. He pointed at the kid. “The Winter Toddler.”

He was saved from their combined glares by Coulson bursting back into the room. He threw up two images on the computer screen. One was of the Winter Soldier, and one was of a young man in old-fashioned military dress. They looked identical.

“What are we looking at here, Coulson?” Fury asked, and Coulson grimaced.

“On the left we have the Winter Soldier, world’s most dangerous and elusive assassin.” Coulson said. “On the right, we have Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, Captain America’s right-hand man, declared KIA during World War Two.”

“Phil, what the hell are you saying?” Barton asked, frowning at the screen. Coulson enlarged a map next to the two pictures. He drew an X on a spot on the map.

“This is where Sergeant Barnes fell to his death.” Coulson explained. “Romanov, that KGB base in the Alps you told us about, when was it founded?”

Romanov stood and walked over to the map. “A little before World War Two,” she muttered. She considered the map and drew a star over where the base would have been.

Barton stood, crossing his arms. “No, there’s no way Barnes could have survived that fall. No one could’ve.”

“No one completely human.” Romanov added.

“Well, as you know,” Coulson started excitedly, “Captain America’s first active mission was rescuing the 107th, Barnes’ unit, from a HYDRA P.O.W. camp. There, Dr. Zola, a renowned HYDRA scientist obsessed with recreating Erskine’s Super-Soldier Serum, experimented on James Barnes.” He said all of this very quickly, turning around at the end to grin proudly at the room.

Barton rubbed his eyebrow. “So you’re saying that Barnes got some knock-off Nazi version of
Captain America’s serum, got rescued, fell from that train, then was captured by some KGB outfit and turned into the Winter Soldier? How could he have survived so long? And how did they turn Captain America’s best friend into a Russian assassin?”

Romanov turned to the table and grabbed various pieces of paper. She handed them to Barton one at a time. “Massive amounts of torture, brainwashing, electro-shock therapy, experiments similar to the CIA’s Project MK Ultra, Project ARTICHOKE, and Project Monarch. And of course: this,” She handed Barton the last piece of paper. It contained blueprints of a chair designed to suppress memory. Barton paled slightly.

“Okay, but the Winter Soldier’s last known assassination was in ’87. He would have to be, like, 70.” Barton said, setting the papers aside.

“Cryostasis.” Coulson said, leaning over the sleeping child and grabbing a file.

“That doesn’t explain how mythical fucking assassin who may or may not be Bucky Barnes; America’s favorite sidekick, is now a 3 year old sitting on my motherfucking conference table.” Fury said, glaring at the kid like he was the one to blame for the situation.

Romanov changed the screen to the file on cloning. It’s been translated by the computer and they all considered it. “There’s another file, from one Vasily Karpov, talking about severe damage done to the Soldier due to incompetent handling. It’s dated approximately 10 months before the Soldier is mentioned again.” She reported. “I think he died.” She said softly, glancing to the child. “I think he died and they cloned him because they weren’t done using him.”

They all sat in silence, digesting this information.

“Fuck,” Fury said resignedly, opening a bottle of aspirin. “We’re gonna have to call Carter.”

If Clint didn’t know Peggy Carter, he’d be worried that the old broad was in danger of having a heart attack.

She blinked away tears without letting them fall, staring at the picture of the Winter Soldier. “Sergeant Barnes,” She murmured, softly touching the photograph.

Toddler Barnes climbed onto her lap. For some reason, Clint had gotten babysitting duty. But with the other options- reforming Russian spy, Captain America Super Fanboy, and Fury- well, he could see how he might be the best choice.

“It's nice to see you again, James.” Peggy said, smiling down at the child in her lap. Baby Bucky touched the ends of Peggy’s hair, right where it started to curl. He tugged lightly at the graying hair, and Peggy grinned at him, pulling at one of the kid’s cowlicks in retaliation. The kid giggled, dimples flashing. It was offensively cute.

“James.” The kid repeated, eyes lighting up. “James, James, Jamie, James. Me, James. I’m James.” He started to bounce happily on Peggy’s lap.

“What is Fury’s plan for this little one?” Peggy asked, and Clint started wringing his hands.

“Not sure.” Clint said, rubbing his eyes. “I’m pretty sure the extent of Fury’s plan right now is getting drunk and putting off paperwork.”

Peggy raised an eyebrow.
“Well, we can’t exactly put the kid in the system. We haven’t sent him through medical yet, but we’re fairly certain that he has some sort of super-soldier serum. Romanov reported remarkable strength and speed, and then there’s the fact that he’s the Winter Soldier - there’s just no chance that we can hand him over to civilians. We could get him some papers and an identity, sure, but…” Clint trailed off, looking at the kid. “And then there’s the strong possibility that HYDRA is gonna come looking for him. He just wouldn’t be safe.”

The kid- James- put his hands on Peggy’s face. She looked at him sadly, and he started to drag his little hands across his face, as if he were trying to smooth away her wrinkles. She held his hands where they’re cupping her face and the two of them seem to share a moment before James looked back at Clint and reached out for him.

“Clin’” He said, making grabby hands. Clint reached over and picked him up, settling him in his lap.

“Yeah, buddy?”

James leaned in and put his mouth next to Clint's ear, whispering something he can't quite catch.

“What was that?” Clint asked, and the kid sighed heavily, as if his tiny patience was being tested.

“Hafta pee.” He muttered, looking down.

“Oh.” Clint breathed, looking up, slightly panicked. He stood, scooping up James. “Bathroom?” He asked Peggy, and she pointed down the hallway, hiding her laughter behind her hand.

Clint waddled down the hallway as fast as he could, carrying James at arm's length. When they make it to the bathroom, he set James down in front of the door. The kid turned around to give him an unimpressed look.

“Pomogi  ” He demanded, tugging at the hem of his pants. Clint helped him unbutton them and followed him to the bathroom, dutifully standing guard outside the stall while James emptied his bladder, singing nervously.

He finished and Clint helped him wash his hands. James was singing the same song from earlier, in that high-pitched reedy tone of a young child and adding in a little hip-shake to go along with it. The song was unintelligible, in garbled toddler speak and Clint found himself bobbing his head along with James’ little dance.

They walked out of the bathroom and James stopped singing. He turned his big puppy-eyes on Clint and opened his arms.

“Up, please.” He said, standing on his toes to reach for Clint. Clint heart melted. He bent down to pick James up, settling him against his side. James sighed contentedly, grasping onto Clint's shirt. Clint rubbed his back and walks them down the hallway.

When they got back to the room, Fury, Coulson, Natasha, and Howard Stark had joined Peggy in her office. They stopped talking and looked up as soon as Clint and James walked in.

“We can trust him.” Fury said, and the tension in the room dissipated.

“What’s going on?” Clint asked, warily stepping into the room. It was crowded, so he and James had to sit in a chair in the corner.

“HYDRA has infiltrated SHIELD.” Coulson told him. “The people in this room are the only
Agents we can be sure of.”

Clint let out a breath. HYDRA in SHIELD. Has he been working for Nazis this whole time? He cataloged everyone in the room, double checking.

Peggy, founded SHIELD and fought in World War Two. Definitely not HYDRA. Same with Stark. Fury and Coulson, recruited right out of basic by Peggy herself. If she trusted them, so did Clint. Natasha, just left one evil organization; wouldn't trade it in for another. He doesn’t know what made everyone else sure that he wasn't HYDRA. Hell, if he were in their position, he wouldn’t have trusted him. He was young, new to the organization, bad at following orders. Whatever they saw in him, he was glad of it.

“How did this happen?” Clint asked, a little dumbfounded.

“Operation Paperclip” Peggy said tightly. “The recruitment of HYDRA scientists after World War Two.”

“There was a scientist by the name of Arnim Zola,” Howard Stark started, looking put out, and Clint recognized the name.

“The guy who experiment on Barnes when he was a POW with the 107th?” Clint asked, and Coulson looked impressed that he had been paying attention before. James yawned sleepily and burrowed into Clint's chest. Stark just looked annoyed at the interruption.

“Yes,” he said. “I asked him to join the Strategic Scientific Reserve in 1945, to dedicate his life to service of the American people for his freedom. Instead it seems he contaminated SHIELD from the inside, like a, like a, um…” He snapped his fingers, trying to recall the word.

“Parasite.” Peggy said grimly.

“So how do we weed out the good from the bad?” Natasha asked, leaning forward. “HYDRA Agents are notorious for taking their own lives before giving anything away. Simple interrogation won't work on these guys.”

Before anyone can come up with any answers, there's a soft knock at the door as Director Pierce walked in.

“Sorry I'm late,” He said, stepping fully into the room. “You know how traffic can be.”


“No!” James yelled, scrambling up Clint's body. He was shaking with fear. “No. Won’ go back! Clin’, please!”

Clint pushed the terrified crying child behind him and stood, drawing his bow. In the same move, Natasha stood, pulling a gun from God knows where. By the time James had thrown himself around the to the back of Clint's leg, everyone in the room, save Stark, had a weapon trained on Pierce.

Pierce raised his hands in surrender and Natasha rushed over to pat him down. Once she decided he was weapon free, she zip-tied his wrists.

“Is this really necessary,” he grumbled, almost good-naturedly as Natasha let him up.

“I think it is.” Nick Fury said, eye gleaming with distrust.
“I’m sorry!” James cried, “Don’t take me back!”

Clint tore his focus away from Pierce and turned to scoop up James.

“It’s okay, buddy. No one’s taking you anywhere.” Clint soothed, swaying back and forth. James sniffled and hid his face in Clint’s neck. Clint did his best to glare at Pierce menacingly while rocking a scared baby.

“A frightened child is hardly justification for such treatment!” Pierce protested, and Clint tried his best not to sneer at him.

“James,” Natasha asked, not taking her eyes off Pierce. “Who is that?”

“Mista Pierce.” The boy answered, voice quavering.

“And what does Mr. Pierce do, darling?” Peggy asked gently.

“He’s the boss,” James said. “He make me do training.” He lisped on ‘training’, his R sound coming out like a W. It made Clint hold him closer.

“Nick, come on. You know me.” Pierce tried.

“Alright Pierce, let’s go.” Coulson sighed, and Fury stood, grabbing Pierce roughly by the arm. “With me. Agent Romanov? Would you like to join?”

Natasha grinned sharply, and it was like there was already blood on her teeth. “It would be my absolute pleasure, sir.”

They left silence in their wake as everyone processed what the hell just happened. Eventually, Peggy stood, smoothing down the front of her shirt.

“Has anyone fed this young man since his arrival here?” She asked and Clint looked at James.

“You hungry, bud?” He asked, shaking James slightly. James nodded, still clutching Clint’s shirt.

“What do three year olds eat?” Clint asked the room, and was answered with a resounding shrug.

“Stark, don’t you have a kid?” He asked and Howard threw up his hands.

“Tony’s 22. He consists on vodka and bimbos.”

“Well what did James like when you knew him?” Clint asked and they just sort of look at each other.

“He liked, um…” Stark started, and frowned into middle space.

“Well he liked Steve,” Peggy started and Stark perked up.

“He definitely did like Steve. Big fan.”

“He was a bloody good shot. Steve used to brag about how he had the best sniper in the army.” Peggy added, and Howard nodded emphatically.

“And he was always coming by to look at tech.” He said. “He really liked the lab. He would come down and show Steve around all the time.”
“But mostly he liked Steve.” Peggy finished.

“That's great you guys, a real nice trip down the Bucky Barnes memory lane. But I meant like, food wise.” Clint sighed.

“Steve liked peanut butter,” Howard sighed, completely unhelpfully.

They ordered pizza.

Clint and James sat on the floor of the office, happily eating their slices as the adults sat at the desk and discussed the future of SHIELD or something. James really enjoyed himself, taking off all the toppings and eating them one by one, and mashing cheese and tomato sauce between his fingers before he decided it's suitable for consumption. It was a huge mess, and Clint watched in fascination as James took apart three slices methodically before Clint decided a fourth slice might make him sick and closes the box; because Clint so did not want to deal with kid puke.

Fury and Coulson come back, sans Natasha, and they started throwing in ideas for ‘pest control’ as Peggy was calling it.

Clint was ordered to clean James up and take him to the medical wing for some tests. He grumbled good-naturedly at being sent away from the grown-up’s conversation, but complied.

James did not like the medical wing.

He started to scream and cry when Clint took him down, but as Doctor Khan began her tests, James went limp, crying quietly. It’s eerie, and more upsetting than the screaming. The kid shook slightly, and Clint has to squash down the hate rising in his chest for HYDRA. Khan looked over at Clint worriedly, and he shrugged, trying not to seem as upset as he was. She continued working on the boy, movements slow and voice gentle. James let himself be moved and prodded like a doll, tears falling down his face silently. The tests weren’t invasive or particularly painful, but the kid looked like his world was ending.

Khan worked quickly, trying not to prolong her examination. She was visibly distressed by James’ reaction, blinking rapidly and rubbing at her face. Clint could sympathize. The kid was holding onto his hand like he can't let himself let go. Clint winced slightly at the surprisingly strong grip.

When Elle finished, she dug through her desk drawer and found a lollipop. She handed the candy to James, who frowned and inspected it diligently.

“It's candy,” Clint explained, and James blinked up at him. “You eat it.”

To demonstrate, Clint took off the plastic wrap and mimed licking it. He handed it back to the kid, who took it and shoved it in his mouth. His eyes went wide at the flavor, and he looked up at Clint.

“Good, right?” Clint asked, and the boy nodded vigorously.

Clint stood and helped the boy off the examination table, holding his hand.

“Thanks for all your help, Doc.” He threw over his shoulder, letting James tug him out of the medical wing.

They get called back to the conference room where Fury, Romanoff, Peggy, and Coulson all seem to be looking through files upon files of HYDRA evil plotting. They all looked stressed out, Coulson pacing back and forth as he read, Fury hunched over and rubbing at his temples as he flipped through page after page, Peggy standing with her hands braced on the desk, adjusting a pair
of reading glasses, and Natasha, pale faced and tight-lipped as she translated Winter Soldier files.

Clint set James down and the little guy took off like a shot, running around the room. He did a few laps, then stopped at Natasha.

“Tasha?” He asked softly, tugging at her pant leg. She looked down at him smiled gently.

“Yes, solnyshko ?”

James crawled into her lap and poked at the sides of her mouth until she smiled. He grinned back and said, “Hi.”

“Hi.” Natasha replied, smiling for real now.

He slipped off her lap happily and walked over to Coulson. He looked up at him expectantly and Coulson stopped pacing to look down at him. “Hey little guy,” Coulson says, sounding like he was trying to contain his excitement at talking to a tiny version of Bucky Barnes.

James held out his hand and Coulson looked around as if to say “Are you seeing this? A baby Howling Commando wants to shake my hand.” He took James’ hand and shook it.

“I’m James.” James said, then grinned. “My name is James.” He repeated, doing a little happy dance, like he was excited to introduce himself for the first time.

“I’m Phil.” Coulson said, shaking James’ hand like they were making a tiny business deal. James nodded and moved on, tapping on Fury’s arm.

Fury looked at him, surprised. James lifted up his arms, asking to be picked up. Fury glanced at the room, as if expecting someone else to come over and scoop up the kid. James stood on his tiptoes and shook his arms, adding emphasis to his request. Fury sighed and picked him up as if it were a great ordeal.

“Furry.” James said, making grabby hands at Fury’s eyepatch. Fury leaned back and glared at the boy.

“It’s Fury.” Fury corrected.

James made serious face. “Furry.”

“Fury.”

“Furry.”

“No, listen, kid. Fu-ry.”

“Furrrrrry.”

Fury sighed angrily and grit his teeth, like this child mispronouncing his name was the greatest challenge of his life.

James leaned over and pressed a smacking kiss to Fury’s forehead. Fury jerked back in shock, looking at the boy. James smiled shyly and Fury gave him an appraising look. “You’re alright, kid.” He said, and James smiled widely.

Clint had to cover his mouth to hold back his laughter. He thought he’d never seen the day that Nick Fury was bested by a child.
James wiggled off Fury’s lap and walked over to Peggy, who turned and bent down to scoop him into a hug.

“Oh, my dear!” She said happily, squeezing James as he giggled happily.

“Peg-peg!” He cheered, hugging her back.

“Tony!” Someone yelled, and everyone turned to the door, to see a tired-looking Howard Stark with a young man wearing an MIT sweatshirt, comic-book pajama pants, and sunglasses.

“What?” The guy said, and Clint realized that this must be Tony Stark, Howard’s son and apparent prodigy. “I felt left out.”

He waltzed into the room, sauntering over to the table. “Hey, Aunt Peggy. Cute kid.”

“I’m James!” James told him, shrieking happily. Peggy impressively didn’t wince.

“Wow.” Tony said, grimacing. “Nevermind. I’m too hungover for you to be cute.”

He drummed his fingers on the table and looked around at the room. He zeroed in on Natasha.

“Hey. I’m Tony Stark. Genius, Playboy, Billionaire, Philanthropist.” He outstretched a hand and Natasha took it, her whole posture shifting, making her look shy and demure.

“Hi. I’m Natalie. It’s nice to meet you Mr. Stark.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and crossed her legs, making Fury turned away to cough.

“Oh, no. Mr. Stark is that guy.” He waved a hand at Howard. “Please, call me Tony.” He stepped closer to her, smirking. “Or you… could call me later tonight?”

Natasha quirked an eyebrow. “How bout I call you our new SHIELD analyst?”

“Haha, yeah,” Tony said, and then his grin froze. “Wait, what?” He whipped around to stare at Howard. “Dad, what?”

“We need your help, Tony.” Howard said.

“I told you! I told you I didn’t want you work for you or your bureaucratic bullshit! I’m not gonna help you spy on people, Dad. Just fuck off.”

“Fuck!” James repeated and Peggy laughed, startled.

“Oh, James, no.” She said, chuckling. “Anthony Edward Stark, you watch your damn language, young man.”

Tony at least had the good grace to look cowed by Peggy. “Sorry, Aunt Peggy. I just can’t work for SHIELD in good conscious.”

She smiled at him gently and set James down on the table. She walked over to Tony and cupped his face. “I know, my dear. But we’re trying to make it better. And we need your help to do that.”

Tony swallowed and looked down, nodding. “Okay.” He said softly. “Okay. What do you need me to do?”

They explained their problem. Well, half of their problem. Their SHIELD-Infiltrated-By-Evil-Nazis problem. Not their Toddler-Clone-Of-Assassin-That-Was-Actually-The-Brainwashed-
Bestie-Of-Captain-America problem. In half an hour of rapid talking and confusing techno-speak, Howard and Tony had designed an algorithm that would run every agent’s file through a computer program and determine whether they were truly SHIELD or a HYDRA implant. According to the Starks, it did this by following each agent’s paper trail from birth. It found patterns and connections that somehow determined which agents were on their side.

Meanwhile, James climbed all over the table and into Tony’s lap, stealing the sunglasses off his face and running around the room. He eventually passed out on the floor, sunglasses skewed on face. Clint sighed, lamenting how adorable this kid could be, and bent down to scoop him up. At his waist, his pager started beeping. He frowned and checked it, seeing that it was an alert from Doctor Khan.

Tony snorted. “Is that a beeper?” He asked, raising a disbelieving eyebrow.

“Yeah?” Clint answered, handing the sleeping toddler off to Natasha.

“Jesus, you people really do need my help.” He scoffed. Clint just rolled his eyes and reached for the phone on the table, dialing the extension for the medical wing.

“Hello?” Doctor Khan answered.

“Doc, it’s Barton. What’s up?”

“I got the results from the lab on James’ blood work. There are some anomalies.”

“Anomalies? Anomalies how? Like, superpower anomalies or disease anomalies?” Clint asked, trying not to sound panicked. Dammit, why did doctors have to use such vague words?

“Oh, the former I believe. He has highly unusual genetic markers, but from what you shared with me, that’s only to be expected. I can confirm that James does have a similar serum to the one that was used to increase the abilities of Captain Rogers.”

Clint rests the phone against his chest and sighs. He looks up to see the room watching him. “He has an enhancement serum.” He tells them, and gets a few nods in response. He raises the phone back up to his ear. “Thanks for letting me know, Khan.”

“There is something else that concerns me, Agent.” She tells him, sounding like she was trying to hide some emotion in her voice.

“Yes?” He asked, stomach already dropping.

“From the scans, there seems to be some sort of… implant in James’ brain.”

Clint swallowed down all of the emotions warring inside him. “A kill switch?” He asked softly, and Fury, the only person close enough to hear him, looked up at him sharply.

“No, no, not that, at least I don’t think it’s that,” Khan reassured him. Clint shook his head at Fury who seemed to sigh in relief.

“What then?” Clint asked, not letting his hopes rise.

“Well, the device is located in the parietal cortex, a part of the brain that many believe controls free will. Now, I can’t examine the implant, so there’s no way I can determine it’s purpose, but if I were to guess, I’d say it could emit small electrical stimulations that would give the same impression as neurons, compelling James to follow suggestions. Or… um,”
“Or?” Clint echoed, trying to keep the rage out of his voice. This wasn’t Khan’s fault. She was the messenger.

“Or the device could disable the self-determination function of the brain completely, making James essentially a puppet. He’d have to follow orders, at least while the device is active.”

“Can we take it out?” He asked, almost desperate.

“It would involve deeply invasive brain surgery that I am unqualified to perform. It would be extremely dangerous, and considering all that James has gone through, probably incredibly traumatizing. My advice would be to wait until he’s older.”

“What can we do to prevent anything from happening now? Do you know what could activate this device?” Clint demanded, going through all the horrific possibilities in his mind.

“A remote switch would be too unstable, too difficult to control. My best guess is probably some sort of trigger. It could be visual or olfactory, but it’s more likely that it will be something auditory. Maybe a key phrase, or some sound. It’s probably something specific, a random string of words, not something you’d hear while passing on the street. My best advice for now is to keep him far away from the bastards that did this to him.” Her voice at the end dropped to something close to a growl, and Clint could empathize.

“Thanks for letting me know, Doc. Bye.”

Clint hung up and looked at the room. He glanced toward Tony Stark and Howard caught his look, leading him out of the room.

“I understand that you guys are keeping secrets from me and I just want everyone to know I don’t appreciate it!” He yelled. “Secrets don’t make friends!”

“C’mon, Tony. If you’re good I’ll show you the R&D lab.” Howard said.

Once the Starks were out of hearing range, Clint reported what Dr. Khan had told him. Everyone paled as he continued talking. Clint himself had to keep himself from glancing over at James. The boy was sleeping in Natasha’s lap, Tony’s sunglasses still crooked on the bridge of his nose. He was smiling in his sleep, and Clint wanted to make sure the kid didn’t have to have another nightmare again in his life.

“We need to keep him in a safe location, at least for now.” Peggy said, brushing her hair out of her face. The usually pristine Director was looking a little worse for wear. Clint couldn’t even imagine what she was going through, haunted by ghosts of her past. She suddenly looked all of her 70 years.

“It has to be somewhere completely off the grid,” Fury said, rubbing at his bad eye. “None of the safehouses, nothing registered, nowhere that SHIELD knows about.”

Everyone looked at each other shiftily, no one wanting to give up their non-SHIELD approved homes. In a room full of spies, it was only to be expected.

Clint coughed. “Um, I might have a place.” He mumbled, and everyone turned to him. “A farm, upstate. It’s not registered under my name, but-”

“Good.” Fury said closing the file on his lap. “The less we hear about it the better. You can lie low there with the boy until we get this all straightened out.”
Clint glanced at Natasha. He knew that she was staying in the on-site quarters, and he knew that the on-site quarters were basically really nice versions of SHIELD’s typical holding cells. She was still technically their prisoner, she had surrendered all her rights when she surrendered to Clint. Even after she was on SHIELD’s payroll, and even after she continued to help them, fighting through years of the Red Room’s conditioning. It hurt to see her so willingly imprisoned. It hurt that she saw it as a kindness.

“Uh, sir?” Clint asks. “Actually, I could use some backup. In the event that HYDRA does come for Barnes, I would be under prepared by myself. I mean, I’m under prepared by myself even without HYDRA attacking. I don’t know how to take care of a toddler, and I certainly don’t know how to do so while defending my farm against Nazis, sir.”

“Cut to the chase, Barton.” Fury sighed.

“I think that I could really use some help and I think that Agent Romanoff is the most qualified to help me, sir.”

Natasha’s head whipped around to stare at him. It was the first time he’d seen her look honestly surprised.

“And how do you figure that?” Fury asked, rubbing at his forehead like Clint was causing him a headache.

“She’s had similar training as many HYDRA agents and as Ja- the toddler. She’s also one of the best hand-to-hand fighters I know of as well as one of the most competent agents I’ve seen. I trust her to watch my six, sir.”

Fury grumbled something under his breath, but waved his hand. “Fine. Do whatever you think is best, Barton. Not like I can convince you otherwise, anyway.”

Clint suppressed his smile and resolutely did not look at Natasha.

“You didn’t have to do that for me.” Natasha said, faux flippantly, as they walked out the office.

“Do what?” Clint asked, matching her tone. “I was just doing what I think is best for the mission,” He shifted James’ sleeping mass to one side of his body, careful not to jostle the boy too much. He glanced at Natasha’s shopping cart full of toddler stuff and idly wondered which poor agent was sent on a midnight shopping run to Target with a list of baby supplies.

They borrowed a car from SHIELD and strapped James into a car-seat. It was late and Clint drove, describing the farm upstate to Natasha. It was a long drive, and Natasha fell asleep eventually, her knees drawn up to her chest and head resting against the window.

Clint drove for a few hours, finally reaching the farm. As soon as he stopped the car, Natasha bolted awake, taking in her surroundings. Clint watched her relax one muscle at a time. She turned to him and blinked twice, then nodded.

They got out of the car, and unbuckled James from his car seat. He was completely asleep, dead to the world. Clint picked him up and he flopped onto his shoulder, a hand coming up to hold onto Clint’s shirt.

They walked into the house, Natasha carrying a basket full of supplies. They set up James’ stuff in one of the dusty bedrooms, laying him down gently. He whimpered softly when Clint let him go, and Natasha placed a hand on his head, smoothing his hair down.
They shared a look, and Clint ached for this. For the kid and the girl and the house; the dream he had always aspired for but knew he could never have. He had tried to have that with Bobbi, but they both knew that it couldn’t happen.

Clint let Natasha have the main bedroom, and he slept on the couch. They were both woken up at 3 am when James cried out with nightmares. After they had settled him down, he demanded that they stay, Natasha and Clint crawling into bedside him, throwing their arms across his tiny body. Natasha and James fell asleep, eerily similar expressions on their faces. Clint watched them, watched every twitch of an eyebrow, every micro smile. Maybe he couldn’t have a family of his own, but what he had was pretty nice.

- 

James Steven Carter. Designing a fake identity was so far beneath Peggy that it was laughable. But she owed it to Sergeant Barnes, to Steve, to give this child as perfect a life as a child could have.

She ought to be working on the problem of the HYDRA infiltration, but she couldn’t bring herself to even glance at the files. It was her fault, hers and Howard. They had brought Zola into the fold, knowing damn well what kind of man he was, what he had done. They were stupid, beyond stupid, to think that any sort of service toward the american people could redeem the man.

When she’s feeling particularly masochistic, she reads the Winter Soldier files. She reads Zola’s handwritten notes about Die Amerikaner. Reads about Barnes’ resistance to torture, about his stubborn pride, how he fought. She reads about how his resolve crumbled after Steve’s death. How he begged them to kill him, to take his memories away. She reads how they erased James Buchanan Barnes.

But that was not the matter at hand. She needed to focus on the child’s future, not his past.

Guardianship was one of the easiest choices she could have made. It was obvious that the boy couldn’t be raised as a part of SHIELD, for it was far too dangerous, but he couldn’t be handed off to a stranger either. Someone close, someone they could keep an eye on.

Peggy knew that the archer and the Red Room defector would want to keep close to the boy, as did she. She knew that the two junior agents felt a responsibility toward James, a care that could potentially turn disastrous. She knew that if pressed, Codename: Hawkeye would even argue for custody if he felt it was needed.

Peggy knew from experience that trying to have a family in this business was far too risky. She remembered with vivid horror sitting by Angie’s bedside, holding her hand. “It’s not your fault, English.” She remembered the painstaking recovery, the target on her lover’s back. She remembered leaving in the middle of the night, pressing a kiss to Angie’s brow and a leaving behind tear-stained note.

No, she wouldn’t let the same tragedy to fall on the young man’s shoulders.

Peggy’s youngest sister, Amanda, had a daughter that was close to James’ age. Peggy remember’s Sharon’s birth. Amanda was supposed to have twins, a boy and a girl. The baby boy had been born dead, and Amanda had been crushed. Her husband, Aaron had left shortly after the children had been born, not able to handle his wife’s depression and a newborn. Now Sharon was walking and
talking and Amanda was mostly recovered, but Peggy could see her longing for the second child she thought she would have.

It would be easy. A quick paperwork smudge, some straightforward convincing. They wouldn’t even need to assign a protection agent, because Amanda and Sharon were already under SHIELD surveillance.

Then it came down to the potential intelligence the boy provided. Not only did he hold the key to a super-soldier serum second only to Erskine’s, but he had been meant to be a weapon. A second Winter Soldier. Would the boy grow up with the weight of these things on his back? What about his previous life? Surely he would grow up learning about Captain America and the Howling Commandos. Wouldn’t he eventually discover his similarities with Bucky Barnes?

Peggy decided that perhaps, when he’s old enough, they can tell the boy the truth. Part of the truth, anyway. He’ll probably grow up with SHIELD as a part of his life anyway. He’ll be used to the unusual. Peggy could put together some information about Bucky Barnes’ life.

She looked up some information and dialed her phone.

“Hello?” A hesitant voice asked on the other end.

“Hello, is this Rebecca Barnes-Proctor?” Peggy asked.

“Uh, this is her daughter, Stephanie. How can I help you?” The voice said.

“This is Margaret Carter, and my organization is interested in any artifacts you may have concerning James Buchanan Barnes.”

“What organization?” The woman asked hesitantly. There was some noise on the other end followed by a quick. “Could you hold on a moment?”

Peggy waited as Stephanie Proctor argued with somebody on the other end of the line. Finally she huffed something unintelligible and there were the sounds of the phone changing hands.

“Hello?” A frail voice asked, and Peggy assumed she was speaking to Rebecca.

“Hello, this is-”

“Peggy, right? I’ve heard about you.”

Peggy struggled for something to say. It was not often she was surprised by anything these days. “Have you, now?”

“Well, I’ve read. Steve and Bucky wrote about you quite a bit, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, really?” Peggy asked, astonished. She had never received the kind of recognition that Steve or Howard had, and that was what she expected. She never thought she would be idolized, not while she was alive anyway. Especially in the business she was in.

“So what can I do for you, Wonder Woman?” Rebecca asked, and Peggy laughed, reminded of
Bucky and Angie all at once.

“Well, I was going to tell your daughter that I’d like any artifacts, correspondence, and information you have regarding your late brother. That I was collecting this information for museum exhibit about the Howling Commandos.” Peggy told her.

“And what will you tell me?” Rebecca questioned, voice sly. Peggy suddenly regretted never meeting her before now. She would have made an excellent agent.

“If I told you it was Top Secret?” Peggy inquired.

“I would expect nothing less.” Rebecca said, cackling. Peggy couldn't help but smile.

“Thank you so much, Rebecca. If you like, I can send one of my agents to pick everything up.”

“You're not coming down yourself?” Rebecca asked, and Peggy could hear the smile in her voice.

Peggy knew what Rebecca looked like, or what she used to. Barnes carried a picture of her. An 18 year old girl with Barnes’ stormy blue eyes but her own auburn hair. A delicate jaw and a mischievous grin. A little awkwardly proportioned as teenagers could be, but Peggy could only imagine the beauty that she grew to be.

“Ah, no I’m afraid I’m far too busy and important. I am in the world saving business, you know.” Peggy smiled, listening to Rebecca’s laughter.

“Some other time then,” Rebecca said.

“Yes, another time.” Peggy promised.

She ended the call and dialed her sister. Amanda would be easy enough to convince.

- 

Clint always hated moving. When he was young and he and Barney were in the system, they were moved around a lot, bouncing from house to house with their meager belongings and each other. In the circus, they never stayed in one place for more than a week. After Barney ran off and Clint had ditch Trickshot and his carnies, he joined the academy and was promptly recruited into SHIELD.

So while Clint hated packing, he happened to be pretty damn good at it.

“I think that’s that last box,” Clint panted, his hands on his knees. He and Natasha and Agent Mirbahar just hauled about 15 boxes of stuff up four flights of stairs.

“Oh thank god.” Agent Mirbahar sighed, fanning herself.

“We still have to unpack,” Natasha said darkly, seemingly unaffected save for the slight flush on her cheeks.

“Pack, pack, pack!” James said happily.

They were moving the Carter family into a brownstone apartment in Bedstuy, a building that SHIELD had quietly bought out from some dangerous eastern-european arms dealers with mafia ties. The landlord had been an asshole who kicked his dog, and Clint had gotten a sense of smug
satisfaction when he put an arrow through the man’s shoulder.

Agent Mirbahar was assigned to the Carter’s protection detail and was moving into the empty apartment next door. She was competent and easy going and had a killer left hook. Clint had seen it in action when they were on assignment together and some asshole trainee had tried to pull her hijab off her head. She dislocated his jaw. Clint liked her.

Clint was moving into the building as well, on the sixth floor. He was going to be the brownstone’s new superintendent. He told himself that he was doing it because SHIELD needed someone to it and because he needed a place to stay after his separation with Bobbi. It was because got married too young, because never had the chance to live by himself, and because he’s always loved Brooklyn.

If he were going to be honest with himself (something he tried to never do), it was because he was attached. He couldn’t bear to send James off and never see him again. The kid had Clint wrapped around his little finger.

“I can’t believe this.” Natasha muttered, opening one of the boxes. “I used to kill people for the KGB.” She pulled a stuffed animal out of the box, handing it to James when he made grabby hands for it. “I am incredibly overqualified for this.”

“Sorry I’m late,” Amanda, holding Sharon and looking weathered, appeared at the door. “I haven’t been in New York since the late 70’s, I got lost.”

Amanda Carter, Peggy’s half-sister, was a slim, tired-looking woman in her early 40’s. She had dishwater blonde hair and an American accent, and she didn’t look much like Peggy at all, except around her eyes when she smiled.

Her daughter, Sharon, was an adorable little terror. She was full of frightful amounts of energy and friendly to the point of aggression.

James was terrified of her.

“Jamie!!” Sharon cried, and she wriggled out of her mother’s grip and launched herself at James. James shrieked and jumped behind Natasha, clutching his stuffed toy tight. When she tried to make a grab for him, he started climbing up the boxes to get away.

Natasha hefted him up, holding him away from Sharon's excited reach.

Her hackles raised and Clint half expected her to hiss at the little girl. Clint figured that Natasha could probably crash in his couch, because they seemed to be in the same boat when it came to James.

“Calm, child.” Amanda sighed, rubbing at her temples. “Leave that poor boy- leave your brother alone.” She turned to nod at Agent Mirbahar. “Nice to see you again, Amira.”

“Good morning, Mandy.” Agent Mirbahar said, struggling to take that packing tape off of one of the boxes.

“Oh, so if we divide and conquer, we may be able to get this done by lunchtime.” Clint said, clapping his hands together.

“Lunchtime?” Sharon asked, turning her huge gaze to Amanda. “Mama, lunchtime?”

“Not yet, Share Bear.” She said, shooting a truly terrifying glare at Clint.
Clint raised his hands in surrender, looking to Natasha for help. She shrugged as much as she could with a tiny boy on his shoulders.

“Alright, you gotta get down, solnyshko.” Natasha grunted, setting James down on the ground. He looked at Sharon’s eager expression and quickly buried his face in the stuffed dog he had in his grasp.

The adults each took on one of the rooms. Natasha, the kitchen/living room, Amanda, the master bedroom, Mirbahar, the kids’ room, and Clint the bathroom. The kids ran around, bouncing from room to room, loud and happy and completely unhelpful.

They finished by the early afternoon, and Agent Mirbahar ran out to get some food. Clint sighed, thinking about how he still had to move into his own apartment. He hated unpacking. Mirbahar came back with two pizzas and a six pack of beer, along with a couple juice boxes. Natasha and Clint sprawled out on the floor of the living room devouring half a pizza between them. Amanda sat on the couch, blotting nervously at her slice with Agent Mirbahar sitting next to her, talking companionably. Sharon sat happily between them, messily eating her piece of pizza. James was going from seat to seat, curious and sipping at his juice box.

Clint nursed his beer and watched James, watched as he smiled cautiously at Amanda, as he fearlessly stole from Natasha’s plate. He eventually got tired and sat down heavily on Clint’s lap. Clint just shifted his plate so James had room and hid his can of beer when James tried to sneak a sip.

There was a knock at the door and Amanda excused herself to go answer it. It was one of the neighbors, stopping by to say hello. She was a heavy-set woman who introduced herself as Darlene Wilson. She pointed out her apartment across the hall and smiled warmly at Sharon and James, telling Amanda about her own children, a 12 year old boy named Gideon, a 5 year old girl named Samantha, and a little baby named Sarah. Darlene gave Amanda a box of cookies and insisted that they schedule a playdate for Samantha and “the twins”. Amanda just nodded blankly, clutching the box of cookies, seemingly overwhelmed by Darlene’s exuberant kindness.

While Amanda was distracted, James, the little sneak, grabbed two cookies from the box, tentatively handing one to Sharon, like a token of peace. She giggled and took it from him. As soon as it was in her hands, James darted away to hide, burrowing in between Clint and Natasha. Clint patted his head, silently commending him for his gesture of friendship.

That night, it was nearly impossible to peel James off if his side.

“I’m sorry buddy, I gotta go.” He said, trying to hand the crying boy to Amanda. “I’m just gonna be upstairs, okay?”

“No!” James wailed, fists clenched in Clint’s shirt. “Want you an’ Tasha!”

“You just have to sleep here tonight, kiddo. We’re not going far.”

James let out an incoherent howl and threw his arms around Clint’s neck. Clint sighed and bounced James on his hip, swaying back and forth. Natasha reached over and started rubbing James’ back in soothing circles. She hummed a gentle tune and James started to relax. After about 20 minutes of Clint bouncing and rocking and Natasha petting and singing to get James to fall asleep. They handed his tiny body to a stressed-out looking Amanda who carried him to his bed.

They waved their goodbyes and walked out of the apartment. Natasha declined his offer of sleeping on his couch, which was fair, since he didn’t actually have a couch set up yet. Clint walked up the
four flights of stairs and unlocked the door that read “SUPERINTENDENT” in blocky letters.

The apartment already had the boxes of his few belongings scattered across the floor. Clint sighed and surveyed the room. Then he opened the boxes at random, until he found the one that had his linens. He pulled out the giant comforter and wrapped it around himself, then laid down on the floor.

He could unpack tomorrow.
Steve

Chapter Summary

1925-1935

Chapter Notes

This chapter has some period-typical offensive terms for LBGTQ people and POCs. Please be warned.

The story that Bucky reads to Steve is an excerpt from Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1925

Steve was walking home, 2 dollars and 50 cents of change rattling around in his pockets from selling newspapers. He held himself proudly, thinking of what to buy with his riches. Maybe some new pencils. And some flowers for his Ma. He was trying to decide which type of flowers his mother would like best when he heard a soft whimper. He turned, tilting his good ear toward the mouth of the alley.

There was another small sound, like an injured animal, and then some crude laughter. Steve puffed himself up and walked down the alley.

There were two boys kicking at a small dog. They were laughing every time the poor animal tried to pick itself up before kicking it down again. Steve’s fists clenched.

“Hey!” Steve yelled, trying to make his voice sound deeper. The boys turned to look at him, and Steve recognized them as Jimmy Peters and Johnny Franklin, two of the older boys from the neighborhood.


“You couldn't pick on someone your own size? Had to pick on some puppy that doesn't even got real teeth yet?”

“You got a problem, kid?” Johnny yelled, and Steve puffed himself up, readying himself for a fight.

“Yeah,” Steve said. “Yeah, I’ve got a problem.”

As the boys started walking towards him, he glanced at the dog, trying to will it to run away. It didn’t, just staggered to its feet and watched as the boys advanced on Steve.
Jimmy lunged and Steve ducked under his arm, kicking at Johnny’s knee. Johnny cursed and grabbed the back to Steve’s shirt. Steve squeaked as he was yanked backward, his breath leaving him as his back hit the wall. He winced as the brick scraped his back. He swung his fists wildly and the boys just laughed. He got punched in the stomach for his efforts and doubled over, wheezing. He got another fist in his face, and he groaned as he felt his lip split.

He was braced for another blow, but it didn't come. He heard one of the boys yelp and looked up.

Jimmy and Johnny were being pelted with small rocks. They were both looking around wildly for their attacker, but they didn't find him. Steve looked up, and could see a little boy around his age sitting on a fire escape. He caught Steve’s eye and waved, then threw another pebble at Jimmy.

They were getting angry, flailing madly as they tried to fend of their invisible attacker. Then, the puppy darted over and started biting at their ankles.

The boys shrieked, attacked from below and above and Steve could help but laugh at the picture they made.

They ran out of the alley and Steve hollered at them as they left. “That’s right!”

Steve could hear laughter join his own and looked up at the boy who had helped him.

The kid jumped down and landed messily, pushing himself up and grinning broadly at Steve.

Steve held out his hand, and the boy took it. “Thanks for your help. You have really good aim.”

The boy shook Steve hand firmly and smiled. “Those guys were real jerks. They deserved it. I'm James B. Barnes by the way. Everyone calls me Bucky.”

“I'm Steve Rogers. Everyone calls me a little punk.”

Bucky threw back his head and laughed, and Steve smiled at him. He liked Bucky.

Bucky broke the handshake to pick up the puppy who was whimpering and trying to crawl up his leg.

“Why don't you and this little beast come up to mine so we can get you patched up?” He asked, nodding to the worn down old building he'd jumped down from. Steve thought about protesting, about scowling and saying he didn't need this kid’s help, but something about Bucky’s earnest grin made him want to agree.

Bucky showed Steve up the stairs of the building, opening the door to a tiny apartment. There was a little girl sitting on a worn out rug, playing with a paper doll. She looked up and smiled at Bucky and Steve, then did a double-take, eyes going wide and smile sparkling.

“Puppy!” She squealed, running toward Bucky. Bucky held the dog slightly out of reach of the girl and she pouted.

“Puppy.” She repeated sadly.

“Later, Becks. Say hi to our guest.”

The girl turned to Steve, looking shy all of a sudden.

“Hi,” she mumbled.
“Hello.” Steve said. “I'm Steve.”

“I'm Rebecca.” She said, then turned back to her brother. “Bucky. Puppy?”

“Jeez, Becca. Let us at least get in the door, alright? I've got to clean him up first, then you can play with him, okay?”

He shuffled past his sister, waving Steve into the living room.

Bucky lead him into a tiny bathroom and had him sit on the side of the bath. He put the dog in the sink and pulled out a bottle of peroxide from the medicine cabinet and tossing it at Steve. Steve fumbled, dropping it to the floor. Bucky laughed, and Steve scowled at him.

“Shut up.” He muttered, wincing as he dabbed at the cut on his lip.

Bucky turned on the water and started patting the puppy down. “You're so brave, little guy.”

“Hey,” Steve said, glaring.

“The dog, Steve.” Bucky laughed.

Steve flushed and looked around for a change of topic. “Where’re your parents anyway?”

The puppy barked and Bucky picked him up, giggling as it licked his face. “Ma’s at work, and Dad’s somewhere, probably.” he answered. “I get to be in charge while they're gone, cus I'm 7 and Becca’s only 4.”

“Well I'm 8, so do I get to be in charge then?” Steve asked haughtily.

Bucky scoffed, looking at the puppy. “What do you think, pal? Does Steve Rogers get to be the boss of me?”

The dog barked, as if in answer.

Bucky looked back at Steve. “He says no.”

Steve cocked his head. “That sounded like a yes to me.”

“You got a bum ear or somethin’? That was definitely a no.”

Steve laughed at him, shaking his head. Rebecca poked her head in the door.

“Bucky. Can I play with the puppy now?” She asked and Bucky toweled the dog off, handing him over. She laughed and clumsily held him like a baby.

“I’m calling him Rabbit!” She said, squeezing the puppy.

Bucky frowned. “That’s silly, Becca. He’s a dog. We’re calling him Argos.”

Becca stuck her tongue out at him. “Argos is stupid! He’s Rabbit!”

“I saved the puppy, so I get to name him, and I’m naming him Argos.”

“Well, really, I saved the puppy,” Steve said.

“And then I saved you.” Bucky said.
“I wouldn’t say you saved me,” Steve grumbled.

“Anyway, I’m in charge, and I say his name is Argos.” Bucky said, crossing his arms.

“What kinda name is Argos, anyway?” Steve asked.

“Argos was Odysseus’ loyal companion! He had the best tracking skills in all of Greece and he was the best dog ever!” Bucky said, hopping up and down.

“Bunny.” Rebecca said, pouting and trying not to drop the wiggling puppy.

Bucky sighed. “Fine, but I’m calling him Argos.”

Becca, nodded and left the bathroom with Rabbit/Argos.

“How’d you know all that stuff? About Greece or whatever.” Steve asked, pushing off of the bathtub.

Bucky shrugged. “I have a book.”

Steve shifted, putting the bottle of peroxide on the sink. “Can I see it?” He asked.

“Sure.” Bucky said, and took Steve’s hand. “C’mon, this way.”

He led Steve into a bedroom that had two beds. Bucky crawled under one of them and resurfaced with a large book with pictures on the cover. He laid on floor on his stomach, and Steve followed suit, crawling next to him. Bucky flipped to a page that held a picture of a man in long robes with a dog by his side. Bucky ran his finger along the words, reading them to Steve.

They read story after story like that, Bucky telling Steve all about his favorites; telling Steve how Theseus bested the Minotaur with the help of Ariadne, about King Midas’ cursed golden touch, about the twins, Artemis and Apollo. He showed Steve the beautiful pictures on each page. Becca came in with the puppy to curl up next to Bucky and listen to Steve and Bucky reenact the Battle of Troy.

Eventually it got dark out and Bucky asked if Steve was staying for dinner. Steve shook his head, telling Bucky that had to go home, promising to come back the next day.

“Steven, where on Earth have you been?” His mother scolded as soon as he got home. She grabbed his chin and frowned over his split-lip. “Have you been fighting again, child?”

“Yes, mama.” He said, chastised. “But I promise it was for a really, really good reason.”

“I’m sure it was.” She sighed, and beckoned him into the kitchen. She fed him stew and prompted him to tell her about his day. He excitedly told her about the puppy and about Rebecca and Bucky. He told her about Bucky’s book and his room and how Bucky smiled at him for no real reason.

His mother listened patiently and smiled softly at his words. She took his dishes and told him she was proud of him for standing up for what was right and for making a friend.

The next day, Steve went right back to Bucky’s apartment after work, greeting his new friend with a hug. Bucky pulled him into his room. Argos jumped up on Steve’s legs, happily yipping hello at him. Steve bent down to scratch behind his ears and chuckled when his face got licked. Bucky complained that he didn’t know what dogs are supposed to eat and ended up giving Argos half of his food.
He and Steve went out for a walk with the puppy close on their heels. Bucky charmed an apple off of a street vendor, and he and Steve share it, taking bit after bite until all that was left was a handful of seeds and a stem. Bucky insisted on burying the seeds, telling Steve that it’s good luck.

Argos dug up the seeds almost immediately, much to Bucky’s indignation. They had to chase after the puppy when he started hunting a few bugs and ran off without them. They ran into a group of ladies and Bucky ran ahead while Steve apologized for the both of them. When Steve finally caught up, Bucky was scolding the puppy, trying to get him to spit out whatever it was he was eating.

That night, Steve decided that he would draw a picture of him and Bucky as Achilles and Patroclus, so that he could give it to Bucky when they saw each other again.

Bucky loved it, sticking it to his wall the next day. They walked around town with Argos by their side, and Steve took Bucky to his house, sneaking the puppy past Mrs. Cunningham, the mean old landlady.

Steve’s mom was astonished and happy to meet both Bucky and Argos. She smiled happily at Bucky’s, “It’s nice to meet you, ma’am” and when he didn't blink at her accent. She cooed at the puppy and picked him up, letting Argos lick her fingers.

She fixed some food for them and sent Bucky on his way.

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1928

“Steve, we’re gonna get in trouble.” Bucky said, pulling on Steve’s shirt.

“This’ll work, Bucky.” Steve assured him for what felt like the hundredth time. He handed Bucky the cap and Bucky gave him a wary look but slipped the hat on.

“Let’s go.” Steve said, grabbing Bucky’s hand.

They maneuvered through the crowd until Bucky squeezed his hand, pulling him toward a large, bustling family with a blond father and a brunette mother.

Steve grinned wildly at Bucky and they ran to catch up with the family. Bucky smiled his winning smile at one of the daughters and she giggled, brushing hair behind her ear.

Steve elbowed Bucky happily, and Bucky looped his arm around Steve’s shoulders.

It was too easy, getting into the stadium. Bucky batted his eyelashes at the girl and held out his hand. She grabbed his hand and Bucky grabbed Steve’s, and they all bustled past the ticket taker.

Bucky rewarded the girl with a quick peck on the cheek, and he and Steve ran into the stadium before any of the adults could notice them. They squirmed through the mass of humanity, Bucky keeping a vice-like grip on Steve’s hand, not daring to let go for fear of being lost in the crowd.

They elbowed their way to the nosebleed seats both giddy with excitement and nerves.
The game started, and they cheered wildly. It was amazing. The Brooklyn Robins were the greatest baseball team in the world and Bucky talked one of the vendors into giving some candied nuts. They made it through the first three innings before any trouble found them.

Bucky made a horrified sound and grabbed Steve’s arm. “Steve, look.”

It was the father from the family the snuck in with, pointing them out to a police officer.

“Oh, boy.” Steve said. “Um, okay.”

“What do we do?” Bucky said, voice rising in pitch.

“I think, um, we should maybe run.” Steve said.

“Yeah, okay.” Bucky said, grabbing Steve’s hand.

“Hey, stop!” Someone shouted, and they started running.

They rushed through the stadium, small enough that they could moved through the crowd without much difficulty. They rushed past spectators and down the stairs as the police officer started chasing after them.

Bucky jumped the turnstile and Steve slid under it. They stopped outside the stadium and made the unanimous unspoken decision to split up. Bucky went left and Steve went right. They knew the area really well, and they knew each other.

They would make it.

Steve ran down the street, ducking into an alleyway and down another street.

He was just starting to feel confident that he would get away when his chest started to tighten and breath became hard to reach.

“No,” He gasped, bracing himself against a wall. “Breathe, c’mon. Breathe.”

He put his hand against his stomach, the way his mom and Bucky did for him when he got like this. “Please, breathe.”

“Hey, kid. Beat it.” It was a guy holding a broom was glaring at Steve, and oh, Steve was leaning against this man’s barber shop.

“Sorry,” Steve gasped. “Sorry, sir.”

“You alright, kid?” The barber asked, and Steve waved him off.

“Just-just a sec.” Steve panted, trying to catch his breath.

“It's.... fine. Take all the time you need.” The barber told him, and went back to sweeping hair.

He took a deep breath and held it, the way his mother taught him. He let out the breath, and took another, repeating this process until he was no longer wheezing. He was almost breathing easily when he heard a shout.

He looked up to see the police officer from the baseball stadium, running down the street after him.
“Oh, damn.” Steve breathed. He pushed off the wall and ran past the barber.

He didn't make it far, the policeman grabbing him by the collar of his shirt. Steve’s lungs seized and he started coughing.

“Quit it, brat.” The cop said, shaking him slightly.

Steve kept trying to gasp for air between hacking coughs. There were tears in his eyes, and was flailing wildly, trying to get the policeman’s hands off of him.

He was starting to feel lightheaded when the cop yelped and suddenly dropped him.

Steve hit the ground and gasped for breath. He looked up to see Bucky throwing candied nuts at the policeman.

The policeman lunged at Bucky and he darted to the right, grabbing Steve’s arm and pulling him to his feet.

“C’mon!” He yelled, dragging Steve along behind him.

Steve stumbled along with Bucky, still trying desperately to catch his breath. Bucky pulled him behind a storefront and crouched.

“Get on my back.” He demanded and Steve shook his head angrily, unable to speak. “Come on Steve, this isn't the time. Get on my back. It'll be faster that way.”

Steve glared at him for a second and then climbed on Bucky’s back. Bucky stood, and Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky’s neck, hanging on for dear life as Bucky started running again.

They made it to an underground station, and Steve hopped off Bucky’s back so they could go down the stairs.

They made it on the train without getting caught, and Steve had finally managed to even out his breathing.

“That was fun.” He told Bucky, who rolled his eyes at Steve.

“I think you live for trouble, Steven Grant Rogers.”

Steve was drifting in and out of consciousness, sweat-soaked reality mixing easily with technicolored fever dreams. One moment, his mother was draping a wet washcloth over his forehead, and the next he was being chased by the mouse in Steamboat Willie, that infernal tune that Bucky was always whistling following him like some cheerful omen of death.

Ma’s doctor friend had said he had rheumatic fever and that to make it go away, he had to take aspirin, which made his stomach hurt. Ma fretted because his joints were still swelling and the rashes weren’t going away.
Steve just fretted that Steamboat Willie was going to catch him and make fun of him for not being able to whistle.

There was a cool wet sensation on his cheek and Steve reached up to wipe it away, coming into contact with something furry. He threw his arm over the soft happy thing and it continued licking his face.

“Argos, stop that!” A voice whispered. Bucky! Bucky was here. And he had Rabbit with him. Steve petted one of Rabbit’s ears, and the dog took that as an invitation to jump on the bed with him.

“Argos, oh my god, you’re gonna wake him up!” Bucky cried, hauling the dog off the bed. Steve felt bereft at losing the weight and warmth of Rabbit, but felt better when he heard Bucky’s voice.

“I brought a book. I thought you'd like it. Or, I liked it. I don't know if you'd like it, it's mostly fairytale stuff and I know you like the stories with fights in them. But one of the stories in this book reminded me of you.”

The was a rustling and Bucky cleared his throat. He started reading and Steve drifted off to the sound of his voice, of the melody and rhythm of it.

He only stirred as Bucky’s voice faltered.

“But at last he knew that he was going to die. He had just strength to fly up to the Prince's shoulder once more. 'Good-bye, dear Prince!' he murmured, 'will you let me kiss your hand?'

'I am glad that you are going to Egypt at last, little Swallow,' said the Prince, 'you have stayed too long here; but you must kiss me on the lips, for I love you.'

'It is not to Egypt that I am going,' said the Swallow. I am going to the House of Death. Death is the brother of Sleep, is he not?'

And he kissed the Happy Prince on the lips, and fell down dead at his feet.

At that moment a curious crack sounded inside the statue, as if something had broken. The fact is that the leaden heart had snapped right in two.

Bucky’s voice cracked and there was a thud as the book hit the floor.

Steve opened one eye conspicuously, trying not to let Bucky know he was awake. It didn’t seem to matter much, because Bucky was sitting in the rickety wooden chair by Steve’s bed, and he had his head in his hands. Steve realized he was crying. He stayed like that, shoulders shaking, soft sobs coming from his lips. The sounds slowed, and finally wiping away his tears. Bucky took up Steve’s hands and held them between his.

“I don't how you can manage a fever of 104 degrees and still have hands like ice.” Bucky huffed, rubbing Steve’s hand in his. He clutched Steve’s hands and looked down at the floor, like he was praying.

Bucky didn’t pray. His mama was a Jew and his daddy was a drinker, and Bucky had lived his whole life without stepping foot inside a church. Steve had tried to teach Bucky how to pray once, secretly worried that his friend would be damned to hell, but it only seemed to upset Bucky, who spat out the latin like curse words. But right now, Bucky was clutching Steve’s hand like his mother clutches her rosary, like Steve was his lifeline directly to Heaven.
“Steve.” Bucky said, voice rough. “You gotta beat this thing, okay?” He sniffed, then wiped his nose on his sleeve. Steve watched in fascination, thinking that Bucky’s eyes looked really blue when they shone with tears, that his lips looked swollen, like Bucky had been chewing them nervously. He looked pale, sicker than Steve felt, like he hadn’t been sleeping or eating in the weeks that Steve has been bedridden. The muscle in his jaw was jumped and Steve watched it move like it was a hypnotist’s stopwatch.

Rabbit woofed softly and Bucky chuckled, the way he does when he’s sad and trying to hide it.

Bucky raised Steve’s hand to his face, pressing it against his cheek. He closed his eyes, and Steve shivered as he felt Bucky’s eyelashes brush against his skin.

“Stevie,” Bucky whispered. His breath ghosted against the sensitive skin of Steve’s pulse point. “This can’t be the end of the line, okay? You can’t do this to me. I swear to god, Steve. Your mom, she’s, she’s talking to the priest. She told me that you wrote a letter to me, in case, just in case.”

Bucky tightened his grip on Steve’s hand, turning to press his lips against scuffed knuckles. “You go, I go, okay?” Bucky whispered harshly. “If you don’t survive this then I won’t either. I promise you that, alright?”

Steve could feel the tremor going through Bucky, and he rolled over to grab Bucky’s arm with his free hand.

“Shhhhh.” Steve mumbled, pulling Bucky toward him. Bucky looked up in surprise, blinking at Steve.

“Stevie, what-?” He stood, like he was going to get somebody.

“C’mere.” Steve demanded weakly, pulling on Bucky’s wrist.

“I really oughta get your Ma,” Bucky protested.

“Buck.” Steve whined, moving over in his bed, trying to make room for Bucky. Bucky sighed like it was a great burden, but Steve saw him smile as he climbed in next to him. Bucky pressed his face against Steve’s sweaty hair and threw his arm over Steve’s chest. Rabbit jumped up on the bed, curling up at their feet, waggling his tail.

They slept, and that night, Steve’s fever broke.

1933

It was so hot outside that it felt nearly feverish in the small Rogers’ apartment. Steve’s heart had been acting up, beating in fits and starts, leaving him breathless. He had been so dizzy that his mother had made him lay on the floor. Where he lay, the wood was cool against his bare back. His mother was sitting on the next room, fanning herself as she listened to a story on the radio.

There was a thunderous sound from the hallway, like a herd of elephants, and Steve sat up. That sound could only be the result of Bucky running up the stairs too fast. He was stopped by Mrs.
Crocetti, their elderly Italian neighbor.

“James, viene qua.” She demanded, voice slightly muffled through the thin walls.

“Signora? How are you? Sei bellissima oggi.” Steve couldn’t understand Bucky’s words, but he recognized the voice Bucky used when he was charming someone.

“You flatter an old woman. Tell me, how is your piccolo leone? I have not seen him around.”

“Ahh, he’s fine. He’s keeping cool with mama leone. I’m going to see him now.”

“Well tell him to keep from fighting until the summer is over. I don’t need that cazzate in this heat.”

Bucky laughed and agreed, then said his farewells, wishing Mrs. Crocetti a good evening.

The door swung open and Bucky threw himself into the apartment.

“Hello Rogerses!” He called, kicking the door shut behind him. “Hey, Mrs. Rogers,” He repeated, voice quieter. He leaned down and kissed Sarah’s cheek.

“Good evening, my dear.” Sarah murmured, cupping Bucky’s cheek.

“Hey Steve,” Bucky said, peeking into Steve’s room.

“Hey, Buck.” Steve replied, too exhausted to get up.

Bucky stood like a god in their tiny apartment. While puberty had hit Steve like a glancing blow, it had hit Bucky full-force. Steve’s limbs had grown, his edges had gotten sharper, and his voice had gotten deeper; but his face was still babyish, and his frame too skinny. Bucky on the other hand, had finally grown into his severe jawline and large ears, and he had shot up like a tree. Steve’s mother liked to tell Bucky that he looked like Cary Grant, and she wasn’t all wrong. His shoulders had broadened and his work at the docks had given him a sinewy muscle that sat really well on him.

Girls sighed when Bucky walked past them now, and when he smiled, he could capture the attention of a whole room. It made Steve’s stomach churn. A part of his was terrified that Bucky would realize that people other than Steve found him captivating. He was worried that Bucky would wise up and figure out that he could do so much better than Steve following him around. But most of him knew that Bucky would never, that Bucky was too kind, that Bucky maybe, possibly, loved Steve as much as Steve loved him.

“Boys, I have to work ‘til late,” Sarah said, struggling to get up from her chair. Bucky rushed over to help her up, and she waved him off once she was up, coughing into the crook of her arm. Bucky’s face took on a pinched expression that Steve knew well. It was his ‘I’m not saying anything because you’re too stubborn to listen.’ face. It was usually directed at Steve.

Sarah left the apartment with a wave and promise to be back before breakfast. Bucky turned his unhappy expression on Steve.

“I know, I know.” Steve waved, exasperated. “She won’t listen, trust me, I’ve tried.”

Bucky frowned but sat on Steve’s mattress, unbuttoning his shirt. “Lord, it sure is hot out there, ain’t it?”
Steve nodded, sighing as Bucky laid down on the floor next to him, shirt open. He looked over at Steve and grinned his big dumb grin. Steve’s heart jumped painfully in his chest, making him twitch and run the heel of his palm over his chest.

Bucky winced and made a sympathetic face.

“How’s your ticker?” he asked, leaning over and pressing his ear to Steve’s naked chest. His skin was cool against Steve’s, and he wanted to reach out and touch Bucky’s hair.

“Oh, you know,” Steve said lightly, trying not to flush. “Same as always.”

Bucky started to tap out Steve’s arrhythmic heartbeat against his shoulder.

Steve had a secret. A secret that he would never tell another living soul. Not even his mom. Not a priest. Not even Bucky.

He was terrified of dying.

He knew that he had more medical problems than he had freckles, and that the number of fights he got himself into weren’t helping to prolong his lifespan any, but.

But.

Sometimes when his chest would hurt at night from his heart beating wrong and his stomach would hurt from coughing and his lungs would burn lack of air, tears would leak from his eyes and prayers would fall from his mouth.

He used to worry about every chance he’d miss. About not amounting to anything. About leaving his mother behind. About what Bucky would do.

But right now, all he could bring himself to think about was Bucky’s lips.

“-eve? Stevie?”

Steve drew himself back to the present, blinking at Bucky’s concerned face.

“Yeah, Buck?” he asked, trying to focus.

Bucky frowned and tapped Steve’s chest twice. “Where’d you go just now, pal?”

Steve shrugged and let himself reach out and touch the fringe of Bucky’s hair. He didn’t see why he should deny himself something so small. Bucky gave him a look that was easily translated into ‘why are you being so weird?’ and grabbed his hand, intertwining their fingers.

“Hey, Buck.”

“Hey, Stevie.”

They didn’t say anything, just squeezed each other’s hands. Steve felt like Orpheus from Bucky’s book. The man went into Hades to retrieve his wife from the dead. The King of Hell agreed to let Orpheus guide his wife out of Hades as long as he didn’t look backwards, didn’t look at his wife.

Steve always thought Orpheus was stupid, for turning back. For disobeying such a simple instruction. For damning his wife because he couldn’t bare not to look at her. Steve felt like if he looked at Bucky, then maybe this moment would be shattered. That if he acknowledged this thing between them, it would be ruined. But he was gonna do it anyway.
“Steve-?” Bucky said, breaking the silence, voice hoarse. He raised his head off of Steve’s chest and looked at him. “What, um, what do you want for your birthday?”

Steve blinked and sat up, nearly nose-to-nose with Bucky.

“My birthday?” He repeated dumbly.

“Yeah. What do you want?” Bucky asked, voice coming out as a whisper by the end.

Steve didn’t answer, just moved the few millimeters it took to press his lips to Bucky’s.

Bucky didn’t move away, just raised his free hand to the back of Steve’s head.

When they broke the kiss, they just stared at each other for a moment. Steve couldn’t help but smile. Soon, they were both cracking up, clinging to each other and giggling hysterically, pausing to press quick kisses to the other’s lips before laughing even harder.

“I can’t believe you,” Bucky eventually got out between wheezes. “God, you dumb little punk.” He reached out and kissed Steve again.

Steve punched his arm. “Me? What about you? ‘What do you want for your birthday, Steve?’ ‘Do you want my eternal love, Steve?’ ‘Can I have your babies, Steve?’” He lowered his voice to mock Bucky and Bucky punched him in the leg, then grabbed his face to kiss him again.

“Shut up, Steve.” He mumbled against his lips.

“You shut up,” Steve replied.

Eventually Steve had to lay back down, and Bucky ran to fetch cushions off of the couch for them to lie down on. They curled together, unable to keep from touching each other, from kissing each other. Eventually, Bucky had to pull back, face flushed.

“Sorry. Sorry, Steve.” He mumbled, sitting up and running a hand through his hair.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked, feeling dizzy from the sudden lack of contact.

Bucky turned impossibly redder, rubbing the heel of his hand over his crotch. “I just, uh, got a little excited.”

Steve started laughing, and Bucky pouted. “Be nice,” Bucky whined, ducking his face.

Steve buried his laughter against Bucky’s thigh and Bucky jumped like a ghost had just walked through him.

“Jeezus!” He cursed, shoving Steve off of him. “Don’t do that!”

Steve laughed even harder, waving his hands apologetically. “I’ll let you calm down, pal.”

Bucky breathed heavily and stared down at his crotch, as if willing his stiffy away.

Steve palmed unhappily at his own groin. He wished he could have the same reaction, wished that they could… well. Steve knew that if his heart could pump blood worth a damn, the two of them could be having a lot more fun. He tried to reach into his pants, to try to-

“Christ, Rogers, don’t make it even harder.” Bucky said, annoyed. He smacked Steve’s hand away from his pants. Steve snorted at Bucky’s word choice, and Bucky imperiously rolled his eyes,
turning a shade redder.

“I’m, uh, gonna go use your bathroom.” Bucky said, darting up and running toward the toilet. Steve threw his arm over his face and bursted into another round of wheezing laughter.

Bucky heated up dinner, bringing it to Steve on the bedroom floor. They sat up, leaning against the wall and each other, eating warm stew and stale bread. Bucky got the dishes and washed them in the sink.

They got ready for bed, Bucky stripping to his undershirt and boxers and helping Steve stand. They brushed their teeth, sharing a toothbrush like they always did when Bucky slept over.

Steve collapsed into bed and Bucky wrapped himself around Steve like a limpet, which it was much too hot for, but neither of them were feeling the heat. They stayed like that for a long time, just holding each other in silence until night fell.

“You’re my favorite person, you know that?” Bucky said later, talking into Steve’s shoulder.

Steve squeezed Bucky’s hand and tried to crane his neck back to look at Bucky. “You’re mine, too.”

Bucky tightened his hold around Steve’s middle, pressing his face against Steve’s back. He mumbled something Steve couldn’t catch, but he forgot to ask, drifting off into sleep.

1935

“We’re going out!” Bucky called, pulling Steve out of his laser focus on his work.

“Are we, now?” He asked, dusting the charcoal off his fingers. Bucky was stripping off his filthy work clothes, throwing them callously on the awful sofa. Steve’s eyes were caught up in the lines of Bucky’s back, in the smooth arch of skin and the way his muscles worked.

“Yeah.” Bucky confirmed, walking over to Steve. He grabbed the back of Steve’s chair and sat in Steve’s lap. He cupped Steve’s face and smiled. “How’d you get that shit on your nose?” He rubbed the tip of his nose with his thumb. It came away black with charcoal.

Steve rested his hands on Bucky’s naked waist, and Bucky ran a hand through Steve’s hair, leaning down to press a kiss to Steve’s forehead. “You’ve been working too hard.”

“I just want to get in.” Steve said, craning his neck to glance at his canvas. He’d been working tirelessly to complete his portfolio.

“They’d be stupid not to love you.” Bucky told him, and Steve squeezed his hips lightly. “You’re a brilliant artist. Stop working yourself up.”

Steve didn’t think Bucky understood the magnitude of the Art Students League of New York’s significance in the art world. He needed to draw until his hand fell off and his eyes stopped working.
“Bucky, I gotta keep working. I have to get it right.” He said, exasperated.

“Steve, I love you, but you’re about to keel over. I feel like I haven’t seen you for days.” He leaned closer, grinding himself slightly in Steve’s lap and leaning down and kissing under his jaw. “I miss you, Stevie.” He whined.

The bastard played dirty.

Steve rubbed his hands up and down Bucky’s back, lightly scratching with his fingernails. Bucky shivered with pleasure.

“Where are we going?” Steve asked, and Bucky nipped lightly at his collarbone.

“I got us a double date.” Bucky said, sitting back. “These girls, Joey and Francine, they’re a lot of fun and they can’t wait to meet you.”

Bucky had a particular talent of finding other people like them. Inverts, tribades, punks, lavenders, queers; whatever you wanted to call it. Bucky seemed to know when someone was in their sort of situations. He often set up these “double dates” with the sapphic couples so that he and Steve, and whoever the two ladies might be, could have proper nights out without being accosted by any jackasses.

“You better clean up, then.” Steve said, leaning down and pressing a kiss to Bucky’s chest.

“I think you should come with me.” Bucky said, standing gracefully and tugging on Steve’s wrist.

“I'm not taking a cold bath with you, Buck.” Steve said, wrinkling his nose.

“I'll go heat up some water, then.” Bucky said with a shrug and turned to walk off to the kitchen.

They met the girls at their apartment, only slightly late. Bucky knocked on the door with a smile at Steve. “They're really great. You're gonna love 'em.”

The door flew open and a girl launched herself at Bucky, wrapping him in a hug. She was wearing a well-loved pink dress, one that had been patched up several times. She turned to Steve with a kind smile. She was colored, and had a lines of freckles across her cheeks and nose. Steve thought that she was quite pretty.

“You must be Steve!” She cried happily, and hugged him, too. Steve wasn't expecting the hug, and so he awkwardly patted her back, trying to ignore the fact that she smelled quite nice.

Somebody cleared their throat and Steve reluctantly stepped back. There was a girl leaning against the doorframe, raising her eyebrow at the display. She was short, shorter than Steve at any rate, and pleasantly heavy. She had short dark hair and large glasses that added to her judgmental look. She shifted her gaze to Bucky.

“James.” She greeted dryly.

“Josephine.” He replied. She smiled at him, with a small roll of her eyes.

Bucky slapped Steve on the back. “Stevie. This is Francine,” he nodded to the pretty colored girl. “And Joey.” He waved a hand at the girl in the doorway. “Girls, this is Steve.”

“It’s so great to finally meet you! Bucky can't shut up about you. It's always ‘Stevie this,’ and ‘Stevie that.’” Francine said, then turned back to Bucky, who was blushing.
Joey turned and locked the door. “Where are we going?” She asked, already looking bored.

“There's a dance hall I heard about from Donna at the shop.” Francine said, grabbing Bucky’s arm at pulling him down the street. Joey raised her eyebrow at Steve, like they were sharing a joke, or maybe commiserating over something, but he didn't quite know what. He awkwardly cleared his throat, holding out his arm for Joey.

“I guess you're my date.” He said, then cringed at how stupid that sounded.

Joey, taking pity on him, grabbed his arm. “Lucky you.” She wasn't really dressed for dancing, but Steve really wasn't either. He was in his church suit, and she seemed to still be wearing her work flock.

“How, uh, how did you meet Bucky?” Steve asked, feeling awkward.

“Francine works with Rebecca,” Joey said, walking quickly. Steve struggled to keep up with her. He didn't understand how someone with such short legs could be so fast. “And Bucky came into visit her. I have no idea how Rebecca knew about me and Frankie, but she said something like ‘this is my queer brother, you guys should get along’, and sure enough, they hit it off right away.”

Steve laughed, shaking his head. “She really should be more careful about who she says that shit to.”

“It’s better than Frankie saying, ‘oh, well I'm a negro lesbian in a Boston marriage with the local rabbi’s daughter’ and then inviting him out for lunch.”

Steve barked out a laugh. “Oh, god.”

“I know,” Joey said, chuckling softly.

Ahead of them, Bucky and Francine were holding hands, swinging their arms back and forth. They were getting glares for some passersby, but most people part of town didn’t mind much about that sort of thing.

They reached the dance and Bucky reached for the door as a large man pushed his way out.

“Excuse me,” Bucky said, and the guy raised his eyebrow.

“You trying to get in, kid?” The guy asked drunkenly.

“That’s the idea, yeah.” Bucky said, stepping in front of Francine, Joey, and Steve.

“Well, you can’t. Not with a negro girl on your arm. The only coloreds were got here are the band.” He turned to leer at Francine. “You play an instrument, sweetheart?”

She rolled her eyes at him, not dignifying that with a response. Joey stepped up and put her arm around her.

“Hey, shut hell up.” Steve said, puffing himself up.

“We’ll try our luck inside.” Bucky said, pushing past the asshole.

“Hey,” The guy grabbed Bucky’s arm. “I’m not done talking to you.”

“Well I’m done talking to you. Have a nice night.” Bucky shook the guy’s arm off and opened the door. “Ladies, after you.”
“You can go in, but leave your dog outside.” The guy taunted, then staggered back, clutching his bloody nose. Steve didn’t pull his punches.

The guy looked at them with outrage, blood pouring from between his fingers.

“Girls, get inside.” Bucky said, and Joey nodded, pulling Francine into the club.

“You fucking punk!” the guy spluttered. He charged at Steve, and Bucky pulled him to the side, letting the guy stumble past them.

He turned like a raging bull, and he ran at them, swinging his fists wildly. Bucky stuck out his leg, tripping the guy and letting him fall.

The guy groaned and tried to push himself up, but failed.

“Let’s go, Steve.” He stepped over the asshole and held his hand out for Steve.

They went inside, meeting up with the girls at the bar. Bucky went to them and gave them both a hug. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Francine said, hugging herself slightly. “I hoped you kicked his ass” She muttered.

“That was a nice punch, Steve.” Joey said with a sigh. “God, what a rattlecap.”

“Does anyone feel up for dancing?” Bucky asked.

“Absolutely. I’m not letting that guy ruin my night.” Francine said. “C’mon, Bucky.”

She grabbed his hand and dragged him to the dance floor. Joey flagged down a waiter and asked for a couple of beers.

She passed him his glass and clinked their drinks together. “To punching assholes in the face,” she toasted, and Steve laughed.

“To fighting for what’s right.” He said, and took a drink.

After a couple of songs, Francine and Bucky came back over to the bar, happy and panting. “You guys should come dance with us!” Francine said, taking a drink from Joey’s beer.

“You don’t want Stevie dancing with you,” Bucky laughed. “He’ll trample on your toes.”

“Very true.” Steve agreed, and he was a little tipsy. He’d had his whole beer and was working on his second, and, being a lightweight, he was right at the place where he was warm and happy. Bucky slung an arm over his shoulders and grabbed Steve’s bottle, taking a swig.

“Mm, this is disgusting.” Bucky said cheerfully, finishing Steve’s beer. He signalled the waiter and asked for another one.

“You’re disgusting,” Steve muttered, burying his face in Bucky’s shirt. Bucky chuckled and ruffled Steve’s hair. Steve pushed him away, making a face. “Get off me, jerk.”

“Punk.” Bucky said happily. The waiter came by with his beer and he uncapped it, downing it in a few swallows. It made his throat work unfairly. Steve pouted at him.

“I’m gonna go back to dancing. Joey, may I have the honor?” Bucky offered Joey his arm and she
rolled his eyes and took it, allowing Bucky to take her to the dance floor. Francine giggled and bumped her shoulder against Steve’s.

“Thanks. For what you did earlier.” She said, smiling prettily at him.

“Oh, it’s really- he deserved it.” Steve said, feeling himself flush. “You’re welcome.”

“You wanna dance?” She asked, and Steve shook his head.

“Bucky was telling telling the truth when he said I’d step on your toes.” Steve told her, and she laughed.

“Alright, I’m sure Bucky’ll let me cut in.” Francine patted his arm and wandered back onto the dancefloor. Steve watched as she tapped Bucky on the shoulder and said something to her. He laughed and spun Joey around, then did the same to Francine. He got out of their way, letting them dance together. He caught Steve’s eye from the floor and waved him over. Steve sighed, but came over.

Bucky took his hand and pulled him in close, letting Steve lead. It was awkward, because Steve had no sense of rhythm whatsoever, and Bucky was so much taller than him. But it was nice, Bucky was close and warm, and he smelled like like his nice aftershave that he used on his nights out. Steve was buzzed enough not to worry about anyone taking offence at their dancing together.

Steve managed to dance with both of the girls and Bucky, all without breaking anyone’s toes. They had a really good time, high off the music and each other’s company.

Eventually, the left the club, stumbling out into the street and singing a Glenn Miller song. Steve couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket, and neither could Joey, apparently, but both Bucky and Francine had nice voices; even if Bucky didn't know half the words to the song.

“Whatddya wanna do now?” Francine asked, and Joey made a face.

“Sugar, it’s 10:30.” She said simply.

“C’mon, Jo. The night is young and so are we!” Francine said, and Bucky cheered.

“Ooh, let's get ice cream cones!” Bucky suggested, and Steve raised his eyebrows.

“Buck, we have like...” Steve counted his pocket change. “11 cents.”

“Great! We can share!” Bucky said. “I know a place near here.”

“No, Bucky, you don't. De’Angelo’s closed last year remember?” Steve said, laughing.

“Oh.” Bucky said. “Well then I'm outta ideas.”

The walked down the street, passing a young boy selling newspapers.

“Hey, sir! Sir!” The boy called, and Steve frowned at him.

“Isn't it a little late for you to be out?” He asked, and the boy waved a newspaper at him.

“It's breaking news! Hitler just sent German Jews back to the Dark Ages!” The boy squawked, and Bucky stopped.

“What?” He asked, and grabbed a newspaper from the boy. “How much?”
“3 cents.” The boy said proudly, and Bucky tipped money into the boy’s hand.

“Keep the change,” he said absent-mindedly, scanning the paper.

“What’s it say?” Joey asked.

“Hitler made a speech in Nuremberg,” Bucky started, frowning. “He stripped Jews of their German citizenship. He says it's to preserve the German race.” Bucky finished, disgust in his voice.

“Let me see that,” Steve said, grabbing the newspaper and reading it over. “Jesus Christ.”

“Well, now what?” Francine asked.

“I have no idea.” Bucky said, and for the first time in his life, Steve thought he meant it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! I'm posting this now because the next few weeks will be insane (I'm getting surgery and moving across the country!) So my editing/posting schedule will be messed up.

I love you and thank you for reading!
James

Chapter Summary

1994-2000

Chapter Notes

Woah. So this chapter turned into a monster. I'm splitting it into two chapters, just to give everyone a little breathing room. There will be some triggering content for some in this, but I didn't tag it because they would be major spoilers. You can find the warnings in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1994

“Sharon, slow down!” James called, running down the street to catch up to his sister.

“You hurry up!” She yelled, not looking back. James huffed and ran ahead, gripping the straps of his backpack and bolting forward. He quickly overtook Sharon, grinning at her outraged squawk. He turned back to stick his tongue out at her, but he was yanked off his feet. He shouted in fright, twisting around to see his attacker.

Miss Mirbahar was holding him at arm’s length, giving him a disapproving face. James smiled. “Hi, Miss Amira.”

“Child, you are going to run right out into traffic.” She said, and looked over, raising an eyebrow at Sharon. “Where’s the other one?”

Just then, Sammy came running up. She stopped in front of Sharon and put her hands on her knees. Once she caught her breath, she scowled up at the twins. “Too. Fast.” She wheezed.

James squirmed in Amira’s grasp until she let him go. He walked over to Sam and frowned. “Are you okay?” He whispered, and Sam nodded. James held out his hand and she took it, smiling gratefully at James.

Sharon pouted jealously, and quickly grabbed James’ other hand.

“Alright, gang. Let’s get you all home.” Amira said, and made Sharon hold her hand. She led the train all the way back to the apartment.

Amanda greeted them all at the door, hugging each of them in turn. “Thanks for picking them up, Amira.” She said, turning back to the kids. “Samantha, honey, you’re mom’s gonna be at work until late. You wanna stay with us for a bit?”
Sam nodded, already heading towards James and Sharon’s bedroom. James turned to his mother.
“Mama, is Clint and Tasha home?” He asked.

“They question is are they home, Jamie. And no, they’re not.” She said, running a hand over his
hair. She turned to Sharon. “Mama’s gotta go run some errands. Don’t give Miss Mirbahar any
trouble, okay, Share Bear?”

“Why don’t you tell Jamie that?” Sharon whined.

“Because he’s a good boy.” She told Sharon, and James smiled beatifically at her. “I’ll see you two
later.”

She thanked Amira and left, waving at her children. Sharon stuck her tongue out at James, then
flounced off to their bedroom to play with Sam.

“Miss Amira?” James asked, and Agent Mirbahar looked down at him.

“Yeah, James?” She asked, walking into the kitchen. James followed her.

“Where do Clint and Tasha go all the time?” He asked, and Amira opened the fridge.

“Juice box?” She asked.

“Apple, please.” James replied, and thanked Miss Amira when she handed him one. She grabbed a
soda for herself and motioned for him to sit at the table. She pulled out a chair and sat next to him.
James had the feeling that this would be a Talk.

“You’re a special kid, James.” She started, and James took a sip of his juice.

“Oh, boy.” He sighed, and Amira laughed.

“You’re really grown up for your age.” Amira told him and James smiled.

“Mom says I have an old soul.” James said proudly, and Amira nodded.

“That you do.” She said, and James beamed. “You’re smart, so I’m not gonna treat you like a kid.
You’re not really asking where Natasha and Clint get off to all the time, are you?”

James looked at his juice contemplatively. He shrugged. “I just wanna know some things.”

“Like what?” She asked, taking a sip of her soda.

James had a lot of questions. He wanted to know his Mama looked at him funny sometimes. He
wanted to know why his bruises and scrapes always went away so fast. He wanted to know why he
knew so many different words for so many different things. He wanted to know why he could
outrun Sharon, even though she was the fastest girl in their grade. He wanted to know why the
grown-ups around him always lowered their voices when he was in the room. He wanted to know
why he had nightmares about a white room.

“Am I an alien?” He asked Miss Amira, and she choked on her soda.

“Oh, honey, no.” She laughed. “You're not an alien.” She told him.

James made a frustrated noise and asked, “Then where do I come from?”

“Oh, buddy.” She sighed, and grabbed his hand. “You’re really too grown up for your own good.”
“Everyone’s always saying that.” James whined. “But nobody ever tells me why.”

“Look, these are really questions for your Mom.” Amira started, and James sighed dramatically.

“But she never answers me!” He said. “Every time I start to ask her something important she runs away or changes the subject. Clint and Tasha are the same, they’re just sneakier about it.”

“Jamie, help!” Sammy yelled, then ran into the kitchen, screaming cheerfully. She darted over to James and crawled under the table. He looked down at her and she put her finger over her lips.

Sharon ran out a few seconds later, looking around. “Where is she?”

“Where’s who?” James asked innocently and Sharon put her hands on her hips. It was a classic move that their mother used when she wanted one of them to confess to something. It looked hilarious when Sharon did it. She looked like a tiny version of Amanda.

“Sam, stupid.”

“Don’t call your brother stupid, Sharon Grace.” Amira warned and Sharon rolled her eyes.

“That’s better, I guess.” Amira sighed.

Sam climbed out from under the table and ran into the living room, tossing couch cushions behind her to slow Sharon’s chase. Sharon yelped and ran after her.

“Don’t break anything!” Amira yelled, then shrugged as the girls continued running. She turned back to James. “I’m sorry, what were we talking about?”

James raised an eyebrow at her and then crossed his arms. It was another classic move of his mother’s. Amira smiled, knowing she’d been caught. “Right, sorry, that wasn’t even my best work.”

“I just want somebody to answer some of my questions.” James told her, and she sighed, the way grown-ups do when they’re sad or tired.

“Listen, James. I’ll talk to your mom. And to Clint and Natasha. You probably have a lot to talk about.” She said, and James protested.

“But-!” He started and Amira held up a hand.

“That’s the best I can do, buddy.”

James huffed and slid off his chair.

“Dinner’s at 7,” She reminded him, and he nodded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

He walked out of the kitchen, pausing to straighten out the couch cushions and pillows. He gave Amira one last, kicked-puppy look, and left to go play with Sharon and Sam.
“James, could you come here, please?”

James put down his Gameboy and frowned. Sharon looked at him from her bed.


“Ugh, get off.” He said, sliding off of his bed. “I don't know. It's probably nothing. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know! You never do anything wrong.” She followed him out the door. “I gotta see this.”

“Yes, mama?” He called.

Sharon ran ahead of him and let out a surprised shout. “Lucky!”

James followed her into the kitchen, where Sharon was hugging Lucky, Clint’s dog.

James spun around with a grin to see Natasha and Clint standing in the doorway. He ran to greet them, and Clint scooped him up into a hug.

“Hey boyo!” He said loudly in James’ ear.

“Hi, Clint.” James said into Clint’s shirt. Clint squeezed him tightly and then passed James to Natasha.

“Hello, solnyshko.” She greeted, much more sedate than Clint.

“Hi, tetushka.” James said, and Natasha set him down.

“What are you doing here? What happened to your face?” James asked, reaching for Clint’s broken nose.

“James, honey, Mr. Barton and Ms. Romanoff are here to talk to you.” His mother said, coming out of the kitchen with Miss Mirbahar and Sharon in tow and Lucky padding along behind them.

“Sharon, why don’t you and Miss Amira go and take Lucky for a walk?” She asked, and Sharon squinted at her.

“No, Sharon. We just need to talk to James a minute.” Amanda said, leaning down to talk to her daughter.

Sharon crossed her arms. “Why can’t I be here? What’s the big secret, huh?”

Amanda sighed. “Look, if you go with Miss Amira and Lucky, you can get ice cream.”

“Deal.” Sharon said.

Clint laughed, and pulled out Lucky’s lead. Lucky rushed forward, tail wagging. Clint attached the leash and handed it to Sharon. She took it happily and grabbed Amira’s hand. “Let’s go!”
They left the apartment, hand-in-hand-in-leash. James turned to his mother and frowned. “What’s going on?”

“Why don’t you sit down, kiddo?” Clint said, taking a seat on the sofa and patting the seat next to him.

James climbed onto the couch warily. Natasha sat down on his other side and his mother sighed. She took the seat across from the couch and rubbed her temple.


“Can I have some juice?” James asked timidly.

“Sure, baby. You can have some juice.” Amanda sighed.

“Apple?” He asked again.

“Yeah, I can swing apple.” She said.

“Uh, same, please.” Clint asked. Natasha shot him a look and he shrugged. “I like apple juice.”

Amanda came back to the living room and handed the two juice boxes to James and Clint, then uncapped her own beer, sitting back down in the chair across from them.

“Mama, what’s going on?” James asked, helping Clint put the straw in his juice box.

“Amira pointed out to me that I should be more honest with you, Jamie. She said you had questions, and I want to answer them for you.” His mother said, and James beamed.

“Really?” He asked excitedly, starting to bounce in his seat.

“Really.”

“Clint and Tasha, too?” He asked and Natasha nodded.

“Us too.”

“Are you guys Scully and Mulder?” James questioned immediately.

“Are we- what?” Natasha asked in confusion.

“They’re characters from a TV show.” Clint told her. “It’s about a down-to-earth redhead and a roguishly handsome loose cannon who solve supernatural crimes, despite the festering sexual tension between them.” He considered this. “Surprisingly apt.”

“We’re not Scooby and Murder.” Natasha said seriously, and James giggled.

“What are you then? Spies?” He asked and Clint and Natasha looked at each other for a moment. Clint shrugged.

“Yeah.”

“Oh my god.” Amanda sighed, putting her head in her hand.

“Awesome!” James said. “Miss Amira, too, right?”
“Uh, yeah. Very good, kiddo.”

“James, we work for an organization called SHIELD.” Natasha started.

“Not mom, though, right?”

“No, I'm really an editor, Jamie.”

“Oh. Okay.” He thought for a second. “Am I a spy?”

“No, James you're not a spy.” Natasha said, then stopped for a moment. Clint made a considering face.

“You are not a spy.” His mother said sternly, shooting a look at Clint and Natasha.

“What am I then?” He asked her.

“James-” His mom started, then sighed. She looked at Natasha. “I don’t know how to-”

“It’s okay.” Natasha said.

“Jamie, when you were really little, Nat and I rescued you from an evil group called HYDRA.” Clint started, turning the juice box in his hands. “You were born in a laboratory, as a science experiment. You have... abilities.”

Amanda made a small noise in the back of her throat, like she wanted to shush Clint.

“Am I a bad guy?” James asked quietly. “If I was made by bad guys, does that make me a bad guy?”

“Oh, no, honey.” Amanda assured, getting up and hugging James. He wrapped his arms around her neck and smelled her hair. It made him feel better.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Natasha asked, voice gentle. James looked up at her and nodded. “I’m like you, James. I was made by bad guys. Except I didn’t get away. And I did bad things for them, for a really long time.”

She looked sad for a second, so James held his arm out, inviting her into the hug. She smiled at him and leaned in, wrapping her arm around James’ back.

“You’re good, Tasha.” James said, and she kissed the top of his head.

“So are you, solnyshko .” She whispered.

James pulled out of his mother’s hold and looked at Clint. “I have superpowers?”

Clint laughed. “Yeah, sorta.”

James started asking questions at break-neck speeds and Clint, Natasha, and Amanda tried to answer them as well as they could.

When Sharon came home, she pulled James aside and questioned him immediately. His mom told him that he couldn’t tell anyone, not even Sharon. He evaded her prodding and was relieved when she finally moved on to bragging about how she had gotten ice cream and he hadn’t.

That night, he thought about everything he had learned, about where he came from. He thought of
the white room behind his eyelids. He thought that maybe he didn’t have to be afraid of it anymore.

1997

Mr. Jean-Baptiste was the coolest substitute teacher in the world. Sharon said he was handsome, but Sharon said that about almost everyone these days. He was tall and dark-skinned with a pretty accent. James maybe thought he was handsome too. But he was also funny, he let them have class outside, and his science experiments were always messy. That’s why it was so exciting when he walked into James’ classroom.

“Hi, class!” He said, walking up to the chalkboard and writing his name on it. It was completely unnecessary, because they all knew him.

“Mr. JB, are you are sub today?” Sam asked, and Mr. Jean-Baptiste nodded.

“That’s right, Miss Wilson.” He always addressed all of his students by Mister and Miss. It was awesome. It made them feel like grown-ups. “Mrs. Davis is taking an extended leave of absence. I’ll be taking over your class for the foreseeable future.”

Some of the louder kids in the class cheered, and Mr. Jean-Baptiste laughed. “Alright, settle down.” He said good-naturedly. “Mrs. Davis said you guys were working on long division, right? Let’s talk remainders.”

James, Sharon, and Sam rode their bikes home, stopping at the bodega on the corner. It was a Monday, so they had all gotten their allowance. It was tradition for the three of them to take their combined riches and buy candy for the week.

“¡Hola, chicos! ¿Qué les voy a dar?” Señor Arroyo asked, and James smiled at him.

"Todo el caramelo que con 5 dólares se pueda conseguir." James answered, and Señor Arroyo laughed and patted him on the back.

“Alright, alright. Don’t go crazy, chicos.” He said, and they darted to the candy section.

Once they had stuffed their backpacks with candy, they thanked Señor Arroyo and went on their way.

“Isn’t cool that Mr. JB is our new sub?” Sharon asked as they chained their bikes up.

“Yeah. I hope Mrs. Davis is okay, though.” James said. Sam rolled her eyes.

“Mrs. Davis is like a million years old. She probably like, got a new hip or something.”

They made their way to their building, and Sharon and Sam raced up the stairs while James lagged behind.
Sam shouted her goodbyes and went into her apartment, slamming the door shut behind her.

Sharon had to wait at the door for James, since he had the key, so he took his sweet time coming up the stairs, just to antagonize her. When he finally unlocked the door, she ran inside, rushing for the kitchen. She pulled the bagel bites out of the freezer and shoved them in the microwave.

James checked the fridge, finding a post-it note from his mother.

*Will be out late. Spend night with the Wilson’s. Sharon: do your English homework. Your teacher keeps calling me. Love you lots- Mom.*

“Mom’s gonna be late again tonight.” James said, and Sharon sighed dramatically.

“Who are we staying with tonight? Please say it's not Amira because her cooking is so gross. I don't think I can stand it. Look at me James, look. I'm wasting away.”

His sister dropped to the floor, convulsing and gagging theatrically.

“It's not Amira. We’re spending the night at Sam’s.”

Sharon hopped up, cured. “Oh good. Mrs. Wilson is the best.”

The microwave dinged and Sharon opened it, shoving bagel bites into her face with no fear of being burned.

“Where do you think she's going all the time?” James asked and Sharon shrugged.

“Maybe she has a secret boyfriend.” She answered, mouth full.

“Ew.” James said, making a face.

“Well, what do you think it is?” Sharon asked haughtily.

“I dunno.” James answered. He just knew that it had to mean something terrible. More terrible than his mom having a boyfriend. He could feel it in the pit of his stomach.

“Wanna watch TV?” Sharon asked, and James shoved the post-it note at her.

“Mom says you need to do your homework.”

Sharon wrinkled her nose. “Ugh.”

“I'll help,” James offered. “For all of your red skittles.”

Sharon huffed. “Fine.”

They worked on Sharon’s English homework, which turned out to be on compound complex sentence structures.

They went across the hall around 5, and Gideon opened the door. He looked at James and Sharon and rolled his eyes.

“Samantha! Your boyfriend is here!” He called, and Sam came running up to the door. She stopped to punch Gideon in the arm.

“He's not my boyfriend. Shut up.” She grabbed James’s shirt and pulled him inside. Sharon
followed, smiling at Gideon. She had a little crush on Sam’s big brother, one that he found both disturbing and adorable.

They holed up in Sam’s room, which she shared with Baby Sarah.

“Jaaaaamieeeee!” She shrieked, launching herself at James. He caught her in a hug, laughing a little at her enthusiasm.

“Hi, Sarah.”

“Do you wanna see my picture? I drew it today in art class.”

“Sure.” James said, and let her drag him over to her side of the room.

“See? That's me, and that's Gideon, and that's Sammy, and that's Momma, and that's a dinosaur!”

“Awesome!” James said. “What kind of dinosaur is it?”

“It’s an ankylosaurus.” She said proudly.

“Cool. I like it’s glasses.”

“Thanks!” She said, pushing up her own pair of enormous glasses.

“Sarah? Can I have James back please?” Sam asked, grabbing James’ arm and pulling him over to her side of the room.

Sam, Sharon, Sarah, and James ended up solving a puzzle until dinner was ready.

Miss Darlene called for them to come set the table and get drinks. They got the table ready and served out lasagna.

“This is delicious, Mrs Wilson.” Sharon praised, shoveling seconds onto her plate.

“Thanks, honey.” Darlene laughed.

Gideon stood, picked up his plate, and took it to the sink.

“Mom, I’m gonna go out for a bit.” He said, kissing the crown of his mother’s head.

“Where too?” She asked.

“Just with some of the boys from work.” He said, and Darlene sighed.

“Alright, just be safe.” She told him.

“Yes, ma’am.” James watched the exchange with trepidation, getting himself another slice of lasagna. He glanced at Sam, who shook her head.

They did the dishes and got ready for bed.

Sharon and Sam shared the bed, and James laid on a sleeping bag on the floor. Sarah had already passed out, glasses still askew on her face. Sharon was slowly drifting off, because she always fell asleep when she was full.

By the time Sharon was quietly snoring, Sam had slid off the bed and laid down next to James. She didn't say anything for a while, just laid there, arm brushing against James’.
“I have a secret to tell you, but I'm afraid to say it.” She whispered, and James turned on his side to look at her. She did the same, so they were facing each other.

“Would it help if I told you a secret first?” He asked quietly and she shrugged, then nodded.

“I’m adopted.” He told her. Her eyes went wide.

“Really?” She asked, voice hushed.

“Sharon doesn’t know, or doesn’t remember. We were really young when it happened, and mom always just said we were twins.”

“Where are you from, then?” Sam questioned.

James made a face. “It’s complicated.”

Sam sighed and rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling.

“What is it?” James asked. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want.”

“No, I do.” Sam said. “It’s just hard.”

James reached down and grabbed Sam’s hand. Secrets were easier to tell when you were holding hands.

Sam took a deep breath. “James, this is gonna sound weird, but-” She exhaled. “I’m a boy.”

James couldn't help it. He laughed. “No you’re not! You got girl parts. I’ve seen them.”

“Shut up! No you haven’t!” She said, smacking him.

“Yes, I so have! Remember when we went to Coney Island and your bathing suit came off?”

Sam sighed dramatically, laughing a little. “That’s not what I meant, stupid.”

“What did you mean, then?”

“I mean, I wish I was a boy. I want to be a boy.” Sam told him seriously.

“What’s so wrong with being a girl?” James asked.

“Nothing. I just think I would be a better boy. Sometimes I pretend, you know? That Sam isn’t short for Samantha and that I’ve always been a boy, and I just feel better about myself. I feel happier.”

James thought about this for a second. “Well, if being a boy makes you happy, then I guess that settles it.”

“Really?” Sam asked.

“Really.” James smiled. “This is Sam Wilson. He’s my best friend. See? It even sounds good.”
The next morning, James untangled himself from Sam’s arms and woke up Sharon. They quietly got their things and went back across the hallway. Sharon darted to the bathroom, claiming the first shower. James put some pop-tarts in the microwave and then went into his mother’s room.

She was lying in bed, asleep. James crawled in beside her, and she stirred a little, but not enough to wake. James thought that this within itself was odd. His mother was usually a very light sleeper. When he was little and he used to have nightmares, his mom would be awake as soon as he was out of his bed.

Now she was lying still, unaware of his presence. He rested his head against her chest just to feel the rise and fall of it, just to listen to her heartbeat. For some reason he couldn’t name, he could feel a sense dread growing in him, a feeling far older than himself.

He kissed his mother’s forehead- the way she did for him when he wasn't feeling well, and climbed out of bed.

He ate a poptart and waited for Sharon to be done with the bathroom. She finally got out and he ran in, suddenly desperate to relieve himself.

He showered quickly, far faster than Sharon at any rate, and dressed.

They were both ready by 8:20, and James made sure to start the coffee machine so his mom would be up in time for work.

They went downstairs and unlocked their bikes. They raced to school, James beating Sharon easily, much to her dismay. When they met up with Sam at the bike rack James bumped his shoulder against Sam’s gently. Sam gave him a shy smile, and James grinned back, wrapping an arm around his best friend’s shoulders.

Class went by smoothly, and it was Taco Tuesday in the cafeteria that day, so spirits were up. Sam and Sharon had soccer practice after school, so when the final bell rang, James bid them farewell, and started packing up his bag. He was almost out the door when Mr. Jean-Baptiste called after him.

“Mister Carter? Can you hang back a few minutes? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.”

Sharon turned around and made the face that she always made when she thought he was getting in trouble. It was a mix of smug glee and fierce protectiveness. James waved her off, and she bounded after Sam.

“Sure, Mr. JB.” James said easily, slipping his backpack off his shoulders. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, James. I’d just like to have a chat.”

“Okay.”

As the last few students slipped out of the classroom, Mr. Jean-Baptiste pulled a chair over to his desk, gesturing for James to sit.

“Would you like a drink? Here, have a Coke.” He said, rummaging around in the mini-fridge. He slid an open can across the table to James.

“Oh, I’m not allowed to have soda, Mr. JB.” James told him.
“That’s okay. It’ll be our little secret.” Mr. Jean-Baptiste assured him.

“Okay.” James took a tentative sip of the coke. It was sweet and fizzy and a little unnatural tasting, but he decided that he liked it. He took another, longer sip.

“Good, huh?” Mr. Jean-Baptiste asked, and James nodded.

“What did you want to talk about?” James asked. “Am I in trouble?”

“Oh, not at all, James. Quite the opposite.”

James took another sip of his coke, blinking slowly. He couldn’t really understand why Mr. Jean-Baptiste wanted to talk to him.

“Why then?” James asked. He was feeling a little weird, like he was underwater.

“Hm? Oh, I was just want your opinion on something. Which book do you think we should read for the class book project? A Wrinkle In Time or The Giver? The both have fantasy tones, but The Giver has more of a dystopian feel.”

James nodded. He was really tired. He thought soda was supposed to make you feel more alert, like coffee, or a bunch of sugar. Instead, he felt like he was sinking into the floor. He took another sip of the coke, trying to fight the sudden heaviness in his eyelids.

Mr. Jean-Baptiste was still talking about books when James’ world went black.

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Sharon loved soccer practice, even if Coach Murry kept carding her. She was a defensive midfielder. It was her right to tackle the other girls.

Sam was the goalie, and she was pretty good, but Sharon didn’t think Sam liked it as much as she should. Her theory was validated when practice was ended early because of some unexpected rain, and Sam was overly cheerful.

“I don’t see what’s so dangerous about a little bit of rain.” Sharon grumbled as they walked back to the bike rack. “We’re not made of sugar or anything. We’re not gonna melt.”

“Uh-huh.” Sam said, clearly not paying any attention to Sharon’s complaining. She seemed to be in her own little world, smiling at nothing.

The reached the bike rack and Sharon frowned. “That’s weird.”

“What is?” Sam asked, and Sharon gestured to where James’ bike was still sitting.

“James hasn’t left yet.”

“Huh.” Sam said. “Maybe he’s still with Mr. JB. You wanna go see?”

“Sure.” Sharon agreed.

They wandered the hallways until they found Mrs. Davis’s room. The door was closed and the
lights were out. Sharon walked up and wiggled the handle, but it was locked. She frowned.

“No one’s home.” She told Sam.

“Maybe he walked?” Sam suggested, and Sharon scowled at the door.

“Oui, j’ai l’emballage. Il est plus petit que prévu. Êtes-vous sûr que c’est la bonne?” It was a deep voice with a sweet accent, one that Sharon recognized.

Mr. Jean-Baptiste was walking down the hallway with a phone pressed to his ear. He also had Sharon’s brother slung over his shoulder like a bag of flour. She gasped and pulled Sam back into a corridor.

“Is that-” Sam whispered, and Sharon shushed her, staring at their teacher. He hung up the phone, and shifted his hold on James. James was asleep, and he looked tiny in Mr. Jean-Baptiste’s arms.

“Son of a bitch.” Sharon said, and it felt good to curse. She wanted to jump on Mr. Jean-Baptiste and tear out his eyes. She wanted to take James and run as far as she could. She wanted to hide under her mother’s bed.

Mr. Jean-Baptiste was walking away, and Sharon took Sam’s hand, leading her down a different hallway. She knew all of the short cuts in the school and she wasn’t going to let James get away.

They made it to the parking lot a few seconds before Mr. Jean-Baptiste and James. Sharon unlocked her bike and looked at Sam.

“I need you to follow them, okay? Find a payphone and call this number if you find out where they’re going. I’m gonna go get some help. Don’t let them out of your sight.” Sharon quickly scrawled a number on the back of Sam’s hand.

Sharon pushed her bike towards Sam. “Take my bike. It’s faster.” Sam nodded seriously, looking pale and determined.

The front door to the school opened and they both crouched, watching in silence as Mr. Jean-Baptiste reached his car and loaded James into the back of it. Sam gripped Sharon’s hand hard, and Sharon fought back the urge to scream for her brother.

The car started, and Sam jumped on the bike, ditching her backpack and peddling as fast as she could.

Sharon ran off like a shot. She knew exactly where she was going. She remembered when she was younger. When her mother would always say to them, “If you’re ever in any trouble, go to Clint and Natasha first. They’ll take care of it.”

Sharon ran through the rain, dodging crowds and pushing people out of her way. She was the fastest runner in her grade. She was the best defensive midfielder in the world. She was going to save her brother.

She made it to the apartment building, running past the elevator and up the eight flights of stairs to the superintendent’s apartment. She banged on the door violently until it swung open.

“Jesus, kid, what?” Clint asked, and Sharon grabbed his arm and started running, although she didn’t get very far.

Clint picked her up and placed her inside the apartment, shutting the door behind them.
“There isn't time!” Sharon shouted, running for the door. Clint picked her up again and put her down in the same spot as before.

Natasha came out of the bedroom and looked at Sharon. “Tell us what's going on.” She said.

“Mr. Jean-Baptiste has Jamie! We have to go get him right now before he kills him or get him hooked on drugs or molests him!” Sharon said, pulling Clint’s arm towards the door. He didn't budge.


“I was at soccer practice but it ended early because of rain, and when we went to go James’ bike was still there so we went back inside to find him and he wasn't there but we heard Mr. Jean-Baptiste talking French and he had James but James was asleep and so we went to the parking lot and Sam is following them on my bike and I came here because mom said you would help if we were in trouble but you're not helping! You're just standing around!”

Clint blinked at her for a second and then looked at Natasha. She nodded and disappeared down the hallway. She came back a few moments later with a weird looking thing that she tossed at Clint. He caught it and it expanded.

“Is that a bow?” Sharon asked, dumbfounded. Clint grabbed something off the kitchen counter, and slung it over his shoulder. It took Sharon too long to realise it was a quiver of arrows.

“Zvyozdochka, listen to me. Where did they take him?” Natasha asked Sharon seriously.

“I don’t know. Sam was following them and-”

She was cut off by a sharp ringing. Natasha got up and answered the kitchen phone. Sharon could hear Sam’s sharp voice from all the way across the room.

“They’re at Atlantic Avenue/Pacific Street station!” Sam panted. “I think they’re gonna get on a train! I’m in the station, but I don’t want to get too close.”

Natasha hung up the phone without saying a word. “Pacific street.” She told Clint, who nodded.

“I heard. Kid can shout.”

“Let’s go.” Natasha said, and opened the door. Sharon started for the door and Clint stopped her.

“Woah, short-stop. You’re not coming.”

“Like hell I’m not!” She protested.

“It’s too dangerous.” Clint told her.

“It’s my brother.” Sharon said, crossing her arms.

Clint sighed and looked at Natasha. She rolled her eyes. “Come on, then.”

Sharon grinned and ran past her. They took the stairs down and Natasha got on a beautiful motorcycle, already speeding away by the time Sharon had gotten out the door. Clint pulled her towards a bright red car. She sat in the passenger seat and he made her buckle her seatbelt, then gunned the engine.

He drove fast, weaving in-between other cars dangerously. Sharon clutched the dashboard and tried
not to watch.

They made it to the station in just under 4 minutes, even though it was usually a 10 minute drive. Clint haphazardly parked and got out of the car without shutting the door. Sharon hopped out and followed him. He looked down at her and sighed, taking the quiver off his back and pulling out all the arrows. He handed them to Sharon, then, without warning, swung her onto his back. She yelped and clutched his shoulders, holding onto the arrows as best she could.

He ran down the steps to the station, hopping the turnstile and looking around. Sharon held saw a flash of red hair and pointed, and Clint followed. They passed a group of payphones, and Sharon saw Sam and waved with her fist full of arrows. Sam looked momentarily horrified, then started running after them.

They all followed Natasha onto the train platform where Mr. Jean-Baptiste was standing, holding James like he had just fallen asleep after a long day, like James was his. Sharon squawked in outrage and kicked Clint in the sides, urging him onward. Clint winced but continued forward.

Suddenly there were screams and shouts from other people on the platform. Natasha had pulled her gun on Mr. Jean-Baptiste.

“Put down the boy.” She demanded.

“This boy is worth a lot of money.” Mr. Jean-Baptiste said, not moving to let go of James.

“Arrow.” Clint demanded, and Sharon handed him one. He drew his bow, pointing it at Mr. Jean-Baptiste.

Sam caught up with them and stopped just behind Clint and Sharon. She looked taken aback. Probably because their landlords and their substitute teacher were in some kind of standoff.

“Drop him.” Clint said.

“Why should I?” Mr. Jean-Baptiste asked callously. “You won’t shoot me. You might hit the child.”

“You wanna bet?” Clint asked, drawing his bow back further.

“Your aim may be good, Hawk, but do you really want to risk James’ life?”

Sharon had heard enough. She slid off of Clint’s back and dropped the arrows. She ran up to Mr. Jean-Baptiste and him in the shin as hard as she could. She was still wearing cleats, after all.

“Fuck, son of a-” He dropped James, and Sharon half caught him, half let him fall on top of her.

Mr. Jean-Baptiste fell backwards with an arrow sticking out of his shoulder. Natasha ran forward and zip-tied his wrists together, pulling him to his feet. He yelled in pain, probably because of the arrow still sticking out of his shoulder. She led him out of the station, not being gentle.

Sam and Clint came over. Sam helped Sharon stand and Clint picked up James. They walked back to the car, but not before Clint made Sharon pick up all of the arrows she dropped.

The ride back was mostly quiet, Sam and Sharon too busy fretting over James to ask any questions. Clint carried James to their apartment, depositing his gently on the couch.

Their mother rushed out of her bedroom, looking at the state of them. She turned on Clint.
“What happened?” She demanded.

“Uh, so. There may have been some light kidnapping? But everything’s-.”

Before he could finish, Amanda had slapped him across the face. Sharon gasped. She had just seen this man put an arrow in someone else’s body not 10 minutes ago. And her mom just slapped him across the face.

“You promised me that he would be safe! How did this happen?” She hissed, and Sam took a step back, frightened by this woman’s anger.

“He was our substitute teacher.” Sharon said. “He was actually a really cool substitute teacher.”

“Don’t you vet the school?” Amanda demanded, still yelling at Clint.

“Do you really want to do this here?” He asked.

“Where else would I do it? Yes. Talk.”

Clint glanced at Sharon and Sam. “We interviewed all of their teachers, but we have no control over who the district-”

“Don’t give me any of that bullshit, Barton. This is your mistake. How could you let a HYDRA agent near my son?”

“He wasn’t actually HYDRA, ma’am. His name is Simon Adelphin. He’s a Haitian national, a sort of bounty-hunter. I doubt he actually knew much about James’... situation.”

“And how do you know all of this?” Amanda asked.

“Natasha’s a very good interrogator.” Clint said.

Amanda waved her hand at him, apparently done with their conversation. She kneeled next to the couch, stroking James’ hair.

“Mama?” James whispered quietly, eyes fluttering open.

“Yes, baby. I’m here.” She answered.

“I don’t think I like soda.” He grumbled, and she laughed a little.

“That’s okay.” She said, kissing his forehead. “That’s okay, Jamie. You don’t have to drink soda.”

“No. No way.” Amanda said, crossing her arms. “You’re not brainwashing him into becoming your little secret agent or whatever. How is that better than what they want to do with him?”

“I just think that he could benefit from some basic self-defense.” Natasha answered.

“Sharon, too.” Clint added. “Kid’s a natural fighter.”

“And the other one.” Natasha said. “All three of them need to be able to protect themselves.”
“They shouldn’t need to!” Amanda said. “They should be able to live normal lives, just like any other kid.”

“Mandy,” Amira sighed. She’d been staying out of this argument for the most part, but she thought that maybe it was time to cut in. “James was never going to have a normal life. You know this. Right now, he’s scared and confused. So is Sharon. They need to be able to do this for themselves.”

Amanda sighed, rubbing her temple. “What happens to them when I’m gone?” She asked.

“What are you talking about?” Amira asked, putting her hand on Amanda’s shoulder. “They’ll always have their mother.”

“No, they won’t.” Amanda said, “Fuck.” She sighed, putting her head in her hands.

“Ms. Carter, are you alright?” Natasha asked, approaching cautiously.

“I’m alright.” She answered, then shook her head. “Well, actually, I’m not. I just need my kids to be.”

“What is it?” Natasha asked, scanning Amanda’s body.

“Cancer.” Amanda said. “It’s cancer.”
“Shut up, asshole.” Sam said, trying to kick James and failing.

“Hey man, you could always drop out and take the Spanish with Sharon and all the other losers.”

“Shut up, James!” Sharon said, trying to kick James and succeeding. “That being said, can you come help me with these conjugations?”

James sighed, dragging himself to his feet.

They were all studying on the floor of the living room, candy spread between them to help them think. James was supposed to be working on his algebra homework, but it seemed he was stuck helping Sam and Sharon for the foreseeable future.

Amanda walked into the apartment, stopping to eye their pile of candy. “Please tell me you’ve eaten something other than that garbage today.”

“Mom, why would we ever eat something other than garbage?” Sharon asked.

“Especially when garbage tastes so good.” James added.

Amanda sighed and set down her keys. She was thin these days, and the double mastectomy hadn’t helped much. She was pale and exhausted looking all the time, and what was left of her hair had lost it’s sheen. Nevertheless, she always had a smile for them when she got home.

She sat on the couch and stuck out her hand expectantly. James smiled and gave her a handful of gummy worms and m&m’s. “You kids have a point.”

“How did it go today?” Sharon asked.

“Same old,” Amanda answered vaguely. She didn’t talk much about her treatment with her kids. She didn’t like to scare them. “What are you guys working on?”

“We’re getting James to do our foreign language homework for us.” Sam answered, and James looked up from Sharon’s conjugation worksheet, squawking in outrage.

Amanda laughed, tapering off into violent coughs. James shot to his feet and ran to the kitchen, bringing her a glass of water. She took the water and sipped gratefully. “Thank you, honey.”

James nodded, poorly concealing his worry.

“How was school today? Anybody give you any trouble, Sam?”

“No, ma’am.” Sam said. He didn’t tell her that no one had given him trouble in a long time. Not after Sharon had punched the first kid who had, then James had punched the second, and Sam had laid out the third. In reality, they walked through the hallways three across, taking up as much space as they could. The three of them were like giants, huge, impenetrable, and so far above everyone else.

Sure, people talked about them: the girl who thought she was a boy; the weirdly intense kid who only ever talked to his sister and his friend; and the girl who competed in every sport and thought she was better than everyone else. They were well known throughout the school as freaks. No one would dare say a thing to their face, though.

“I mean, my Mandarin teacher will probably skin me tomorrow for bombing this animals quiz.” Sam joked.
“Ah, Madame Gao’s a big softie, she’ll go easy on you.” James said.

“Dude, Gao is terrifying. She just loves you because you can speak Mandarin and Cantonese with her.”

“She invited me to tea,” James said, smiling faintly.

“Don’t go.” Amanda and Sharon said at once.

“I know, I know. I turned her down. Still, it was a nice gesture.”

There was a knock on the door, and Sam hopped up to answer it. It was Darlene and Sarah with a dish of enchiladas.

“I brought dinner!” Darlene said cheerfully, and handed the dish to Sarah. “Go put this on the table, honey.”

“Hi, mom.” Sam said, and Darlene wrapped him in a hug.

“Hello, my handsome boy.”

“Moooooom.” Sam complained, trying to escape the hug.

“What? Can’t a mother hug her son? I feel like I haven’t seen you in weeks!”

“Sorry, Mrs. Wilson.” James said, smiling his most charming smile. “We’ve been keeping him well fed, promise.”

She looked around, raising her eyebrow at where Sharon was trying to hide their candy stash. “Looks like it.”

“Come on in,” James said, ushering Darlene into the apartment.

“Hi, Mandy.” Darlene said, leaning down to kiss Amanda on the cheek. “How are you feeling?”

“Oh, I could just about run a marathon.” Amanda sighed.

James felt a tugging at his sleeve and looked down. It was Sarah.

“What happened to your glasses?” He asked, and she blinked rapidly.

“I’m trying out contacts.” She told him. She blinked some more. “I don’t think I like it.”

“That’s okay. They’re not for everybody.” James told her.

“I don’t think they’re for anybody.” Sarah grumbled unhappily, rubbing at her eyes. “This has got to against the Geneva conventions.”

“The what?” James asked, then shook his head. “Never mind. You wanna help me set the table?”

“Not particularly. But I will.” She said.

“Thanks.” James said.

Sharon and Sam got drinks and Darlene helped Amanda to the table. They ate enchiladas, which were delicious, as usual. They joked and talked and enjoyed each other’s company. Amanda was, if not bright and vibrant, quick-witted and happy. It seemed like a real family meal, it gave James
hope for the future.

Which was why it was so devastating when she collapsed the next week.

They were at the grocery store, and Amanda was complaining about all the processed junk they were choosing, and Sharon was trying to convince her that sugary cereal was actually a better for them than oatmeal, while James was quietly add essentials to the cart, like milk and eggs.

He and Sharon were arguing over which ice cream to get when the heard the sound of frozen peas crashing to the ground. James turned quickly, to see his mom laying on the floor, pale as a ghost.

“I know CPR!” Sharon shouted, dropping to the ground next to Amanda. She started chest compressions immediately, pausing for a second to wipe her eyes on the sleeve. “1, 2, 3, 4, 5...” Her voice wavered as she continued counting. She set her jaw and kept going.

James was paralyzed. He just watched as his sister fought to keep his mother alive.

“James!” Sharon snapped. “Get help.” She leaned down and breathed into Amanda’s mouth.

James shook himself out of his frozen state and ran out of the aisle. He saw a man with a cell phone on his belt and stopped him.

“Sir! Please call 911. My mom, she’s-” He stopped, suddenly unable to breathe. He pointed down the frozen foods aisle where Sharon was still performing CPR.

The man pulled out his phone and dialed, running over to the aisle. James followed him.

“Yes, I’m at the Superfoods on Fulton street, a woman has collapsed...”

James kneeled down by his mom’s head, smoothing his hand over her buzzcut.

“Mama, please, please, please.” He muttered, petting her head.

“25, 26, 27, 28...” Sharon counted, voice cracking. “James, I can’t. I can’t, please just-”

She started sobbing, and James kissed his mother’s forehead. He collected himself and moved to her side, taking over the chest compressions.

“28, 29, 30” He leaned down and pinched his mother’s nose shut. He breathed into her mouth twice, then started over. “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8...”

He got a rhythm going, and he could ignore everything else. He could ignore that there were tears falling off his face and onto his mom’s shirt. He could ignore that Sharon was behind him, holding him and sobbing into his neck. He could ignore the man still talking on the phone next to them. He could ignore the crowd that was slowly gathering, just watching, not doing anything. He could ignore the lights and the gurney and the people telling him “Stop now, Jamie. You can stop.”

He turned into Clint’s chest, and Clint picked him up, holding him close. “Shh,” Clint said. “You’re okay.” James looked over Clint’s shoulder to see Natasha holding Sharon, stroking her hair.

Clint and Natasha carried them out to the car like they were toddlers again. Natasha even helped
them with their seat belts. Clint drove to the hospital, and they got out of the car, Sharon and James drifting close together. They tangled their hands together, walking into the hospital like conjoined twins.

Natasha got them signed in, and a nurse directed them to the waiting room. No one told them what was going on or if their mom was okay. They sat, both staring at nothing for what felt like years. Clint went to the vending machine and got a soda for Sharon and an apple juice for James. Natasha left to go terrorize the staff.

Eventually she came back with a scared looking nurse. “Mister and Miss Carter?” She asked. It took Sharon and James a second to realize that they were being spoken to.

“Y-yes?” Sharon asked, digging her fingernails into James’ hand.

“Your mother has pneumonia.” The nurse told them.

“I thought she had cancer.” James said weakly.

“No, she does,” The nurse started. “Because of the tumor burden, her body has lost the ability to fight infection.” Natasha elbowed the nurse, wanting to stop James and Sharon from shrinking in on themselves.

“Uh, so we’ve intubated your mom, so that we can get the fluid out of her lungs. We have her on life-support-”

“Is she gonna die?” Sharon asked.

The nurse looked horrified. “I-”

“God, you’re no help.” Natasha growled, taking the nurse by the arm and leading her away.

Clint followed her, presumably to stop her from killing the poor nurse.

“What room did the desk lady say mom was in again?” Sharon whispered.

“C37” James told her.

“Let’s go.”

The ran down the hallway hand-in-hand, pushing past the big doors to the ICU. They found C37 and waited for a couple doctors to leave the room, then slipped inside.

Sharon gasped at the sight. Their mom lay there, covered by wires on all sides. There were machines making her breathe. She looked dead.

“What does her chart say?” Sharon asked.

“What?” James questioned, not taking his eyes off his mother.

“Her chart. In movies people always read the chart to see what’s wrong.” Sharon explained.

James picked up the clipboard at the end of the bed and read over the papers there. “I can't- this is gibberish.”

“Let me see,” Sharon said, grabbing the clipboard. She looked at it and shook her head. “Yeah, that’s nothing.”
James put the chart back on the bed.

"Should we move closer?" Sharon whispered.

"I don't know." James answered. "The nurse said that her body can't fight infections. Maybe we shouldn't touch her. Just to be safe."

"Okay." Sharon said, and they went over to the chair next to the bed. There was only one chair, and it was meant for one person, so it was a tight fit for both them.

They just watched her for a while, watched the mechanical rise and fall of her chest, watched the medicine bag drip into her veins, watched the little line on the monitor, the one that meant her heartbeat.

"I'm scared." Sharon said.

"Me too." James admitted.

"I don't want her to die." Sharon whispered.

"Me neither." James said.

"What happens if she... if she doesn't wake up?" Sharon asked.

"I don't know." He said, and pretended that he wasn't crying.

Eventually, a nurse found them in there and shooed them out, stating that only people above the age of 16 were allowed in the ICU. She only scoffed when Sharon tried to convince her that they were 17. They wandered back to the waiting room where a frantic Clint was pacing. When he saw them he ran toward them, picking them both up in a hug.

"Goddammit, you guys can't just go wandering off like that." He muttered, kissing the tops of their heads. "It's fine if you sneak around, just tell me where you’re going."

Clint and Natasha ushered them out of the hospital and back to the apartment. They hadn't even noticed that it was dark out until they got outside.

Neither of them wanted dinner, so they just got ready for bed. By some unspoken agreement, the twins had decided on sleeping in their mother’s bed while Clint and Natasha took their room.

Sharon climbed into bed and James followed suit, turning the bedside lamp off. It was nice. The bed was big and warm and it smelled like his mom. He was almost asleep when he heard quiet crying.

James turned over to see Sharon hugging a pillow to her chest, crying. He didn't say anything, just wrapped an arm around her. She stopped crying eventually, but whether she'd actually stopped or just fallen asleep was undetermined. James let himself fall asleep to the sound of her quiet snores.

"Hi, Dr. Khan? This is James Carter."
James forgot how much he hated hospitals and doctor’s offices. They reminded him so much of the scary place from his nightmares. The only doctor he ever saw was Doctor Khan, the woman who ran medical at the SHIELD base in New York. Her office was cozy and had bean-bag chairs. She was an expert about James’ “enhancements”. He saw her at least once a month and she did tests on his strength and speed and mind.

“James, how can I help you?” She answered warmly.

“Hi, um, remember that thing we talked about? A few months back?”

“James, it's perfectly natural for your body to be going through some changes.”

“No, not that. Um. My mom, she’s in the ICU. She’s on life support and I-” He stopped, taking a deep breath. His school’s counselor mad him and Sharon practice breathing exercises, like holding his breath and counting to 3 was going to get his mom out of the hospital.

“James.” Dr. Khan said seriously. “We’ve talked about this.”

“I know, I know.” James said.

“Your mother refused to participate in the procedure. And even if she hadn’t, we have no guarantee that it will work.”

“I don’t care!” James yelled, and got a few looks from the other people in the payphone line. “I don’t care,” He repeated, quietly. “I don’t care what she wanted, because right now a machine is the only thing keeping her breathing, okay? This might save her life. Please. Please, Doctor.”

There was a deep sigh from the other end of the line. “Okay. Come down to my office tomorrow morning for some preliminary tests. We can talk.”

“Thank you, Doctor Khan. Thanks.”

James hung up the phone, smiling to himself. He was gonna save his mom’s life.

He made Natasha take him out to the SHIELD base in Manhattan. She looked grim, clutching the steering wheel tightly. When they arrived, they pulled into the parking garage, and Natasha pulled James out of the car, keeping him protectively close by.

They walked to the medical office, and Dr. Khan greeted them kindly. She asked Natasha to stay outside, much to her frustration. James followed Dr. Khan into her office, sitting down comfortably on the couch.

“So your mother has pneumonia?” Dr. Khan asked.

“Yeah.” said James quietly.

“Hm.” She muttered, grabbing a clipboard and writing something down. “I’m gonna have to draw some blood, if that’s alright with you.”

“Oh, of course.” James said, already pulling up his sleeve. “Whatever you need.”

Dr. Khan laughed. “Not right now.” She said. “I’ve studied your enhancements extensively, James, and while there’s evidence that it has some healing properties, we have no idea if it will clear up her infection, let alone cure her cancer.”

“I have to try.” James said. “She’s my mom. I’ll do anything.”
“I understand.” Dr Khan said, nodding. “I’ll see what I can do.”

James paced in the waiting room, and Sharon sat in her usual spot, watching him warily.

“Why is it taking so long?” He asked the air, and she rolled her eyes.

“It’s science, Jamie. It’ll take a while. Khan knows what she’s doing.” Sharon knew a little about what James could do. She was bouncing in her seat, clearly just as full of nervous energy as James. She seemed excited, confident in what was happening. James was a little more tentative.

“I don’t know, Share. I have a bad feeling. God, what if this doesn’t work? What if it makes things worse and it’s my fault?”

“Please just sit down.” Sharon sighed. James huffed and sat next to her. She leaned over the armrest and hugged him. She pressed their cheeks together uncomfortably, combing her fingers through his hair. It was the way their mother hugged them. She pulled back and smiled at him. “Better?” She asked.

James rubbed weakly at his sore ribs where Sharon had squeezed him far too tight. “Yeah, thanks.”

They waited, swinging their legs against the chairs. Amira had dropped them off, then went with Dr. Khan to Amanda’s room. So they were by themselves, not counting all the other families in the waiting room. Sharon was reading the newest Harry Potter book and James was working on their homework. The school had given them some time off, probably at Natasha's demand. Sam always came by after school with their make-up work.

“What the vertex formula again?” James asked.

“y = a(x – h)2 + k” Sharon said, not looking up from her book.

“Thanks.”

Amira came into the waiting room, looking too pale for anything good to have happened.

“What’s wrong?” James asked.

“Let me call you kids a cab. Dr. Khan’s gonna be a while.” She said, and James shot to his feet, dragging Sharon with him.

“What happened?” He demanded, panicked.

Sharon started running toward the ICU, pulling James along with her. They reached room C37 where Amanda was being wheeled away with an oxygen bag on her face and a doctor doing chest compressions. Dr. Khan was following them, shouting orders.

“Doctor Khan!” James shouted, and a nurse stopped them, holding them back. Sharon screamed at him, beating her fists against the man’s shoulder.

Amira ran after them, grabbing James and Sharon from behind, pulling them back down the hallway and out of the ICU.

“What’s happening?” James asked her, trying wrestle out of her hold. “Amira, what’s happening? What’s going on?”
“I’ll tell you in the car, c’mon.”

“We’re not leaving!” Sharon yelled, elbewing Amira in the side. She grunted and loosened her hold on them. Sharon started running for the doors, but a security guard stopped her before she got very far. He picked her up and carried her out of the building, Amira close on their heels.

They got in a cab, an Amira sat in the backseat with Sharon and James, who were both trying to fight their way out of the car.

“Settle down!” She shouted, and the kids stopped moving. “Your mom went into cardiac arrest before we could apply the serum. They’re taking her to surgery and Dr. Khan will do her best to help her. All we can do right now is wait.”

“For what?” Sharon asked.

“For whatever happens next.” Amira answered grimly.

Amira dropped them off at the Wilson’s apartment, promising to call with any news. Darlene ushered them to the couch, fussing over them and then going to the kitchen to make cookies when it was clear they wanted to be left alone.

Sharon and James sat, staring blankly at the TV, clutching each other’s hands. Sam came out of his room, the one that used to be Gideon’s, and saw them sitting there. He didn't ask any questions, just climbed onto the couch and sat with them.

They blankly sat through dinner, then through getting ready for bed. They stared at the ceiling of Sam’s room, minds too far away to process anything.

Sharon finally fell asleep around 1 in the morning, hugging a pillow tight to her chest, curled in a ball so tight it looked like it should hurt. James stayed awake, on the floor of Sam’s room with Sam laying next to him.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing.”

“Are you okay?” Sam whispered, and it felt like all those years ago, when they traded secrets.

“I-” James started, then his voice got caught stuck in his throat. He hadn't spoken since he left the hospital, and just the simple act of making a sound brought tears to his eyes. “I want my mom.” He said, crying.

Sam rolled over, wrapping his arms around James. James buried his face into Sam’s chest and sobbed silently. Sam just held him, rubbing circles over his back, letting him cry. When he finally tapered off, he pulled away a little, staring at the ugly wet spot he’d left on Sam’s chest. He picked at the fabric.

“I’m sorry I ruined your shirt.” He whispered, and Sam shrugged.

“That's okay. I hated this shirt anyway. You actually did me a favor.” Sam told him seriously.

James breathed what was almost a laugh, knocking his head against Sam’s collarbone. There was a brush of something against his forehead, something that felt like a soft kiss.

James looked up at Sam, and Sam leaned in, pressing his lips against James’. James didn't respond, too shocked and inexperienced to do anything.

Sam suddenly rolled onto his back, throwing an arm over his eyes. “Sorry, sorry. Fuck, I’m so sorry.”
“I... what?” James responded, voice cracking.

“Oh, god, Jamie. I'm so sorry. I'm a horrible person.” Sam continued.

“You-” James stammered, still caught off guard. “Why did you do that?”

“I'm know, I'm sorry. Please forgive me, I shouldn't have done that-”

“No, I mean, why?” James asked.

“I don't know.” Sam said miserably. “I wanted to. You looked really sad and I just-” he sighed. “I'm sorry.”

“It’s okay.” James said faintly. He pressed his fingers to his mouth, chasing the ghost of Sam’s lips. “It was... okay. I'm not mad.”

“Oh thank you.” Sam said, turning over and hugging James quickly. “I promise I'll never do it again.”

“Why not?” James asked. Sam looked at him.

“What?” He asked sharply.

“I didn't not like it,” James told him. “It was weird, but, I dunno. I guess it was nice.”

“Really?” Sam asked quietly.

“Yeah.” James said.

“Oh. Okay. Cool.” Sam said nonchalantly.

James smiled at his friend and turned on his side, finally able to stop worrying long enough to fall asleep.

James woke up with a feeling of dread in the pit of his stomach. He looked around the room to see that Sam was still asleep, head resting on James’ arm. Sharon was awake, sitting up in Sam’s bed.

She looked at James and James looked back. She lifted up the covers and James gently took his arm back from Sam, climbing in the bed beside her.

“I'm afraid that if I get out of bed, something terrible will happen.” She whispered, and James nodded. She moved close to him and he wrapped his arm around her, leaning his head against her shoulder.

They sat quietly for almost an hour before James finally spoke. “We have to leave eventually. We need to know.”

Sharon sighed shakily, nodding “I love you, Jamie.” She said, tears filling her eyes. James held her tighter.

“I love you too.”

They slid out of bed together, holding hands as the walked out into the hallway.
Mrs. Wilson was sitting at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. She looked up when they walked into the kitchen. Her eyes were red.

“I'm sorry.” She told them, and Sharon stopped, letting go of James’ hand. “I got the call at 4 last night. I'm so sorry, babies.”

She stood to hug them and James’ mind went blank. It was like someone flipped to the wrong channel on a TV. There was nothing but white noise as Sharon collapsed forward into Darlene’s arms, shaking with sobs.

James couldn't cry. He couldn't think. He couldn't feel his body. He couldn't breathe.

His mom.

His mom was-

“Oh god,” James whispered, and ran to the kitchen sink, emptying his stomach.

When he was done, he slid to the kitchen floor, bringing his knees up to his chest. He rocked himself back and forth until he stopped wanting to scream.

James stood uncomfortably in the starchy suit, holding Sharon’s hand. They’d been staying on and off with the Wilsons and Clint for the past week as Amira helped plan the funeral. Now, they were standing in Green-Wood Cemetery, burying Amanda Elizabeth Carter.

Her coworkers and friends from the publishing company were there, as well as Amira, Clint, Natasha, all the Wilsons, and Amanda’s sister.

It was quick, Amira speaking about all of Amanda’s accomplishments as a woman and a mother. They lowered her into the ground, and Sharon and James walked up and threw dirt over the coffin.

They held the wake in the Wilsons’ apartment, where Darlene had made a ridiculous amount of food.

Sharon and James sat on the couch, letting people shake their hands and apologize for their loss. Sam came and sat on the floor next to them, bringing a plate full of food for them to graze off of.

They stayed their for what felt like hours as people cried at them and hugged them and cried at them some more. Finally, people started leaving. It was almost completely over when an elegant older woman crouched in front of them.

“Hello, my darlings.” She said, reaching out and squeezing their knees.

“You’re Peggy, right?” Sharon asked. “Mama’s sister?”

“Yes.” She said. “I’m your Aunt Peggy. It’s nice to meet you both, though I wish it could be under better circumstances.”

James nodded. He thought that Peggy smelled really nice, almost like his mother.
“Are you here to take care of us?” Sharon asked her.

“Yes, my dear.” She said, pushing Sharon’s hair back from her face. “I’ve resigned from my job so that I could move up here with you two.”

James wanted to hate her, wanted to yell at him for trying to replace his mother, wanted to distrust her; but he couldn’t. Something about her made him want to trust her unconditionally.

“I know it doesn’t seem like it now, but I promise you that everything is going to be okay.” Peggy said, and James-

James believed her.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter contains non-consensual drug use of a minor (no assault of any kind occurs), minor transphobia, cancer, and death of a parent. So sorry.
Heyyy! Sorry that chapter took forever, but I just moved to New York! I need friends, so if anyone in the Brooklyn area wants to chill and scream about Stucky, hmu!

Here’s what my grown-up James looks like! Just in case you want a visual of how he's different from CT:TFA Bucky or WS Bucky.

Much love!

2002

“The most notable squadron of its time was The Howling Commandos, a group of seven men lead by Captain Steven Grant Rogers, or as he’s better known, Captain America. It was a non-traditional group, as it was de-segregated and made up of men from three different countries.”

James sat in the back of class, idly doodling on his worksheet. Mr. Terry was out sick so they were watching some documentary about the Howling Commandos, since World War Two was their next unit. He wasn’t really paying attention, because there was nothing he could learn from this documentary (which seemed to have been made in the early 80’s) that he couldn’t learn at home. Peggy had known all of the Howling Commandos, and her stories about them were always totally awesome. He knew things that Mr. Terry and the History channel would never know about Captain America and his squadron. Like how Captain America was a terrible dancer. Or how Tim “Dum-Dum” Dugan would horde chewing gum and always end up with it stuck in his iconic mustache. How Gabe Jones and Jim Morita fought racism and prejudice their entire lives, and are still hardly known by name. He knew what Captain America’s very last words were.

So he didn’t need to watch this stupid documentary. He could just get the worksheet answers from Sam later.

"But in this band of brothers, the most interesting friendship was between Captain America and his lifelong pal, Bucky Barnes."

There were a few whispers in the class, then giggles, and James could suddenly feel eyes on him. He looked up to see a picture of a young Bucky Barnes in uniform, hat and smile slightly crooked.

“Dude,” Sam hissed.

“I see it.” James said.
“You’re like a dead-ringer.”

“I know, I see it.” James repeated.

“That’s seriously spooky, man. You're like his emo twin brother.”

“I’m not emo.”

“Okay, goth, whatever.”

“I’m not- would you shut up?”

“Why? So we can watch this vaguely racist documentary about a bunch of dead guys? I mean, they just called Private Morita ‘oriental’.”

“Yikes.” James said. He couldn’t help but glance back up at the projection screen, watching the face of his doppleganger. It was strange to see. People kept glancing back at him, obviously comparing him to the man on screen.

The bell rang, and they all gathered their stuff, bustling out of class. The substitute was asleep at the desk, so they all moved quietly.

“Hey, JC, it’s your free period, right?” Sam asked.

“Yeah.” James said.

“I was gonna skip Geometry because...” Sam started laughing. “There’s a quiz and I did not fucking study at all, man. Do you just wanna go to the bathroom and make out?”

“I would love to, but I’m gonna to the library.” James said, hooking his thumb over his shoulder.

“Fine. I'll go see if Sharon wants to skip with me.” Sam said.

“Are you gonna make out with my sister?” James asked.

“Ew, no.” Sam said, making a face. “I'm just bored and need someone to entertain me.”

“Okay, I think she’s in gymnastics, right now.” James said. “So.... good luck convincing her to ditch.”

Sam sighed dramatically. “You Carters are so boring.”

“Yep, that's us.” James smiled, slapping Sam on the shoulder. Sam rolled his eyes, leaning close to James. He rolled on his tiptoes, kissing James quickly on the corner of the mouth.

“Later, loser.” Sam called, running down the hallway.

James flipped him off and headed towards the library.

Mrs. Rodriguez, the school librarian, was used to his presence by now. She looked up from her desk and gave him a warm smile. He smiled back started browsing.

His english class was doing a unit on women in poetry, and he was trying to decide whether to do his paper on Sappho or Emily Dickinson when he glanced up at the history section.

He knew he was being ridiculous. The fact that Bucky Barnes had similar features as him meant
nothing. But he had this nagging feeling in his stomach, and he knew that it wasn’t going to go away unless he did something about it.

He put the two books down and went to the history section. He started scanning the World War 2 books, pulling anything he could find on the Howling Commandos. Then, he went over to the biographies. There was nothing on Barnes, but there were 3 books on Captain America, so he grabbed those too.

He took them over to Mrs. Rodriguez who raised an eyebrow at his selection. “Working on a project, Mr. Carter?” She asked.

“Yes, ma’am. Writing a paper on the Commandos.” He told her.

“7 books seems a bit excessive.” She said, already scanning the titles.

“I’m just trying to be thorough, ma’am.” He said, smiling as charmingly as he could.

“Nothing from the foreign language section today?” She asked.

“Not today.” He said, and she slid the books across the desk to him. “Thanks.”

“Anytime, James.”

He stuffed the books in his backpack and headed out of the library, finding a quiet corridor to spread out in. He was flipping through the first book when he felt someone behind him and whipped around.

“Dude,” Sam said, jumping back. “You’re antsy today.”

“Jesus,” James breathed. “Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

“I wasn’t trying to. What’re you reading?” Sam asked, trying to peer at the book in James’ hands. James pressed the book against his chest, trying to hide the cover. “Nothing.”

“Is it porn?” Sam questioned.

“Why would it be porn?” James asked incredulously. “Why would it ever be porn?”


“Yeah, fine.” James said, waving him off. Sam and Sharon were always on high alert when it seemed like James was in one of his moods.

James shoved the book in his backpack and turned to Sam. “What’s up?”

“I was just hiding from Mr. DeHoyos. He’s like the fucking hall-pass terminator, I swear to god.” Sam said.

“Do you still wanna make out?” James asked.

“Sure,” Sam said.
James got home, swinging his backpack off his shoulder.

“Aunt Peggy?” He called, sticking his head in the living room. Peggy wearing her reading glasses, typing to her laptop. James came in and kissed the top of her head. She glanced up from her computer and smiled at him.

“Hello, dear.” She said. “Where’s your sister?”

“She’s got lacrosse practice.” He told her, and she hummed.

“There’s tea,” Peggy said, then thought for a moment. “It might be cold now.”

“Alright,” He said, going into the kitchen. He ended up eating a bag of grapes, a box of crackers, and a few left over tacos. The tea was cold, but he drank it anyway. After he was done hoovering his way through the kitchen, he went to his room, starting on the pile of books he had gotten at the library.

The first book was mostly on military strategy and the Howling Commandos missions. The second was about the innovative nature of the SSR and the Howling Commandos, how it shaped the modern government organization and how it employed women and people of color in positions of power. The third was about propaganda methods used by the US in World War Two. The fourth was a historical drama that had no place being in the nonfiction section of the library. There was very little about Barnes in any of these books, other than mentions of his sniping skills and closeness with Captain America.

He was frustrated with the lack of progress, so he set the books aside and went back out to the living room. He’d go back to the biographies later.

He went back to school the next day with more questions than answers.

“A target gene is inserted into a circular piece of DNA called a plasmid,” Mrs. Johansen was reciting dully, pointing to the board. Sharon kicked him under his desk. He winced, but didn’t react. She kicked him again. The third time, he caught her ankle. She struggled, but it was no use. He was stronger and they both knew it.

He squeezed the ankle in warning and dropped it, shooting her a look.

She kicked him again.

James sighed and looked at her, mouthing ‘what’.

Sharon grabbed his notebook and wrote ‘You’re being weird’ on the corner of his page.

He rolled his eyes and turned back to Mrs. Johansen’s powerpoint.

Sharon kicked him again.

‘It’s nothing,’ He scribbled on the edge of his paper.

“The plasmid is introduced into bacteria through a process called transformation, and bacteria carrying the plasmid are selected using antibiotics.” Mrs. Johansen droned on.

“Tell me,” Sharon whispered. “Tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me-”

“Sharon Carter, do you need another trip to the principal’s office?” Johansen snapped, turning to face them.
“No ma’am,” Sharon said sullenly. She put her head on her desk and glared mulishly at James.

‘How many would that make? 7 this month?’ James wrote in his notebook, and Sharon stuck out her tongue, then held up 8 fingers. James laughed silently at her, and she kicked him again, maliciously.

The next few days had him researching like a crazy person. He felt like a stalker, trying to trace the life and death of Bucky Barnes. He was overwhelmed by his own persistence, his strange need to know. It wasn’t just that Barnes looked like him. It wasn’t that he lost his father at the same time James lost his mother, it wasn’t that he was friends with the most famous american icon of the 20th century. It was that when James saw the man’s face, he knew what Barnes was thinking.

“Peggy?” He asked tentatively on the fifth day of his weird Bucky Barnes binge. “You knew Bucky Barnes, right?”

Peggy blinked at him, a faintly surprised look on her face. “Is that what’s been bothering you?” She asked.

“I- what? Why would some dead guy from a million years ago be bothering me?” James tried, nonchalantly. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“I suppose it doesn’t.” Peggy said, though she didn’t look convinced.

“I mean, in history we’re doing a project on heroes of World War Two, and I figured everyone was gonna do Captain America. I was gonna do my project on you, but Sam said that it was probably cheating.” James started. “So I was looking into some of the other Commandos, and I guess Barnes seems pretty interesting. There’s not a lot on him anywhere, since he died so young and everything, but-”

“James,” Peggy said gently.

James took a deep breath and looked at Peggy. She raised an eyebrow.

“Just ask me what you want to ask me.” She said.

“Why does he look so much like me?” He asked, then amended. “Or, why do I look so much like him?”

“You know so much that you shouldn’t.” Peggy sighed. “But I suppose that it’s impossible to keep secrets from children.”

“Thanks for that wildly enigmatic answer, Aunt Peggy. It solves everything.” James said, rolling his eyes.

“Oh lord, you haven't changed a bit.” She sighed. She pulled herself up from her chair and waved him over. “Come with me.”

He followed her to her room, the one that used to belong to his mother. Peggy pulled him over to her closest and pointed to a small cigar box on the top shelf. “Grab that for me, will you?”

“Sure,” James said sarcastically, making a face at her. She made a face back and James stood on his tiptoes, grabbing the box.
Peggy directed him to set the box on the bed.

“What is this, Peggy?” He asked, and she patted the bed, motioning for him to sit.

“When I first met you, I had this put together.”

“At the funeral?” James asked, brow furrowing.

“No, before then.” She smiled, flipping open the box and pulling out a picture. It was of Peggy, maybe 10 years younger, holding a sleeping child. The kid had messy dark hair and sunglasses askew on his face.

“Is that-” James started, and Peggy nodded.

“That's you, the day Barton and Romanoff rescued you from the HYDRA facility.”

“Oh,” James breathed, looking at the picture.

“James, what I’m going to tell you will sound strange, but-”

“I’m his clone.” James said.

“Well, yes.” Peggy said, slightly taken aback. “How did you manage to sort that out?”

“In biology we were talking about how they make insulin for diabetics. They take the gene from E. Coli patients and they sort of cut and paste it together to turn it into medicine.” He said, staring into the middle distance.

“They clone it.” Peggy surmised, and James nodded. “You’re really much too clever for your own good,” Peggy sighed.

“You knew him? Barnes, I mean.” James asked, and his voice sounded far away, like it was playing on the radio in the next room.

“Not very well, I’m afraid.” Peggy said. “But perhaps better than most.”

“What- um, what was he like?” James asked, and Peggy reached into the box, pulling out a couple photographs. One was of Barnes in his military uniform, the one that most publications used of him. Another was of Barnes as a teenager, maybe James’ age. He was crouching, one arm around a young girl and another around a goofy looking dog. He was smiling at the camera.

“He was much like you,” Peggy said kindly. She reached out and smoothed James’ hair down; a gesture that he was much too old to tolerate, but one that he found intensely comforting. “He was smart and brave, quiet around most people, but really quite charming when it came down to it. He was fiercely protective of the people he loved.” She smiled at him. “We had an understanding, he and I. We weren’t quite friends, but we trusted each other.”

James started going through the box. There were a few photographs, but it seemed to be mostly drawings and letters. He picked up a piece of paper, seeing a charcoal drawing of himself, of Barnes, bent over a book, with sunlight streaming through a window. It was soft and beautiful and James wanted that memory, of reading on a sunny day, looking as content as a cat. At the bottom of the page, there was the artist’s initials. SGR.

James looked up at Peggy. “Did- was this drawn by...”

“Yes,” Peggy said, looking sad. “Steve had quite the talent. He told me once that he meant to be an
artist before the war.”

“It’s beautiful,” James breathed.

“Well, he had a very particular muse.” Peggy said. She took another drawing from the box. It was of Barnes again, this time sleeping shirtless in a bed. He looked peaceful and gentle, like whoever had drawn it had done so in the early morning, just before the waking hours.

“Oh.” James said. “Oh. He and...” He trailed off, looking at the picture. “A few dozen historians just felt smugly vindicated and they don’t know why.”

Peggy laughed quietly. She patted his hand and closed the box. “This is yours, when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Peggy.” James said quietly.

“Of course, my darling.”

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1930

Dear Steve,

I think I hate Indiana. There are no buildings or interesting people here. Dad’s funeral was fine. People keep telling me that they’re sorry that he died, but I’m not. I feel sort of like a bad person because of it.

Mom and Becca are doing okay. I think that maybe mom is relieved that he’s dead, too. Rebecca is just happy with all the attention.

I hope Argos isn’t giving you and your ma too much trouble. Thanks again for taking care of him.

I miss you a ton and I can’t wait to get back to Brooklyn. I imagine the city isn't the same without me there.

Love,

Your friend, Bucky Barnes.

---

“Hey do you wanna see that new Tom Hanks movie?” Sharon asked. She was flipping through a fashion magazine, making disgusted faces at the various photoshoots. James hummed noncommittally, turning a page of his book.

“Is that the one with the weird guy from Titanic?” Sam asked.

“Dude, don’t act like you don’t know Leo’s name. You’re not too good for Dicaprio.” Sharon said.

“Whatsoever.” Sam scoffed. He pulled the pencil from behind his ear and scribbled something on his worksheet.

“We could always go see the Two Towers again.” Sharon offered.
“The elves are hot, but I cannot sit through that movie again. It was way too long.” Sam complained. “Plus, where are all the brothers?” He asked. “Are there no black people in Middle Earth?”

James hummed again.

“We could always go to the video rental place.” Sharon said. No one said anything. Sharon threw the magazine down on the coffee table. “I’m borrrred.” She whined.

She looked at where Sam and James weren’t paying her any attention. She sighed dramatically and flopped against James. He grunted when she dug her elbow into his side.

Sharon rolled her eyes when she didn’t get more of a reaction. “When’s Peggy getting home?” She asked. “She’s the only cool person I know.” She looked at James. “What are you even reading? Is that Greek?”

“Armenian.” James said.

“You’re so boring.” Sharon sighed. “You are both so boring.”

Sam shrugged. “Sorry, sis.”

“Ugh,” Sharon said. She got off the couch and went into the kitchen, opening the fridge. She made dissapointed sound and shut the fridge. She went through the pantry and found nothing. She checked the fridge again, like maybe the contents had changed in the last minute.

“Are Clint and Natasha home?” She asked James.

“I think so, yeah.”

“I'm gonna go hang out with them, since you guys are being such major losers.” She said.

“Have fun,” Sam called as Sharon stormed out.

“Jeez,” Sam said, after she slammed the door shut. “I'd ask if it was her time of the month, but we’re synced, so I know it's not.”

“She's just edgy because varsity basketball tryouts are next week.” James told him.

“Are you sure?” Sam asked. “She wasn't like this with soccer or volleyball or any of the other 900 sports she's in.” He said.

James shrugged and shifted so he was laying with his head in Sam’s lap. Sam easily carded his fingers through James’ hair. James sighed happily.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better,” Sam said, and James frowned in confusion.

“What do you mean?” He asked.

“I don’t know. You seemed upset there for a little bit.” Sam told him. “Sharon and I were worried.”

“Oh,” James said. “Yeah, I guess I was distracted.”

“By what?” Sam asked, and James shrugged.

“Does it matter?” James questioned.
“I guess not.” Sam said. He scratched lightly against James’ scalp and James murmured sleepily.
Sam laughed. “You’re like a cat, man. A little sun, a little food, a little attention, and you’re all
good.”

“Mm, yep.” James said, burrowing his head against Sam’s thigh. Sam chuckled. He rested his
worksheet against James’ shoulder and wrote down an answer. “What are your plans for the
weekend? Mama’s going down to Chicago to visit Gideon and the grandbabies, and I thought,
since we’ve got Monday off, maybe you and I could go do something.” Sam said, curling James’
hair around a finger.

James turned on his back and smiled at Sam, and Sam smiled back, leaning down to give him a
kiss.

“That sounds like fun.” James said. “But I’m going to D.C.”
Sam made a face. “Why? What’s in D.C.?”

James laughed. “What’s in D.C.? Sam, it’s the nation’s capital.”

“I know that, dumbass. I just don’t know why you’re going.” Sam said, flicking James in the ear.

“Peggy used to live there, before she moved back here.” James said with a shrug. “Just some
sightseeing before it gets too cold.”

“Sharon didn’t say anything about D.C.” Sam said, frowning a little. James leaned up and kissed
him again, trying to distract from the topic. Sam laughed against James’ lips and cupped his face.
“Is this what we’re doing now?”

“Yep.” James told him. “Sharon’s not here, so we have free range.”

“Free range to make up on the couch?” Sam asked.

“Sure.” James said. “Or... the bed, if we want.”

“You make an excellent point,” Sam smirked. They jumped off the couch and raced to the
bedroom.

---

1942

Dear S,

Thanks for the chocolate you sent with your last letter. I don’t know how you managed to scrape
together enough money to buy it, but I sure appreciate it. It was sweet and bitter, just like you.

I’m a Sergeant now. Apparently I’m good at following orders and have a steady aim. Who knew? I
guess following you around all those years got me ready for the Army better than Basic ever did.

It might just be the paranoia of being out here, but I feel like your letters are getting more and
more vague. I mean, your last one was sent from Muncie. Why the hell were you in Muncie? Are
you trying to keep me from worrying? Because it’s not working, sugar. I know you’d tell me if
something was wrong, I’m just antsy being away from you this long.

I’m in Italy now. I remember you always wanted to go to Italy, to see the all the renaissance art
(see, I pay attention). I’ll be honest, there’s not much beauty here but I got to see one of them
paintings, one of a saint dying some horrible death. It was beautiful. Tragic and horrifying, but beautiful all the same. Still, these Italian guys, they've got nothing on you.

The Italian I picked up from your old neighbour, Mrs. Crocetti (remember her?) has really paid off. These people, they don’t like Mussolini any more than we do, but they’re terrified of him. They’ve got this saying here: “A cane scottato l’acqua fredda pare calda.” It means “a burnt child fears fire.” I figure these people have been burned enough.

They’ve got another saying here. “Amare e non essere amato, quanto risponde sens esser chiamato.” It means “There is no greater torment than to be alone in paradise.” I don’t know about that, but I figure there’s no greater torment than being away from you.

I love you with all my heart, and I can’t wait to see you again. Save your money, don’t send me anymore chocolate. The thought of you waiting for me is sweet enough.

’Til the end of the line,

PS: Can you check up on Becca? She hasn’t sent anything in awhile and I you know that I worry. Love you.

James pressed his face to the window of the moving train, trying to see everything he could. Washington was beautiful, all the marble and the monuments and the busy important-looking people bustling around. It was so different from New York, so much smaller.

Peggy was sending him to stay with an old friend of hers, trusting him to take care of himself for the most part. She and Sharon had planned their own little girl's trip to Manhattan. They had decided to stay in a fancy hotel there and go shopping, to play tourists for a little bit before heading back to Brooklyn. They were both obsessed with that Sex and the City show, so it worked out.

James got off the train and followed Peggy’s directions to her friend’s house. It was a charming little place with red brick and a pretty garden. It made James happy to look at. He rung the doorbell and held the straps of his backpack nervously.

The door swung open to reveal a tall black man with an eyepatch. All James could think was ‘fuck, this guy is truly terrifying.’

“Um, you have a lovely home.” James peeped, and the guy crossed his arms threateningly.

“Peggy’s kid, right?” He asked, and James nodded wordlessly.

“Huh.” Was all the guy said, and didn’t move to open the door any further.

“Nicky, stop scaring the poor thing and let him in,” Scolded a feminine voice from inside. A small woman pushed her way in front of the man and smiled at James. She was pretty, with laughter lines and short cropped hair. “I’m Monica Chang-Fury, this brute is my husband, Nick Fury.”

“Oh. It's, uh, it's nice to meet you.” James remembered his manners and extended his hand. Monica shook it and elbowed Nick until he did, too.

Nick squeezed his hand kinda tight, and it felt like he was sizing James up for something.
“Come on in!” Monica said cheerfully. “It’s so great to finally meet you. Peggy has told us all about you and you sister.”

James warily followed Monica, glancing behind himself to make sure Nick wasn't going to try to murder him or something.

“Um, how- how do you know Peggy?” James asked.

“We used to work for her.” Monica said. “The guest room is right down here, honey.”

“Oh, you're-” James looked between Nick and Monica. Nick, he could associate with the intensity James had seen from other SHIELD agents, like Natasha, or Clint on a bad day; but Monica just sort of seemed like someone’s mom.

“If I seem unthreatening, it means I'm doing my job.” Monica told him with a warm smile.

“Oh god,” James whispered. What lion’s den had Peggy sent him to?

“You must be hungry, sweetie. Why don't you sit down? I'll fix you a snack.” She pulled out a chair.

“Oh, um. I’m good. I ate on the train.” James lied. “Thanks, though.”

“Eat something.” Nick demanded, putting a hand on James’ shoulder and pushing him into the chair. James squeaked.

“I made some blackberry pie.” Monica said sweetly. “You allergic to anything, honey?”

“No, ma’am.” James said obediently.

She put a plate in front of him. “Tea?”

“Three sugars, no milk, please.” James told her.

“Ooh, just like your aunt.” She said. “Nick, you want some pie, baby?”

Nick, from where he looming behind James, nodded.

After a supremely awkward tea, James retreated to the guest room. He got out his cell, a sturdy nokia flip phone, and texted Sharon.

J: P’s friends r crazy
S: what did u expect
S: they’re all spies
S: still pissed i didn’t get to come

James contemplated visiting one of Smithsonian exhibits before deciding to get straight to the point. He was in DC for one reason.

Monica gave him directions to the bus stop and sent him along with some granola bars and a bottle
of water. James sat next to a blind woman who told him she was going to visit her son. James said he was visiting his father.

He helped her off the bus when they reached Arlington. She told him how the cemetery was originally Robert E. Lee’s estate, and how as punishment for his crimes, the government turned it into a Union burial ground.

He bid her goodbye, and headed into the cemetery. He found himself in front of the Tomb of the Unknown. James watched the Honor Guard watch back and forth 37 times before he got up the nerve to approach. He nodded nervously at the Sentinel who, predictably, did not nod back. He placed one flower at the base of the Tomb, taking a moment to pay his respects.

Then, he walked across the way to the daunting statue, known as The American Soldier. It was Captain America, holding his shield and looking god-like and patriotic. James looked up at him.

He'd never been here before. It was overwhelming, and it made James feel small; like he was literally standing in the man’s shadow.

He knelt down to read the inscription at the bottom.

*Captain Steven Grant Rogers*

1917-1945

*John 15:13*

James went through his backpack and pulled out a bouquet of sunflowers. He put the flowers down and briefly touched the stone face of the grave.

“Peggy said these were your favorite, so.”

He picked at one of the petals and frowned. He felt like he should say something, but he couldn't find the words. He stood, dusting off his pants and looking away.

He opened the tour pamphlet and found the directions to the gravestone of one Sgt. James Buchanan Barnes.

He found the right headstone and sat in front of it.


He chuckled grimly to himself, feeling stupid. “God, this is weird, right? I mean, you're not even buried here, not really. It’s just a marker. I’m talking to a rock.”

He pulled up some grass, tearing apart the blades. “I’m your son, sort of. Or, I guess I’m... you. Like rebirth, reincarnation in a kind of way. They took you, your dying body, and they turned you into me. Like I’m your ghost or something.”

James shook his head. “What am I supposed to do with that information, huh? Like, once, a lifetime ago; I was Bucky Barnes. And now I’m not. Am I supposed to just forget about it and continue on living my life the way I would’ve done? Should I honor your memory somehow? I can’t just do nothing, right? Because now that I know, I can't un-know. It’s like realizing that a picture
frame is slightly crooked. It's gonna bother me until I do something about it.

“I mean, how am I supposed to live up to you? You’re a fucking war hero and I’m what’s left of you. I mean, no pressure or anything.

“I think we’re almost the same. We like some of the same things, I think. Boys, for one thing. That must have been hard for you. I mean it’s still not great. Matt Shepard and AIDS and the Church, it’s still... but god, growing up when you did, where you did. That- that must have been really hard.

“But you had him, right?” James nodded in the direction of the god-like statue depicting Steve Rogers. “And you two, you really loved each other. Like, like, movie kind of love. The kind that people right cheesy songs about. That must have pretty nice. I’ve got Sam, but he’s really just my best friend. I love him a lot, but not in the poetry kind of way, y’know?”

James sighed melodramatically and leaned his shoulder against the headstone. “What else... oh, we both have sisters. You and me, I mean. Mine’s name is Sharon. She’s a pain in the ass but I love her to pieces. She’s my twin, sort of, and we’ve always had that spooky twin connection going on. Like, she’s been upset recently and won’t tell anyone why, but I know it’s because there’s a new girl at our school who she’s crushing on big time. Her name is Abigail and she’s a year above us and she’s good at everything she does and Sharon has literal hearts in her eyes whenever she walks past. It’s adorable, but Sharon doesn’t know how to handle her feelings. She’s used to being in control and it frustrates her when she can’t figure something out.

“Your sister, Rebecca, she was younger than you, right? She’s actually helped me a lot. She put a bunch of stuff together to help me understand you better. I guess you died before you got to see her grow up. Um, well, she married your friend Gabe Jones in the early 50’s. They had three kids together, Gabriella, James, and Stephanie. The last two were named after you and Captain America, obviously. She was a really awesome lady. She became a huge political activist. She fought for women’s rights, civil rights, even gay rights.

James went through his backpack and pulled out a couple of photographs. “Um, here’s a picture of her with Martin Luther King,” he said, showing the picture to the headstone. “This is her meeting President Johnson, this is her with Gabe and their kids. This is her with her grandkids.”

James put the pictures back in his bag. “She died last year, in her sleep. I think you would be really proud of her. I know she was proud of you.”

James stayed next to the headstone, sometimes talking, sometimes just sitting in silence; until the sun started to set. He stood and dusted grass off his pants. He had found a smooth stone on the ground some time before and was now turning it over in his hands. He put the rock on top of the headstone and paused for a second. “Thanks, Bucky. For, well....just- thanks.”

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1944

Stevie,

*If you’re reading this, it means that I didn’t make it. I’m sorry that I can’t be here for you right now, but I promise you that whatever happened, it wasn’t your fault. I love you.*

*I’m gonna be clear here Rogers. Don’t you fucking dare do something stupid just because I’m not*
here to watch you. I need you be safe, okay? I need you to keep yourself safe. Please, do that for me. I’m okay waiting for you in whatever afterlife I end up in. I prefer to wait for you. Actually, I don’t want to see your face for at least 70 years. I love you.

Can you make sure Becca is taken care of? You’re all she’s got now, and she’s just a kid. Just check up on her every once in awhile. Make sure no one gives her any trouble. Make sure she’s eating alright. Make sure she’s not too broken up. You’re her hero, you know. Mine too. I love you.

It’s okay for you to be sad, but please don’t spend the rest of your life mourning me. I’ve made peace with it, with your God and mine. Meet someone. Take Peggy dancing. Try not to step on her toes too much. Have the life you deserve, Steve. Get married. Get a house in Staten Island with a room that has enough natural light for a studio. Get a dog or six. Be happy. Maybe name your first kid after me or something. I love you.

You, Steven Grant Rogers, are one in a billion. You were the love of my life. I’m so glad the world has you in it. It’s already a better place because of it. You’re golden and brave and kind and you’re going to make it through this. My life was worth it because you were in it. I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

I love you.

Always yours,

Bucky Barnes.

2004

“Fuck.” Clint wheezed, hitting the ground.

James froze. “Sorry! Sorry, Clint. Are you okay?” He helped Clint to his feet.

“Yeah, kiddo, I’m fine. Just gimme a sec.”

“That was good, James. Just remember to watch your footwork.” Natasha coached.

“Yeah, and I know you don’t want to hurt me, but you need to stop pulling your punches. I’m a big boy, I can take it.” Clint told him, smacking James’ fist. “You gotta stop running away from your strength.”

“Okay.” James said.

“We’ll go to the firing range tomorrow.” Natasha said, offering James a water bottle.

“We’ll take Sharon, too.” Clint added. “I know she’s worried about the gun part of her qualification exam.”
“Didn’t you fail that part?” James asked.

Clint shrugged. “Guns aren’t really my thing.”


He jabbed Clint in the ribs, where James knew Clint was ticklish. He shrieked and jumped away. Natasha rolled her eyes at the display.

There was the sound of feet pounding up the stairs, and then the door burst open.

Sharon was there, panting heavily. “Fuck, that's a lot of stairs.”

“What is it?” James asked. Sharon had that look in her eye.

“You got in.” She gasped. She waved her hand, clutching an open letter. “I had to read it and Jamie, you got in!”

James dropped his water bottle. “Columbia?” He whispered.

“Yes!” She said, flinging herself at him. He laughed excitedly and picked her up, spinning her around. She squealed delightedly.

He put her down and stuck his hand out. “Let me read it.”

“Out loud.” Natasha demanded, beaming at him.

“Dear Mr. Carter-” James started.

“That's you!” Clint pointed out happily.

“On behalf of the Committee on Admission, I want to congratulate you-” James voice wavered. “On your admission to Columbia University in the City of New York.”

At that moment, Sam came running through the door, nearly tackling James off his feet.

“Oh geez,” James said, stumbling backwards.

“Sharon's so much faster than me.” Sam breathed. “Congrats, JC.”

“Thanks, buddy.” James said, patting Sam’s back. He smelled like bread from his job at the bagel shop down the street.

Sharon was on her phone, dialing for Peggy. “Peggy! It's me! Bring home some champagne. Jamie got in!”

Sharon held her phone away from her ear as Peggy yelled excitedly down the line.

James lost track of whose arms were around him at any given point for the next half hour. There was a lot of excited jumping up and down and shrieking.

They moved the party downstairs in the Carter residence, and James begged off the attention of his friends so that he could take a shower and change out of his sparring clothes.

Once he was standing under the hot water, he allowed himself a moment of panic. Columbia
University. What if they didn't mean it? What if the letter was sent by mistake? James Carter is a very common name after all. What if he got there and they realized that he wasn't really all that smart after all? And god, what about tuition?

116th and Broadway was only 14 miles from his home, but at that moment, it felt very far away.

James shut off the water and towed off. He went into his room and figured that he probably wasn't going to leave the house again that night, so he just changed into some pajama pants and an old t-shirt from his short lived stint on the high school track team.

He came out into the living room where Peggy was struggling with a large cheesecake from James’ favorite deli. James went over and took it from her, setting it on the kitchen counter.

Peggy pulled him down by his shirt and kissed both his cheeks. “Well done, my darling.”

James blushed and gave Peggy a hug. “Thanks, Aunt Peggy.”

She frowned and sniffed his hair. “Hm. Smells nice.”

“Thanks, I used Sharon's shampoo.” James told her.

“What kind does she use?” Peggy asked.

“I don’t know. It’s like ‘vanilla mist’ or something girly like that.”

Sharon hadn’t applied for any schools, and had spent the last year taking community college classes and training for her application as a SHIELD trainee.

It’s made James a little nervous, his sister working for SHIELD. He knew that she could be put in serious danger, but at the same time, he knew that she would be amazing at anything she chose to do.

Sam was planning on studying psychology and had applied to several schools. He had been accepted to Howard and NYU, rejected from Rutgers, and was still waiting to hear from Georgetown.

James and Sam had broken up and gotten back together several times over the years. They had come to the conclusion that they made better friends than boyfriends, but they would always love each other.

When Sam’s prom date, a girl named Eliza, had found out that Sam was trans and bailed on him last minute, James had stepped in and taken Sam to prom himself. When James had been dumped by a boy and had been left crying at a McDonald’s in Manhattan, Sam had come and picked him up and even bought him some chicken nuggets.

They would always be there for each other, but the romantic chapter of their relationship was pretty much over.

“Hey, man.” Sam said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”
“Yeah, of course.” James said. “You want a piece of cake?”

“Nah, I'm good.” Sam told him. James looked up at him and took in his nervous expression.

“Okay,” James said, and let Sam lead him into the bedroom. James sat on the bed and watched Sam pace.

He let Sam take his time, waiting patiently on his bed.

“You know I'm really happy for you, Jamie, and I probably shouldn't even be talking to you about this, since this your day, and you know what? Never mind, let's just go eat some cake. Forget I dragged you in here.” Sam said, starting for the door.

“Sammy, tell me what's going on.” James said, grabbing Sam by the wrist. “Come sit down for a second.”

He pulled Sam down, and Sam sat on the bed with a huff.

James took Sam’s hand, because secrets are easier to tell when you're holding hands.

“We can't afford it,” Sam whispered. “College, we can't pay for it. Not without taking the money away from Sarah. And you know she has to go, she's a genius.”

“Sam...” James said. “What about loans?”

“We don't have the credit,” Sam said softly. “My mom, she's trying, and she’s taking too many hours, she's wearing herself down and I can't let her keep doing it.” He shook his head and scoffed sadly.

“I haven't told anyone this yet,” Sam said, taking a deep breath. “But I think I want to join the Air Force.”

James took a quick breath, trying not to show his surprise. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Sam said, a certainty in his voice that James had never heard before. “Yeah, my dad, you never got to meet him, but he was in the Air Force. He was named Sam, too.”

James nodded, not interrupting. He rested his shoulder against Sam’s, and Sam leaned against him heavily.

Sharon burst through the door, “You guys better not be fucking on my bed aga-” She stopped when she saw the somber scene.

“Are you guys having a moment? Without me?” She questioned, sitting on James’ bed beside Sam. “What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Sam and James said at once, and Sharon wrinkled her nose at them.

“You’re really going to try to keep secrets from me? While I’m literally training to be a spy?”

“You should stop telling people you’re training to be a spy. It kinda negates the whole thing.” James said.

“That should really be the first thing they teach you in spy training school.” Sam added.

Sharon huffed and narrowed her eyes. “I’ll figure it out. Whatever it is, I’ll figure it out.”
“Okay, Jamie Bond.” James said with an eyeroll.

She shut the door behind her and Sam collapsed against the bed, dragging his hands over his face.

“Fuuuck.” He sighed. “I don't know man. It's what I wanted to be when I was a little kid. I thought my dad was so cool because he could fly in the air like a bird. But since the Towers fell,” he shook his head and sighed. “The world just seems so much more dangerous.”

“Well, I guess it all boils down to whether or not you believe in what you're fighting for.” James said.

“I guess you're right.”

“Y’know, it's illegal to lie on an enlistment form.” James said, the words ringing in his ears like a song that can't leave your head. He frowned at the odd sense of deja vu.

“Well, I'm sure as hell not telling the truth.” Sam said.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.” James sighed.

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. “This isn’t going to work.”

“We’ll figure something out,” James assured him.

“How?” Sam asked tragically. “I mean, they do a physical! They’re gonna know I lied before I even get there.” He rubbed his face and sighed. “I'm going to work at Bagel Palace forever.”

“I think I know someone who can help.” James said, then stuck his head out the door. “Hey, Peggy?”

Peggy looked up from her soap operas. “Yes, my dear?”

“I need some help lying on an official government document and committing identity fraud.” He said.

Peggy stood, eyes twinkling. “Sounds like an interesting challenge.”

She came into the room and Sam and James explained what they were trying to do.

“You know, Sam; I once knew another young man who lied on his enlistment form,” Peggy started

“Please say it was Captain America, please say it was Captain America...” Sam murmured. He, like Sharon and James, had heard enough of Peggy’s war stories to idolize the Captain.

“It was in fact Steve Rogers. As a matter of fact, he lied on 7 different enlistment forms before he was accepted into the military.”

“What about- um,” James winced, looking sideways at Sam.

“Sergeant Barnes was randomly selected.” Peggy said.

“He was drafted?” James asked. “I didn't know that.”
“Why would you?” Sam asked. “I mean, I know you like to read about the Commandos, but there can’t be that much stuff about Bucky. Hell, I was well into my teen years before I realized he wasn’t actually a 12 year old boy in tights.”

“I think I can make this work for you, Sam. Actually, I know an Air Force officer who owes me a favor.” Peggy said. She picked up her phone and dialed. She was actually really good with technology, for someone nearing her eighties.

“Hello is this, Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes?” She paused and smiled. “Hello, dear, this is Peggy Carter.” She tilted her head. “Yes, that Peggy Carter. I was wondering, I have a young man here who has an interest in joining the force.”

She stood and smiled at the boys. “Yes, well there is a slight problem...” she left the room to continue her call, and Sam looked at James seriously.

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, but dude. Your aunt is cool as shit.”

“I know.”

2009

“But he wasn't even there, so it's not like it matters,” Sam was saying, his voice tinny over the video call. James was sitting in front of the computer, nodding along to whatever squadron gossip Sam was filling him in on.

“Mmhm.” James hummed.

“Like we've been busting our asses looking for this Stark guy and this douche thinks he can come in and change how we do everything? Rhodes was pissed.” Sam laughed.

“Yeah.” James said absentmindedly.

Sam paused. “And then we fought a cat from the planet Jupiter and we all went out for tea and crumpets with the Queen.”

“Sounds fun.” James told him absentmindedly.

“James!” Sam snapped, and James looked at the screen and winced at Sam’s expression.

“Sorry, sorry, Sam. I'm super distracted.” James apologized.

“What's going on with you, man?” Sam asked. “It's like you're a thousand miles away. Or, thousand more miles away than you already are.”

“I'm just nervous,” James said, chewing at a hangnail on his thumb. “I have to defend my thesis tomorrow and I feel super underprepared.”

Riley popped into the screen. “Is that JC?”

“Hey, Riles.” James said. He and Riley had a somewhat strained relationship. When Sam had started basic, he had immediately fallen head over heels with another soldier, John Riles. Riley and
Sam hit it off right away, keeping their relationship a secret to everyone except their closest friends. Riley had been dubious of James at first, of James and Sam’s history and their closeness.

James and Sam had a relationship that was hard to understand, but the loved and needed each other. Sam had told Riley in no uncertain terms that he was never going to end his friendship with James, and James had assured Riley had he had no romantic feelings towards Sam.

Still, Riley tended to keep James at arm’s length.

Riley nodded at James from the screen and collapsed onto a cot behind Sam.

“You’ve got nothing to be worried about, man.” Sam assured him. “No one knows more about... language migration? Than you.”

James laughed. “It’s language and social inequality as pertains to New York City and all of its boroughs.”

“See? Now I’m no expert, but that sounded smart as shit.”

James laughed. “Thanks, Sammy.”

“Alright, now take off your shirt, big boy.” Sam purred.

From behind Sam, Riley shot to his feet, looking around wildly. James and Sam both laughed at him.

“You’re too easy to rile, Riles.” James laughed.

“Seriously, every time.” Sam laughed. He stood and cupped Riley’s face, rubbing their noses together. It was sickeningly sweet.

“You guys are gross.” James complained, and Riley flipped him off. When they started making out and seemed to forget he was there, James rolled his eyes and closed the laptop.

Sam called him at the same time once a week, 4:30pm Afghani time, which was 6 in the morning for James.

He didn’t mind it, though. He actually liked the early hours.

He got to walk Elizabeth, his dog. He rescued her when she was a puppy, and she was missing half of an ear and most of her tail. She was some kind of pit bull mix and ugly as all hell, but James figured she was just about the best thing in the world.

The two of them ran about 5 miles every morning, going up and down the Brooklyn bridge in time to see the sunrise. Afterwards, they got bagels from the place down the block and James helped Mrs. Shumaker on the 10th floor with her groceries.

James poured food into Ellie’s bowl and refilled her water. She panted happily at him and James patted her on the side.

James took a shower and put on some clothes, nearly tripping over Elizabeth where she laid in his doorway, fast asleep.

He rode his motorcycle to work. It was a beautiful machine, one that he bought himself as a gift after graduating college. It was a beast, loud and obnoxious; but it was shiny, and James loved it.
He rode into the New York SHIELD base’s parking garage and flashed his badge to the security officer.

It had started like this: he was a college sophomore and he was doing homework in the library when he got a call from Natasha.

“Tetushka? Aren't you supposed to be in Budapest?”

Natasha, sounding slightly frantic, replied with, “Tell me you know Hungarian.”

“Uh, yeah, I know Hungarian.” He told her. He knew most languages.

“I sent a picture to your phone.” She said. “I can't trust anyone else to translate it for me.”

“Okay,” he said. “Give me two seconds.”

James proceeded to translate instructions on how to neutralize a weapon of mass destruction that had been minutes away from destroying Central Asia.

Thus began his work for SHIELD.

He worked in the lower levels of the building, mostly translating memos and files. Sometimes he worked the phones, fielding calls from agents who needed a translator.

It wasn't terribly exciting, but it paid well for a part-time job. Plus, on the recommendation of high-ranking SHIELD agents, he had a high security clearance and was allowed to translate documents that had classified information in them.

James walked into the office space where the translators all worked.

“Morning, Yoonyeon.” He greeted his desk partner. She nodded at him, not looking up from the paper she was reading.

He strolled to the coffee maker, grabbing one of the generic mugs. The SHIELD office actually had really good coffee. He didn't know who made it every morning, but it was fucking delicious.

He sat at his desk, going through the box of paperwork he was meant to translate. It could easily be an at-home job, but the documents weren’t meant to leave the building and couldn’t be uploaded on any computer.

The first document was a memo from a rival agency, written in coded Mandarin. It had some basic information, passphrases and aliases, all very cold-war style spy shit.

The second was a weapon design written in a mix of Arabic and Sanskrit. It almost tripped James up, the intricacies and similarities of the two languages. It was obviously written by someone very clever.

He loved this kind of work. It was like solving a linguistic puzzle. It was always satisfying when he could figure it out.
The third was a file, and very old looking. It was strange, but not completely unheard of. He flipped through it, just gazing at the languages. It was mostly Russian, with some handwritten notes in Romansh, German, and English.

He looked at the front of the file and his stomach dropped. There, on the bottom, was the emblem of HYDRA. The skull stared at him, mocking him, daring him to open the thick file.

James took a deep breath and opened it.

His own face, unshaven and unconscious, was the first thing to catch his eye. He quickly shut the folder, closing his eyes.

“What the fuck.” He whispered. Yooyeon looked up.

“Do you need help?” She asked.

“No, it’s just-” He shook his head. “I’ve got it, thanks.”

He opened it again; slowly, like something was going to jump out and bite him.

The Winter Soldier. The name was so pretentious that James stifled the urge to giggle hysterically. What the actually hell was going on?

As he read, his stomach sank lower and lower into the ground. He read about torture, about body modifications, about training and brainwashing, about a living weapon. He read about killing, about hands, his hands, covered in blood.

There were 80 pages of records, of assassinations, of murders, of an awful cycle of violence and torture.

When Bucky Barnes fell from that train, he landed in hell. He killed and killed until he died; and then nine months later, James was born.

There was a quick note on the last page, written in English.

1990- Asset retrieved by Agents Barton and Romanoff. To be placed in safe house until further notice.

James shut the folder carefully and walked calmly to the bathroom, kneeling in a stall and retching up his delicious SHIELD coffee.

When he finished vomiting, he sat in his stall, struggling for breath. He fumbled with his phone, pressing his speed dial.

“James, this better be important, I’m on a job right now.”

“Sharon, I-” James gasped, tears blurring his vision.

“Where are you?” She asked, voice sharp.

“I’m-I’m at work.” He said. “In the bathroom.” He let out a short sob, covering his mouth with his hand.

“Are you hurt?” She demanded.
James shook his head and then realized she couldn’t see him. “No.” He said shortly. “It’s just- god, Sharon.”

“Shh, you’re okay.” Sharon soothed. She started humming. “Oh, my darling, oh, my darling oh, my darling Clementine. You are lost and gone forever. Dear sweet darling, Clementine.

“Ruby lips above the water. Blowing bubbles soft and fine. But, because I was not a swimmer. I lost my Clementine.”

It was a song that their mother would sing to them whenever they were upset. She would smooth her hand over their hair and kiss their foreheads and sing to them. When they got a little older, Sharon pointed out to her that it was a sad song, about a girl who drowned and whose lover consoled himself in her sister.

Still, it had always brought the two of them comfort.

By the end of the song, James’ breathing had slowed and his hands had stopped shaking.

“Okay.” He whispered.

“Okay, are you sitting?”

“Yes,” He said.

“I want you to stand up.” She told him. “Go to the sink.”

James followed her instructions. “Okay.”

“I want you to splash some water on your face.” Sharon said, sounding firm.

He did as she said, and she sighed. “What happened?”

“Just…” James sighed. “Something upsetting at work.”

“Jamie, you haven’t had an attack like that in years.” She scolded him. “What translation job could have gotten to you so bad?”

The last time had been when he was a freshman in college and exams and the anniversary of his mother’s death had fallen in the same week.

“It was just an upsetting file.” He told her. He hated lying, and he hated lying to Sharon most of all, but he didn’t know if what he had just learned was dangerous. “The people we work for aren’t always the best, they do bad things, you know this.”

“Is someone giving you trouble? If they are, you can tell me. I’ll take care of it.” She was using her big sister voice.

“Sharon, I’m a grown man with literal super-strength. I’m not being bullied.”

“You’d tell me if you were, right?” She asked, and James smiled.

“Yeah, Share, I’d tell you.”

“Okay good.”

“So, what kinda job are you working?” He asked.
“You know I can’t tell you that.” She said.

“Sure, you can. I have a higher security clearance than you, remember?” He said, grinning over the line.

“Oh my god, I’ll never forget it since you seem to have the need to remind me every five minutes.”

James laughed, because this had been a thorn in Sharon’s side for months. Field agents needed to earn their status, while James’ was basically handed to him.

“Fine. I’m working intel on Tony Stark’s disappearance.” Sharon told him.

“Huh. Sam’s working rescue for Stark, too. Apparently Colonel Rhodes is a friend of Stark’s. You should call Sam, see what he knows.”

“Thanks I’ll be sure to check it out. The higher-ups are working us like dogs. Apparently Howard Stark still has some pull around here and he’s demanding that everything gets put on hold until his son is found alive.”

“I mean, it’s understandable.” James said. “Tony’s his only son, and he lost his wife last year. Wouldn’t you do everything you can to save your family?”

“I guess so.” Sharon said grudgingly. “It doesn’t make me any less exhausted.”

“Alright. I’ll let you go. Thanks for…. thanks.”

“Okay, love you.”

“Love you, too. Bye.”

“Bye.”

James hung up the phone and rested in against his head for a second. He picked it up and dialed again.

“Hello, you’ve reached the voicemail box of… ’Fuck do I talk now? Am I supposed to say my name? Natasha can you-’ Unfortunately, they cannot take your call. Please leave a message at the tone. When you are finished recording, hang up or press 1 for more options.”

The beep sounded loudly in James ear and he clenched his jaw.

“Hey, fuckface, it’s me. Ever heard of the Winter Soldier? Because guess what? I have, asshole. I’m coming over to yell at you and Natasha.”

He hung up, and had to keep himself from cracking the screen of his phone.

He told his supervisor that he was sick and left on his bike, riding furiously towards Bed-Stuy and his childhood home.

He took all eight flights of stairs and banged his fist on the door marked SUPERINTENDENT.

“Open the fucking door, you lying assholes!”

The door swung open to reveal Natasha in a pair of boxers and a purple shirt, her hair in disarray.
James had obviously just woken her up, which was strange, because it was nearly 1pm.

"Hey, slysh, kozyol, v chem problema?" She growled, showing teeth.

James pushed past her into the apartment. “My problem is the fucking Soldat .”

She reared back, pulling a gun on him in an instant. Where she got a gun, James had no idea.

James grabbed her wrist, spinning her around and wrenching her arm behind her back. He took the gun and pushed her away, quickly unloading the gun.

Natasha rolled to her feet, drawing a knife from under one of the couch cushions.

James threw the gun’s clip to her, and she caught it, looking at him with confusion.

“I'm not brainwashed or trying to kill you or anything.” James sighed. “Although I kinda wish that I had known that ‘brainwashed killer’ was a setting I had.”

“How did you find out?” Natasha asked, still on guard.

“The Winter Soldier’s fucking sparknotes were on my desk today, ready for me to translate.”

Clint burst into the room, completely naked and half asleep; his bow drawn.

Natasha grabbed the bow from him, tossing him a throw blanket from the couch. “Put that away.”

She told him. “We have company.”

“I heard fighting.” Clint said, wrapping the blanket around his waist. He looked up at James. “Oh, hey kiddo. What's up?”

“He knows.” Natasha sighed, putting down the bow and tying her hair up into a bun

“What does he know? That's a super cryptic thing to say, Nat. There are literally a bunch of things he could know.”

“About the Winter Soldier, dipass.” James said. “And I'm angry at both of you, so please stop trying to banter so I an yell.”

“Oh.” Clint said. “Okay.” He waved a hand. “Carry on, then.”

James took a deep breath. “I cannot believe that not one of you shady fucks told me about… I'm sorry, can you put on some pants or something? I just can't take you seriously right now.”

“Uh, sure. I'll just be a minute.” Clint said, waddling into the bedroom.

Natasha crossed her arms and looked at James. James looked down, embarrassed.

“Were you guys sleeping? Sorry if I woke you up.”

“We got back from Istanbul this morning.” She said.

“Sorry,” he repeated, feeling strangely scolded.

She sighed and sat on the couch, beckoning him to sit next to her. He sat and she guided his head until it was resting on her shoulder, like she would when he was a child.

“Ya znala yego.” She whispered. “Ochen' davno”
“How did you know him?” James asked. One of Natasha’s curls had come loose from it's bun and James had the childish urge to wrap his finger around it.

“He trained me. When I was a little girl, I was with this place called the Red Room. It was part KGB, part HYDRA. They took orphaned girls and turned them into killers.” She rested her cheek against James’ head. “The Soldat only trained the best.”

She tucked the stray strand of hair behind her ear. “He was amazing. Fast, strong, brutal, and ageless.”

“The perfect weapon.” James said sourly.

“If you got close enough to the Soldat and lived, you could see the sadness in his eyes. Like a lost child.”

Natasha chewed her bottom lip. “That's what frightened me the most about him. He never seemed to know quite what he was fighting for.”

Clint came back into the living room, wearing a gray sweatshirt and a pair of worn jeans. “You wanna beer, kid?”

“It's 12:50.” James answered.

Clint shrugged. “To each his own.” He wandered into the kitchen and came back with a beer for himself, a stolichnaya on the rocks for Natasha, and a water for James. He also grabbed a box of cold pizza from the fridge for them to share.

Natasha downed her drink in one go, and it made James wince. He could never get used to vodka. He opened the pizza box instead, making a face when he saw the pineapples on it. He grabbed a slice and gingerly started picking off the unnatural toppings.

“What do you know about the Winter Soldier?” Clint asked bluntly.

“I know how they tortured him, how they turned him into a weapon. I know how they kept him on ice when they didn't need him. I know his kill count. I read extensive reports on his missions from the late sixties to the early nineties, along with descriptions of HYDRA's control methods.”

James rubbed his face with his hand. “That guy who took over the Soldier after Zola died? Karpov? He was one sick fuck. I mean, they were all sick fucks, they're Nazi assholes; but Karpov…”

James shook his head. “His notes were nauseating. He kept calling the Soldier ‘it’, like, like he wasn't even a person.”

He swallowed and tears prickled his eyes. He grabbed Clint’s beer, taking a swig for himself. His hands were shaking again, and he was terrified of having another attack here.

“Poor bastard.” Clint said. “I always thought he was a myth. I mean, how could one person be responsible for that many kills over 40 something years? It's impossible. Or, I thought it was.”

Clint shook his head, grabbing his beer back from James.

“You were so small,” Clint said with a smile. “And you just tackled Natasha and started screaming at us. I had your file, but I just couldn't believe it.”

“What do I do now?” James asked.

“What do you mean?” Natasha replied.
James sighed. “Now that I know that I’m... I don’t know. A murderer.”

“You’re not a murderer, James.” Natasha sighed.

“I know, but it’s what I’m mean to be, right? What they made me for?”

“You decide what you are meant for.” Natasha told him. “They made you, solnyshko, but they do not get to define you.”

James nodded, and Natasha smoothed a hand over his hair. Clint patted his knee and stood, grabbing James’ pizza from him, walking back into the kitchen.

“If you’re not gonna eat it right, you don’t get to have it.” Clint scolded.

“I’m still mad at both of you.” James murmured, leaning back against the sofa.

“I don’t know how we’ll go on.” Natasha said sarcastically.

James bid his farewells and went down to the fourth floor to talk to Peggy. She probably knew even more about the Winter Soldier than Natasha and Clint had. Plus, it had been a while since he had gone to check on her and he was starting to feel guilty about it.

He knocked on Peggy’s door. There was no answer. He knocked again and called, “Hey, Aunt Peggy?”

She was probably out, he rationalized. But the nervous part of him, needed to be sure.

He turned around and knocked on the Wilson’s door. It opened quickly, and Sarah was standing there, looking unimpressed in the way only teenage girls could manage.

“Hey, Baby Sarah. Do you have your mom’s keys by any chance? I need to get into the apartment and I think I left mine downstairs.”

“I’m 17.” Sarah said, turning around and fishing through the bowl on the side table. “I wish you and Sam would stop calling me ‘Baby’.” She put the keys in his hand and he grinned at her.

“Thanks, Baby.” He said, just to see her blush. She’d had a crush on him since she was 4, and no amount of teenage attitude was going to keep James from embarrassing her.

He turned and unlocked the door to his old apartment, peeking his head in tentatively. “Peggy?” He asked. He walked the rest of the way into the apartment.

The TV was on, playing some tela novela. Peggy was in front of it, collapsed on the floor.

“Peggy!” He called, rushing over to her side. Sarah ran into the apartment, looking frantically at James and Peggy.

“Sarah, call 911!” He demanded, and she whipped out her phone.

James leaned down, feeling along Peggy’s neck for a pulse. It was there, reedy and unsteady, but it was there.

He shook her shoulder. “Hey, Peggy? Peggy, can you hear me? It’s James.” He said, voice wavering. “Aunt Peggy?” She didn’t respond. Her eyes didn’t even twitch.
“She’s non-responsive,” Sarah was saying, and James had to clench his eyes shut. Not this. Not this again, please. He couldn’t do this again.

He grabbed a blanket from the couch and wrapped it around Peggy, lifting her into his arms easily. Too easily. She was too thin, too frail.

“What are you doing?” Sarah asked.

“I’m taking her downstairs.” James said. “C’mon, we’ll meet the ambulance there.”

“Okay.” Sarah said warily. She followed him into the hallway, shutting and locking the door behind her. James must have dropped the keys.

The ambulance took less than 5 minutes to get there, and James helped the EMTs load her into the back. He assured Sarah that everything was going to be okay, sounding hollow to his own ears. He made her go back upstairs, then followed the ambulance on his motorcycle.

He got to the hospital in record time, only to be told to sit and wait for any news on Peggy’s condition. He paced around the waiting room, pulling out his phone and dialing speed dial for the second time that day.

“This is Sharon Carter. I’m not at my phone or I didn’t want to pick up. You know what to do.” There was a shrill beep, and James let out a breath.

“Sharon, it’s James. Um, Peggy’s in the hospital. She fainted or something, I don’t really know. They’re not telling me anything, but, um, I’ll call you as soon as I know something.” He sighed loudly, trying not to cry for a third time that day. “Um, yeah. That’s- uh, yeah. I love you. Call me back. Bye.”

After getting a few glares from other people in the waiting room, he decided to sit in one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs.

Why was it always so damn cold in hospitals? James rubbed his hands together, trying to generate some warmth. The white walls and the sterile atmosphere seemed like it had come of a childhood nightmare.

He bounced his leg with nerves until finally someone came to speak to him.

“Mister Carter?” A voice called, and James shot to his feet. It was the doctor.

“Yes? Is she okay?” James asked quickly and the doctor smiled gently at him, adjusting her glasses.

“Your aunt was suffering from severe dehydration. We have her on an IV drip, to replenish her fluids.” She told him, and James nodded.

“Why, uh, why was she so dehydrated?” He asked and she sighed.

“Mister Carter, have you noticed your Aunt behaving strangely lately?” The doctor asked.

“What?” James questioned, confused.

“Has she lost weight recently? Seemed confused? Forgetful?”

“I don’t know. I guess?” James answered.
“I’m concerned with your Aunt’s behavior. I’d like your permission to run some tests.”

“What- what kind of tests?” James asked.

“Cognitive behavioral tests. I’d like to run some psychiatric tests as well, just to be safe.”

“O-okay. Yeah, whatever you need.”

The doctor pulled out a clipboard from somewhere and gave him a pen.

“If you could just sign this consent form.”

James signed it absentmindedly and handed it back to her.

“Thank you, Mister Carter.”

She left him with more questions than answers. It was another hour before someone came out to talk to him.

It was a young male nurse. He was tall and handsome with a kind smile.

“Mister Carter?” He asked, and James stood so quickly he gave himself a head rush.

“Yes? That me. How’s she doing?”

“She’s fine for now. She’s resting. Doctor Ellis ran some tests earlier,“

James had a moment of confusion before realizing that Doctor Ellis must have been the woman he spoke to earlier.

“And?” James asked.

“Mister Carter, your aunt has a form of multifactorial dementia.”

James sat down. The nurse put his hand on James’ shoulder and squeezed lightly.

“What now?” James asked.

“Well, the hospital’s social worker will be here in the morning to evaluate her ability to live on her own. As for right now, I think you should go home and get some rest. You look exhausted.”

“What about Peggy?”

“She’s being well looked after. Trust me, she’ll be alright. She seems like a tough lady.”

“She is.” James said, and the nurse patted his arm lightly.

James walked out of the hospital numbly. He was shocked to find that it was dark out. It was like the opposite of walking out of a matinee movie, blinking at the bright light of day in confusion of how it could still be there. Instead, he was just staring dumbly at the moon, wondering what it was doing in the sky.

He called Sharon again, getting the same voicemail message.

Beep.

“Uh, hey Sharon. It’s me again. They’re saying Peggy has multiple- multi- um- shit.” He rubbed
his face. “Some kind of dementia. They’re keeping her overnight. I’m coming back tomorrow. Um, can you call me back so I know you’re okay? Okay. Love you, bye.”

He hung up and decided to call a cab rather than try to drive himself home. He got to his apartment and was greeted by a slobbering dog. He knelt down and wrapped his arms around her neck, burying his face in her fur.

“Hi, Ellie. Hi, sweet girl.” He whispered. She wagged her tail happily and grumbled at him. She never really barked, just vocalized.

He let her outside to her business, then got in the shower, turning the water as hot as it would go.

He got into bed naked, letting Elizabeth crawl in beside him. He didn’t like to sleep alone.

He woke up at around midnight to his phone buzzing against the nightstand. He almost didn’t answer before he saw it was Sharon calling. He answered the call and put the phone against his ear.

There was a crackling silence over the line, and James could hear the quiet sound of Sharon breathing.

“Hello?” He whispered.

“I don’t know what to say.” Sharon said quietly from the other end.

“You don’t have to say anything.” James told her.

Sharon made a sound between a chuckle and a sob. “Did you know she’s survived 23 assassination attempts? 23. That’s more times that Queen Elizabeth I, Queen Victoria, Mary of Scots, and Queen Elizabeth II combined.”

“I’m sure she appreciates the comparison.” James said.

“She has so many secrets.” Sharon said sadly. “She always thought that was what was going to get her in the end.”

James stomach lurched at the idea of everything that Peggy had hid from him. “You never know. They still might.” James said, trying for levity.

Sharon let out a breath on the other end of the line. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.” James agreed. “Fuck.”

Neither of them said anything else, but they both stayed on the line. Eventually, James heard Sharon’s breaths even out into sleep, and James followed her, curling around Elizabeth.

He was woken at 11am, an hour he hadn’t slept to since he was still in high school.

His phone was ringing shrilly, a call from an unknown number.

He answered it, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. “Hello?” He asked.

“Mr. Carter, this is the doctoral advisory board at Columbia.”

James jumped out of bed, covering the receiver with his hand. “Shit! Shit fuck! Shitting fucking
He brought the phone back to his ear. “Oh, hello.” He said pleasantly. “I was just about to call you. My train was delayed and I’m going to be a bit late.”

He ran to his closet, holding the phone to his ear with his shoulder and pulling on a pair of pants.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” The man on the other end said. “Would you like to reschedule?”

“No! No, it’s okay.” James said. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

He rushed out of the apartment still pulling on his jacket. He realized last minute that his motorcycle was still at the hospital. He hailed a cab and pulled all the cash out of his wallet and thrust it at the driver.

“Get me to Columbia University.” He demanded, and the cabbie nodded, revving the engine.

He got there in ten minutes, wincing at the time. He hadn’t grabbed his notes. He hadn’t grabbed anything other than his phone and wallet.

He stood in front of the board, and when they asked him questions, he answered. It was strange and surreal, and James felt miles away from his body.

He could defend this thesis in his sleep, and he had. Once, a boy that he had over had complained about him spouting facts about socioeconomic inequality in Washington Heights in the middle of the night.

By the end of it, people were shaking his hand and congratulating him, and calling him Dr. Carter. It took him a few to minutes to realize what was happening, and when he did, he hugged the nearest board member.

She grunted in surprise, but didn’t actually seem to mind all that much. James flushed and put her down when she patted his ass appreciatively.

He grabbed his phone, dialing Peggy’s number to tell her the news before realizing that she wouldn’t pick up.

His good mood diminished as soon as it had come, and he sighed. He thanked the board members again and left, taking the subway to the hospital.

He signed in at the security desk and sat in the waiting room as Peggy’s doctors were alerted that he was there.

A tiny woman with curly hair came out to greet him.

“She’s ready for you, Mister Carter.” A nurse said, laying her hand on his shoulder. “She may be a bit confused, so be gentle.”

James nodded, chewing on the inside of his cheek.

“This way.”

James followed the petite woman down sterile white hallways. His hands twitched by his sides, and he wished his sister was with him. Sharon would know what to do.

The nurse ushered him into a small room. There Peggy lay, surrounded by wires and machinery,
tucked into a bed that’s white color was slightly different from the white of the walls. James focused on this detail, ignoring how frail Peggy looked, how breakable.

He pulled a chair beside the bed and sat. He didn’t really know what to do with himself. He settled on holding one of Peggy’s hands. That’s what people always seemed to do in movies.

Her hand was small in his. He remembered a time when Peggy seemed to be the biggest person in the world. When her presence would take up entire rooms.

When Sharon was in basic training at SHIELD and was being harassed by the other applicants for being too young, too inexperienced, too pretty, too female, she had asked how Peggy had done it. How she had managed to succeed in every aspect of her life. How she managed to master espionage and diplomacy at a time when no one wanted to see her succeed at either. She had looked Sharon in the eye and said “Compromise when you can. Where you can't, don't. Even if everyone is telling you that something wrong is something right. Even if the whole world is telling you to move. It is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in they eye and say, ‘No, you move.’”

It had made James think of his Aunt Peggy pushing mountains across the Earth to get her way.

Now, Peggy couldn’t even squeeze his hand back.

“Hi, Aunt Peggy.” James whispered.

She gazed at him, eyes filled with confusion and fear. He had never seen her look this lost before.

“Peggy?” He tried again.

“S-sergeant Barnes?” She breathed, shaken.

“No. No, Peggy, it’s me. It’s James.” He told her, voice pleading.

“You fell.” She accused. “You died. You fell and died and Steve-” She broke off, eyes filling with tears. “I’m so sorry, Sergeant, but I broke our promise. I-I couldn’t keep him s-s-safe.” She was sobbing now, and James couldn’t do anything but watch and try to hold back tears of his own.

“It-it’s okay, Agent Carter.” James said, his voice raw. “You did the very best that you could. Ca-Steve would be proud. He would be so proud of everything you’ve done, Peggy.”

Peggy wept uncontrollably until the nurse from before injected something into her IV. She looked at James and he stood, wiping away his own tears, half expecting her to come after him with the needle too, if he didn’t stop crying.

“What- what can I do?” He asked, putting his hands in his pockets. “What are my-our options?”

The nurse smiled at him sympathetically. She had to get this question a lot. “Well, I would strongly suggest either hiring a full-time care-taker or placing her in a long-term care facility. I’m afraid there is no cure for dementia, but with proper medications and therapy, your aunt may be able to continue living a happy and fulfilling life; one that is mostly symptom free. I know the memory loss and confusion seem bad right now, but I assure you that it will improve under the proper care.”

As the nurse continued on, James felt selfishly and utterly alone. He stupidly wished he could talk to Peggy. His Peggy, the woman who helped raise him. But she was gone. She was gone and hollowed out, with nothing but the pain of the loss and the secrets she accumulated over her long life. He wanted somebody, anybody, to fix this problem for him. To magically cure his aunt and
take away all the hurt and responsibility of finding her the “proper care”.

He had never felt so isolated. His mom was gone. Sharon was in DC, training. Sam was in the middle of the desert somewhere, trying not to get shot at. Natasha and Clint were off on another mission, doing god knows what god knows where. In that moment, he felt utterly and completely alone.

He stayed by Peggy’s side, telling her all about how he was Dr. Carter now, and didn’t that sound nice? Maybe not as nice as Agent Carter like Peggy and Sharon, but still, has a nice ring to it, right?

Peggy didn’t answer, and she stayed unconscious the whole time he was there. Eventually, the nurses gently kicked him out of her room.

James could only thank whatever deity was out there that Peggy wasn’t staying in the same hospital his mother had. He didn’t think he could have taken it otherwise.

James got home that night, exhausted both physically and emotionally. All he wanted was to take a shower and go to bed. Of course, life sucks and it wasn't going to give him a break quite yet.

He fumbled with his keys, trying to find the one for his apartment, when he realized his door was already open. Music was coming from inside. James carefully pushed the door open the rest of the way. He set his keys down on the entry table and slowly pulled open it’s drawer. He kept his handgun there, a gift from Natasha.

He check to see if it was loaded, and clicked off the safety. He crept down the hallway, gun in his hand. He followed the sound of music into his living room. There was a dark shape sitting in his lounge chair, and James moved to point the gun at it.

“Don’t move.” He demanded. He turned on the light to see Nick Fury sitting in his living room, casually raising his hands.

“It’s good to see you, Mr. Carter.”

“It’s Dr. Carter.” James told him, not wavering at all. “What the fuck are you doing in my house? Where’s my fucking dog?”

“I wanted to talk.” He said, easily leaning back in James’ favorite chair. “Your mutt is locked in the bathroom.”

James crept towards the bathroom door, keeping his gun trained on Fury. He reached behind himself and fumbled for the doorknob. Elizabeth came rushing out, sniffing James’ leg nervously.

He reached down and scratched behind her ears with his free hand. “Good girl”

“You couldn’t have called?” James asked. Elizabeth growled at Fury, hackles up.

“I needed to make sure this conversation stayed between us.” Fury said. James slowly lowered the gun. He sat down on the couch, not taking his eyes off of Fury. He signaled Elizabeth to stand down, and she padded over to him and sat at his feet.
“How’s Monica?” James asked.

“She left me.” Fury said simply.

“Sorry to hear that.”

“I slept with her mother.” Nick said, and James raised his eyebrows.

“Probably a bad call.” He told Fury.

“Probably.” Fury agreed.

“Why are you here?” James asked.

“I wanted to talk to you about a project I’m putting together.” Nick said. “It’s called the Avengers Initiative.”

“Nice name.” James said. “A little dramatic, but full of flair.”

“I’d like you to be a part of it,” Fury told him.

“You need a translator?” James asked. “You could have just sent in a formal request of my services. I mean, I’m pretty sure we work in the same building.”

“I’m not here about your skills as a translator.” Fury said. “I thought that we could use some of your... other talents.”

James set his jaw. “Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Are you starting a band? Because whoever told you about my base playing has greatly overexaggerated my ability. I know how to do the riff from ‘Smoke On The Water’, but that’s about it.”

“Cute.” Fury said.

“Yeah, I’m fucking adorable.” James agreed.

“Mr. Carter.” Fury started.

“Doctor.” James growled.

“My apologies.” Fury said, lifting up his hands. “Contrary to what you might believe, I’m not here to piss you off.”

“You sure about that?” James asked. “Because I’ve had a rough day, Director Fury, and I don’t care much for surprises.”

“You have a gift, Dr. Carter.” Fury said.

“Is that so?” Asked James.

“You have abilities that most people could only dream of. You’re strong, fast, smart. You’ve trained with two of the best agents in the world.” Fury said. “We could use you. You’d make an excellent asset to the team.”

“An excellent asset...” James trailed off, looking up sharply at Fury. “You son of a bitch.” James said. He chuckled sourly to himself. “You left those files for me to find.”
Fury remained silent.

James got up and walked to the kitchen. He opened up fridge, grabbing himself a beer. He opened it and walked back into the living room, leaning against the couch.

“You want your own Winter Soldier, right?” James asked Fury, taking a sip of his beer. “A weapon.”

“You could save lives, Doctor.” Fury told him quietly.

James laughed, and it sounded sickly to his own ears. “I couldn't save my own mother. I can't save Peggy.” He clenched his jaw. “I can't save anyone.”

Fury stood. “You're not a kid anymore, James. It's time to stop hiding from what you are. What you were made for.”

“You're right Nick. I'm not a kid anymore. When I was a kid I was scared of you. Now I know you're just a lonely old man with no depth perception. I'm not joining your team. Get out of my house.”

“I didn't think you'd be such a coward,” Nick said coolly. “What would Peggy say?”

James stood to his full height, gripping the bottle of beer with enough strength that it shattered in his hand. Elizabeth hopped to her feet, rumbling unhappily. “You should leave.” He told Fury calmly. “Before you see what exactly I was made for.”

Fury raised his hands and sauntered out of the apartment as if he was saying “I may be leaving, but it's only because I want to, not because you told me to.”

James grit his teeth and went to the kitchen, digging a large shard of glass out of his palm. He ran water over the large gash in his hand, watching the blood mix with water and swirl down the sink. He hissed uncomfortably, and dug around his cabinets until he found his first aid kit. He wrapped his hand with gauze, the grabbed his broom.

He stared at the mess of broken glass and beer before deciding he could deal with this shit in the morning.

He fed Elizabeth and collapsed into bed.

When he woke up, the cut had healed.

“Any questions?” James asked his class. They all stared at him blankly, except for Candice, Bethany, Maria, and Joel; who were all making cow eyes at him and twirling their hair around their fingers.
“Okay, well, remember to finish Chapter 13 of Cien Años de Soledad by Monday, okay guys? And-”

The bell rang, and everybody jumped to their feet, shoving their shit into their backpacks.

“Have a good weekend!” He called over the ruckus of his students leaving the classroom as fast as they could and gossiping to each other.

High Schoolers.

He sighed and started putting his own stuff into his bag. He was almost off campus when his phone started ringing.

“Hello?” He asked.

“Professor Carter? This is Phil Coulson.”

James blinked. “Um, I’m sorry, who?”

“With SHIELD.”

“Oh.” James said. “You do I don’t work for you guys any more, right?”

“Yes, I’m aware. But, Professor, we have a… situation.”

“I’m sure you guys can handle it on your own, whatever it is.” James said, walking down the stairs to his subway stop. “Or better yet, get Iron Man to handle it. That guy loves attention.”

“Sir, this is about Captain America.”

James stopped at the base of the stairs, and the guys behind him walked into his back, cursing at him.

“We’ve discovered the wreckage of the Valkyrie.”

“You’re calling the wrong Carter about this.” James said hoarsely.

“Former Director Carter has been informed.” Colson told him. “But there’s more. We found Captain Rogers.”

James’ stomach plummeted. It was stupid, to mourn a man he’d never met. But he couldn’t help it. Steve Rogers had always been a presence in his life, whether James wanted it or not.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll put together a nice service.” James said. “Maybe Arlington can get put up a new statue or something.”

“You’re misunderstanding me, Professor. We found Rogers- we found him alive.”

“He’s-” James choked. “He’s alive?”

“And he’s been asking for you.”
Steve

Chapter Summary

1937-1945

Chapter Notes

You guys are so nice to me! He's a chapter for all your goodwill. Mwah!

(also there's a little bit implied character death in this chapter sorry)

1937

Steve squeezed his eyes shut and rolled over as Bucky bounded into the room like an eager puppy, already cleaned up and dressed, damn him.

“Steve, Stevie, wake up!”

Steve groaned and put a pillow over his head to block out the noise. His bed dipped as Bucky sat down next to him. A warm hand ran down Steve’s back. “Aw, don’t be like that, Stevie, it’s a beautiful day!”

Steve threw the pillow off his head and sat up, glaring at Bucky. He looked pointedly out the window, where it was pouring buckets. The wind was blowing hard enough to rattle the windows, and the thunder and lightning had to be the result of God punishing somebody, Old Testament style.

He raised his eyebrows at Bucky and crossed his arms.

“My Lord, you are grumpy today.” Bucky said, lifting a hand to feel Steve’s forehead. Steve smacked his hand away. Bucky relented, holding his hands up. “You sleep okay?”

“My bed was pretty lumpy,” Steve said, poking Bucky in the stomach.

“Hey, who you callin’ lumpy, punk?” Bucky asked in mock offense. He tackled Steve back onto the bed and they tussled for a bit before it turned into groping and wheezing laughter. They fell silent after a bit, and Bucky rested his head on Steve’s chest, laying on his side. He faced Steve and reached out to thumb Steve’s chin.

“Hey.”

Steve ran a hand over Bucky’s hair and smiled down at him because there was no reason not to.

“See?” Bucky said cheerfully. “Now who needs sunshine with a smile like that?”
“Jeez, Buck.” Steve said, and he could feel himself turning red. “You sure woke up happy.”

“It's a good day, Steve,” Bucky replied rolling onto his back. “Neither of us have to work, we’re both young and healthy, your good pal FDR sent us a box of cream cheese, and,” He added, grinning slyly. “I've got a surprise for ya that I think you’ll like.”

With that, he stood, graceful like a cat, whistling a tune that Steve doesn't recognize, and walked out the room.

Steve sighed and kicked off his blankets, stumbling into the hallway. He tripped over Rabbit, the dog looking up at him expectantly. Steve leaned down and rubbed his graying muzzle, getting a half-hearted tail thump for his trouble. Steve straightened his back, wincing as several vertebrae popped, then followed Bucky into the kitchen.

He was standing there, grinning like the devil himself. He held something behind his back and Steve could catch a whiff of something sweet.

“First, tell me how much you love me.” He demanded, bending down for a kiss. Steve put his hands on his hips and glared up at him.

“I'll decide that for myself, jerk. Whaddya get me?”

Bucky smirked and took the plate out from behind his back. Steve gasped excitedly, reaching out, but stopping short of actually touching it.

“Is that-?” Steve breathed.

“An apple crumble.” Bucky said smugly. “You can touch it, ya know. It's not gonna disappear if you do.”

Steve took the plate from him carefully, breathing in the scent of sugar and cinnamon. He looked up at Bucky, choking on emotion.

“It's still warm.” Steve said, “How-?” He cut himself off, grabbing Bucky’s collar. “James B. Barnes,-” he shook his head, pulling Bucky into a rough kiss.

Bucky chuckled against his lips, one hand against Steve’s hip and the other steadying the plate.

“Okay, okay,” Bucky said finally, pushing Steve back. “You gotta eat it before it gets cold.”

He sat and tentatively took his first bite of the crumble as Bucky watched him expectantly. It was probably the best thing he'd ever tasted in his life. He closed his eyes and just savored the flavors.

“Nice work.” Bucky said happily, and Steve nodded, mouth full. He held up his fork in offering but Bucky shook his head. “Nah, I'm good, Steve. Keep at it.”

Bucky whistled, and Rabbit came padding over, sitting at Bucky’s feet with a huff. “Hey, old timer.” Bucky said, scratching the dog’s ears.

Steve worked through most of the apple crumble before he was overly full. He pushed the plate at
Bucky who wrapped it in foil and placed it in the ice box.

“I swear, Buck,” Steve sighed, sprawling out in his seat, holding his full stomach. (And when was the last time he’d been full?) “You like watching me eat more’n anything else in the world.”

Bucky laughed and sat down next to him. “You got me. I've been fattening you up to make an Irish stew.”

Steve wrinkled his nose up, setting his feet in Bucky’s lap. “You wouldn't make it right. You don't know Ma’s secret ingredient.”

“You sure the secret ingredient isn't Irishman?” Bucky asked, and Steve laughed and shoved at his shoulder.

“How'd you get the apple crumble, Bucky?” Steve asked finally, and Bucky squeezed his foot.

“So, you know Becca’s neighbors? The Baranowski’s?”

Steve nodded, remembering the elderly couple that lived next door to the Barnes family.

“Well, Mister Baranowski passed away last week,”

“Bucky!”

“Yeah, yeah, God rest his soul, let me finish. So all the ladies at the synagogue have been baking for the Widow Baranowski, and you know how the old lady’s mean as a hornet’s nest, but she has a soft spot for me and Becks since we spoke Polish with her and all. Anyway, we went over to help out this morning and as payment she said we could each take one thing from the synagogue donations, so…” Bucky trails off, scratching the back of his neck.

“Thank you, Buck.” Steve said.

“Of course, Stevie.” He replied, staring down into his lap and smiling softly, cheeks pink.

Steve leaned over to press a kiss to Bucky’s cheek. “You’re the best.”

Bucky scoffed. “I know that.”

Steve slammed the door behind himself, not even feeling guilty when the frame rattled.

Unfit for battle. How could they say he was unfit for battle? He had been born battling. Every waking moment was a fight for him. Every fucking day was a warzone. Who the hell were they to tell him he was unfit for battle?

He had just wanted to do something right. He had just wanted to fight for his country rather than
his own pride. For once, in his goddamn life, he wanted to mean something.

Goddamn them. Goddamn them for saying he couldn’t.

“Steve?” Bucky yawned, walking barefoot into the main room. His hair was a mess and there were bags under his eyes. He must’ve just gotten off a shift. Steve felt a little bad for waking him up. He’d been working far too hard recently.

He stopped in the entrance to the living room, leaning against the wall. He was smiling softly, the way he always did when Steve came home. It made Steve feel sick to his stomach with his anger and guilt and exhaustion.

Bucky caught Steve’s expression and his smile turned downwards. He took a few steps into the room, eyes roaming over Steve’s form, as if he could find what was wrong in the air around Steve’s body.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asked quietly, reaching out to touch Steve but stopping at the last minute, like he had thought better of it.

Steve looked down at the paper clenched in his fist, crumpled and barely legible. Steve thrust the paper at Bucky, who took it with a grimace. He smoothed out the creases and held it in front of himself.

Steve watched Bucky read the paper, then read it again. He blinked a few times and his shoulders slumped. He handed the paper back to Steve and clapped him on the shoulder. “That’s too bad, Stevie. I knew how much you wanted this. I’m sorry.”

Steve knew Bucky’s every expression and gesture, knew the differences between when Bucky’s fingers twitched for a cigarette and when they twitched to touch Steve. Steve could read Bucky’s emotions more clearly from the line of his body than he could if his feelings were written across his forehead.

Right now, Bucky was relieved.

“There are other ways to help the war effort.” Bucky started, rubbing his thumb soothingly over Steve’s collarbone. It infuriated him. “You know that more than anybody Stevie. Hell, Becks says that there’s an opening at her factory for painting designs on the planes. You-”

“I don’t want to sit around painting naked broads on the side of a plane and pretend that I’m doing my part!” Steve yelled, smacking Bucky’s hand off of his shoulder. He was angry. He was so angry. He was itching for a fight and Bucky was right there.

Bucky paled and took a step back. “I didn't mean nothing by it, Steve, really. I just-”

“You just what? You're just glad that you can hide me away like I’m some dame, some damsel that’s too damn delicate for a fight! I’m not your punk, Bucky!”

“Steve-” Bucky tried, desperately. He was shrinking on himself like he was the one who was a foot shorter than he was supposed to be. Like he was the one who should be kept away from a fight at all costs.

“Well, fuck you, Barnes! I'm my own man!” He was moving forward now, getting in Bucky’s space like some violent parody of their usual foreplay.

“I-I know you are, Steve. I never said you weren’t-”
“You don't want me to fight!” Steve exploded. “You know damn well how long I've been waiting for FDR do join this fucking war, how long I've wanted to be a soldier-”

“Like your dad?” Bucky shot back, looking suddenly furious. “You been waiting to fight and die like a hero, Steve? Is that what you want? Huh?”

Bucky clenched his jaw, pushing himself forward. Steve sneered back, enraged. How could Bucky even-

“That’s right, Steve. You're a big man, a big soldier, just like your pa. Except when you go off to war, you won't be leaving your wife and son behind, no, you won't be abandoning them, just me.”

“How dare you?” Steve spat. His hands were balled into fists, aching to hit. “How dare you bring my father into this-”

“And what about my dad, huh?” Bucky asked, teeth bared. “You wanna turn out like him? George Barnes was a mean old bastard who drank himself to death.” Bucky gestured wildly. Steve took a step back. Bucky never talked about his dad. “Yeah, that’s right. That’s what war does to people, Steve. The brave ones die and turn into heroes while the cowards become drunks who hit their kids. You want that for yourself, Steve? Is that what you want? Either way, you end up in the ground.”

“I'm heading that way no matter what!” Steve shouted, pushing Bucky’s chest. Bucky stumbled backwards, back hitting the wall. He straightened, and Steve threw his fists up.

The anger drained from Bucky’s face, and just shook his head at Steve, looking tired.

“I’m not gonna fight you.” He sighed.

He walked passed Steve and picked up the coat that had been half-heartedly tossed onto the couch. He hung it up on the rickety old hat rack by the door.

“For the record, you’ve never been unfit for anything in your life, Steve Rogers.” He said, not looking at Steve. He ran his hand down Steve’s back, like an apology, like repentance, then paused for a moment. He sighed and shook his head, then walked back into the bedroom.

Steve looked up, wanting to say something- an apology, a thank you, an insult- anything; but Bucky had already disappeared into the bedroom.

The next morning, Steve walked out into the living room to see Bucky curled up on the couch, a book in his hands. He looked exhausted, like he hadn't slept all night. To be fair, Steve hadn't either.

He went into the kitchen and heated up some water. The coffee he made was weak; it was their third day on this ration, and he ended up just mixing the grounds with the water and drinking it quickly before he could register the taste.

He glanced into the living room and raised the mug. “Coffee? It's disgusting, but it'll wake you up.”
Bucky just shook his head, not looking up from his book. He was hunched up, his shoulders by his ears.

He was always like this after they fought, quiet and withdrawn. Bucky wasn't giving Steve the silent treatment, just treading lightly, afraid that anything he might say could launch another argument. Steve always just pretended that nothing had happened.

Steve sat on the chair across from him, pulling his sketchbook out from the cushions. He liked this spot because it had good light and the perfect view of Bucky’s usual nesting spot.

Steve watched Bucky read, some book he had borrowed from the library. Steve liked watching Bucky read. He was so expressive, reacting to every word like it was something he had never seen before. Steve loved it when Bucky read to him, because he would do voices for each of the characters, and he brought life to every page.

But Steve’s very favorite was when Bucky finished a book. He would walk around in a daze, this puzzled look on his face like a was still lost in the words. Steve had a too many drawings of Bucky like that, eyes a million miles away, expression lost in a fog of emotion, a faint satisfied smile on his face. It was Steve’s favorite of all of Bucky's faces, and as Bucky closed this book, it was nowhere to be found.

Steve knew he had to say something, do something to ease whatever pain Bucky was in.

“Bucky, I-”

“I've been drafted.”

Bucky wasn’t looking at Steve. He didn’t seem to be looking at anything, really. Just staring at some point in the middle distance, unseeing.

“What?” Steve asked, and his voice came from far away, like it wasn’t quite his, but not anybody else’s either.

Bucky held up a piece of paper, crumpled, like it had been balled up and then smoothed out several times. “The Selective Service System sent a notice last week.”

Steve got up and grabbed the letter from his hand, scanning it over.

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**ORDER TO REPORT FOR INDUCTION**

*To: James Buchanan Barnes*

*Order No. 10535*

*Having submitted yourself to a Local Board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining your availability for training and service in the armed forces of the United States, you are hereby notified that you now have been selected for training and service in the Army.*

*You will, therefore, report to the Local Board named above at National Guard Armory at 6:30 AM on the...*
Steve stopped reading, looking up at Bucky. “You’re...” He wanted to say something, but he had no words.

Bucky was standing in front of him, eyes trained to the floor. “I’ve gotta report to my station next Tuesday. I’m gonna be examined and then,” He shrugged. “I’ve already given Mr. Dollarhide my two weeks, and, and Becca knows ‘cause she saw the letter, you know the nosy thing reads all my mail. I was gonna tell you, Steve, so you that could find someplace else to stay but I couldn’t find the time. I’m real sorry. I’m sorry, Steve.”

Steve dropped the letter and cupped Bucky’s face in his hands, forcing him to look Steve in the eyes. “Now, what’re you sorry for, huh?”

“I don’t know.” Bucky whispered, leaning his forehead against Steve’s. “Just am.”

“Me, too.” Steve muttered, wrapping a hand around the back of Bucky’s neck, pulling him down until his head rested against Steve’s shoulder. “God, Buck, I’m so sorry.”

1943

“So your body finally caught up to that big ol’ mouth of yours, eh?” Bucky asked, grinning at Steve. His body swayed with the truck, eyes glassy and movements slow. Steve grabbed his wrist to check his pulse. It was as sluggish as the rest of him.

“Yeah I guess so.” Steve answered, squeezing Bucky's hand affectionately. What he really wanted to do was strip Bucky bare and check him for injury, then kiss every part of him he could see. He couldn't do that now, not in the bed of a truck surrounded by soldiers who had just escaped from a labor camp. Not when there were so many eyes on him, on his garishly colorful suit. Not when Bucky was still recovering from whatever the Red Skull and that Zola bastard did to him.

“Buck, I’m gonna hop out and walk, free up a space for someone who needs it.” Steve said, giving Bucky one last squeeze before standing.

“I'll come with you.” Bucky said, struggling to his feet.

“Bucky, the only way you’d make it 20 yards is if I carried you.” Steve told him, gently pushing him back down into his seat.

“Could you do that?” Bucky asked, eyes sparkling the way they did when he was thinking of something dirty.

“I sure could, but I’m not gonna.” Steve said, shooting him a look that meant later.

“You ain't walking, Sarge.” A burly man with a mustache called. “And even if ya could, we wouldn't let you. Not after what you done for us, right, fellas?”

A group of men walking by the truck cheered and Bucky smiled fondly at them. “You boys are too good to me.” He said.
They camped out on the Italian border in a heavily wooded area. Some guys were nice enough to give Steve and Bucky a tent of their own. It was small, and embarrassingly, he had no idea how to pitch it. Bucky directed him, the asshole, telling him how to do it and laughing at him when he failed. Some of the more able-bodied guys came over and helped him set it up.

Steve begged off a sleeping bag for himself, telling the fellas to give it to somebody who needed it more. He did make sure that Bucky got one, though.

“Christ.” Bucky said, flopping down on the sleeping bag, then hissing as some bruised part of him struck the ground.

“Oh god, come here you dumbass.” Steve said, dragging Bucky toward him in a rough kiss.

“Woah.” Bucky said stupidly, realizing he was Steve's lap. He put his hands on Steve’s chest, firmly groping him. “God almighty, Steve. Look at you. How are you feeling?”

“Never better. My heart beats right, I can hear and see everything. I can breathe, Buck.” Steve said, and Bucky smiled.

“It’s a miracle.” He cupped Steve’s face and kissed him. He stopped and looked down at Steve’s crotch. “Hey, when you got all big, did you get, y’know... big ?”

“Oh my god, Bucky.” Steve groaned, and blushed.

“That’s a yes.” Bucky smiled the smile of the soon to be sinning.

“Let me look at you,” Steve demanded, pushing Bucky’s shirt up.

Bucky’s skin broke out in gooseflesh, but he didn't protest, leaning into kiss him.

“I'm not making love to you here, Buck.” Steve told him, running his hands over Bucky's prominent ribs, over the bruises there.

“But why?” Bucky whined, pressing his forehead against Steve’s.

Steve shushed him, taking stock of Bucky’s injuries.

God he was skinny. Steve’s hands spanned half his waist. He wondered if this was what Bucky felt, when Steve was small and sickly. He wondered how Bucky survived with this worry, how he held something so frail in his hands without thinking it would break.

Bucky cupped his face, tipping it up to look him in the eyes.

“God I missed you.” Bucky sighed. “I'm pissed that you're here, but I really fucking missed you.”

They fell asleep, sharing the one sleeping bag. It was a tight squeeze, but they made it work, having slept in less comfortable circumstances than this.

Steve woke again later that night to Bucky repeating his name, rank, and number over and over, his body shaking with terror. Steve held him close, stroking his hair, afraid and unsure of what to do. The terrified mumbling eventually stopped, but the shaking persisted. Steve didn't sleep the rest of that night, just held Bucky with all of his considerable strength, pressing his cheek into dark hair.

When they marched out that morning, Bucky was full of questions about Steve’s transformation. He was obviously more clear-headed than the previous day, and could keep pace with his fellow soldiers.
“So how strong are you, really?” He asked, poking at Steve’s biceps.

“Well, I can lift a motorcycle and a quite a few chorus girls with one arm,” Steve told him, flexing slightly. “When I was first getting used to it, I kept accidentally breaking things. I would go to open a door only to take it off its hinges. It was pretty embarrassing.”

Bucky learned all about Erskine and the serum and Camp Lehigh and the experiments and tests. Bucky winced slightly, and Steve had to wonder what sort of tests and experiments he underwent at the hands of Zola.

Bucky scolded him for being stupid and for not telling him anything in his letters, but it seemed half-hearted, like Bucky was only arguing because it was expected of him. He looked tired, the way Steve’s mom used to look when Steve would fall headlong into fight after fight without letting himself heal from whatever illness he had just brushed off.

They marched, and those who couldn’t were supported by those who could. A group of men marched in front, side by side with Steve and Bucky. Steve recognized them, they had been some of the first he’d freed and they had fought well together. Bucky knew some of them, trading easy slaps on the back with a colored fella named Gabe and snide quips with an oriental looking guy he called Morita.

Steve wondered if they had fought together or met in the camps. When he asked, Bucky explained that they’d met when a fight had broken out at the base, when Bucky found out how some of the guys in the regiment were treating the Sierra Platoon, the 107th’s segregated squadron.

Steve smiled as he listened to their recounting of the brawl, remembering telling Dr. Erskine, “I don’t like bullies.” He wondered if maybe he learned that from Bucky.

They made it back to base that evening, greeted by thunderous applause and a smug-looking Peggy Carter quipping, “You’re late.” And Bucky shouting “Let’s hear it for Captain America!”

They sent their injured men to the medical tents and Steve went to Colonel Phillips, expecting to be court-martialed. Instead, all he got was an appraising look and gruff send off.

Bucky tagged along behind him through all of this, looking unsure of himself. When a reedy looking medic came over, Bucky waved him off.

“You should really go with him, Buck. You look ready to keel over.” Steve told him.

“I just need to lie down.” Bucky told him, and Steve dragged him to his tent.

“That Agent Carter sure is a spitfire, huh?” Bucky asked, quirking his mouth in a familiar half-smile.

“You’re a dog, James B. Barnes.” Steve chuckled, rolling out his sleeping bag.

“No, I mean, she likes you.” Bucky said, rolling on his side to look at Steve. Steve sat down on his bag and Bucky shifted so his head was resting on Steve’s thigh. Steve started running his fingers through Bucky’s hair in the way he knew Bucky loved. Bucky sighed happily and rubbed his cheek against Steve’s thigh like a cat.

“Peggy’s just nice, is all.” Steve told him, shrugging.

“Nah,” Bucky said. “She likes you. I can tell.”
Steve snorted and tugged on Bucky’s hair lightly in retaliation. “So what, Buck?”

“Sooollooo,” Bucky said leadingly, picking at a stray string on Steve’s trousers. “You should go for it.”

“Go for… Bucky, what are you talking about?” Steve asked. Bucky shrugged one shoulder.

“You should ask her to be your gal.” Bucky told him, idly tracing patterns onto Steve’s leg. Steve froze, frowning down at Bucky.

“Bucky,” Steve said, and Bucky won’t meet his eye.

“And don’t gimme none of that ‘she’s too good for you’ cowshit. I mean, you’re a real sheik, Stevie. You look like something the gods put down on Earth to tempt us mere mortals.”

“Buck,” Steve said, settling a hand on Bucky’s hip, marveling slightly over how small Bucky still felt under his hand.

“Yeah, Peggy’s nice,” He started, and he could feel himself start to blush. “And sure, I like her alot, but, Bucky. I love you.”

Bucky turned to face Steve and looked just below Steve’s chin. “You’re Captain America,” He said, and his voice is hoarse. “You’re gonna be a hero, and the whole world’s finally gonna see what a great man you are. The last thing you need is some dumb queer following you around.”

“Hey,” Steve said gently, cupping the side of Bucky’s face. “You’re my dumb queer.”

Bucky laughed and it sounded suspiciously wet. Steve rubbed his thumb over Bucky’s cheekbone and grinned down at him.

“You’re my favorite person, Bucky. Nothing’s gonna change that.”

“Well, shucks, Captain.” Bucky said, and Steve flicked his ear.

“Don’t you get started on that shit.”

That morning, Peggy and Phillips approached him with an offer. He could handpick his own team, lead special missions, even be included in strategy meetings. All in exchange for letting a propo team come in to film him in all his red white and blue glory.

The team that he and Bucky assembled was good. It had its problems, Gabe and Denier had the tendency to gossip in French, and Jim and Dum Dum would devolve into petty bickering if left alone for too long. But it was a good team. They trusted each other. Steve hoped they could anticipate each other’s action in a fight.

At first, Steve was clumsy, awkward. He didn’t know his way around a gun, and he often underestimated his own strength. Peggy pulled him aside for private lessons, and she taught him how to use his natural instincts, all his fight, and channel it into something graceful, something deadly.

Steve remembered the first time he learned how to throw a punch.

“Didn’t your father ever teach you to throw a punch, lad?”
Steve’s ma was wrapping Bucky’s hand gently, tutting disapprovingly over his damaged knuckles.

“Just how to take one, ma’am.” Bucky answered, grinning his gap-toothed smile.

Steve was sitting on the floor next to him, holding his ma’s cosmetic mirror and dabbing vinegar over the bruise on his cheekbone.

“He’s good at other things, ma. He’s certainly scarier than I am.” Steve said, jumping to his friend’s defense. Steve was scrawny for his age, but Bucky wasn’t, and he could holler like nobody’s business.

“Scared of this face?” Sarah asked, cupping Bucky’s cheek. “Perish the thought.”

Bucky giggled, blushing under her attention. “My ma says it’s better to throw your weight around than to throw your fists.”

“Your ma’s a bloody smart woman.” Sarah agreed. “But when you must throw your fists, you ought to throw them properly.”

She finished tying of the bandage, then motioned for him to stand up. He clambered to his feet and helped Steve do the same.

“Make a fist.” She told them. She stood and evaluated them, adjusting their finger placement and pushing their elbows down.

“You want to take your thumb and wrap it down across the bottom of your fingers. Keep your fist tight, but not so tight it hurts. Always hit with your first two knuckles.”

Bucky and Steve grinned at each other, looking at each other’s hands and doing as she said.

“If you must hit somebody, don’t go for the face,” She continued, grinning at her boys. “It’s too hard, you could hurt your hand. Hit the soft spots. The stomach, the sides, and if you want to end the fight quickly; the throat or the groin.”

Bucky snickered and Steve gasped. “Ma! That’s fighting dirty!”

“Sometimes dirty’s the only way to fight, my boy.” She told him, winking at Bucky, who burst out into peals of laughter.

“Throw a punch.” She told them, and they both swung their fists.

She tutted and shook her head. “No, no, no, children.” She threw her own punch, short and fast and brutal.

“The power doesn’t come from your arm, it comes from your core. Roll your hips like you’re swinging a baseball bat.”

“Steve, you have all that power in you, but you don’t know what to do with it.” Peggy told him. “You’re afraid of what you can do, afraid to push yourself.”

“I just don’t want to hurt you, Pegs.” He said, with a smile.

She smiled back at him, then, quick like a viper, she struck. Before he knew it, he was on the floor, with Peggy’s arm across his throat.
“Noted.” Steve breathed and Peggy laughed quietly, her breath ghosting against his face.

“Oh, um. Excuse me.”

Peggy got off of Steve and stood, smoothing down her skirt. “Sergeant Barnes,” She greeted, clearing her throat. “I was just showing Captain Rogers some technique.”

Steve rolled up to his knees and took Peggy’s offer of a hand up. He smiled at Bucky, who looked from him to Peggy.

“Kicking his ass, more like.” Bucky said. “Er, pardon my language, ma’am.”

“You’re quite alright, Sergeant. Do you need something?”

“Just needed to borrow Cap for a few seconds.” Bucky said. “May I?”

“Oh, by all means.” Peggy said, and Steve jogged over to Bucky.

Bucky took his arm, half-guiding, half-dragging him out of the tent.

“What do you need?” Steve asked, smiling down at Bucky. He was in a good mood. Sparring Peggy had been fun, and he’d learned a lot. He was starting to get really good at using Stark’s shield, not just as defense, but as a weapon as well. Steve was really starting to feel like a real soldier.

“We’re heading out in the morning. You feeling ready?” Bucky asked, and Steve felt on top of the world.

“Hell, yes.” Steve said, and Bucky laughed. He pulled Steve into an empty tent and kissed him. Steve was surprised by the suddenness of it, but he pulled Bucky closer. They hadn’t had the time for this. They’d been too busy, with pinpointing locations of HYDRA camps, strategizing rescues for other prisoners, planning attacks.

“What’s this about?” Steve asked, pulling back. “Not that I mind, of course.”

“Steve, you need to know-” Bucky started, but then shook his head and kissed Steve again.

“Need to know what?” Steve asked against Bucky’s lips.

“Never mind, it doesn’t matter.” Bucky said, fumbling with Steve’s shirt. “How does this stupid thing work?”

“Buck, what’s wrong?” Steve asked, drawing back.

“Nothing, Steve. It’s nothing.” Bucky told him, sounding frustrated.

“Buck.” Steve sighed, and Bucky turned away, running his hand over his hair. He slumped on a cot in the corner, then waved Steve over. Steve went, tentative. He sat next to Bucky, and Bucky took his hand.

“Stevie, it’s not like you want it to be.” Bucky said quietly. “This war, it’s horrible. I’ve seen such horrible things. I’ve seen people do things to other people...” He took a shuddering breath. “It’s not all honor and bravery and patriotism. It’s cowardness and cruelty and it’s no place for you, Steve.”

“I need to be here, Buck. I need to fix all that. I’m here for a reason. I was chosen for a reason.”
Bucky laughed wetly, shaking his head. “The things I’ve done—”

“It doesn’t matter, Bucky. You’re helping people. You’re saving lives.”

“I’m ending them. I killed this kid, maybe 18 years old. He was so scared, Stevie. I could see it in his eyes and I killed him anyway.”

“He was a Nazi.”

“He was just a kid!” Bucky shouted, and then took a deep breath. “He was just a kid, Steve.”

“You’re right, Buck, I’m sorry.” Steve soothed, squeezing his hand.

“I know you have this idealistic picture of what this is gonna be like, and I love that about you Steve; you see the best in people, in everything. But this place, Steve...” He trailed off shaking his head.

Steve slung his arm over Bucky’s shoulders, pulling him close. He pressed his lips to the crown of Bucky’s head and held him close. “It’s gonna be okay, Buck. I promise. I’ll keep you safe.”

Bucky laughed, and it was raw and unhappy. “Promise me you’ll keep yourself safe, too.”

“I promise.” Steve said, kissing Bucky’s forehead. “I promise.”

“Good.”

Dum Dum pounded the hood of the Nazi munitions truck. “Sarge?”

Bucky swung himself into the front seat and started pulling at some of the wires until the engine roared to life.

“How’d you do that?” Steve asked, smiling at Bucky.

“I’ll teach you sometime,” Bucky told him with a smirk.

“You know how to drive a truck, Cap?” Dum Dum asked, sliding into the passenger seat.

“I, uh, I drove a bumper car at Coney Island once.” Steve said sheepishly. “Does that count?”

Dum Dum just laughed and gestured for Steve to climb into the truck.

“You’ll learn pretty quick,” Bucky said, starting to drive. “It took me about 10 minutes to figure out, and you’re a damn sight smarter than me.”

Morita, Derneir, Monty, and Gabe had grabbed the first truck, and had already left, leaving Dum Dum with Steve and Bucky.

It was their third mission together. They’d received a transmission saying that there was going to be a large shipment of weapons to a nearby HYDRA base. The Howling Commandos (a ridiculous name if you asked Steve) had been camping nearby, waiting to intercept the shipment. They were
going to take it back to the SSR so that Stark and his minions could test the weapons.

They got back to the base pretty quickly. Bucky was pretty good at driving, for a New Yorker. When they got near, Steve hopped out so that the men knew not to attack.

They weren't expecting the sarcastic applause that greeted them. Steve frowned.

“What's going on?” Bucky called.

“Not sure.” Steve said warily. He knew that the guys were just teasing for something, but the little guy inside him bristled, feeling mocked.

Gabe ran up to them, wheezing with laughter. He was clutching something bright and colorful in his hands.

James jumped out of the truck and grabbed the paper from Gabe. He scanned it over, then did it again.

“What the fuck.” He said softly, which sent Gabe into even more peels of laughter.

“Buck, what is it?” Steve asked.

Bucky handed it to Steve without a word.

**CAPTAIN AMERICA AND THE HOWLING COMMANDOS!**

Steve had to blink at the garishly colorful words.

“Wow.” Was all Steve managed.

On the front of the… thing was a drawing of him in full red white and blue gear, holding his shield.

Behind him was a man in a bowler hat, who assumed to be Dum-Dum, a man wearing a Union Jack, who must be Monty, a man with a mustache and a beret that had to be Dernier.

Gabe and Morita were suspiciously absent from the drawing.

“Who’s this kid in the mask?” Steve asked in confusion. Next to the Steve character, there was a young boy wearing red tights and a blue jacket with a domino mask covering his eyes.

Gabe chortled with laughter, sitting down on the wet grass. “It's fuckin’ Barnes.” He wheezed.

Steve looked at the picture and then looked at Bucky, then looked back down at the picture, a smile slowly creeping across his face.

“Don't you dare start, Rogers.” Bucky threatened.

“Go to page 9,” Gabe told him from where he was rolling around the grass.

Steve opened the booklet to page nine, where Captain America was scolding Bucky.

“Bucky, you little rascal! You nearly lost us our lives today!”

“Golly gee, Cap, I'm sorry! I really am!”
“I ought to give you a spanking for that little stunt.”

“Golly gee, Buck.” Steve said.

“Oh my fucking-” he grabbed the comic from Steve and threw it into the truck.

“Aw, c’mon, Buck! Don’t make me give you a spanking.” Steve teased.

“I’d like to see you try, you little punk.” Bucky told him, and Steve ducked down and got Bucky around the waist, lifting him clear off the ground.


“Someone get Stark to deal with his shit!” Bucky yelled when it looked like Steve was heading for their tent.

“Steven Goddamn Rogers, I swear to every single deity in heaven and hell, I will skin you alive!”

“Uh-oh.” Dernier said under his breath. “La mère est en colère contre le père.”

“I’m angry at you too, Frenchy!” Bucky yelled from where he was climbing down from his perch.

“All of you! Why the hell do you let him do that shit!”

“Buck, relax. No one got hurt.” Steve said.

“No one got hurt? No one got hurt, he says! I had to put down 12 krauts because your dumbass just runs directly into trouble. No strategy! Just the amazing human cannonball, Steve Goddamn Rogers.”

‘Steven Goddamn Rogers’ had turned into something of a nickname for Steve of late.

“And you!” Bucky turned on the rest of the men. “You just let him! He's strong, but he's not indestructible! That last guy had a gun to his head! Do you think he could heal from a bullet to the fucking brain? Pull your damned weight!”

“Buck,” Steve said, putting a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky slapped his hand away.

“Don’t ‘Buck’ me, asshole! You could have died!”

“Yeah, and it's not their fault.” Steve said quietly. “They did their jobs. They listened to their Captain.”

“Well my Captain’s gonna listen to me.” Bucky said, grabbing Steve by the dogtags and pulling him down to eye-level. “You are not doing this shit on my watch, you get me? I'm here to keep you safe, and I can't do that when you're being a fucking dumbass. Understood?”

“Bucky-”

“I understand.” Steve said.

“Good.” Bucky said, pushing past Steve to the HYDRA warehouse. “Let’s finish this shit!”

Bucky was still fuming when they had finished the mission and set up camp in the woods. Steve ducked into the tent, sitting next to Bucky, who stubbornly refused to look at him.

“I know you’re sore with me, and I’m sorry.” Steve said. “I know that you worry about me, because I worry about you, too. I love you too much to see you hurt, but Buck, this is war. We’ve got to take risks. And I know I do stupid shit; that I charge head-first into danger, but it’s because I know I can take the hit. The other men, they can't.”

He grabbed Bucky’s hand, and brought it to his lips, kissing the scraped knuckles.

“I love you.” He said.

Bucky sighed and relaxed against him, like he was trying to cover Steve’s entire body with his own.

“You're such a fucking punk.” Bucky whispered. “I can't- Steve. I can't watch you die. It would kill me. It would actually kill me, Steve. You have to be more careful, okay? Because your life is mine. Protect yourself like you're protecting me, because it basically amounts to the same thing.”

“Okay.” Steve whispered, lips brushing against Bucky’s forehead. “Okay.”

“I mean you have that stupid shield for a reason.” Bucky added. “It's not actually a big frisbee, you know.”

Steve chuckled softly. He slipped his dogtags over his head. “Here,” he said, offering them to Bucky. “Switch with me.”

Bucky looked puzzled, but did as he said. Steve put Bucky’s tags on and smiled at him.

“This way neither of us can die. We’re not allowed, see? Wrong name. Can't tie a spirit to a body without a name.”

Bucky slipped Steve’s dogtags over his head carefully. He smiled up at Steve and kissed the corner of his mouth. “Thanks.” He said. “I feel safer already.”

1944

Bucky smeared the rouge on his lips and cheeks, hiking the nylons up further on his legs.

“Damn, Sarge.” Dum Dum quipped. “If I didn't know better, I'd say you were one fine-looking lady.”
“He does make quite the pretty picture,” Monty commented, shooting a look at Steve, who blushed.

“This is just like that time we went to that club in Harlem,” Bucky said, grinning at Steve. Steve coughed into his fist, looking away.

“Wasn’t that the time the police busted up the party and we had to hike it out a window in heels?” He asked Bucky, just to see the other guys’ faces.

“I still talk to Harold/Desdemona. That gal knows how to have a good time.” Bucky smirked, and it looked obscene with his lips so red.

“‘Allo?” Madame Mathieu stuck her head in the door. “Sont vous le Sergent presque prêt?”

She was the madam of the brothel they were staying in, and a strong leader in La Résistance, but she refused to risk any of her girls for this mission. Hence, Bucky.

“Oui, un instant s’il vous plaît.” Bucky answered. He looked at the Commandos. “You guys better get out of here. I’ve got some wienerschnitzel to cook.”

“Gross.” Steve said, wrinkling his nose.

The rest of the Commandos left the brothel, and Steve squeezed into the closet. Bucky had protested this plan, saying that he could get the information he needed by himself, but Steve needed to be there. Someone had to watch Bucky’s six, and with a mission that involved seduction? Well, Steve would just rather stay in the room.

Bucky spread himself sensually along the bed, satin dress draping elegantly over his thighs.

The wienerschnitzel Bucky was cooking was a high-ranking HYDRA official with a weakness for women and shady establishments like the one Madame Mathieu ran. He was a personal friend of Hitler’s and a confidant of Schmidt’s (Bucky had put a ban on calling him ‘The Red Skull’)

“Right this way, Monsieur.” Madame Mathieu said, gesturing General Weber inside. He was a large man with a pot belly and a gray beard.

“Oh, what have we here?” Weber said, his accent thick.

“Bonjour, Herr général.” Bucky purred. His voice was light and airy, with slight french accent to it. It made Steve’s skin break out in goosebumps.


Bucky helped Weber out of his coat. Bucky ran his hands over the various medals pinned to it. “Is very impressive.”

“Dankeschön, ” General Weber said, running a hand along Bucky’s leg. “What is your name, mein Schnucki?”

“Stephanie .” Bucky said, glancing over where Steve was hiding with a smirk. Steve rolled his eyes.

“Well, Stephanie, I am a very important man.” Weber bragged, and he lifted up Bucky’s hand, bringing it to his lips.

“Vraiment?” Bucky asked, leaning in.
“Oh, oui, mon petit.” Even Steve could tell that man’s French was horrible.

“What is it zat you do?” Bucky asked, playing up the accent a little more. Steve had to admit that Bucky’s wide-eyed French girl routine was working. And that it was also very cute.

He had been critical of the plan originally, but Bucky had pointed out that regular interrogation was don’t going to work on a HYDRA agent. They took their own lives as soon as you had them cornered. Honey was better than vinegar, it seemed, because Werber loved to talk about himself.

“My dear, I’m working to save the world.” Werner declared proudly.

Bucky gasped. “Truly? How will you do so?”

“HYDRA will usher in a new dawn of mankind.” Werner said, sounding like he was reading from a pamphlet.

“HYDRA? I have not heard of this.” Bucky said, and Werner laughed, brushing back a strand of hair where it had gotten caught in Bucky’s lipstick.

Steve wanted to jump up right then and there, but he knew Bucky and Peggy would both kill him if he ruined a perfectly good plan.

“Oh, mon cheri,” Weber said, kissing the inside of Bucky’s wrist. He kissed his way up Bucky’s forearm. “HYDRA is the backbone of the Third Reich. We are the power behind Germany.”

Bucky giggled demurely and pressed his red lips against Weber’s jaw, leaving a smear of lipstick there. Steve ground his teeth.

“Tell me more,” Bucky breathed into Weber’s ear, stroking the man’s thigh.

“Ah! We- we have the world’s greatest scientists working on a weapon right now, one that will win the war for the Führer and help Germany rule the world!”

Bucky straddled the General, pushing him down on the bed. “What sort of weapon?” Steve winced, Bucky’s accent was slipping; but Weber didn't seem to notice.


“Y-yeah?” Bucky asked, leaning down. He regained his composure, taking back control of the situation. “How does this work?”

“I do not understand the science behind it, but Zola- hgnk!”

Bucky had pulled him up by the front of his shirt and put an arm across the man’s throat.

“Where is Zola?” Bucky demanded, voice normal. He shook Weber, and the General’s face began to turn red as he struggled for breath.

“Bucky!” Steve said, bursting out from the closet. “Bucky, stop! You’ll kill him!”

“Zola’s plan, I’ve seen it.” Bucky said, not loosening his grip on Weber’s throat. “When he was- he told me that he could turn an American soldier into a weapon for HYDRA.”

“Heil-” Weber croaked, and Steve lunged forward, digging his fingers into the General’s mouth, keeping him from swallowing the cyanide capsule.
“No you don’t you piece of shit.” Steve muttered, wiping his hand off on his shirt. “Now I suggest you tell my friend where Zola is hiding before he loses his temper. He might be pretty now, but he can get real ugly when things don’t go his way.”

“Deine Oma masturbiert im stehen!” Weber cursed, struggling in Bucky’s grip.

Bucky reached under his dress and pulled a knife from his garter belt. He placed it between Werber’s legs and the General went still.

“Feel that? That’s my knife at deinen Hoden. If you don’t tell me what I need to know, I’m gonna start cutting off important bits. And from what I could tell a few seconds ago, you don’t have much to spare.”

“Bulgaria.” Werber sighed. “Zola is in Bulgaria.”

“See? That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Steve asked.

“Fick dich, Fotze.” Werber spat.

“You wish.” Bucky said, pushing Werber off the bed.

He stumbled, trying to catch his footing. “Th-that’s it? You’re just going to-to let me go?”

Bucky shrugged. “Sure.”

“I don’t see why not.” Steve added. “I mean, we got the information we needed from you.”

“Yeah, you can go ahead and report back to Schmidt that you gave away his secret science base.” Bucky said. Steve took off his jacket and handed it to Bucky. Bucky put it on and turned to Steve. “What do you think? Should we go by that cafe with the soups?”

“I don’t know, I’m kinda feeling souped out. What about that bar down the street? It looked pretty nice.”

“Eh, Monty went there, said it wasn’t all that great.”

“You have to help me!” Weber cried, kneeling at their feet. “I can’t go back! They’ll kill me for being a traitor!”

Bucky and Steve looked at Weber, as if surprised he was still there. It was a look that they had perfected pretty early on.

“I don’t know how to help you, Weber.” Steve said. “I mean, there’s really nothing I can do for you at this point.”

“Since you told us everything you know, we have no use for you.” Bucky said, getting off the bed and stepping over where Weber was grovelling.

“No! No! I know many things! I will tell you everything! Please, please, just don’t send me away.”

Steve looked at Bucky, as if considering this.

“Well…” Bucky started, looking to Steve.

“If you really think you can help,” Steve said. “I guess we can keep you protected.”
“Yes! Yes, thank you! I will help you.” Bucky walked over to the bedroom door and banged on it with his fist. Dum Dum and Morita came in, helping the General to his feet.

“Escort General Weber safely to base.” Steve said authoritatively, as if they hadn’t known exactly where they were taking Weber.

They left with Weber and Steve turned to look at Bucky. “Nice work.”

“Thanks. Sorry I lost it there for a second.”

“No it’s… it’s perfectly understandable.” Steve said. “And we got what we wanted.”

“Yeah.” Bucky sighed. “I better change out of this get-up.”

“Wait-” Steve started, then stopped himself.

Bucky turned to look at Steve and Steve blushed.

“Really? This does it for you?” Bucky asked, and Steve shrugged.

“We do have the room for another…” He checked his watch. “Half-hour.”

Bucky slipped out of Steve coat. “Well, monsieur,” He said, slipping back into a French accent and wrapping his arms around Steve’s shoulders.

Steve laughed against his lips. “Stop, don’t do the voice.”

“What’s wrong with the voice?”

“You sound like Lilian Harvey.” Steve said, and Bucky scoffed.

“No I don’t!”

“Oh, you sure do, Buck.”

“Take it back!”

They tussled for a bit before moving the argument to the bed. In the end, they forgot what it was they were talking about.

1945

“...eve? Steve. Steve, you have to look at me.” Peggy’s voice was sharp and commanding, if tinged with more than a little sorrow.

“Peggy, I-” He shook his head, unable to speak. “I couldn’t save him.” He whispered.

The Commandos had left him alone. Steve knew that they didn’t blame him for Bucky’s death, knew that they were giving him space, but it still stung. They loved him as a brother and now he was gone.
God, he was gone.

Steve grabbed his dogtags from where they rested next to his heart. Usually they were warm from the heat of his body, but today they were like ice.

“Steve.” Peggy repeated. She took his hand. He looked up at her. She was weeping, and god, she was so beautiful. Steve had always been aware of this, and had always appreciated it, but today it made him furious. How dare she? How dare she look at him with kindness in her eyes? How dare she be soft and warm and so close? How dare she expect nothing of him? How dare she comfort him? How dare she remind him so strongly of what he had lost?

“Before he…” Peggy took a breath. “He gave me this letter. Just in case.”

She took it from her jacket and placed it on the table. She stood and straightened her jacket.

“Read it when you’re ready.” She told him, then leaned down and kissed his forehead.

She walked out of the destroyed pub, leaving Steve alone.

All alone.

Steve had prayed so many time over his life. In his prayers he asked Him for forgiveness, for forgiveness, for patience, for kindness, for peace and salvation and strength and virtue and love and everything inbetween. The thanked God in all of his prayers.

Never once had he cursed him.

Even when his mother died, he asked for her entrance into heaven and for her restful peace.

Now he stared at the sky and wanted to pull it down. To reach into Heaven and scream into His face to ask him why. What kind of monster was He? To give Steve forgiveness, patience, kindness, peace, salvation, strength, virtue, love, and everything inbetween; all in one person. One man. Bucky had been the answer to each and every goddamned prayer, and He had taken it all away from Steve. Like some sick joke.

“Fuck!” Steve yelled, throwing the glass bottle to the ground. It shattered, and Steve felt a pang of satisfaction. It felt good to break something. Steve wanted to rip and tear and shatter and break everything in his sight.

His fists clenched and unclenched on the table. He knew, that if he wanted to, he could taken down this whole building with just his hands.

“Fuck,” He whispered. He ran his hands over his face.

He stared at the envelope on the table. It stared back at him.

He opened it delicately, holding it like a wounded bird that could fly away at any moment.

Stevie,

Steve closed his eyes. He could hear Bucky’s voice, see his lips mouthing the word. Stevie, Stevie, Stevie.

He took a deep breath and brought himself to read the rest of the letter. Every I love you was painful in a way Steve, in all his years of illness and fistfights, had never felt before. Every I love you made his heart feel like it was crying.
“Still telling me what to do,” he laughed, tears streaming down his face. “God, you jerk.” He wiped his face on his sleeve. He read it again and again until his vision grew blurry and the words were burned on the inside of his eyelids.

Peggy’s voice over the radio cut out, and Steve closed his eyes.

He was crashing. He was going to die.

He grabbed the dogtags around his neck and smiled sadly.

“I’m sorry, Buck.”

He closed his eyes and waited for the warm embrace of rest.

All he felt was cold.
Phil wasn’t much of a winter guy. He’s even less of a summer guy, but he was still pretty unhappy about the snow pelting him at all sides. He’d been called out to the middle of arctic fucking nowhere with no reason given. One of the SHIELD boffins met him at the airport, obviously excited about something but under order to keep quiet.

He was driven to a makeshift laboratory, with tents and lights and duct tape and eager scientists bustling around talking quietly among themselves. Phil glared from under his parka, waiting for an explanation.

One of the techies excitedly waved him over, holding up one of the tent flaps for him to duck under. Everyone seemed to be gathered around what appeared to be a block of ice. “Can someone please tell me what is so goddamned spectacular about this? Is it the world’s biggest ice cube? The world’s smallest glacier?”

“Sir?” A meek girl wearing a lab coat under her ski jacket approached him. “I think you’d better see for yourself.”

Phil shot her a scathing look and only felt a little gratified when she shrank in on herself. He walked toward the ice block, letting the field techs scurry out of his way.

Once he reached the ice, he stuttered to a stop. He reached a hand to touch, but halted, curling his fingers in. Abruptly, he turned to the nearest tech.

“Is this really-” he started, and the guy nodded jerkily. “Damn.” Phil breathed, turning back to the ice, barely making out the slight glint of red and blue metal. “Is he-”

“He’s alive, sir.” A voice came from behind him, and he turned to see the meek girl from before. Phil’s disbelief must have shown on his face, because she raised her eyes to meet his. “Our sensors detected a heartbeat. It’s faint, but present. Right now, we’re acting on the assumption that Captain Rogers’ … enhancements must have kept him alive. The ice seems to be acting as a sort of cryostasis, keeping him perfectly preserved.” She trailed off, looking at the ice.
“Who else knows about this?” Phil demanded.

“The team that found him, the science and medical officers that are here today, Director Fury, former Director Carter, Mister Stark, and yourself, sir.”

Phil rubbed his temples. “Which Stark?” He asked.

“Ah, that would be Stark Senior.” The girl said with a quick smile.

“Do you think we can keep him alive?” Phil asked, eyes straying back to the ice.

“I have confidence in my team, sir.” She replied.

“That wasn’t an answer.” Phil told her. She grimaced.

“Sir, in all honesty, even if we do manage to unfreeze him without any complications- of which there are many- there’s a chance that the ice is the only thing keeping him alive. There’s also may be a possibility he may be completely brain-dead. The defrosting process has so many risk factors involved that it would probably just be safer to keep him in the ice. If he’s not thawed at an even rate with a consistent temperature, if even one part of his tissue becomes metabolically active a few seconds before another, it could mean permanent damage. If gas bubbles present in his tissue thaw, there’s the possibility that they will move about and create embolisms. He’ll have to be on life support as soon as the thawing process starts, and probably for a while after.”

Phil looked between the block of ice and the girl. “So, it’s not optimistic, huh?”

“Sir, this is the single best medical team on the planet. If we can’t bring a man back from the dead, we have no business being here.”

Phil had to revise his initial assessment of the girl. “Agent Phil Coulson.” He introduced, extending a hand.

“Doctor Helen Cho.” She replied with a firm shake.

The pieces of the Valkyrie wreckage were collected and shipped off to some SHIELD containment unit for examination. Captain Rogers was flown to New York on a refrigerated plane.

The SHIELD medical facility had been renovated specifically for the purpose of defrosting Captain Rogers.

Doctor Cho had set up the largest hyperbaric chamber Phil had ever seen, set up with life support systems, health monitors, and a bath of an antifreeze solution in which the ice block was completely submerged.

Cho had explained that after the antifreeze had thawed Rogers to a certain point, the bath would be refilled with a saline solution, which would be gradually warmed in order to get the Captain to a normal body temperature and restart his organ systems. He would then, from what Phil understood, be blow dried. Cho hadn’t gotten Phil’s joke that it was basically a car wash for Super Soldiers.

If all went well, the whole process would take about a week. Phil and Fury spent the week trying
to determine every possibility and what actions they would have to take for each one. They drafted statements for if Captain Rogers woke up, if he died, if he turned out to be brain-dead. They made lists, trying to figure out who they would tell.

The president was informed, as were a select few government officials; but they decided to keep from telling the congress until they were sure Captain Rogers would survive.

They were currently arguing about what accommodations would have to be made for him, if he woke up.

“All I’m saying is that he should be free to chose!” Phil was saying, this close to tearing out his remaining hair.

“He’s going to be waking up in a world completely unfamiliar to him. Don't you think we should ease him into it?”

“You just want to use him!” Phil said. “Nick, I know you have your heart set on this Avengers thing, but it’s a fantasy!”

“Look, Phil. This man is still the property of the United States government-”

Just then, the door to their conference room swung open.

“This is a private-” Phil started, but the man interrupted him.

“He’s awake.”

Fury and Phil stood, running down the hallway to Rogers’ hospital room.

The Captain was struggling on, the bed, yelling wordlessly. Doctors and nurses were holding him down, wrestling to strap him to the bed.

Doctor Cho caught sight of them and came over, looking harried.

“He’s awake.” She said simply.

“We noticed.” Phil said, staring past her.

Rogers let out a strangled cry, and they all turned to look at him.

“Bucky!” He yelled, thrashing against the straps.

Phil blinked. That wasn’t quite what he expected.


“His friend who died in the war.” Phil said.

“Sort of.” Nick added.

“Oh.” Cho said. “Oh! The one with the mask? We called him Migug Sonyeon.”

“America boy?” Phil asked.

“Yes. Captain America and his sidekick, America Boy.” Dr. Cho said, as if this made perfect sense.
Rogers let out a pitiful moan and Cho jumped, like she forgot he was there. She ran over and prepped an IV, getting two burly nurses to hold Rogers’ arm down. She slipped it into his vein and his struggling slowed until he slipped into sleep.

She came back over to them, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“I always thought that Captain America could take out a room of doctors and nurses.” Phil said. “No offense.”

“None taken. On a regular day, he probably could. He’s weakened right now, but he should be able to regain his strength once we start physical therapy.”

“And his mental state?” Fury questioned.

“Well,” Cho trailed off. “Let’s just say the fact that he called out for America Boy is a good sign. We won’t be able to know for certain until he’s fully conscious. Right now, he will be having fits of waking, thing that he probably won’t even remember. Once his body and mind have fully healed itself, then we can know for sure.”

“Okay.” Fury said. He left the room and Phil followed him.

“I need you to call Carter.” Fury said, walking briskly down the hall.

“Sir, I’m not sure that’s a good idea. Peggy’s doctors informed me that-”

“The other one.” Fury said.

“Agent 13? She's in Dubai, sir.” Phil told him.

“No! The-” Fury pinched the bridge of his nose. “The other other one.”

Phil stopped. “You want me to call James? What for?”

“Well, the Captain wants him.” Nick said.

“Not really, sir.” Phil said. He scrambled to keep up with Fury. “I really don't think that would be a good idea.”

“Look,” Fury said. “The kid needs to be informed of what's going on. You don't want him pissed off, believe me, I've seen it.”

“But, Rogers thinks he’s dead. And, well, he's not exactly wrong. Don't you think that, on top of the emotional stress of waking up in a new century, throwing in his dead best friend would be a little… damaging?” Phil argued.

“I never said that Captain Rogers needed to see Carter, I'm just saying that Carter ought to see Captain Rogers.” Nick said, and Phil frowned in confusion.

“You're using them as bargaining chips.” Phil realized. “Against each other. You still think that James could join your team.”

Fury shrugged. “He needs to know what's going on. New York's a small town. You never know where they might run into each other.”

Phil sighed. “I'll make the call, but I want you to know that I am strongly opposed to it.”
“I wouldn't expect anything less, Agent.”

James waited nervously outside the SHIELD hospital room. He had no idea what to expect. He wanted to throw up.

A young woman in a lab coat came into the room, smiling at him gently.

“Hello, Professor Carter? I'm Doctor Cho.”

James stood, wiping his hands on his jeans. He shook the doctor’s hand.

“Um. Hi.” He said.

“He's just inside.” Cho said.

“Uh, okay.” James said, swallowing nervously.

He walked into the room, sitting in the uncomfortable plastic chair next to the bed.

Captain America laid there, asleep. James didn't know what to think. He's seen pictures before, grainy and black and white, and the few self-portraits he had drawn; but it was nothing compared to the real thing.

He was almost angelic, laying there in the white sheets against the white walls. He was really beautiful and golden looking.

James could see what Peggy and Bucky Barnes once saw in the man.

There were black straps over his chest and arms, and James looked at Dr. Cho in confusion.

“Just a precautionary measure. You can take them off if you like.”

James felt a strange surge of anger. How dare they tie him to the bed like a criminal? He quickly undid the straps, rubbing gently at the reddened skin around the Captain’s wrists.

“I'll give you some space.” Cho said, and she stepped out of the room.

James inspected the Captain, looking for injury. The man had crashed a plane, how was he unhurt? How was he alive at all?

Would James survive a plane crash? Could he be frozen for 70 years and wake up intact?

There was something around Rogers’s neck, and James hooked a finger around the chain, pulling it out of his shirt.

It was a set of dogtags.

James B Barnes

32557038
“These aren't yours,” James murmured. He rubbed his thumb over the shiny surface of the metal, feeling the bumps and ridges of the letters.

Without thinking, he snapped off the notched tag, leaving the other behind. He put it in his pocket and tucked the remaining tag back into Rogers’ shirt.

“That's fair, right? I get one, you get one.”

He took Steve’s hand, the way he did with Peggy when he went to visit her at the hospital.

“This has to be scary for you.” James said quietly. “Your home is gone forever. You have to start over in such an unfamiliar place. Almost everyone you loved is gone.”

James took a deep breath. “But it's okay, because you're strong and you have people who will be there for you. Probably not me,” James added, a little mournfully. “But I talked to Natasha, and she said she’d look out for you. Trust me, she's a good friend to have. She may seem a little icy at first—sorry icy was a poor word choice, but anyway—she's the best.”

James felt the the hand in his move, a slight twitch of the fingers and a soft squeeze. He jumped and looked down at where Captain Rogers is stirring. He was about to call for someone— a nurse, a doctor, an agent— when Rogers’ eyes flutter open. He furrowed his brows and groaned slightly. He sounded almost grumpy, like a kid not quite ready to wake up on a school morning. He looked at James and his eyes soften, and his lips turned into a sad smile.

“Buck.” He sighed, and squeezed James’ hand, clumsily running his thumb over the back of James’ knuckles, like an old soothing gesture.

James squeezed back and choked out, “He- hey. How’re you feeling?” He glanced at the door, willing someone to walk in and realize that Rogers is awake before James completely ruined this.

“Bucky,” Rogers repeated, and oh god, he was crying, or at least about to. There were tears in his eyes, and his voice was heavy with emotion.

“Shh,” James said, reaching out to comfort him. Horrifyingly, he ended up running his fingers through Rogers’ hair, like petting a cat. Rogers leaned into the touch, squeezing his eyes shut like the gentle contact was hurting him.

“Bucky.” He said again. “Bucky I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Oh. Oh no.” James said. “Don't cry. Please don't cry.” He cupped Rogers’ face, thumbing away the tears. “Hey. Hey, Ca-Steven. What’s wrong? What’re you crying about, huh?”

“I should've caught you, Bucky. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I should've save you, I should've—” he tapered off into hiccups of sobs.

James frowned, gently stroking Steve's face. “It's okay. Steve, it's okay. Look, look around. Look at me. I'm okay. We’re both okay.”

Rogers seemed to take in his surroundings for the first time. The sterile room with its white walls,
the bed he was laying in and the soft cotton shift he was wearing. His eyes went wide and he looked back at James. James winced, realizing what this must look like to Captain Rogers.

“Is this- are we-” He looked back at James, and James tried to give him a reassuring smile. “I was crashing...” he trailed off, eyes hazing with drugs and confusion.


“There were bombs. I couldn’t let them- they were going to kill millions of people.”

“So you crashed it.” James said, because he knew this story. Peggy had told him a hundreds time. She always ended the same way. “Stupid, self-sacrificing git.”

Steve chuckled. “Yeah. Yeah I kinda am.” He looked at Bucky and his cheer wavered. “You weren’t there, Buck. You weren’t there anymore and I-” he closed his eyes and took a shaking breath. “God, missed you.”

He took the hand that still held James’ and raised it to his mouth. James held his breath as Rogers’ chapped lips brush over his knuckles.

“I’m glad we’re both here.”

“Yeah,” James agreed, “Yeah, me too, Steve.”

He looked up and caught the eye of Doctor Cho. She looked slightly frantic and he was sure that he looked the same.

She bustled in, and James kept the Captain’s attention on himself as she injected something into his IV bag. Steve sighed quietly and smiled, eyes drifting shut.

“Oh my god.” James breathed, pulling his hand out of Steve’s slack grip. “Oh my god.”

“Did he say anything? How were his awareness levels?” Doctor Cho questioned him, voiced hushed.

“Uh, I don’t know, he seemed pretty out of it.” James said, rubbing his hands over his face. “He thought I was, he thought-“

“But was he forming complete sentences? No word salad or paragrammatism? Was he able to focus? To understand?” She pressed, and James sort of shrugged.

“I mean, his speech was fine. He was mostly just confused and upset.” James answered, and Cho began to check the Captain’s vitals and reflexes.

“Did he say if anything was bothering him? Any pain, discomfort? Intolerance to the light or temperature?”

“No, uh, he mostly just cried at me.” James told her.

“So he recognized you?” Cho asked, then shook her head and amended, “Not you, but your face?”

“Yeah. Yeah, he did.” James said, sighing.

“Okay, that’s a good sign, Profesor Carter. His reflexes and vitals look excellent, and if he held a conversation with you that means his language comprehension is normal and his Broca’s area is healthy. You actually just helped us cancel out the possibility of brain damage in his frontal lobe.”
“Right. Good.” James said, sitting back in his chair. He wanted to take Steve’s hand, to make sure he was alright. Make sure he wasn’t going to cry again.

Captain Rogers made a sound in his sleep and Doctor Cho frowned.

Cho started talking, seemingly to herself “Now that he’s waking up, we’re going to have to keep him sedated. At the rate at which he seems to be metabolizing his medicine, we’re going to have to figure out how to... and we should probably start physical therapy soon before he’s fully conscious, but I don't know if he even-” She trailed off, picking up Steve’s chart and scanning it.

“I’ve never had to care for a super-human before. It’s very frustrating.” She told James, who smiled at her. “I mean he’s incredibly fascinating to study, from a scientist’s point of view. But as his Doctor?” She shook her head.

James was struck with an idea. “Do you know Dr. Khan? I think her first name is Amelia, she’s the on-site medical officer at SHIELD.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of her.” Cho said, cocking her head. “Why?”

“You should talk to her.” James said, trying not to sound enigmatic. He wasn’t sure how much Cho knew, and he didn’t want to reveal anything that was classified. “She knows a bit about this stuff.”

Cho gave him a look, but didn’t press. “Thank you. I’ll be sure to call her.”

James nodded, and Cho set down Steve’s chart. “I’ll leave you alone.”

She left the room and James ran a hand through his hair, letting out a shaking breath.

“God, this was a shitty idea, Carter.” He said to himself. “What were you thinking? ‘Oh, yeah, let’s go see the traumatized veteran! Oh, and also, let’s look just like his dead boyfriend! That’s a good plan! Everything will work out perfectly!’ God, you fucking dumbass, I hate you so much.”

His phone started ringing and he nearly jumped out of his skin.

It was Connor, a guy he had been seeing recently. He was “like, not looking for anything too, like, serious right now, but hey, you’re only young once, right babe?”

James let it go to voicemail.

“Jesus, it’s freezing in here.” James shuttered. “Are you cold?” He asked the Captain. “I’m cold.” He stood, going through the room’s cabinets. He finally found a shelf filled with with linens and pulled down a set of blankets. He spread the one on top of Steve, tucking it against the mattress. He wrapped the other one around himself like he was a mummy.

He sat there for about an hour, not saying anything. He simply watched the rise and fall of Steve’s chest. He was a miracle. James supposed some people might put him in that category as well, but Rogers’ had survived so much. Illness, the Great Depression, being queer in the 30’s, a medical experiment, the Second World War, a plane crash-

It was truly a miracle the man was still alive and functional.

James didn’t really believe in any sort of god, but he thought that maybe if there was one, it had a plan for Steve Rogers.
Dr. Cho walked into the room and startled when she saw James. “Oh!” She placed a hand over her chest. “You’re still here.”

“Am I… not meant to be?” James asked warily.

“No, you can be wherever you want, I suppose.” She shook her head. “I was going to run another set of tests.”

“Oh. Um, I’ll get out of your way, then.” James said, standing. He took the blanket off of himself and threw it over the bed so it covered Rogers, but it didn’t look too much like he was trying to cover Rogers. “I need to feed my dog, anyway.”

He got home, still thinking about Steve Rogers. It was infuriating, like he had a song stuck in his head.

He fed Elizabeth and worked on grading papers. His phone rang and he nearly silenced it before he saw who was calling.

“Hey,” He answered.

“Hold on, I’m trying to video call you.”

“Sam, now’s not really-”

“Is it this button?” There was a loud beeping sound in James’ ear and he moved away from the phone.

He could hear Sam fumbling with the phone and he sighed.

Finally, a little Sam appeared on the screen, wearing his uniform.

“Jamie! I can see you!” He said excitedly. “Can you see me?”

“You’re a little blurry, but yeah. I can see you. What’s up?”

“Can you keep a secret?” Sam asked excitedly.

“Depends.” James said with a shrug, thinking to himself, ‘more than you know.’

Sam rolled his eyes. “Can you keep a secret from Sharon and my mother and Baby S and Gideon?”

“Can I keep a secret from my sister and your entire family? Hmm…” James pretended like he was thinking about it. “Not for very long, but I can give you a few days, yeah.”

“You’re such an asshole.” Sam said. “Here I am, trying to tell you that Riley proposed, and you’re being a sarcastic dick about everything.”

“You’re engaged!!?” James asked, nearly shouting.

“Yeah, motherfucker!” Sam said, flashing James his ring.

“Holy shit Sam!”
“And you’re the first person I’m telling, so you need to shut the hell up about it until at least the end of the day.”

“Put Riley on for a sec.” James said.

Riley popped into view, looking as content and happy as James had ever seen him. “Yes, I know. You’ll kill me if I hurt him.”

“I won’t be the one killing you, Riles.” James said seriously. “I’ll let Natasha and Sharon do it. I’ll just help them with the body, capisce?”

“Well, it’s never gonna happen, Carter.” Riley said. He wrapped his arm around Sam’s shoulder and kissed his temple. “I love him too damn much.”

“Awww.” James said. “I just threw up in my mouth a little.”

Riley rolled his eyes and gave the phone back to Sam.

“I’m happy for you, Sam.” James told him sincerely. “Really. I know I give Riley shit, but he’s great for you.”

“I know.” Sam said, slightly smug. “I wanted to ask you something.” He paused for dramatic effect, even they both knew what he was going to ask. “Will you be my best man?”

“I would be honored.” James said, and he was choking up a little. “Fuck, dude. I’m so proud of you.”

Sam laughed wetly, quickly wiping his eyes. “Shut up. All I did was say yes.”

“I will get you the best strippers.” James said, putting his hand over his heart. “The finest in all the land.”

“You better. Or I’m replacing you with Sharon.”

“She’d actually plan a better bachelor party than me.” James said.

“Yeah, just make sure to get her help with that one.” Sam laughed.

“Allright. I love you, man. Congratulations.”


“Bye.”

Sam hung up the phone, and James realized that his cheeks hurt from smiling.

He had a moment of thinking ‘Holy shit, we’re grown ups now’, the kind of thought that comes with any major milestone and never feels quite true.

He got into bed and started scrolling through his phone. Sharon texted him around 11 about Sam’s engagement and they texted back and forth about bachelor party ideas.

James fell asleep thinking that he needed to buy a new mattress.

His bed was too soft.
His bed was too soft.

Steve groaned, furrowing his eyebrows. Why was his bed so soft? Was he in a hospital? What sort of hospital had beds this nice?

Steve pulled his blanket closer to himself and breathed deep. His blanket smelled like Bucky.

Oh, he must be home, then. Maybe he was recovering from getting sick. He had a fever, that's why he was so confused.

But… he didn't get sick any more. And Bucky…

Steve sat straight up in bed.

He could hear the radio playing a baseball game. It sounded familiar.

The door opened and a woman walked in, completely out of uniform. Her tie was too large, her hair too long.

“Morning.” She said kindly. “Or should I say afternoon?”

“What am I?” Steve demanded.

“You're in a recovery room in New York City.” She told him.

_The Dodgers take first and oh! It's a home run! What a game, what a game!_

Steve looked back at the radio. He had heard this game before. Hell, he was there.

“Where am I, really?” He asked again, jaw tightening.

The woman chuckled softly. “I'm afraid I don't understand.”

“The game.” He said. “It's from May, 1941. I know because I was there.” He and Bucky had gone right before Bucky had to go off to basic.

The woman’s eyes widen slightly, and Steve stood, sensing threat.

“Now I'm gonna ask you again.” Steve said slowly, walking toward the woman. “Where am I?”

“Captain Rogers-” she started.

“Who are you?” He demanded.

Two men in tactical gear came into the room. Steve pushed them both back, and they fell through the wall.

Steve climbed out of the wall, revealing that the room had been inside a large hangar of some sort, just scenery.

“Captain Rogers, wait!” The woman yelled, and Steve ran through the nearest doors he could find.
He ran out into a hallway filled with people. There was a loud voice saying frantically, “All agents, Code 13.”

The people started chasing him and he ran through the crowd, pushing people out of his way.

He made his way out of the building and just started running.

A cab honked at him and he turned back to see the strangest looking car he’d ever seen. He shook his head and kept running.

He ran and ran, trying not to notice how similar everything looked, yet so wrong. He finally slowed to a stop when he was surrounded with glowing billboards. They had moving adverts on them and they made his eyes hurt to look at.

People on all sides were shouting at each other, and some were even dressed in strange costumes. Cars that didn't look like cars were honking and everything was so overwhelming and bright.

Suddenly, three black… vehicles surrounded him. More men in tact gear got out, forming a complete blockade around him.

“At ease, Soldier!” A voice called, and Steve looked behind himself to see an older black man with an eyepatch walking toward him.

Steve braced himself for a fight.

“Look, I’m sorry about that little show back there, but we thought it best to break it to you slowly.”

“Break what?” Steve asked.

“You've been asleep, Cap.” The man said somberly. “For almost 70 years.”

Steve looked at the man, then looked around at his surroundings. He wanted to laugh, to shake his head and call the man crazy. But everything around him looked like it came from the pages of one of Bucky’s sci-fi novels.

“You gonna be okay?” The man asked.

“Yeah…” Steve said, thinking of his promise to Bucky and his last words to Peggy. “Yeah, I just… I had a date.”

The man ushered him into what he confirmed was in fact a car. He sat next to Steve in the back seat and kept his eye on him.

“What?” Steve finally asked.

“I don't know.” The man said finally. “I was expecting you to be more…”

“Traumatized?” Steve asked.

“Racist.” The man said, and Steve laughed, trying not to sound hysterical.

“Sir, some of the best men I’ve served with have been people of your color.” Steve said. “I don’t care about that sort of thing.” He thought for a moment. “Uh, don't suppose you have any information about what happened to my squadron?”

“Here,” the man said, handing him a stack of files.
“I… didn't catch your name before.” Steve said.

“It's Fury, Nick Fury.” Fury smiled like there was a private joke he was making.

Steve went through the files of each of the Commandos. Dum Dum had died of a heart attack in 1988, Monty had died of cirrhosis of the liver in 1990, Dernier had died of lung cancer in 1993, Gabe had a stroke in 1990, then lived paralyzed for another 3 years before having another stroke and dying. Jim died in 2004… Jesus in a new millennia, of heart failure. Stark had died just a few weeks ago. Peggy was still alive.

She was still alive. Of course she was. She was the strongest of them all. She was in a nursing him in Washington DC.

Steve quickly wiped his eyes, not wanting to let Fury see him cry.

“It was a test, right?” Steve asked. Fury raised an eyebrow. “The badly dressed nurse, the old baseball game, the nonstandard bed? You were waiting to see how long it would take me to notice.”

“We wanted to test your mental reflexes as well as your physical ones.” Fury said appreciatively. “And I can see that you're pretty damn smart.”

*How did you get the blanket to smell like him?* Steve wanted to ask, but it had probably just been his imagination. From what he could tell, Fury was manipulative, but he wasn't cruel.

They got back to the building and Fury better explained what had happened. It didn't make a lick of sense to Steve how he was still alive even after they brought in the doctor to talk him through it.

God seemed to want him alive. Steve didn't know why. Probably to torment him further. It was a stupid, petty thought to have, and Bucky would kill him for it, but Steve felt bitter that he couldn't even seem to die right.

The SHIELD agents (SHIELD is the SSR but not really) set him up with a room in the building. They gave him something called a computer (it isn't for doing math problems, despite the name) the computer allowed him to search for whatever information he wanted.

*James Buchanan Barnes*

*Steven Grant Rogers*

*Margaret Anne Carter*

*Rebecca Grace Barnes*

*Brooklyn, New York*

*Adolf Hitler*

*johann Schmidt*

*Arnim Zola*

*HYDRA*
Some computer searches yielded a cornucopia of information, and some yielded next to nothing.

His own name? Cornucopia. Born July 4th, 1914 to Sarah Rogers and Joseph Rogers. Steven Grant Rogers, best known as Captain America…

Nick Fury’s name? Nothing. Did you mean Nick Furry?

Eventually, the bright screen of the computer hurt his eyes and he pushed it away from himself, running a hand over his face. What was he supposed to do now?

Judging by the military formality of the room he was in and Nick Fury’s matter-of-fact orders, Steve assumed that he was to continue working for the US Army. For SSR or SHIELD or whatever agency claims him as their own.

Part of him was relieved by this; it was familiar to him, simple, something he knew how to do.

Another part of him wanted to scream, “Haven’t I given enough?” He had lost everything. His friends, his family, his love, his life, and now, his home.

But what else could he do? He basically on an alien planet. He didn’t know anything besides war, really. What would he do? Become an artist, get a house with Bucky, die of old age? That life was so far behind him is was laughable.

He would fight for SHIELD, he decided. It was Peggy’s organization, so it couldn’t be that bad. As long as he knew that what he was fighting for was right, he would fight. And maybe, he would be killed in battle, and then; only then, he could finally rest.

He thought of Bucky’s letter, the one he gave to Peggy before he got on that plane, the one that he needed kept safe. He thought of Bucky telling him: I don’t want to see you for at least another 70 years.

Does this count, Buck? He thought. Can I come home to you? Please, please, Buck. I’m so tired. I know what life you wanted for me, but I can’t do it. I can’t accomplish happiness without you. I’m sorry.

Steve found the SHIELD gym and went through punching bags. It made his mind quiet.
words, so he just gave everyone who turned something in an A.

Ever since he sat by Captain America’s bedside and held his hand while he cried, he had been distracted, far away from everything else. The news had broken about a week after James had already known, that Captain America had been found alive in the wreckage of the Valkyrie.

*Captain Rogers was unavailable for statement, but we here at Channel 9 news eagerly away his first public appearance.*

They had put out pictures of the Captain in the plane, frozen in a block of ice. He looked like a corpse. It was unsettling.

There was a sharp scream in the hallway, and James stood, running in the direction of the cry. It was Mrs. Henderson, the Geometry teacher. She was standing by her window, covering her mouth with her hand. There was something dark in the sky, some sort of opening. From it, strange flying things were pouring out.

“What the fuck,” James muttered. He got out his phone, and the lock screen told him: *BREAKING NEWS: ALIEN INVASION?*

“What the fuck.” He repeated.

Another alert chimed on his phone.

*BREAKING NEWS: HOSTILE ALIEN INVASION IN NEW YORK*

He ran out of the building, leaving his bag in his classroom. His apartment wasn’t too far from the school, and he sprinted up the stairs, throwing open the door to his linens closet. There, he kept his weapons. A sniper (a gift from Clint); two handguns (Peggy and Sharon); and a set of throwing knives (Natasha).

James ran as fast as he could with an M40 slung over his back, a two handguns tucked into his pants, and several knives hidden in unspeakable places. He got on his motorcycle and seemed to be the only person on the Brooklyn Bridge going *towards* Manhattan.

He got to the island, driving against the crowds. He he stopped to help up civilians in danger of being trampled to death under panicked masses. The aliens hadn’t reached this block yet, but he knew that nothing could kill like 8 million New Yorkers running for their lives. He was digging through the wreckage of a tour bus, looking for survivors when he made his first close encounter. The thing popped out of nowhere and fucking hissed at him. James yelped and shot it in the face with his handgun.

He was riding toward Times Square, where most of the fighting seemed to be happening, when his phone started ringing. He picked it up without looking.

“Yeah?” He answered, winded.

“*JC, am I seeing this right? We’ve got aliens now?*”

James sighed and parked his bike, holding the phone to his ear.

“Yeah, Sam. We’ve got fucking aliens now.” He replied. There were less civilians here, and James was waiting for something freaky to jump out at him.

*Man, I can’t believe I’m risking my ass over here, boring to death in the fucking desert, while you*
get to fight aliens in New York!” One of the aforementioned aliens lunged for his side, and he swung and shot it, then swung to his 9 o’clock and shot its friend.

“Shit! What was that?”

“That was me shooting E.T. in the head.” James muttered, wiping alien gunk off his face.

“Aw, man! Did you at least say something cool? You should’ve been like Will Smith in Independence Day, y’know. Like ‘Welcome to Earth, bitch!”

While Sam spoke, James ran over to a young woman with her leg trapped under a car and helped her up. She could stand under her own weight, so James ushered her to keep moving.

“No, Sam. I didn’t get the chance to say something cool,” He replied. One of the ugly things screeched and lunged at him. He jumped back and shot it once, then twice; just to be sure it wouldn’t get up again. “Look, man. I love you and all, but I’ve gotta get to some high ground so I can kick some alien ass.”

“I wish I were there!” Sam called and James hung up on him, pocketing his phone. He climbed a fire escape to get on the roof of an old tenement building, then started running across the rooftops, like he had always wanted to do when he was a kid.

He knew he was right in the midst of shit when saw the giant portal spewing out aliens right in the center of Times Square. One of the things flew over his head on what seemed to be a hovering motorbike? Whatever it was, it looked cool and James wanted it.

He unsheathed one of his knives and threw it, catching the alien in the neck, and he watched in satisfaction as it fell to the pavement. The alien motorcycle was still hovering in the air, and James backed up, then took a running leap for it.

He almost overshot, scrambling for purchase for a terrifying second before successful mounting the bike. James studied the controls for a few moments before deciding to just go for it. Turned out to be pretty similar to what he was used to, just flying. He took off towards the fight, finding a nice perch on top of one of the old buildings.

He settled down, unstrapping his sniper from his back and setting it up. He peered through the scope, trying to find some of his friends in the mess.

A flash of red and gold whizzed past him, and he rolled his eyes. The Iron Man was basically a celebrity, one that James thought was slightly overrated. He always thought Tony Stark was pretty full of it.

There was a huge handsome blond man with a cape on the ground below, swinging what seemed to be a large hammer at his attackers. James didn’t know who the fuck he was, but he seemed to be on team Earth, so James took out a few of the aliens on his six, just to be helpful.

There was a deafening roar behind him and James whipped around to see a giant green monster with its fists full of aliens jumping from a building like King Kong. That must be Dr. Banner, then. Natasha had mentioned him once or twice, and seemed terrified of him. James was just glad he was one of the good guys.

He turned back to his sniper just in time to see a flash red hair. Natasha was flying through the air, gracefully, as if she had wings. She landed on top of one of the alien’s bikes and stabbed the thing in the back. James figured she had things under control.
He looked back down from where Natasha had come from and his breath caught in his throat. There, dressed like a big, dumb, American flag, was Steve Rogers, barreling through a group of aliens like he was the invincible rage monster. What kind of stupid ass strategy was that, Rogers?

James swore and started dropping the aliens around the Captain. When there were none left to fight, Rogers looked up at James’ perch, bewildered, and James ducked back into a shadow, cursing himself for choosing such a visible position.

The Captain blinked, but was soon distracted but more aliens. James tried not to openly admire his mid-air acrobatics too much. They were only sort of cool.

James went back to slowly picking off aliens on the ground, settling into that cool focus of a sniper. He only stopped when he ran out of ammo for the rifle. James got up and swung himself onto his cool new alien bike, flying through the air and shooting any flying alien he passed with his handgun.

There was no reason he should be enjoying himself this much, but his blood was rising. James wondered if this sick thrill he had was some lingering effect of the Winter Soldier, but decided to shelve that question for later when the thought made bile rise in his throat.

He landed on the ground and started taking down a small cluster of aliens, shooting them each one by one. When his second beretta ran out of ammo, he panicked slightly; throwing his gun at one of the aliens before remembering his knives.

He’s down to one alien when his phone started ringing. Again.

He killed the motherfucker to his right and bent to pick up its laser gun thing as he answered the call.

“Yeah?” He asked, sounding way more breathless than he wanted.

“James? Are you in New York?” It was Sharon, sounding panicked.

“Yeah, I’m right in the thick of things, what’s up?” He fired at two oncoming aliens, and was taken momentarily off guard at the laser gun’s kickback.

“The World Security Council just decided nuke Manhattan.”

“What?” James asked in alarm. “They can’t do that!” An alien jumped on his back, and he flailed wildly, only screaming a little bit. James twisted and shot the thing in the gut.

“They apparently can. Fury’s gonna try to stop it, but if he can’t, you have 8 minutes.”

“Fuck! Fucking shitting fucks,” James muttered, dropping the laser gun and climbing the nearest building. “Thanks for letting me know, Sharon.”

“Stay safe, Jamie.” She murmured, and James laughed.

“A little late for that, isn’t it?”

She sighed and hung up, while James scouted for the nearest costumed superhero.

He saw a arrow cut through the air, and grinned. Clint was two rooftops over, taking down aliens like a pro.

James was a little smug about startling Hawkeye, jumping down next to him and watching the
super spy jolt. James waved like the shithead he was.

“Jesus H Christ kid, what are you doing here?” He asked, and James threw a knife at an alien scaling the side of the building.

“Oh, you know.” James shrugged, grin broadening. “Avenging.”

“You are such a little shit,” Clint muttered, shooting again.

“Yeah, well we’ve got bigger things to worry about,” James answered, and Clint turned to give him a look which clearly meant, ‘no shit’.

“Yeah, I noticed.” Clint said, gesturing to the general chaos around them.

“No, I meant the nuke heading toward this city in 7 and a half minutes.”

Clint whipped around to stare at him. “Who the fuck approved that?” He asked, and quickly shot over James’ shoulder.


“Fucking bureaucratic fat cats.” Clint growled and pressed the comm in his ear. “Babe, did you get that?” James leaned in to hear.

“Fucking fucks, what the fuck.” Came Natasha’s angry reply.

“I’m confused and alarmed by the amount of profanity coming from our two resident assassins. What’s happening?” That was Tony Stark’s voice over the comm.

“We’ve got a nuclear missile headed our way.” James reported.

“Who the hell are you?”

“Does it fucking matter? There are 8 million goddamned people on this goddamned island and the government would rather count them all as collateral damage than trust you costume wearing fucks to take out these ugly ass aliens. So you better get your metal ass in gear and take of the fucking nuke that’s headed our way or so help me god, I will rise from nuclear fallout and kick your bougie ass.”

There’s silence over the radio as everyone either processed what he said or is shocked by it. Then, the unmistakable voice of Steven Grant Rogers crackled to life over the comms.

“Christ, did no one ever teach this kid to watch his fucking language?”

“It’s an honor and a privilege, Captain. Now, does anyone have any ideas?”

“I can close the portal,” Grunted Natasha. “I’m with Selvig, I have Loki’s staff, I can close the portal.”

“Wait.” Stark said. “If I get our birdie before it hits, I know just the place to put it.”

“Stark, you’re a genius.” Clint said.

“I know. It’s kinda my thing.”

The next few minutes were utter chaos. Stark saved the day, but fell from the sky. Some guy
named Loki was apparently responsible for everything and Clint ran over to Stark tower to catch him before he slipped away. James sighed and climbed down the stairs of the building.

He lost his motorcycle somewhere among the debris, so he made the trek back to Brooklyn on foot.

He found his apartment building utterly destroyed. He panicked.

“Elizabeth!” He yelled. “Ellie, baby?” He started digging through the rubble, looking for his dog. “Elizabeth!”

The was a sharp whine and James whipped around. Elizabeth was running towards him. She had a slight limp but seemed okay. He grabbed her in a hug and buried his face in her fur. “Oh, there’s my sweet girl. God, Ellie, I thought I’d lost you, baby.” He picked her up and started walking. He didn’t know where he was going until he was at Barclay’s station.

The station was packed with shocked people, clutching their remaining belongings the way James was holding onto Elizabeth.

He managed to catch a train to DC. No one complained that he had a dog in his lap or that he still had pieces of plaster in his hair.

He got to DC around midnight. He and Elizabeth walked to Sharon’s apartment, knocking lightly on the door. She swung it open and grabbed James in an embrace.

“Um,” His voice was hoarse from disuse. “Can I crash here for a while?”

“Oh my god, just get inside.” Sharon said, pushing his towards the couch.

“So, what do you think? You ready to join SHIELD full time?”

Steve sighed, running a rag over his shield. “Sure. It’s not like I have anything else going on.”

Natasha laughed. “You? What about bingo club? What would Ethel think if you stopped showing up?”

Steve smiled. He didn’t really trust her, but he thought he was starting to like her. “I’m not so good at the spy thing.” He admitted.

“You don’t have to be.” Natasha said. “I’m good enough for the both of us.”

“Are we partners now?” Steve asked, raising his eyebrows.

“If you want to be.” Natasha shrugged. “My normal partner is… taking a leave of absence.”

“Tell Barton I’m sorry about what happened to him. I can’t imagine how awful it was.” Steve said. Natasha looked sad for a moment before covering the expression.

“He’s tough.” She told him. “He’ll get through it.”
“I, uh, I have a request.” Steve said.

“Of course,” Natasha said. “What is it?”

“Can I… not live in New York? It’s just so strange. Everything just looks wrong.”

“Well, we have a base in DC. How does that sound?”

“DC sounds nice.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Still 2012 lol

It had been months since James left New York, and he hadn’t been back. He figured there was nothing there for him anymore. Sharon and Peggy both lived in DC, and Clint and Natasha had recently moved down. James had called the school and quit his job, called his landlord and ended his lease, since you know, there was no building anymore.

He got a job at a nearby high school. It was severely underfunded, and hadn’t had a language program to speak of. James had worked with the administration to design one and craft lesson plans. He was the only language teacher, and he taught Spanish, French, Latin, Mandarin, and an ESL class. A language for each day of the school week. It meant he had a heavy workload. It could be a pain in the ass, but he really did love his job. It didn’t pay much, so he taught at a community college on the weekends for a little extra money.

“Dr. Carter?”

James blinked, looking down at his student. “Yes, Mr. Kaplan?”

“Are you okay? You seemed… I don’t know. Far away.”

“I’m alright, thank you. I’m just tired.” James said, scrubbing a hand over his face. Class had ended a few minutes ago. He hoped Billy hadn’t just watched him zone out for that whole time.

“Well, I was wondering… um sorry, this question is kind of personal, but um, are you gay?”

James raised his eyebrows. “That is a personal question, Billy. But, yes. I am. Why do want to know?”

“Well, um, Teddy and I, we wanted to start a club for um, gay and bi and trans students.” Billy said nervously, rubbing a hand over his neck. “But we need a teacher coordinator, so I was just—”

God, was James ever this young? “Of course, Mr. Kaplan. I’d be happy to help.”

“How? Billy beamed. He moved forward, like he was going to hug James, but then thought better of it. He just smiled gratefully and ran out of the classroom.

James sighed and sat at his desk, drafting an email to the principal about Billy’s club.

There was a knock on his door and he called “Come in!” Without looking away from his computer.

“Nice setup you’ve got here.”

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.” James sighed, pushing away from his desk.

Nick Fury was leaning against one of the tiny plastic chairs meant for James’ students.

“How did you even get in here? Did you sign in at the visitor’s desk?” James asked. “God, this
place needs better security. What do you want, Fury?"

“I just wanted to compliment you on your good work during the invasion.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” James said, rolling his eyes. He stood and started writing tomorrow’s homework on his whiteboard. “And even if I did, which I don’t, I would still tell you that I don’t want to be part of your superteam.”

“Rogers moved to DC last week.”

“What?!?” James whipped around, dropping his dry erase marker.

“I assigned your sister to his surveillance team.” Fury said. “I thought you’d want to know.”

“Oh.” James said, blinking. “That’s actually- thanks.”

“You can imagine how damaging it might be for him to see you.” Fury added.

“Trust me, I know.” James said.

“This way, Agent 13 can notify you if you might ever be in the same place.”

“She has a name.” James said bitterly.

“Does she,” Fury asked mildly.

The door opened and Elliot Amir, the AP US History teacher, walked in.

“Oh, sorry. Is this a bad time?” He asked, looking between James and Fury.

“Not at all,” James said, smiling kindly at Elliot. “Mr. Smith was just leaving.”

“Thanks for the information, Professor.” Fury said, and left the room with a dramatic swish of his trenchcoat. James rolled his eyes.

“Woah. Who was that guy?” Elliot asked.

“He’s just one of my students at the community college. What’s up?” James said.

“Oh, it’s nothing, I just…” Elliot trailed off.

He was one of the younger teachers, around James’ age. The girls who weren’t already in love with James were in love with him.

“What?” James asked, teasingly. “Had a language question?”

“‘astatie altaeamul mae nafsi.” Elliot said in Arabic, and James smiled.

“kunt la turid miniy ‘ana altaeamul maeaha balnsbt lak?” James asked, and Elliot blushed.

“Did Billy Kaplan ask you about your sexuality today?” Elliot asked him and James laughed.

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, he did.”

“What a kid.” Elliot said. “Are you helping him with his club?”

“Yeah, I figured that it’s not like I already have enough on my plate.” James said sarcastically. “I
was just emailing Sandra about it now. He said something about his friend Teddy? Do you know him?”

Elliot nodded. “Teddy Altman. Smart kid. Could probably be a football star, wants to be a veterinarian.”

“Is he Billy’s boyfriend?” James asked, hitting send on his email.

“Yeah. They danced around each other all of last year when Teddy transferred, finally got together over the summer.”

“Huh.” James said. “What does it say about me that high school gossip is literally the most interesting thing in my life right now?”

Elliot laughed. “Well did you hear that Thomas Jones and Gloria Franklin broke up because Thomas was cheating on her with Monique Taylor?”

James gasped. “Thomas, how could you?” He questioned, faux dramatically. Then he thought for a second. “Wait, I thought Monique was a senior.”

“She is!” Elliot said excitedly.

“No way. Monique Taylor’s dating a sophomore? But she was Homecoming Queen!”

“I heard that she’s only doing it to get back at Benji Mistretta.”

“Oh my god.” James chuckled, rubbing his eyes. “We need to get a life.”

“Seriously.” Elliot agreed. “Hey, um. Do want to get dinner on Friday?”

James smiled. “That would be nice.”

“Cool. I’ll, um, I’ll text you.”

“Sounds good.”

“What about Carol in accounting?” Natasha asked, shooting down two men on Steve’s six.

“Seriously?” Steve asked, throwing his shield to disarm the alarm system. “You’re doing this now?”

“You’ve been avoiding me!” Natasha accused, and she ran at Steve, who catapulted her to the rafters. She put the guard up there into a sleeper hold.

“Because every time we get together you try to set me up on a date!” Steve told her, taking out the three men who charged at him.

Natasha jumped down next to him. “I just worry about you, Cap. You seem lonely.”

“I’m fine.” Steve said. He swung his arm and took the locked door off its hinges. “After you,”
Natasha stepped over the door and aimed her gun at Prime Minister Steele. He was a corrupt leader who tortured his own people, and now he was fleeing the country.

Steve handcuffed him and Natasha led them out of the airport hangar. They put him in the back of a SHIELD van and sent it on its way.

“You wanna get some starbucks?” Natasha asked.

“That’s the coffee thing, right?”

“Yeah.” Natasha answered.

“Sure.”

They got to the coffee shop and Natasha ordered something very elaborate and European sounding. Steve ordered a plain black coffee.

“You know, I used to mix coffee grounds with water and just drink it.” Steve said.

“I never know when you’re fucking with me and I love it.” Natasha laughed. “But sugar isn’t rationed anymore, and I can’t watch you punish yourself by drinking black coffee.”

“Why?” Steve asked, bringing his cardboard cup protectively to his chest. “It’s good.”

“I mean compared to dirt water, sure.” Natasha said. “Live a little, Rogers. It’s not like you need to watch your calories.”

Steve shrugged, pouring a little sugar into his drink. “Will you stop cornering me about going on dates?”

Natasha sighed. “They don’t have to be dates! I just think you need some friends who aren’t… you know, me.”

“I have other friends!” Steve said defensively.

“Like who?” Natasha asked dryly.

“Stark, for one.” Steve said.

“You can’t stand Stark.” Natasha said. “Try again.”

“Okay fine. Thor. Thor and I are friends.”

“Seriously? He’s an alien who you haven’t seen since May. Doesn’t count.”

Steve opened his mouth to speak and Natasha interrupted him. “In fact, don’t say anyone else who we saved the world from Loki with.”

Steve crossed his arms.

“See? All I’m saying is that you don’t get out much. Your whole life since you woke up has been SHIELD work. There’s nothing wrong with being good at your job, but the way you do it is unhealthy, Steve.”

Steve sighed. “Fine. I’ll go out with Karen.”
“It’s Carol.” Natasha said. “And I’m just realizing what a bad idea that is. I’m not gonna force you on a date you don’t want to go on. I mean, do you even like girls?”


“I mean, I always figured you and Sergeant Barnes…” She trailed off, raising her eyebrows.

Steve buried the urge to shush her. He had been in this new millennia long enough to know that homosexuality wasn’t illegal anymore. It some places, it was even celebrated. But it was still Steve’s instinct to glance around like someone could overhear them.

“I mean,” Steve sighed heavily. “Yeah. Bucky and I loved each other in every sense of the word. And I was never with anybody besides him, but…”

“You’re attracted to women, too.” Natasha assumed bluntly.

Steve nodded, a blush creeping on his cheeks.

“Congrats, you’re bisexual.” She said, raising her sugary-coffee concoction. Steve warily bumped his cup against hers.

“Thanks?” He said. “Can we stop talking about this now?”

“Sure,” Natasha said, looking slyly smug.

Steve wished he had some dirt on her, just so it wasn’t so easier for her to embarrass him. He did appreciate her frankness, because it was hard for him to trust anybody, but especially hard for him to trust an agent of SHIELD. He also appreciated her companionship.

“What about you? You have a boyfriend? A girlfriend?” Steve asked, trying for casual.

“I don’t have a boyfriend.” She said, flipping her hair.

“You and Barton aren’t…” Steve trailed off, trying not to cross the clear line that Natasha had.

She shook her head.

Steve snapped his fingers. “Barton! Barton’s my friend. We got beers that one time.”

Natasha laughed. “I’ll be sure to tell him. He’ll probably pass out of excitement. He’s got the biggest dude crush on you.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “It’s not like I’m Cary Grant or anything.”

“Yeah. Cary Grant never punched Nazis in the face. Cary Grant never had comic books.”

“Oh, god.” Steve laughed. “Those comic books aren’t still a thing, are they?”

“They went of favor in the 70’s, but then there was a cartoon in the late 80s that lasted until 99’. But since you were defrosted, I’m sure they’ll make a resurgence.”

“God, I fucking hated those things.” Steve said, rubbing his hands over his face. “Gabe and Jim never got to be in it and Bucky was a dopey 12 year old sidekick.”

“They added Jones and Morita in the 60’s during the civil rights movement. Never aged up Barnes, though.”
Steve laughed. “You and the rest of the team better get used to it.”

“What, you think there’ll be Black Widow comics?” Natasha asked, smiling.

“I’d be shocked if Stark isn’t already funding an Avenger’s series.”

“Christ, probably.”

Steve sipped his coffee and grimaced. “Too sweet.”

“You’re such a baby,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes. She grabbed his coffee and her own and threw them away. “C’mon, we’ve got to do some paperwork.”

“My favorite.” Steve sighed, following her into the car.

She parked in the SHIELD garage and turned to him. “Hey, instead of trying to meet new people, how about you go visit Peggy?”

Steve looked at her sharply.

“What? I know Peggy. I know you know Peggy. I know where Peggy’s staying.” Natasha shrugged. “I know you want to see her, and I know she wants to see you.”

“I just—” Steve rubbed his temple. “I’m just worried about—”

“You’re worried she’s going to look old,” Natasha surmised. “Guess what? She is old. And so are you.”

*I’m worried she’ll remind me of everything I’ve lost.* Steve thought. But it was unfair to Peggy to put that on her. She was his friend. The only friend he had left, it seemed.

“Okay,” Steve said. “When I have time, I’ll go visit Peggy.”

“Sharon told me you have a date tonight.” Peggy said teasingly. She was propped up in her bed, clarity in her eyes. It seemed to be a good day for her.

“Sharon’s a big old blabbermouth.” James said, rolling his eyes. Elizabeth growled happily, and Peggy scratched behind her ears.

“Won’t you let her on the bed?” Peggy asked imploringly and Ellie turned to him, eyes big and watery like she agreed.

“Fine, just don’t give her any food. Ellie, up.” Elizabeth jumped onto the bed, cuddling fiercely with Peggy. Peggy took the turkey off her sandwich and fed it to Elizabeth, who ate it cheerfully. James just sighed.

They assisted living home that Peggy lived in allowed visits from pets, as long as they were well trained. Once the staff had gotten to know James and Elizabeth, they had actively encouraged that she come along with him every time he saw Peggy.
“I’m sorry, what was it we were talking about?” Peggy asked, turning her attention back to James.

“Sharon.” James answered.

“Oh. She told me you have a date tonight.”

“Well, Sharon’s a blabbermouth.” James repeated. Sometimes conversations with Peggy went in circles like this, but James was patient.

“Who’s the lucky gentleman?” Peggy asked, gently petting Elizabeth’s head.

“One of the other teachers. His name is Elliot.”

“Elliot’s a nice name.” Peggy commented.

“We’re just getting dinner,” James explained.

“Anything fancy?” She asked.

“I hope not. You know how I am in fancy restaurants. Food shouldn’t cost exorbitant amounts of money.”

“Remember that time we went to the nice place in Tribeca and you tried to order an apple? Just an apple?”

“It was because the cheapest thing on the menu was an apple gorgonzola salad and it was still 20 dollars!”

Peggy laughed, and the laughs quickly turned into coughs. James stood to get her a glass of water and helped her raise it to her mouth.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“I’m quite alright, thank you.” Peggy said. James grimaced, watching the slight tremor in her hands. “What’s the name of the chap you’re going on a date with?”

“Elliot. He teaches History.”

“Elliot’s a nice name.” She said absentmindedly.

“Yeah.” James said. “Yeah, it is pretty nice.”

Elizabeth whined and buried her head against Peggy’s chest. Peggy blinked down at Ellie and frowned.

He could tell she was drifting off.

“Peggy?”

“Have you asked Steve to visit?” Peggy asked him.

“No, I haven’t.” James said. “I don’t know Steve, remember?

“Could you just let him know that I want to see him? I’m sure he’ll come.”

“Sure, Peg. Tomorrow I’ll remind him to come.” He got out his phone and texted Natasha.
“Thank you, Sergeant.” Peggy said, patting James’ hand.

“Anytime, Agent.” James replied around the lump in his throat.

James took 20 minutes to decide which jacket to wear when Elliot rang his buzzer. He grabbed his keys, wallet, phone and headed downstairs.

Without a jacket on.

“Hi.” He said, opening the front door.

“Hey.” Elliot said, smiling at James. “Shall we go?” He asked formally, bowing a little. It was stupidly cute.

“Sure.” James said, hooking his arm through Elliot’s.

They walked down the sidewalk arm-in-arm. The breeze picked up and James shivered a little.

“Oh, here.” Elliot took off his jacket and wrapped it around James’ shoulders.

“Thanks.” James said, feeling himself flush.

They got the restaurant. It was pretty nice, and James eyed Elliot nervously.

“Don’t worry,” Elliot laughed, reading James’ expression. “It’s not as fancy as it looks. I can afford it.”

They got their table and Elliot ordered a bottle of wine for them both.

They chatted a little bit about some of their shared students and tried to find shared interests in each other outside of work. They both like reading, were from New York, and had never left the country.

James learned that Elliot’s father was Egyptian and his mother was from Pennsylvania. He had two older sisters and a younger brother. James explained that he was adopted and had a sort-of twin sister.

They got their appetizers and they were ridiculously good.

“Oh my god you have to try this.” James said, mouth still mostly full.

“Ok, as long as you try this first, because; holy shit.”

They both took bites off each other’s plates and groaned.

“Holy fuck, that’s good.” James sighed.

“Jesus Christ.” Elliot agreed, nodding his head.

“You sure know how to pick ‘em.”” James told Elliot.
“I do, don’t I?” Elliot said, looking at James with a small smile. James could feel a blush creeping up his neck.

Elliot leaned in, smiling at James over the rim of his glass. James was about to say something stupid, like hey, this food is great, but how about we just skip to dessert? When his phone rang.

He checked the screen and saw that it was Sharon calling. “It's my sister, so I better...”

“Oh, yeah, of course.” Elliot said. He waved blanket permission/forgiveness, and James picked up the phone.

“Hey, Share, can it wait? I'm kinda in the middle of-”

“Jamie, it's Sam.” She said, and all the blood left James’ face.

“Oh, god. He's not...” He asked shakily, and Sharon cut him off.

“He's fine. He's actually being flown into GW ask we speak. He sustained some minor injuries.”

“Sharon, goddammit, I need you to be more specific here.” James cursed, running his hand through his hair. “What do you mean, ‘minor injuries’?” He stood up from the table to pace. Elliot watched him with a worried expression.

“He's got a broken leg, some fractured ribs, a sprained wrist, and some bruising.” She said, trying to sound calm.

“What happened?” James demanded.

“He and Riley were shot out of the sky.” Sharon said. She took a shaking breath. “Jamie, Riley is dead.”

James sat back down heavily. “Oh god.” He covered his mouth with his hand. “Oh my god. Poor Sammy.”

“I thought you'd wanna come down.” Sharon said somberly. “He’s gonna need us.”

“Yeah.” James said. “Yeah, I'll be there right away. Have you called Darlene? And Sarah?”

“They already know.” Sharon told him. “And, James; they found out.”


“The field medic that rescued Sam, he figured out that Sam’s not- y’know.”

“Oh.” James said. “What does that mean? Will he be in trouble?”

“I doubt it, since he deserves a fucking Purple Heart after what they put him through, but they probably will discharge him.” Sharon said, anger seeping into her voice.

“Okay,” James said. “Okay. I'll see you there.”

“Alright. Love you.”

“Love you, too. Bye.” James hung up the phone and rested his head in his hand for a few seconds. It took him a minute to remember that Elliot was still there, looking at him with concern.
“Sorry, Elliot. I, uh, I got to go. My friend, he's hurt and I-”

“James, it's okay.” Elliot said kindly. “Do what you need to do.”

“Thank you.” James said, and leaned in to kiss Elliot on the cheek. “I’m sorry.”

He ran out of the restaurant and hailed a cab (something much harder to accomplish in DC than in New York) and told the driver to get to GW as fast as he could. It was only once he was in the car that he realized he was still wearing Elliot's coat.

He ran through the double doors of the hospital, Sharon waiting for him in the lobby. She caught him in a quick hug.

“Where is he?” James asked.

“He’s in surgery.” Sharon said.

“Surgery?” James asked, voice rising.

“They’re putting pins in his legs.” Sharon said. “Darlene and Sarah are on their way, but it’ll be a few hours.”

“Fuck.” James said. “Fuck.” He leaned against a wall and Sharon took his hand.

“He’s gonna be okay.” Sharon said.

“Is he?” James asked. “Sharon, Riley’s dead.”

“I know,” She whispered. She leaned against James’ side, and James wrapped his arm around her waist and rested his cheek against the top of her head. They waited there until the doctor came out, telling them that they could see Sam.

They went into the room, where Sam was laying on a cot with his arm in brace and his leg in a cast.

“Heyyyyyy.” Sam said, blinking sleepily at them. “It’s Jamie and Share Bear.”

“Hey, Sammy.” James whispered. He pulled over a couple of chairs and he and Sharon sat by the bed.

“You guys look sad.” Sam complained.

“Sorry.” James said, trying to smile. “Is this better?”

“Mmm, not really.” He said.

Sharon chuckled softly. She was smoothing down the blankets, a nervous habit of hers.

“My little babies,” Sam murmured nonsensically, reaching out for them. James took his hand.

“You’re on the good stuff, huh?” James asked.

Sam nodded. “I fell from the sky.” He said wistfully.

“Yeah,” James choked out. “Yeah, you did.”

“I’m a cyborg now.” Sam said seriously, patting his leg.
“Six million dollar man, Sam Wilson.” Sharon said, grabbing Sam and James’ hands.

“Sam Wilson-Riles.” Sam said sleepily.

“Sam,” Sharon started, looking sideways at James. “What do you remember?”

“We were flying, looking for- for um…” He frowned. “For a thing. And then… then we were falling.”

He looked around the room. “Where’s Riley?”

“Sammy,” James started, and Sam tried to sit up. Sharon and James both stood, trying to keep Sam in bed.

“I want Riley.” Sam told them.

“I know you do.” James said. “I know, but you need to stay in bed.”

“Where’s Riley? Why isn’t he here?” Sam asked, confusion and exhaustion evident in his voice.

“Shh,” Sharon said, rubbing a hand over Sam’s hair.

Tears ran down the sides of Sam’s face, unbidden. James thumbed them away quickly, trying to hold back tears of his own.

“I want- I want Riley.” Sam said again, voice quiet.

Sharon, scrolled through her phone, finding a Marvin Gaye album. Sam started humming along softly. James sighed in relief, looking at Sharon gratefully.

Eventually, Sam fell asleep, hand still in James’. Sharon called Darlene, who was still on the train.

There was a knock at the door, and Sharon and James both stood. Colonel Rhodes was there, in full uniform with his hat under his arm.

“Colonel,” Sharon said, nodding.

“Agent,” Rhodes greeted.

“Did you get it?” She asked.

“Honorable discharge, full VA support, compensation and benefits included.” Rhodes reported.

“Thank you,” Sharon said.

“It was the least I could do.” Rhodes said sadly, looking over at where Sam was sleeping. “Sergeant Wilson and Sergeant Riles were the best men on my team. They’ll be missed.”

“Yeah.” James said. “Yeah, they will be.”

“Excuse me, I have to go speak to Mrs and Mr Riles, now.” Rhodes said. “Give Sam my condolences.”

“Of course.” Sharon said.

Over the course of the next few hours, Sam slept restlessly, waking up momentarily to ask for Riley, for James, for his mother, for pain medication.
They didn't answer any of his questions, just handled him gently until he fell back asleep, guilt growing in their stomachs.

Darlene and Sarah came into the room around 1 in the morning, frantically fussing over Sam.

Sam blearily bats their hands away, telling them, it's fine, just some bumps and bruises. The Wilson women quickly realize what James and Sharon already knew.

Sam didn't know that Riley was dead.

James ran out to get waters for them both, along with a dry turkey sandwich for himself. Sharon scared the nurses into letting them stay past visiting hours, and they took chairs from the waiting room, crowding around Sam’s bed. Eventually, they all started falling asleep. Sharon rested her head on James’ shoulder and dozed off. Baby Sarah curled up in her chair with her knees to her chest, falling asleep with her neck at and uncomfortable looking angle. Darlene slumped forward, putting her head on Sam’s bed and began snoring softly. Soon, James was the only one left awake, nervously chewing on his thumbnail.

He looked at Sam’s chart a few times, though he had no idea what anything written on it meant. Eventually, James drifted off, eyes drooping.

He jerked awake what felt like seconds later. Early light was streaming through the window, and there was an ache in his muscles that came with sleeping in an unusual position. He checked his phone, and saw that it was just after 5 in the morning.

He stretched, feeling his bones pop.

“That was gross.”

James whipped to see Sam staring at him from the bed. “I don’t know man. It was pretty satisfying on my end.” He answered.

Sam was clear-eyed and lucid, looking around the room.

“Do you want me to get a doctor?” James asked quietly.

“No, but, uh, can you help me sit up?” He asked.

James helped him lean forward, stuffing pillows behind his back.

“Thanks,” Sam whispered.

“No problem.” James answered. He grabbed his water bottle and handed it to Sam, who took it with his good hand gratefully. When he had finished it, he looked at James.

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” Sam asked, no inflection in his voice.

James didn’t say anything, simply nodded.

Sam closed his eyes, pressing his mouth into a grim line.

“So...” James started, voice cracking.

“Just...” Sam whispered, shaking his head sharply. “Just please don’t talk.”

Sam screwed his eyes shut, bringing his hands up to cover his ears. Like if he couldn’t see or
couldn’t hear, then maybe be it wouldn’t be true.

He stifled sobs, and the wracked his whole body. He shook with the force of his pain, and all James want to do was tell him that it was okay, that it would get better, but he knew that it was all a lie, so he kept his mouth shut.

Finally, James couldn’t take it anymore. He climbed onto the bed and wrapped his arms around Sam. Sam buried his face into James’ chest, fisting his hands in the back of James’ shirt. James just held him close, pressing his lips to Sam’s forehead.

“It’s my fault.” Sam said.

“Shut up.” James said quietly. “Do you know how pissed he would be if he heard that shit? It’s not your fault.”

“But-”

“Just… just shut up, Sammy.” James said, pulling Sam closer.

Steve nervously waited outside the assisted living home. He fidgeted with the bouquet of sunflowers, trying to think of what he would say. The automatic doors opened and he jumped backwards, startled.

He laughed and shook his head, feeling stupid. He went inside and waited awkwardly at the information desk until someone helped him.

“Hello, sir. How can I-” The young woman trailed off, eyes going wide.

“Um, hi.” Steve could feel himself blush. The attention he got now always made him a little self conscious. “I’m here to visit Peggy Carter.”

“Oh- oh! Of course. Right this way, um, sir.”

Steve had read up on Peggy after coming out of the ice. She had built SHIELD from the ground up, protecting the country with little recognition for years. She never married and never had children of her own, but she did adopt her niece and nephew after her sister died. She had a full life, with adventure and intrigue, yet so few people knew her name.

The got to the room marked M Carter on the door. The nurse knocked lightly. She opened the door a crack and stuck her head inside.

“Ms. Carter? Are you taking visitors?”

“Is it Steve?” A familiar voice came through, and Steve smiled.

“Yes, ma’am it is.”

“Then show him in, for goodness sakes!”

Steve chuckled and the young woman smiled at him, opening the door for him.
“Hey, Pegs.” Steve said.

“About damned time,” Peggy said exasperatedly.

She was sitting up in her bed with a book on her lap. She had long gray hair and older features, but underneath it all, she looked the same.

“Pull up a chair, sit. Let me look at you.” Peggy demanded, and Steve did as told. She looked at him appraisingly, then sighed exasperately. “Still unfairly handsome. As always.”

Steve laughed. “Not always. I didn't look like this when you met me.”

“As handsome as always.” Peggy repeated sternly.

“Whatever you say, Peggy.” Steve said.

She cracked a smile, reaching out to thumb his chin. “It's good to have you back, Steve.”

He leaned into the contact. She still smelled the same.

“It's good to be back,” he said, and he actually sort of meant it.

Peggy shook her head. “God, you stupid, self-sacrificing git.”

Steve frowned. The words sounded eerily familiar, like Bucky had said them to him once. It was strange, since Bucky wouldn't ever use that language. He'd probably just grumble something along the lines of “Steven Goddamn Rogers, too much of a stupid fucking martyr to figure out how to land a fucking plane.”

“Yeah.” Steve said, clearing his throat. “Sorry about that. But, well….”

“I understand. You had to save the world.” She said. “I've done it once or twice, and I've also made sacrifices.”

She looked sad for a moment.

“Who did you lose?” Steve asked.

“Besides you?” She asked quietly. “And the rest of the team?”

Steve took her hand gently. She smiled sadly at him.

“I was in love. After the war. I met someone. Her name was Angie.”

Steve tried not to look too surprised. “What was she like?”

“She was an actress.” Peggy said with a smile. “She was funny and smart and beautiful. She was skinny and blonde and had this anger behind everything…” She shook her head with a laugh. “She reminded me of you, a bit.”

“What happened to her?” Steve asked.

“We moved to California so she could act. We bought a house together. Talked about starting a family. Around 1958, a Russian agent was sent to kill me. He broke into our house.” Peggy took a shuddering breath. “Angie had trouble sleeping sometimes. She heard him come in and tried to stop
him. He shot her.” She closed her eyes. Steve moved closer to her. “I took him down, but Angie-
Angie would never walk again. Never act again. I took that away for her.”

“Peggy,” Steve said. He squeezed her hand.

“I left her in the hospital with a note. I ran back to New York and SHIELD. I never saw her again.
Two years ago-” Peggy stopped, voice breaking. “She died, August 26th, 2009.”

“Pegs, I'm so sorry.” Steve said, leaning across to hug her. He buried his face in her hair. She
hugged him back weakly. “God, I'm so sorry.”

“I had always wondered what you were thinking, that night in that bombed out bar.” She
whispered. “You had just lost him, and you were so angry. I could see it in you, Steve. You were
so bloody angry at the world. I couldn't comprehend it then, but that day, standing at her funeral…”
She shook her head and her hair tickled his neck. “God, Steve I was furious.”

She let him go, cupping his face for a minute. Steve wiped his eyes, not even realizing he had been
crying. Peggy did the same.

“Look at the two of us,” Steve said, and Peggy chuckled.

“What a pitiful sight we must make.” She added.

“What, um, what are you reading?” Steve asked, trying to find a lighter subject.

“Oh, something that my nephew recommended to me.” She said. “It's a French book. Usually I
find the French needlessly dramatic, but this is actually quite good.”

She showed him the cover, which read: L’amant.

“Uh, the love… person? The lover”

“The lover.” Peggy assured him with a smile.

“Man, my French’s gotten rusty.”

“My nephew, he's a linguist. Quite good, too. He's got a PhD. He's always recommending these
foreign books to me and I have to remind him that I only speak the 5 languages.” She trailed off,
smiling bashfully at Steve. “Sorry, I'm an old lady now. I love to brag about my kids.”

“No, no, he sounds great, I'd love to meet him sometimes.”

“You can't.” Peggy said quickly. “I just mean…” she trailed off, wincing. “Sorry, I just get
confused sometimes. I say the wrong thing.”

“That's okay, Peggy.” Steve said. “I understand.”

Peggy rubbed her temple. “I am quite glad to see you, Steve.”

“I'm glad to see you, too. It's almost like no time has passed.” Steve said with a smile.

Peggy chuckled and shook her head. “No it's not. It's been a long time, Steve. The sooner you
accept that, the easier it will be.”

“I know,” Steve said quietly. “It's just hard. Everything is just…gone.”
“Not quite everything. Not yet.” Peggy said, and she reached out to touch his cheek. He held her hand to his face and closed his eyes.

“Peggy,” he breathed. “I'm so scared.”

“That's okay.” She said. “It's okay to be scared as long as you don't let it control you.”

He stayed with her for a while longer until it was time for her medication. She waved him away, saying that she always fell asleep afterwards. He hugged her before he left, trying not to crush her. He buried his face in her hair until she smacked him on the back of the head and told him to leave. He laughed and kissed her on the temple and then left the room.

Steve went out into the hall, smiling. He leaned against the wall, feeling the mix of emotions warring within him. He was happy, but terrified. Sad, but relieved. He didn’t know how he should feel, but he knew that he was glad he had finally gotten to see Peggy.

Just as he collected himself enough to leave, a dog came around the corner. It had half of an ear and a stump tail and a slight lazy eye. It was the single most adorable thing Steve had ever seen.

Steve crouched down. “Hey, beautiful! What are you doing here?”

The dog made a excited grunting sound and ran over to Steve, nub tail wagging wildly. Steve laughed and grabbed the dog in a hug, trying not to giggle like a child when the dog licked his ear, huffing happily.

“Hi, buddy! Where’s your person, huh? What’s your name?” Steve asked, pulling back to see the dog’s collar.

Elizabeth Jean Carter

I am friendly!
If lost, please call my human at 917/413-2272

“Do you know Peggy?” He asked the dog, rubbing her snout. She chuffed at him.

“Ellie? Where did you run off to, girl?” A male voice called. Steve stood with a jolt, feeling a strange chill.

The dog whined and around the corner walked…

“Bucky?” Steve whispered.

Bucky was standing there at the end of the hallway, wearing modern clothes and looking young and healthy, like he had before the war. He caught Steve’s eye and paled. God, there was no way this could be happening.

“Fuck!” Bucky yelled, and started running down the hallway.

“Bucky, wait!” Steve called, and started chasing after him.

Steve followed him down the hallway, but as soon as he turned the corner, Bucky was gone.

Steve whipped around wildly, trying to find him. “Buck!” He cried out, trying not wonder, trying
not to think; it's finally happening I'm losing my mind, oh my god it was Bucky he was there, he was right there it was him, it was Bucky. I'm going crazy, fuck, I'm losing it.

“Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ, Jesus fucking Christ.” James whispered. He was curled up from where he was hiding in the air vent of Peggy’s home. It was trick he had learned from Clint, never thinking it was something he’d ever have to use.

James covered his mouth with his hand, trying not to breathe too loudly.

“Jesus Christ,” he repeated. “God dammit, Sharon! You had one job. Fuck. Fucking fuck. Fuck!” He was trying not to hyperventilate in the small space. He got out his phone to yell at Sharon when his phones’ background reminded him of something.

“Ellie! Shit!”

He looked through the grate to see Steve Rogers looking around wildly, hands in his hair. James felt a pang of guilt for the obvious distress he had caused. Elizabeth was there by his side, nosing his leg, trying to soothe him. He seemed to be broken out of his breakdown by Ellie whining at him.

“H-hey, puppy.” Rogers said shakily, leaning down to pet Elizabeth. “You saw that, right?”

She yipped at him.

Steve left the building, Elizabeth close behind him.

James banged his head against the side of the vent. "Fuck."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

2012

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the strange update schedule! School has started and it's been pretty crazy (art school, man) In other news, I turned 18 today! Here's a present for all of you!

The phone rang. Steve waited nervously, chewing his lip. He held the phone a little away from his ear, because he read somewhere that they emit radiation and since then, he'd been treating his phone like a tiny nuclear bomb.

The phone rang one last time, then went to voicemail.

“Hi, if you're hearing this and you're not a telemarketer, then you should probably just text me.”

Steve tried his hardest to listen, to figure out if that was Bucky’s voice, but through the tinny sound of the phone, he couldn't tell.

The beep sounded, and Steve grimaced. He didn't know if getting an answering machine was worse than actually talking to someone.

“Um… hi. This is Steve. Uh, you don't know me but I have your dog, Elizabeth? She's okay, she's being taken care of, but I'm sure she misses you. So, um, call me back? We can meet up so I can give her back to you. Okay. Um. Bye.” He hung up and smacked his head against his phone a couple of times.

Elizabeth grumbled at him, and Steve patted her head. Steve thought it was funny that she never barked, but he figured it had something to do with her other disfigurements.

“Hey, girl.” He said, and she rested her head on his leg. “Yeah, you miss him, don't you? I miss him too.”

Steve stood and walked to the kitchen. He got out his leftovers and went back to the couch, which was extremely expensive and comfortable.

He hated it, hated that it didn't smell like old cigarettes and didn't have a lump in the middle and a spring dangerously sticking out of one of the cushions.

He turned on the radio, listening to a game. He did have a TV, but it tended to hurt his eyes if he watched too long.

Elizabeth curled up on the couch next to him, and Steve let her eat off of his plate. It was honestly really nice having another, well, not person, but another entity in his apartment. He guessed he
hadn't noticed how lonely he really was until there was another being with him all the time.

His phone pinged, and he glanced down, seeing a text from Natasha.

*get ur ass to base it's mission time! :D*

Steve never knew how long a mission would be. Could be a few hours, could be two weeks. He looked at Elizabeth nervously.

“You can’t feed yourself, can you?” He asked hopefully. She huffed at him.

Steve sighed. “Crap.”

He stood and grabbed his bag and his shield. “C’mon, girl.” They walked across the hall and Steve knocked on the door anxiously. Kate, the pretty nurse who lived across from him opened the door, looking harried.

She had her phone pressed to her ear. “Stop, Ja- stop yelling at me! It’s not my fault, I- Hold on! Hold on, shut up. Shut up.” She pressed her phone to her chest and looked at Steve. “Hey, sorry about that. What’s up?”

“Um, I’m going out for a little while and I was wondering if you could watch this dog?”

“Sure, I love dogs! What it’s-” She looked behind Steve at Elizabeth and stopped, eyes going wide.

“Yeah, she’s a little weird looking, but I promise she’s friendly.” Steve laughed, rubbing his neck.

“What did you say your dog’s name was?” Kate asked in a high-pitched tone.

“She’s not mine.” Steve said quickly. “Her name’s Elizabeth. I think she’s lost, I’m trying to find her real family.”

“Uh-huh.” Kate said. “Yeah, sure. I’ll take care of her. How long?”

“I’m not sure actually.” Steve said with a wince. “Work is a little unpredictable. As soon as I know, I’ll um, I’ll text you.”

“Oh, that’s fine.” Kate said. She leaned down and Elizabeth immediately went up to her. “Hey, Ellie.” Kate greeted. “Me and her will have a good time. Won’t we, girl?” She scratched Elizabeth behind the ear, in the exact spot that Steve had determined was her favorite. Elizabeth’s tongue lolled out and she rolled over, showing her belly.

Kate’s phone made a sound so loud that Steve could hear it and she rolled her eyes, bringing her phone back to her ear. “I’ll call you back, J.” She hung up.

“Boyfriend?” Steve asked, then blushed. That totally sounded like flirting.

“My brother.” Kate answered. She shook her head and grumbled, “Pain in my ass.”

Steve laughed. “Alright, well. I guess I’ll go. You sure you’re okay with taking care of her?”

Kate smiled. “Of course.”

He got to base, parking his motorcycle. He met Natasha in the Fury’s office.

“What’s Fury?” Steve asked.
“He’s on his way. Did you get a dog?”

Steve frowned. “Do I smell?”

“You’re pants are covered in dog hair.” Natasha smell. “And you kinda smell. How could you get a dog without me knowing?”

“I didn’t get a dog.” Steve said. “I’m just… borrowing a dog. She was lost.”

“Do you have pictures? Tell me you have pictures.”

“Yeah” Steve said. His phone’s camera was full of shaky pictures of Elizabeth.

He showed the most visible picture to Natasha. She looked at it for a second, then started laughing.

“Yeah, I know.” Steve said. “She’s kinda goofy looking.”

“Christ, this is too good.” Natasha laughed. “Text me that picture.”

“How do I do that?” He asked.

“Here, just give me the phone.” Natasha said, grabbing his phone from his hand.

“I’m never gonna learn if you just-” he sighed, and Natasha handed him back his phone.

“It’s already done.” She said, taking out her own phone, rapidly texting someone.

Steve leaned over, trying to see what she was saying. She pulled that phone close to her chest.

“God, etiquette much?”

“Sorry.” Steve said, blushing. “Who are you texting?”

“Clint.” She said quickly. “He loves a good dog pic.”

Fury came in the room, entrance dramatic as always.

“Put away your phones, kids. We’ve got a motherfucking disaster.”

“Captain America stole my dog and it’s your fault! You had one job! One job, Sharon! Tell me if we might be in the same place! God, fuck it’s not that hard! One text!” He mimicked Sharon’s voice “‘Hey James, Captain America is heading to visit Peggy, make sure not to be there in case he sees you and has a panic attack and steals your fucking dog!’ Jesus fucking Christ, Sharon!”

“I don’t report to you!” Sharon answered.

“Does he even know how to take care of a dog? I mean, I don’t know what they used to do to dogs back in the 30’s! What if he eats her?”

His phone buzzed. He looked and saw he had a text from Natasha.

wtf this is ur dog right? u didn't tell me that he took ur dog when u saw him lololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololololol
Attached to the text was a slightly blurry picture of Elizabeth.

“He’s telling Natasha that Ellie is his dog! He’s blatantly displaying his crimes!”

“Oh my god, James. He’s Captain America. He’s not going to eat your fucking dog. Look. He talked to me. He told me that he’s trying to find her family. Your number’s on the collar. Has he called you?”

James paused. “Yeah, he’s called me. He left a voicemail asking to meet up.”

“Well there you go!” She said. “He’s a good guy, James.”

“Sharon, how the fuck am I supposed to meet up with up with him and collect my baby without causing him extreme mental anguish?” James asked.

“Well...” Sharon said. “Ellie’s staying with me right now.”

“What?” James asked. “You have her?”

“Yeah. Cap’s on a mission and he asked me to dog-sit.” Sharon told him. “Maybe you could just... steal her back?”

“Oh my god, Sharon. And then what? What would you tell him? That you're the world's shittiest neighbor? ‘Hey, Cap, I know you left your puppy with me but she's gone now!’ You can't do that to him!”

Sharon sighed. “I guess you have a point. He's so depressing.”

There was a yipping sound and James gasped. “Was that Ellie? Put her on the phone.”

“She’s a dog, James.” Sharon sighed.

“Put her on the phone.” James said.

He could practically hear her eyeroll. He listened for Elizabeth’s tell-tale panting.

“Hi, baby girl!” He could hear Elizabeth grunt into the phone. “How’s my sweet girl?” He asked, and Elizabeth whined. “Daddy misses you, yes he does.” He crooned.

“You’re so gross.” Sharon complained.

“Whatever.” James said. “You’re just jealous of our connection.”

“How’s Sam?” Sharon asked somberly.

“He’s doing okay.” James answered. “Sarah had to go back to school and Darlene’s here for another couple days, but he’s doing alright.” Sam had been staying in James’ spare room for the time being. Luckily, his building had an elevator, so Sam could navigate it easily. He’d been withdrawn and depressed, and the VA doctors have him on a litany of medications that have made him sluggish and absent.

Sometimes he wouldn't speak for hours at a time, once an entire day. James could hear him sometimes at night, waking from nightmares about falling. Sometimes he would walk around the apartment quietly, like a restless ghost. Other times, he would stand in James’ doorway until James would beckon him into the room, flipping open the covers until Sam would crawl in beside him and fall asleep.
“When is the funeral?” Sharon asked.

“Next week, back in Missouri.” James answered.

“Fuuuck.” Sharon breathed. “This all sucks. It just fucking sucks.”

“When did our lives get this fucked up?” James sighed.

“I think it was the day we met.” Sharon said with a laugh. “The forces that be never intended for us to meet.”

“The terror twins of New York.” James said, an old nickname that their mother used to call them. “God Dammit,” he sighed. “Sorry for yelling at you.”

“It's fine. Sorry that Captain America stole your dog.”

“It's fine. I think I have an idea.”

“You want me to what?” Elliot asked.

“I know it's a little strange.” James said.

“Why can't you do this yourself, exactly?”

James winced. “Sorry. I totally understand that we’ve only been on half a date. You don't have to do it.”

“No, I mean- I'm your friend, I want to help you.” Elliot said with a frown. “I'm just confused. This guy who who has your dog... do you know him?”

“Not exactly, no.”

“Are you afraid of him or something?” Elliot puffed himself up a bit. “Is this guy stalking you? Did he steal your dog?”

“No, no it's nothing like that.” James said, smiling to himself a little bit. Elliot was really sweet. “I just need someone else to get her for me. It's really weird and complicated to explain. Sorry.”

“It's fine, James.” Elliot said. “I get it. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to. It's none of my business.”

They sat there in the kitchen, Elliot stirring his tea with a spoon. James had taken to putting on tea and biscuits every time he had a guest over, something Peggy had insisted was what one did when one was not an impolite savage.

“Your place is really nice.” Elliot commented mildly. “Most teachers’ houses are usually complete wrecks. Or at least that's true of the ones I've visited.”

“Thanks. I grew up with my aunt and sister so I've learned to keep a tidy living space.” James shrugged. “Also, I watch a lot of HGTV.”
Elliot nodded solemnly. He glanced back at the living room, something he had been doing a lot during their conversation. He obviously was trying to find a polite way to ask. “So, um, who’s the guy on your couch?”

“That's Sam, don't you fucking dare wake him up.” James said, then felt a pang of guilt when Elliot looked hurt. “Sorry. It's just, he hasn't slept in three days.”

“Right. And he's your roommate?” Elliot asked.

“For the time being. He just got back from Afghanistan.”

“Oh.” Elliot seemed to deflate with relief. “So you and he aren't…” he gestured.

“Oh! No, we're not. He’s enga-” James shut his mouth with a click, feeling sick to his stomach. “Anyway. Will you do it?”


“Thank you so much. You're the best. Seriously.” James leaned in quickly and kissed Elliot on the lips. Elliot blushed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“ Weirdo.” He scoffed at James and James smiled at him. He really liked Elliot.

“'ant tahabani.” He teased.

“ akhrus. No I don't.” Elliot said, punching James softly on the arm. “Fine. Maybe a little. But only because you're pretty.”

James stood and started collecting the silverware. “Thanks for your help, El. Seriously.”

“Yes, yeah. Just buy me dinner and we’ll be even.”

James showed Elliot out, telling him that he'd text him. He walked back into the apartment and leaned against the door. Even though everything around him was going to shit, he felt warm and happy for a few seconds.

Sam jerked violently in his sleep and James startled. He sighed sadly and walked over to the couch, kneeling next to Sam. Sam let out a short groan and James grabbed his hand, squeezing it lightly.

Sam’s eyes fluttered open and he sighed when he saw James. “Sorry.” He muttered, pushing himself into a sitting position.

“What're you apologizing for, huh?” James asked softly, and Sam rolled his eyes. “You want some water?” Sam nodded and James stood, walking into the kitchen.

“How'd your date with that guy go. Um, Eli?”

“Elliot.” James answered, handing Sam his water. “And it wasn't a date. I just needed a favor.”

“ Musta been some favor.” Sam said. “You got out the fancy tea.”

“Shut up.” James said. He sat next to Sam, bumping their shoulders together.

“Fuck.” Sam sighed, running a hand over his face. “I hate this, Jamie. I really fucking do.”

“I know I sound like a broken record, Sam, but-.”
“I'm not gonna go to therapy like some white housewife with a drinking problem.” Sam said.

“Sam-” James sighed, but Sam shook his head.

“Look, I know it worked for you and Sharon when y'all were kids, but sitting in a circle and talking about my feelings isn't gonna flow with me.”

“Can you just try it? I mean you used to love this stuff, before. Remember when you wanted to be a social worker?” James asked.

“That was before.” Sam told him stubbornly.

“Just once? I'll go with you if you want.”

“I don't know, man…” Sam said nervously.

“Please? You don't talk to me, you haven't left the house, you're not sleeping or eating. I can't keep watching you do this to yourself, Sammy.” James’ voice cracked and he shook his head. “Please, don't make me lose you, too.”


“Thank you.” James said gratefully.

Sam opened his eyes and gave him a small smile. “Only because of your solid guilt-tripping.”

“Yeah, it's my superpower.” James said with a smile.

“One of many.” Sam yawned. “I think I'm gonna go back to sleep now.”

“Okay.” James said, and kissed Sam's forehead. “I love you, man.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sam sighed, pulling the blanket back over himself. “Love you, too.”

---

Steve read the text for what felt like the millionth time.

*Hi! Thanks you so much for calling! I'm so glad Elizabeth is safe. Can we meet at the Starbucks on Independence? What time is best for you? Thanks again!*

He'd just gotten back from his mission with Natasha and the STRIKE team. A local gang had gotten their hands on some alien weapons and were wreaking havoc in some of the inner cities. The cops weren't equipped to handle it and they had called in SHIELD. It had been rough for Steve, because the people they were fighting weren't even just civilians, but they were kids. Kids that were desperate and had fallen into a bad situation. A few guys from the STRIKE team took too much joy in beating them senseless.

He’d gotten back home and simply held onto Elizabeth, burying his face in her fur. She whined at him, licking his shoulder.

Now, he read the text on his phone for the millionth time with a growing sense of
dread/excitement/anxiety in his stomach. He chewed on his lip, fingers hovering over the screen.

*Hey! What's your-*

He held down the erase button.

*Hello! I'm Ste-*

He shook his head, deleting it.

*Hi! Thanks for writing-*

“God dammit.” He sighed, knocking the phone against his head.

*How does tomorrow at 10am sound?*

He send it without looking, clenching his eyes shut. Steve tossed his phone onto the coffee table and stood, pacing around his apartment. Elizabeth hopped off the couch and followed him, tail wagging.

He went to the icebox, knowing that it would be empty before he even opened it. He stared at the single bottle of soy sauce and the box of baking soda until the chill seeped into his bones and he shivered, trying not to think of the shock of the cold arctic water.

He shut the door to the fridge and sighed.

From the living room, his phone buzzed. Steve jumped over the kitchen counter and grabbed his phone, nearly taking out his table. He rolled to his feet, holding his phone. He held his breath and opened his text messaging app.

*Sounds good!*

He let out his breath, feeling strangely disappointed. He didn’t know what he expected.

Steve let out a hefty sigh and collapsed onto the couch. He grabbed the remote and flipped the TV on. He was starting to get used to it. It was stupid, but he really like the kid’s cartoons. He remembered when he was 17 and watched *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* for the first time, how amazing it was, how expressive the characters were, how beautiful the backgrounds could be.

Now he could flip through the Television and see a movie or show with flawless animation. There were a lot of things that terrified him about the new world, but there were a lot of things that amazed him.

He got out his phone to text Natasha. *What Disney movie should I watch tonight?*

His phone buzzed almost immediately. *Barton and I are coming over.*

*Do you know where I live?*

Without a reply, they arrived in only a few minutes, carrying armfuls of DVDs and snack foods. Barton dropped everything he was holding onto the couch and ran to greet Elizabeth, who happily licked at his face.

“Buckle in, Rogers. We’ve got a long night ahead.” Natasha said seriously as Barton rolled around on the floor with the dog.
“Oh jeez.” Steve sighed.

“Tonight we view the entirety of the Disney Renaissance.” She declared dramatically.

“You know I don't know what you mean.” Steve sighed, moving the various snack boxes out of his way so he could sit.

“We will start with the timeless classic; The Little Mermaid.” Natasha told him, loading the DVD into the TV. “Then Beauty and the Beast. Then Aladdin. Then Lion King. Then… then we’ll see how you're feeling and go from there.” She stood and sat comfortably next to Steve, resting against his side. He tried not to show it, but he really wanted to lean further against her, hungry for human contact.

“Lyubov moya, are you coming?” She called to Clint.

“Should I make the popcorn now?” Clint asked, then squealed happily as Elizabeth licked his ear.

“Yeah, now’s a good time.” She said, and walked into the kitchen, then stopped.

“Uh, Cap? Where’s your microwave?” He asked.

“Oh. I don't have one.” Steve answered.

Clint looked completely befuddled. “Oookay. Um. Let me google how to do this shit.” He got out his phone and started typing. “You got pots and or pans?”

“Yeah, I have pots and pans.” Steve sighed. “Bottom left cabinet.”

The next few minutes were a mix of muttering and banging sounds, followed by aggressive popping and terrified shrieks. Finally, Barton came into the living room with a bowl full of popcorn.

He sat on the floor at Natasha’s feet and handed her the popcorn. She grabbed the remote and turned the movie on.

After the Lion King’s credits were rolling and Steve was wiping the tears from his face, he turn the TV off. Clint and Natasha were both fast asleep, tangled together on the couch, limbs everywhere. Steve had to move their bodies off of his lap so he could stand. Elizabeth, from where she was laying on the floor, stood, following him.

He went to his bedroom, pulling a blanket off of his bed. He draped it over them, a sense of warmth growing in his stomach. It was nice to be close with someone again, even if they were as strange as Natasha and Barton were.

He cleared the area of empty candy boxes and wrappers, putting the trash in a pile on his kitchen counter. He could deal with it later. All he wanted now was to fall asleep.

-“You've officially fucking lost it.” Sharon said over the comms. “Over.”

He did feel a little like a crazy person. He was sitting on a rooftop with a scope, staring at a Starbucks. He had bugged the jacket of his sort-of boyfriend/coworker and had his sister posted outside in disguise, as if this were an actual drop/retrieval mission. Christ, it was like they were on the set of a high budget spy movie.

“Jamie, why the fuck are we using this civilian instead of Sam? Over.”

“Sam’s going through some stuff, over.” James answered. He swung his scope to look at Sharon. She was dressed as a hipster, with a short dark wig and a beanie, with ironic glasses and a nose piercing. She was sitting outside the Starbucks, pretending to work on her laptop.

“You mean he’s sitting on your couch and binge watching West Wing. Over.” She said.

“If you must know, he’s actually going to group therapy today. Over.”


“Just annoyed him until he went.” James said. “Over.”


“Eagle? Is that what we decided to go with? Over.” James asked, training his scope onto the cross street. He spotted Elizabeth first, trotting happily down the street. Next to her was a large broad-shouldered man. He was wearing blue-jeans and a tight t-shirt. He also had a baseball cap pulled low over his face and dark sunglasses.


“Be nice, over.” James sighed.

“You’re the one stalking him, over.” Sharon snarked.

“I’m the one stalking him? You literally moved across the hall to monitor him at all times of the day.”

“Yes, but it’s my literal job that I get paid to do. You’re just sad and weird.” Sharon said.


“Mouse is in place, over.”

“Mouse? Really? He has a name.” James sighed. “And what’s up with all the animal code names?”

“Well, I had planned on Falcon, but then you brought a school teacher instead of Sam. Over.”

James rolled his eyes and tried to find Elliot in the Starbucks. He was standing in line, humming to himself nervously, which James found kind of adorable.

Elliot walked up and ordered a chai drink, bouncing on the balls on his feet.

“I will admit, he is pretty cute.” Sharon said. “In a nerdy kinda way. Over.”


“Eagle is entering the building.” Sharon reported.
Rogers walked into the Starbucks with Elizabeth. He looked around the store wildly. James felt a pang of guilt at the look on his face.

An employee came up to him, looking concerned. She spoke to him for a few minutes, and he nodded.

“He's not allowed to have the dog in the store.” Sharon reported.

Just then, Elliot turned, drink in hand. He spotted Elizabeth and walked over to Steve.

“Hello?” Elliot said, voice patchy through the cheap listening device.

Steve looked at Elliot, face falling. “Um, is this--dog?” There was static in James’ ear, and he strained to listen.

“Yes, she’s-” Elliot stopped, eyes going wide. “Um, you’re...” He trailed off, staring at Rogers.

“Come on, rookie.” Sharon muttered. “Don’t choke.”

Elizabeth whined impatiently and both Steve and Elliot turned to look at her. She stepped forward and sniffed Elliot’s pant leg. She must have smelled James on him, because she stood and wagged her tail, huffing excitedly.

“We better-- outside.” Rogers said. Elliot nodded and followed Steve out of the coffee shop.

“I’m sorry,” Elliot started. “I’m an American History teacher. It’s an, it’s an honor to meet you.”

“Oh.” Rogers said. “Um. Thank you.” He replied uncomfortably. He handed Elizabeth’s leash to Elliot who took it clumsily.

Steve crouched down and scratched Elizabeth under the chin. He said something that James couldn’t quite catch, and stood.

“She’s a good dog.” Steve told Elliot, sounding choked.


Rogers held out his hand and Elliot gaped at it. After a moment he took the Captain’s hand and shook it.

“Nice meeting you.” Rogers said haltingly.

“You too.” Elliot said, clearly not trying to be too enthusiastic. Elizabeth yipped at Steve, bumping her head against his leg. He chuckled wetly, patting her head.

“Goodbye,” Rogers said, seemingly to both Elliot and Elizabeth.

“Bye.” Elliot said. He started walking down the street, shaking his head in disbelief. Once he was out of earshot of Rogers, he chuckled to himself giddily. “Captain fucking America.”

Sharon stood from her spot and started following Elliot nonchalantly. James almost started packing up his stuff when he took one last look at Rogers. He looked shattered. There was no other word for it. He was just standing on the sidewalk, hand still outstretched. His stance was hunched over, like he had been punched in the stomach.

“Um, you guys go ahead.” James said. “I’ll catch up.”
“James-” Sharon started.

“Over and out.” He said, pulling the comm out of his ear.

He climbed down the fire escape of the building, bag slung over his shoulder. He didn’t really know what he was doing, but as Rogers collected himself and started walking the street, James pulled his hood over his head and started following him.

James weaved through the crowded street, keeping his head down and his hood pulled low. He watched how Rogers had his hands deep in his pockets, his posture slumped. If anyone saw him on the street, they wouldn’t recognize him. He didn’t walk like Captain America. He didn’t walk like someone who could face war, or battle, or even a harsh word. He looked like a broken man.

One that didn’t look both ways before walking out into the street.

“Shit, stop!” James called, and lunged forward, grabbing the back of Rogers’ shirt and yanking him back, just as a massive truck barrelled past.

They stumbled backwards, and James fell onto the sidewalk.

"Sorry, I'm sorry about that, I just-" Rogers ran his hands over his face. "Shit, let me help you up." He offered his hand and James took it without thinking. Rogers pulled him to his feet easily.

They made eye contact. "Um." James squeaked.

Rogers went pale, eyes wide and jaw slack.

"Fuck." James sighed.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

"I fucked up."

Chapter Notes

So from here on out my updates are gonna be a little crazy. I’m in my first year of college and classes are starting to pick up. I’m loving it though! Sorry for the madness!

The alternate title of this chapter is: We Can’t Keep Gaslighting Captain America

“Your- how are you- how-“ Rogers stammered. He was getting paler and paler and James seriously worried that he was going to faint right then and there.

“Captain Rogers, I need you to breathe.” James said, and apparently that was the wrong thing to say because he started shaking his head, his eyes clenched shut. He took a few blind steps backwards and stumbled over the curb.

James reached out quickly and grabbed the front of Rogers’ shirt, yanking him forward.

“Christ, let's get you outta the street.” James murmured. He grabbed Rogers’ arm and started pulling him down the sidewalk. “We’re on 14th, right? I have a friend who lives near here.”

“What- what's happening?” Rogers demanded, though he let James lead him easily.

“It's a really complicated story, man.” James said. He got out his phone and dialed. When he got the answering box, he sighed. “Tetushka, it's me. Look, um-” he glanced back at Rogers and switched to Russian. “Я всё испортил. Big time. Я с капитаном. Anyway, hope you're out of town, because I’m coming to your place.”

Rogers, who was on the verge of a panic attack behind him, barely seemed to register anything that was happening. He just held onto James’ arm, tight enough that he thought it might bruise.

James took them the two blocks to Natasha’s DC safe house, fumbling through his keys until he found the right one. He dragged Rogers into the living room and forced him onto the couch. James went to the kitchen and poured a glass of water. He walked into the living room and pushed the glass into Rogers’ hands.

“Drink.” He demanded.

“Bucky, how are you-”

“Just drink.” James repeated firmly. He sat on Natasha’s ottoman, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Shit.” He muttered again.
“You're dead.” Steve said. “You died. You fell. I saw you-” he broke off with a sob started gasping for air, like he couldn't quite breathe. James took the glass of water and he guided Rogers until his head was between his knees. He rubbed Steve’s back, the way he did with Sam when he was having a flashback.

“Alright, buddy. Just breathe. There you go.” James whispered. “Like me.” He took one of Rogers’ hands and put it on his chest so that he could feel the rise and fall of James’ breath.

Rogers’ fingers curled in the front of James’ shirt and he pulled James forward, grabbing his face and pushing their mouths together in a harsh kiss. James made a surprised sound and tried to pull away, but Rogers’ was cradling the back his head.

Finally, he broke the kiss, resting his forehead against James’. “It’s really you.” He whispered, rubbing his thumb along James’ cheekbone. James closed his eyes. He grabbed Rogers’ hands, which were on either side of his face, and pulled them away.

“Captain Rogers,” He said quietly. “I’m not who you think I am.”

Rogers looked at him blankly. James could see in his eyes how fragile he was in this moment. He worried that the truth would kill him. But he couldn’t lie about this.

“I’m not Bucky Barnes.” He said in a rush.

“Buck, what are you talking about?” Rogers asked, with a slight smile, like he was waiting for the punchline of a joke.

“I’m not Bucky Barnes. My name is James Steven Carter. I’m a 26 year old language teacher from Bed-Stuy.” He said as gently as he could.

“I don’t understand.” Rogers said softly, voice small, face falling.

“Captain-” James sighed, then shook his head. “Steve. I’m not him. I was born in the late 80’s. I have a sister named Sharon and a best friend named Sam and I don't know you. I’m- I’m not Bucky Barnes. I'm sorry.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asked, voice raw. He was staring at James, like he was trying to memorize his face.

James ran a hand through his hair, sighing loudly. He stood and started to pace.

“I'm sorry, you were never supposed to see me.” James said, not looking at Rogers. “But, dude, you took my dog.”

“Elizabeth? Wait- you were at Peggy's, weren't you?”

“Yeah, she’s my- she raised me. I visit her every day if I can. You weren't supposed to be there. At least- not at the same time as me.” James felt like tearing his hair out.

“So-” Rogers started, then stopped. “Sorry, I'm still confused. If you're not- I mean, why do you…”

“It’s complicated.” James sighed.

“Uncomplicated it.” Rogers demanded, and he seemed less broken now, more intense.

“I- I was cloned.” James said. “As part of a HYDRA program.”
“HYDRA?” Rogers asked, standing. His fists were clenched by his sides. James took a step back.

“I know this is hard to hear,” James started, raising his hands in surrender. “Sergeant Barnes didn’t die when he fell.” He spoke quickly. “He was badly injured, but not dead. HYDRA found him and... they did experiments on him. In the 80’s they cloned him and I was born, but I was rescued by SHIELD when I was a baby.”

Rogers blinked. “Experiments?” He asked quietly.

“I’m...” James said. “I’m sorry, Captain. They did some pretty awful things to him. He, uh, he died in 1987.”

“I...” Rogers sat back down on the couch. “Give me a second.”

“Sure.” James breathed, slightly panicked. It was setting in for him, how badly he’s fucked up. He got out his phone and made a group text with Natasha, Clint, and Sharon.

_I FUCKED UP. I FUCKED UP BAD._

Sharon was the first to reply.

_Jamie wtf did u do._

_THE ONE FUCKING THING I WASN’T SUPPOSED TO DO._ He typed, wanting to bang his head against a wall.

_Is Rogers ok?_ Natasha sent.

_Yeah, we’re at your place actually. He’s not doing great, but it could have gone worse._ He replied.

_What have you told him?_ She asked.

_Aw, shit. Clint replied unhelpfully._

_I probably told him too much._ James sent. _It’s not good._

_I’m coming over._ Natasha texted.

“Fuuuuck.” James sighed. “I’m in so much trouble.”

“With who?” Rogers asked, and christ, he was right beside James.

“Jesus!” He yelped, putting a hand over his heart. “Fuck, dude. You’re sneaky.”

“Are you in trouble?” Rogers asked again.

“Yeah, but just the mundane kind. No... aliens or nazis or anything. Just people who are gonna be pissed at me for potentially psychologically damaging you.”

Rogers blinked. “Who?”

“Just my... well, I guess you know Natasha, don’t you? She was part of that whole...” James waved his hand. “Avengers thing.”

“You know Natasha?” Rogers asked, bewildered.

“Yeah, she’s a family friend.” James said. “And we’re in her apartment.”
“This is Romanoff’s place?” Rogers asked, turning around to stare around the room. “Really?”

“I know, it’s cute, right?” James said. Natasha’s living room was filled with soft blankets and rugs in light pastel colors.

Rogers nodded, peering at the ugly floral couch. He looked back at James, almost like he couldn’t help but stare. James looked away and scratched the back of his neck. He shifted uncomfortably and looked back to where Rogers was still observing him.

The door opened and James sighed in relief. “That was qu-” He turned around the corner to greet Natasha, but Rogers yanked him down behind the couch, covering his mouth with his hand.

Several heavily armed men strode through the living room, guns cocked. The first one made motions to the other ones, and they split off in separate directions, one going towards the bathroom, one going towards the bedroom, and the leader staying in the living room. He glanced around the room and started towards the kitchen, his back turned.

James carefully slipped the drawstring out of the hood of his hoodie, wrapping around both his fists like a garrotte. He started to stand, but Rogers held his arm, keeping him back.

“What are you doing?” James whispered.

“Stay here.” Rogers said, then jumped clear over the couch, grabbing the guy in a tackle.

“Like hell.” James muttered, then walked around the couch, because he was a rational human being. There was the repulsive sounds of bones cracking and the guy under Rogers went still.

James walked passed him and walked into the kitchen. He opened the freezer, pulling a gun from between the Ben and Jerry’s, where Clint was known to keep spare weapons. Rogers just stared him.

“Knives, second drawer to your left.” He whispered, and checked to see if the pistol was loaded. Of course it was. Clint didn't know how to treat his guns.

James grabbed his phone, and held down the 1 button. It was a beacon that alerted Natasha, Clint, and Sharon that he was in danger, and it allowed them to track his location. It was much better than when he was an awkward preteen and had to wear a life-alert button around his neck like a senior citizen.

“Hey, boss-” a man in tact gear came into the kitchen and stopped when he saw James and Rogers.

“Duck.” James said, and fired at the the guy, catching him in the shoulder. Rogers stood from his duck and looked back at James.

“Nice shot.” He said.

“Thanks.” James answered.

The third guy ran in, having heard the gunshot. James aimed again, and Rogers went back to ducking.

James pulled the trigger, but instead of a shot, there was the tell-tale click of the gun jamming. “Fucking-” James growled, throwing the gun at the guy. “Clint.”

Rogers charged the guy.
“What the fuck,” James said. “Dude, he has a big fucking gun!”

Rogers didn’t seem to hear him, just clocked the guy in the face. His helmet flew off his head, and his face was bloodied underneath.

The guy grit his teeth and pulled a gun from a thigh holster, aiming it at Rogers. He fired twice, and Rogers was able to gracefully spin out of the way both times. Rogers kicked the gun out of the man’s hand.

James took the opportunity to jump on the guy’s back, wrapping his homemade garrotte around his throat. It was like a weird non-consensual piggyback ride. James held on for dear life as the guy whipped around, struggling for air and trying to get James off his back.

“Shit,” James yelped as he was thrown around, like he a little kid’s superhero cape. He was slammed against a wall and he wheezed as the air was knocked from his lungs. Perhaps this wasn’t his best idea.

The string of his hoodie snapped, and James slid to the floor, smacking his head on the wall. The guy coughed, clutching his throat. Rogers walked up and snapped the guy’s neck.

James struggled to his feet, giving Rogers a thumbs-up. Rogers smiled at him, almost fondly, but then his eyes went wide. “Buck, look out!”

Someone grabbed him from behind. James’ hands flew to the arm across his throat, tugging uselessly. There was something warm leaking into his shirt and he made a face. It was the guy from before, the one he shot.

“Don’t move!” The guy commanded gruffly.

“Which one of us?” James asked, voice a little strained. “Me or him?”

“Obviously him.” The guy answered.

“So I can move?” James asked.

“No, you can’t- shut the fuck up!” The guy shook him, which cut off his air, preventing him from saying anything clever.

James jabbed an elbow into the guy’s ribs and when the guy loosened his grip, he spun around, slamming his hand against the bullet hole. They guy cried out in pain, and James grabbed a knife off the counter, stabbing him in the throat.

He made a disgusting gurgling sound and drop to the floor. “Oh, shit.” James murmured. “Is he dead? Oh, fuck, he’s super fucking dead, isn’t he?” He felt like he was gonna be sick.

The door slammed open and Natasha and Clint stood there, weapons drawn.

“Great entrance, guys.” James said dryly. “But we got it covered.”

Natasha looked over the scene. “You fucked up my apartment.”

“Hey, kiddo.” Clint said, stepping over one of the guys’ bodies to give James a short hug. “How’s it going?”

James gave him a baffled look. “Um. Not good?”
“I know, I’m just trying to lighten the mood.” Clint said, ruffling James’ hair. He looked at the wreckage and sighed. “Do you know who they were after?”

“Could be any one of us.” Natasha said, then turned to James. “This is why you always leave one alive, so I can question them.”

“I tried!” James said, pointing at the one he killed. “I shot that guy in the shoulder! It's not my fault he decided to be a dick!” He looked at Clint. “And stop putting your guns in the freezer! It's bad for them!”

He felt pretty hysterical at this point. He just killed a guy. He’s only ever killed paper dummies and aliens. Plus he always hated it when people tried to murder him.

“Alright, why don't you come sit down, solnyshko?” Natasha said, trying to find a seat that wasn't in view of the very visible carnage. “I'll make some tea.”

“I'm fine,” James said, shrugging her off. “They were heavily armed and wearing tact gear, but they weren't expecting Captain Rogers. They would have sent more guys.”

“Okay, that narrows it down some.” Natasha said, nodding.

“And I don't think anyone actually knows Clint lives here, right?” He asked.

“Unless they were conducting surveillance.” Natasha argued.

“Maybe they weren't here for a person.” It was Rogers. He was looking at the dead bodies. “Do you keep anything here? Important documents? Stuff from work?”

“They're not exactly equipped for a B&E.” Clint said.

“Maybe they're armed because they knew whose apartment they were breaking into.” James said thoughtfully, looking at Rogers. “Who’d want to go into the Widow’s web without some protection?”

Natasha looked like she was considering it for a moment, then her head jerked up and she ran into the bedroom.

“Um, I'm gonna go after her.” Clint said, and ran into the bedroom.

James looked at Rogers, and they both started down the hallway.

Natasha was frantically pulling books out of her bookshelf while Clint was tearing up the rest of the room, both clearly looking for something.

“Uh… what's up, guys?”

Natasha looked up, holding a book in each hand. “You said there were three of them, right? Only three?”

“Yeah, there were just the three guys.” James said. “I'm…pretty sure.” He turned to Rogers.

“Right?”

“I-I didn't see them come in.” Rogers said. “I only saw the three we fought.”

“What are you missing?” James asked.
“Ooooh-kay.” Clint said. “This is bad.”

“Guys?” James asked carefully.

“Fuck.” Natasha cursed, throwing the books down. “Fuck.”

“That’s not reassuring.” James said.

“Stupid.” Natasha said, rubbing her temples. “God, how could I be so stupid?”

“It’s not your fault, Tash.” Clint said, putting a hand on her arm. She jerked her arm away, clearly frustrated with herself.

“What happened?” Rogers asked.

“I didn’t like the look of the new STRIKE team.” She said, picking up books and putting them back onto the shelf. “I didn’t trust them, especially after our last mission.”

Rogers nodded. “Understandable.” He said.

“I heard that they were asking about a file, something that a very select number of agents should know about. I talked to Fury, and we both agreed not to question them about it, to see what it was that they wanted. But the file couldn’t stay at SHIELD so I took it home with me.” Her voice was calm and pragmatic, but her anger was visible as she forcefully restocked the shelf.

“What file?” James asked tentatively, dread growing in his stomach.

“You know what file.” She replied, not looking at him.

“Shit.” James said, leaning back against the wall.

“Um,” Rogers looked at the three of them and their various expressions of defeat. “I don’t know what file.”

James’ phone rang and he jumped slightly. It was Sharon.

“Hello?” He answered, sounding tired and weary to his own ears.

“Are you okay?” She demanded, sounding worried.

“Yeah, it’s just been one hell of a day.” He answered. “How’s my baby?”

“Sam? He’s doing just fine.” She answered, her joke falling a little flat. “Ellie’s good. She’s happy to be home.”

“That’s good.” James said. “Will I see you when I get back home?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Okay, love you.”

“You, too.”

She hung up and he sighed. “That was Sharon.” He told the room, pointlessly.

“So you think the STRIKE team did this?” Rogers asked.
“Did you recognize any of those guys?” James asked, and they all looked at one another.

They shuffled back into the living room, and pried off the helmets of two of the bodies. “Nope.” Clint said, tossing the helmet to the couch. “Don't know this dude.”

“Maybe hired mercenaries.” Natasha observed, leaning over the body of the leader. She held up his arm. “This watch is too nice for an agency job.”

“Dibs.” Clint said, and Natasha tossed the watch to him.

“That’s just unprofessional.” Rogers commented, crossing his arms.

“Hey, man. Free stuff is free stuff.” Clint shrugged, slipping the watch on.

Natasha pulled a flip phone out of the dead guy’s pocket. “Burner. I’m gonna dial the last number they called.” She pressed a button and held it to her ear. She grimaced and shook her head. “Line’s dead.”

“Is this what being a spy is? Looting corpses? So glad I dodged that bullet.” James sighed, walking into the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of water and sat on the counter. His day was just getting worse and worse.

Rogers followed and leaned against the counter next to him. “Sorry you got dragged into this.” Rogers said gruffly.

“Actually, I dragged you into this.” James said. “They were probably here for me.”


“HYDRA. They’ve been after me my whole life.” James shrugged and looked into his glass. “When I was a kid, those two had me under constant surveillance.” He nodded toward Clint and Natasha. “For good reason. There’ve been 14 attempted abductions.”

“19.” Clint said, walking into the kitchen. “We don’t tell you about all of them.”

“What?” James asked, whipping around.

“Remember that shitty frat boy who ghosted you?” Clint asked, grabbing a beer from the fridge.

“Chaz? From sophomore year?” James asked.

“Totally a merc.” Clint said. He popped open his beer and took a swig.

“You’re such a dick.” James said, throwing a dish towel at him. Clint caught the towel and walked back into the living room.

“Why are they after you?” Rogers asked.

James shrugged. “There’s a lot of things that I don’t get to know, but I basically have a similar serum to you. Super strength, speed, endurance, agility, whatever. They want me to be their weapon.”

Rogers took a sharp breath. “What did they find here?” He asked.

“A file about me. Well, not me. About the Winter-”
“James!” Natasha called. “Come help me.”

James sighed and set down his glass. He walked over and helped Natasha roll the dead bodies in a tarp.

Clint was on the phone with someone, arguing about something. After a minute he hung up and sighed. “Okay, clean up crew will be here in half an hour, but we gotta go see the boss.” He told Natasha.

“Well, you guys have fun.” James said, grabbing his coat. “I’m not in the mood to deal with the world’s scariest pirate today.”

Clint grabbed the back of his shirt. “No, no, no, bucko. You’re coming with us.”

They all loaded into Natasha’s car. It was a small, sporty thing, and James and Rogers were squeezed uncomfortably in the back. For some reason, Rogers didn’t seem all that bothered. He just leaned against James, staring out the window. Every once and awhile, he glanced back at James.

The got to the SHIELD HQ and loaded into the elevator. The ride up to Fury’s office was tense and awkward, Natasha was still obviously angry with herself, Clint was unsuccessfully trying to cheer her up, and Rogers wouldn’t stop looking over at James.

It was almost a relief to see Fury. He was crossing his arms and leaning against his desk imposingly. “Doctor.” He greeted.

“Director.” James replied.

They all bustled into the room, Natasha standing in the front of the group and Rogers standing in the back.

“Romanoff, tell me what happened.” Fury ordered.

She gave him a run down of the situation. Fury seemed to consider everything for a moment, then sighed, turning to James.

“Doctor Carter, you're gonna have to leave town.” He said.

“What! No way! You can't just-”

“And you're going to need protection. A body guard.”

James spluttered. “I- you- I’ll have you know that I'm a living weapon!”

“That's the problem.” Fury stated. “You'll be out until we can figure out what's going on and eliminate the problem. Barton, you still have that spot in New York?”

“Yeah, he could probably crash with me or Amira.” Clint shrugged. “And Mrs. Wilson would probably be happy to take him in.”

“Let’s not drag Darlene into this.” Natasha muttered.

“Hey! Let's just wait a minute,” James protested. “I have a job here! Family! I need to take care of Elizabeth! And Sam! I can't just up and leave!”

“You can take a leave of absence. Your dog can go with you. Sam can move in with Sharon. James, people are after you. You're in danger.” Natasha told him.
“I can take care of myself.” James said, crossing his arms.

“Not against this.” Fury said. “That folder contained secret passphrases that will turn you into a puppet. HYDRA will wipe your mind, torture you into compliance, and force you to kill. Now, you're a good kid, Carter, but you're a stubborn son of a bitch. The Winter Soldier was the world’s deadliest assassin. He toppled governments, killed a goddamned president. If you don't do your fucking utmost to keep HYDRA from getting their hands on you, I'll just have to kill you myself to save the trouble.”

Rogers pushed in front of James, shielding him behind his massive shoulders. He stood chest to chest with Fury, teeth bared. “I’d like to see you try.”

Fury smiled and shifted his gaze to Clint as Natasha. “I think we found our bodyguard.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

♩♫♬getting to know you♩♫♬

Chapter Notes

Hugs and kisses y'all

“I swear, I will buy you dinner when I get back into town.” James said into the phone.

“I don’t understand, why are you going back to New York?” Elliot asked.

“It’s a family emergency.” James told him, pulling clothes out of his dresser.

“How long will you be gone?” Elliot questioned.

“I don’t know, man.” James sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t apologize, I just… I’m worried. Are you okay?” Elliot asked him.

“Yeah, I-I’m fine.” James said, pulling his dufflebag down from the top of his closet. “God, did you know I needed to get three different subs? One for Mandarin, one for Spanish and ESL, and one for French and Latin. No one would take all of my classes. Like, I already had my lesson plans ready, they wouldn’t even need to be proficient in the language.”

Elliot laughed. “It makes sense. It takes three people to do all the work you do in one day.”

“It’s not that hard! My kids are good kids, and my lessons are pretty simple. I don’t see what the problem is!” James complained.

“Only you, James. Only you would call teaching five different subjects easy and act like the little demons we teach are sweethearts. If anyone else did what you do, they’d collapse from exhaustion after 2 days.” Elliot chuckled.

“What can I say?” James asked, dragging all of his stuff into the living room. “I like my job.”

“You’re crazy.” Elliot told him fondly. “Have fun in New York.”

“Thanks, I will.” James said, and hung up.

He looked at Sharon and Sam and sighed, throwing his stuff down on the ottoman.

“This is the worst idea.” James said, starting to stuff his shirts into his duffle.

“What are you talking about?” Sam demanded. “You get to take off work and chill with Captain America for a few weeks! That's the dopest shit I've ever heard!”
“Sam, I look just like his dead boyfriend! Imagine if—” James stopped himself, teeth clacking shut. “I just don't want to fuck him up any more than I already have.” Elizabeth jumped up onto the couch next to Sam and looked at James. She whined at him and he scratched her under the chin.

“Jamie, it's the only option you have.” Sharon sighed. She was folding his sweaters, trying to fit them in the bag with the rest of James’ stuff.

“God, he's so traumatized.” James sighed, putting his face in his hands. “How am I going to keep from hurting him?”

“Just try to be gentle with him.” Sharon said kindly. “He's been through a lot.”


“Steve, I can't stress this enough,” Natasha said, loading weapons into a bag.

“I know, I know. He's not Bucky. He just looks like Bucky.” And talks like Bucky. And smells like Bucky. And smiles like Bucky.

“He's his own person.” Natasha told him. “He doesn't know you. People are after him, and he's scared.”

“I know, Natasha.”

“And if anything happens to him, I’ll be very upset, you understand?”

Steve looked at her, saw the intensity behind her eyes. “I understand.”

“Now, I'm probably gonna go offline for a while, but if you need anything, I want you to report to Amira Mirbahar. She's an agent stationed in Brooklyn, and she’s a good resource to have. She knows James and she knows how HYDRA operates.” Natasha grabbed Steve’s phone and started tapping away at the screen. “I'm putting her number in now.”

“Thanks for all your help, Natasha.” Steve said. “Sorry I've been so…” He waved a hand in explanation.

“You're fine.” She said easily. “No one else has been through what you have. Seeing James must have been hard. I’m sorry we hid so much from you.”

Steve shrugged. “It's fine.”

He stuffed his shirts into his suitcase. After their meeting with Fury, Natasha sat Steve down and explained everything. How Bucky survived the fall from the train, but was found by HYDRA. How they tortured him, brainwashed him, turned him into a killer and kept him frozen. How he died, alone and in pain and they didn't even care, they just tried to replace him, like he was a broken weapon.

Steve’s normal nightmares of the plane crashing and of Bucky falling have turned in horrific scenes of Bucky in a laboratory, screaming for Steve’s help; of Bucky choking the life out of Steve, eyes blank, not recognizing him; of Steve being forced to kill Bucky in order to keep him from hurting someone.
He hadn’t been getting much sleep lately.

“I’ll keep him safe.” Steve promised.

“I know you will.” Natasha said, and she seemed kind of sad. She put her hand on the side of his face, a strangely gentle gesture. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Keep yourself safe, too.” She whispered.

Steve nodded, feeling himself blush.

“Alright,” She said, picking up the heavy looking weapons bag. She shoved it at him, and he held it against his chest. “You’re all packed.”

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They met up at SHIELD’s private aircraft hangar. Elizabeth was terrified of all the plane noises and refused to move until James picked her up and carried her.

“You big ol’ baby.” He told her lovingly.

Sharon scoffed. “I guess this means we have to carry your bags now?”

James shrugged. “What do you want me to do?”

She sighed and grabbed his suitcase. Sam took his duffle and smiled, rubbing Elizabeth’s head. She licked his fingers.

They started down the runway towards the plane. Elizabeth squeaked nervously as they got closer, and scrambled further up James’ body.

James could make out the shape of two other people and Sam gasped excitedly, elbowing James and pointing.

“Dude, dude! That's Captain America!”


They got closer and Natasha ran up to greet them. “Hey, solnyshko. Hey Elizabeth.” She laughed and scratched one of Ellie’s ears.

Rogers walked up, then stopped; staring at Sharon.

“Kate?” He asked, brow furrowed.

“Oh, damn.” Sharon sighed.

“Uh, Captain Rogers, this is my sister, Sharon Carter.” James introduced awkwardly, gesturing with his arms full of big dog.

“I work for SHIELD,” Sharon explained quickly. “I was assigned as your protection.”

“Oh.” Rogers said. “Huh.”
“Also, the geek that's bouncing off the walls over here is Sam.” James nodded towards Sam, how put out his hand excitedly.

“Sergeant Wilson, sir. It's an honor to meet you, sir. My fiancé, he-” Sam stopped, and Rogers took his hand.

“It’s nice to meet you Sergeant.” Rogers said kindly.

“My fiancé, Riley, he was a big fan of yours. I mean, I am too, but he collected the comics. He had a poster and everything. He dressed up as you every Halloween. God, he was such a fucking dork.” Sam told him shakily. James glanced at Sharon. It was the first time Sam had been able to coherently talk about Riley without breaking down.

“He sounds like someone I would have loved to meet.” Rogers smiled, squeezing Sam’s shoulder.

“Th-thank you.” Sam said, then turned his attention quickly to Elizabeth so no one besides her could watch him break down. James handed her over to him and took back his duffle bag. Sam wrapped his arms around Elizabeth, putting his face in her fur. James rubbed Sam’s arm. Sam walked a few feet away to get himself some space.

Rogers looked deeply upset by this, watching Sam walk away. He looked at James. “Is he okay?”

James glanced back at Sam and frowned. “Uh, no. He probably won't be for a while. But…” he chewed his lip. “Hopefully he’ll get there one day.”

“His fiancé was military?” Rogers asked.

“Yeah.” James said hoarsely. “He fell.”

Rogers winced and James felt suddenly and deeply stupid.

“Sorry.” James said.

Steve shook his head. “Don't worry about it.”

“We better get you boys on that plane.” Natasha said, breaking the awkwardness by clapping Rogers on the shoulder.

James turned to Sharon made a face. “Oh my god I'm literally the worst I hate myself.” He whispered to her. She rolled her eyes at him.

“Get over yourself, baby bro.” She said. “He's Captain fucking America. It's gonna take a little bit more than one idiot putting his foot in his mouth to take him down.”

“Right.” James sighed. “Right. Thanks, Share.”

She ruffled his hair. “Alright, let's load you on to the jet, dumbass.”

They walked toward the plane, and Sam jogged to catch up with them.

They boarded the plane, and James whistled lowly, impressed. He'd never been on a plane before.

Sam set down Elizabeth and she ran over to James, sniffing at his feet. Then, she ran over to Rogers, yipping happily at him.

“Hey, girl!” Rogers said excitedly, crouching down to greet her. She licked his face and he
laughed. James smiled and started putting his bags in the overhead bins. When he was done, he turned to Sharon and Sam.

“I guess I’ll see you guys later.” He said, and Sharon wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He picked her up off the ground and she squealed, smacking him on the back until he put her down. He pulled Sam into a hug and kissed his forehead.

“I love you guys.” He said, pulling them both close.

“Love you too.” Sam muttered.


“You too.” He said. He quickly kissed both of their cheeks, then let them go. “Okay, get out of here, you two.”

They both hugged him again, then scurried off the plane. James watched them go, a sense of dread growing in his stomach.

“They’ll be fine.” Natasha said from behind him. James turned to her.

“Yeah, I know.” He told her. “I just worry.”

“You’re gonna be fine too. I’ll make sure of it.” She promised.

“I know you’ll keep me safe, tetushka. You always have.” He said, and she smiled at him.

“Good luck.” She said, and patted him on the shoulder. She hopped out of the plane and James let out a shuddering sigh, looking around the cabin nervously.

He climbed into one of the seats, buckling the seatbelt. He called Elizabeth over and buckled her in as well.

“Hello, sirs.” A voice came over the intercom. “I’ll be your pilot today. Our flight to New York City will last approximately one hour. Sit back, relax, and enjoy your flight.”

The engine roared to life, and James held tightly onto the armrests. When the jet started down the runway, he squeezed his eyes shut until the strange, weighted sense of flying took over his body. He opened his eyes and realized that he had been holding his breath.

“First time?” Rogers asked from the back of the plane.

James nodded quickly.

“Yeah, I don’t have great track record with planes.” Rogers said, and James let out a surprised laugh.

“Well, this pilot probably knows what he’s doing.” James told him. “Probably.” He amended. “Actually, I’m gonna go check.” He unbuckled his seatbelt and walked over to the cockpit. He knocked on the door and opened it.

“Um,” He called back to Rogers. “Um Captain?”

“Is something wrong?” Rogers asked, and James could hear the sound of a seat belt unbuckling.

“Um. There’s no pilot! There’s no pilot!” He turned to Rogers and pointed violently at the empty
cockpit. “Where’s the pilot?”

Rogers stuck his head in the cockpit. “Huh. That’s strange.”

“Wha-!” James ran down the cabin, rummaging through his backpack. “What the fuck! There’s no pilot! Why isn’t there a pilot? How are we flying?” He got on his phone, prepared to call Sharon, or Natasha, or the fucking police, when the plane started talking.

“I’m sorry to have startled you, sir. I’m afraid that the plane is being flown by me.”

Rogers frowned. “Jarvis? Is that you?”

“Yes, Captain.”

Rogers looked at James. “It’s okay, it’s just Jarvis.”

James threw his hands up in the air. “I don’t know what that means! Who’s Jarvis? Why can’t I see him?” He was feeling slightly hysterical. People were out to get him, he was being forced to leave his home, and now his plane was pilotless.

“I’m an Artificial Intelligence created by Mr. Stark. I currently have control of your plane and I’m flying it remotely. It’s actually much safer than having a human pilot.”

“Oh, good.” James said sarcastically. “I feel much better, knowing that Tony Stark’s imaginary friend is flying the plane instead of a flesh man. Thanks. Thanks so much.” He sat back down next to Elizabeth, fishing through his bag for his book.

The flight was fairly quick, if nerve wracking. James read a collection of essays by a famous translator and poet, Anne Carson. Elizabeth fell asleep, resting her head on his lap.

They landed at LaGuardia around 11am. The airport seemed to stress Rogers out, so James led them out as quickly as possible. He hailed a cab and loaded their bags into the back. James argued with the driver about allowing Elizabeth in the car. The cabbie looked into the rearview mirror and saw Rogers. His eyes went wide for a moment, then he shook his head and scoffed. God, James had missed New York. Everyone in DC had been so disingenuous. In New York, people weren’t afraid to show what they were feeling, they would just tell you outright.

They made it to the old brownstone that James had grown up in, and the sight of it filled him with nostalgia. It was like the opposite of anticipation. He already knew what all had happened in this building, but standing before it still had him on edge.

“Let’s go.” Rogers said, making his way in.

“It’s the top floor, the door marked ‘Superintendent’.” James told him. Rogers started up the stairs quickly, and James followed at a more sedate pace. He stopped on the fourth floor staring briefly at the door to his family’s old apartment. He touched the old wood, running his fingers over a small dent in the varnish where Sharon tried to shoot one of Clint’s arrows inside. Where he met his family, where his mother had her last meal, where he lost his virginity. It was strange now, that he couldn’t go in.

James shook his head and continued up the stairs. Rogers was standing in the center of Clint’s living room with Elizabeth at his feet.

“It’s cleaner than I expected.” Rogers remarked.
“Natasha.” James said simply. “She lives here, too. I mean, when she’s in town anyway.”

James walked to the bedroom and started unpacking his bags. Rogers followed him. “Natasha and Barton live together?”

“Well, yeah dude. They’re married.” James told him, putting his glock in the nightstand. “Where else would they live?”

“Married? No they’re not.” Rogers said quickly.

James laughed. “Yes they are. I was there.”

He walked over to the closet and opened the dresser, pulling a picture from the sock drawer. He handed it to Steve. It a picture James knew well. Of Natasha in a pretty white dress and Clint in a scruffy tuxedo, standing in front of City Hall. An 11 year old James was by Clint’s side, and a little Sharon was by Natasha’s, holding her bouquet. Everybody in the picture looked extremely happy.

“Son of a gun.” Rogers said, handing the picture back to James.

James tucked it away back into the drawer. “Uh. You go ahead and get unpacked. I'm gonna go see Amira.”

“Wait,” Rogers grabbed his arm. It was too familiar a gesture. James pulled his arm away.

“Sorry.” Rogers apologized, dropping his hand. “But I don't want you to go anywhere until I scope out the place.”

“Dude, I used to live here.” James said with a shrug. “It's fine.”

“Just-” Rogers reached for him again but stopped. He looked frustrated, like he wanted to communicate with James but didn't know how, like there was a language barrier between them. “Just stay here for a second, please.”

James nodded carefully. He walked out to the couch and sat, beckoning Elizabeth to join him. She hopped up on the couch and nosed his hands. He pet her and she whined at him.

“Yeah, baby. I know.” He said. “Been a weird couple of days, huh?”

Rogers walked through the apartment, talking on the phone with someone. James tried to ignore him, curling up and grabbing the TV remote. He flipped through the channels until he found a novela that he enjoyed watching when no one else was around.

Rogers walked cautiously into the living room. “Um, can I sit?”

James moved his legs to make some room. “Yeah, sure.”

They both sat on the couch. James kept his eyes glued to the screen, barely watching it. He could feel Rogers’ gaze on him. He shifted uncomfortably, glancing over at Rogers. He quickly turned his head toward the TV guiltily. Elizabeth huffed and shifted her weight, as if she could feel the tangible tension in the air.

“Um, you can change the channel if you want.” James offered.

“No, this- this is fine.” Rogers said. He watched the TV like he was just realizing what was happening on the screen. “Are they speaking spanish?”

“Sí.” James answered with a small smile. “It’s a rerun of La Usurpadora.”
“You speak Spanish?” Rogers asked.

“Well, yeah. I speak most languages. I think it might be part of what HYDRA did to me. Or maybe it’s just me. I have a PhD in linguistics, actually. I teach at a high school back in DC.”

“You were-” Rogers stopped and shook his head. “I mean- he was, Bucky was- always good with languages.”

“Really?” James asked. “That’s interesting. Peggy never said anything about that.”

“Peggy and Bucky didn’t really know each other all that well.” Rogers explained with a shrug.

“Oh.” James said, because, well; he didn’t know what else to say.

An uncomfortable silence descended.

James stood and perused the kitchen. The fridge was mostly empty, save for a couple cans of beer and an old bottle of mustard. He sighed and shut the fridge, going to the pantry. It was basically the same story. A couple of boxes of mac and cheese, a very old, very gross sweet potato, and a bottle of vodka.

James considered the vodka, but decided the situation wasn’t quite that dire.

“Hey, am I good to leave yet? Someone needs to go grocery shopping.” He called to Rogers.

“I’ll go with you.” Rogers volunteered and James internally sighed.

“Sure. There should be some reusable shopping bags in the linens closet.” James told him, pointing towards Rogers’ left.

“Ellie, come.” James commanded. Elizabeth hopped up from the couch and walked over to him.

The trio went to the corner. James lamented to see that Khim’s Korean Market was gone, replaced with a generic chain grocery store. “Dammit.” He muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Rogers asked immediately.

“Nothing. They’re just gentrifying the fuck out of my neighborhood.” James sighed. “Can you stay outside with Elle? They’re not gonna let her in.”

“Oh.” Rogers said. “Yeah, I guess, just… be quick.”

James walked into the grocery store and headed toward the produce section. The shopping didn’t take long, James just got the bare necessities. It was all overpriced organic bullshit, but SHIELD was footing the bill, so he didn’t mind much.

He checked out at one of the automatic machines, and headed back to the street. They carried the food back to the apartment and James loaded it into the kitchen as Rogers watched, hovering.

The man who wasn’t Bucky was reading a book. It was a spectacle to watch. The book was in a
different language, and Steve couldn’t even recognize it’s alphabet. James, not Bucky, but James was reading this book with his full attention.

Steve had always loved to watch Bucky read. He was so expressive, so involved with every word, that Steve could tell what was happening in the story without even looking at the book. Now, as Steve watched James, he knew that he was reading something that was making him think too hard.

*Bucky had that look on his face, the one that meant whatever it was he was reading was making him think too hard. Steve walked over to the couch.***

“Read to me.” Steve demanded, laying his head in Bucky's lap.

“What, you understand Greek all of a sudden?” Bucky joked.

“Nope.” Steve replied cheerfully. “Just like hearing your voice.” Bucky chuckled, running his hand through Steve’s hair.

“How about I just read it in english?” Bucky offered. “So you know what I'm saying.”

*Steve shrugged, just happy to lie there and let the words wash over him.***

*Bucky smiled and started reading.***

“He seems to me equal to gods that man

who opposite you

sits and listens close

to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing- oh it

puts the heart in my chest on wings

for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking

is left in me

no: tongue breaks, and thin

fire is racing under skin

and in eyes no sight and drumming

fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking

grips me all, greener than grass

I am dead- or almost

I seem to me.”
“That’s real pretty, Buck.” Steve told him.

“Thanks.” Bucky laughed. “I didn’t write it.”

“I know,” Steve said. “Still. I like it.”

“What are you reading?” Steve asked, voice unbidden.

“Oh, it’s a collection of old Norse myths.” James answered. “Hey, I guess you’re friends with an old Norse myth.”

“Thor’s not really Norse.” Steve pointed out.

James shrugged. “He’s in my book.”

“Fair.”

James shut the book. “You want dinner?”

“Sure.” Steve answered, feeling like he’d said something wrong.

“I think I’m just gonna call in. Does Indian sound good to you? Or maybe Thai?” James stood and walked to the bedroom, walking out with a laptop.

“I’ve been meaning to try Thai.” Steve said. It was on his list.

“Cool.” James said. He started typing, then stopped. “How are you with spicy food?”

“Not good.” Steve admitted easily.

“Okay.” James said, and continued typing.

The food came quickly, and the delivery boy was delighted when James chatted with him briefly in Thai. James handed Steve a paper box and a pair of chopsticks. Steve struggled with them for a while before conceding defeat and getting a fork from the kitchen.

They ate in silence. Steve decided he liked Thai food. He finished his dinner quickly, and watched James. It was probably strange of him; his behavior around James in general has probably been pretty strange.

“Okay. That’s it.” James sighed, setting down his food. “Nope, can’t do it.”

Steve watched in dread as James walked out of the room. God, it hadn’t even been a day and Steve had already fucked it up.

James came back into the living room with a strip of fabric in his hand. “Captain Rogers, could you please stand up?”

Steve cautiously stood. “You can call me Steve.”

“You can put this on.” James said, thrusting a sleeping mask at Steve. It was obviously taken from the plane.

“Are you… are you blindfolding me?” Steve asked, confused.
“Just-” James waved his hands. “Please put on the blindfold.”

Steve shrugged and took the mask from him, slipping it over his eyes. It was soft and comfortable, as far as blindfolds go.

“Hello, Captain Rogers. My name is James Carter. It’s nice to meet you.”

James took Steve’s hand in a firm shake.

“It’s… nice to meet you, Mr. Carter.” Steve replied.

“It’s doctor, actually.” James corrected, and Steve smiled.

“Well, Doctor Carter, you can call me Steve.”

“In that case, you can call me James.”

James let Steve’s hand go. “Can I take off the blindfold?” Steve asked.

“That depends. When you take it off, who will you see?” James answered.

Steve’s smile dropped. “I- I’m sorry. It’s hard.”

“I know.” James said. “I can’t imagine how hard it is for you. But I’m not him. I’m not. The sooner you understand that, the better.”

“Okay.” Steve said. He took off the sleep mask and smiled weakly. “It’s good to see you, James.”

“Good to be seen, Steve.” He answered, taking the blindfold back.

That night, James dug through his stuff, pulling out the cigar box that he always kept with him. It was the box that Peggy had given him when he was 15 and confused about why his face looked so much like a long dead war hero. It was a box of things that Rebecca Barnes had put together without knowing why. It was a box that had memories and drawings and letters and photographs. It was the box that held what was left of Bucky Barnes.

“Hey, Cap?” He knocked on the door to the guest room.

“Come on in.” Steve greeted. He was unpacking his things. There wasn’t that much stuff. Just some clothes and an extremely recognizable shield resting at the foot of the bed.

“Uh, I just wanted to drop this off for you.” James said. He waved the box. “Peggy got this for me when I was little and I basically have everything in it memorized, so. Here.” He held the box out and Steve took it cautiously. “It’s just some things. Of his.” James explained haltingly. “Letters, pictures, those sort of things.”

Steve just stared down at the box, not moving to open it.

“I’ll just leave y-”
“James.” Steve looked up, and oh god, those were tears. Every time he saw this guy, he made him cry. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” James said with a small smile.

Steve stayed up all night, going over the contents of the box over and over until he just couldn’t anymore. God, this was everything to him. James had given this to him. He had given him the last of Bucky.

He fell asleep, the contents of the box scattered around him. His last coherent thought was that he could finally separate Bucky and James.
“How’s life on the lam treating you, baby bro?” Sharon asked.

“We’re twins and it’s boring.” James replied.

“I’m older and you’re in the greatest city in the world.” She answered. “You can find something to do.”

“Captain Tightass won’t let me do anything.” James complained.

“He’s your protection detail. It’s his job to keep you safe.” Sharon said.

“Ugh.” James said. He threw himself backwards on the couch. From the floor, Elizabeth gave him an unimpressed look.

Steve walked out of his room, still in his pajamas, holding his shield and looking slightly panicked.

“Give me a sec, bud.” James said, sitting up, covering the receiver with his hand. “Is everything okay?” He asked.

“This apartment is booby trapped.” He said, looking a little manic. “I woke up with an arrow two inches from my head this morning.”

“Sharon, I’ll call you back.” James said, hanging up the phone. He turned his full attention to Steve. “What?”

“I don’t know how we haven’t set off any of the traps in the past two days, but this morning, I rolled over, and an arrow shot out of the ceiling and embedded itself in my pillow.”

“Huh.” James said. “Maybe they just forgot that one?”

Steve was feeling along the doorframe, presumably for more traps.

“Can I help?” James asked.

“No, you should probably stay where you are and not move at all.” Steve said, moving on to the kitchen. James shrugged and watched as Steve went through the cabinets. There was a loud popping sound, and a shower of white powder.

“Woah!” James shouted, scrambling to his feet. “Are you okay?”


James pressed his phone to his ear. It rang as the cloud of flour dissipated.

“Hello?” Clint’s voice asked.
“Hey, did you Kevin Mcallister the fuck out of your place?” James demanded.

“What?” Clint asked again, not sounding completely awake.

“Home Alone. It was a Home Alone reference. You flour bombed Captain America.” James said, and Steve wandered cautiously into the living room, holding his shield close to his chest and looking like a kid in a ghost costume.

“Oh shit.” Clint said. “Shit, the traps.”

“Yeah, the traps.” James sighed.

“You guys need to clear out of there. Don’t touch any of the weapon stashes. Or the bookshelf. I’ll call in a team to... de-trap the place.”

“Yeah, okay.” James said. He looked over at Steve. “We need to go.”

Steve looked down at himself and back at James. “I'm in pajamas and covered in cornflour.

“How long do we need to be out?” James asked Clint.

“Uhh, I'll just call you when you're good.” Clint said.


“Bye.”

James hung up and looked at Steve. “Okay, go change and like... don't touch anything, I guess.”

“Where are we going?” He asked.

“Oh… I don’t know.” He looked at Elizabeth, and she thumped her tail. “Wanna go for a run?”

She stood up, happily wagging her tail. He looked at Steve. “Sound good?”

Steve smiled. “Yeah, sounds good.”

“On your left!” Steve called cheekily, passing James.

“That’s the bike lane, asshole!” James called, laughing. He surged forward, Elizabeth on his heels, as he caught up with Rogers, then quickly overtook him.

“On your right!” James yelled, shouldering past Steve. He could hear his laugh and smiled.

James had missed running on the Brooklyn Bridge. The way he could watch the skyline grow closer, see the people on the sides selling drawings and tourisy knick knacks, the sounds of annoyed cyclists and the cars below.

There was a happy yipping sound and Steve ran past James, laughing with Elizabeth in tow.

It had been a long time since James had run at full speed. The last time was probably at SHIELD, while Dr. Khan monitored his vitals and took notes.

But James grew up with Sharon Carter. He had a competitive streak a mile long. He wasn't about to let this guy beat him. He powered forward until he was neck-and-neck with Rogers. People were
yelling and jumping out of their way and James just laughed, delighted.

They reached the end of the bridge, crashing their way into Manhattan like a pair of steamrollers. They came to a stop in front of a bewildered group of tourists.

Steve rested his hands on his knees, laughing breathlessly. James leaned against a park bench, trying to catch his breath. Elizabeth strolled up to him, wheezing.

“Oh baby, I’m sorry.” He sighed, scooping her up. She panted against his neck, whining. He carried her to a food cart, fishing around in his pocket for his wallet. “Three water bottles, please. And can I get a empty cup? Oh, and a mango.”

He carried Elizabeth and the water to the bench, where Steve was resting. He tossed a bottle to Rogers, who caught it easily without looking. James poured one of the waters into the empty cup and set it down for Elizabeth. She started drinking out of it greedily and loudly.

James sat down and cracked open his water bottle, draining it quickly. He pulled a slice off the mango, offering it to Steve.

“What's this?” Steve asked, face scrunching up in confusion. It was kind of adorable.

“Oh, it's a mango. I guess that they weren’t exactly available back in your day. It’s fruit that grows in India.” James explained.

Steve laughed and shook his head. “Amazing.” He took the slice and sniffed it experimentally. James tried to hide his laugh behind his hand. Steve looked up at him and blushed.

“Sorry.” James said. “It's just- you're supposed to eat it.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I know that, jerk.” He moved to eat it, then paused. “Do I eat the skin?”

“Yeah, it's fine.” James answered, trying not to smile.

Rogers tentatively ate the mango slice, smiling at the flavor. “Oh, that's good.” He said, sounding pleasantly surprised.

James tried not to be charmed. He stretched his legs and groaned. “Fuck, I don’t think I've been that winded before.”

“I’ve never met someone who’s run as fast as me. Not even the other Avengers.” Steve said, leaning forward. “How’d you keep from getting recruited?”

James ate another slice of mango and gave one to Elizabeth, who had been nosing at his hands. “Fury wanted me to join up.” He shrugged. “I worked for SHIELD for a while when I was in college, just as a translator. But-” He sighed. “I don’t know. My whole family is SHIELD: Peggy, Sharon, Natasha, Clint; but it just wasn’t for me. Maybe it's because I was literally made to be a weapon, or maybe it's just me, but don’t think I could fight for a living.”

James didn’t look up, but he could feel Rogers’ eyes on him. “Well, I don’t know you all that well, but I think you’ve done pretty good for yourself.”

James smiled at the ground. “Thanks, Cap.” He handed Steve another slice of mango.

“Has Barton called yet?” Steve asked, mouth full.

James pulled out his phone and checked. He had some texts from Sharon and Sam from their group
chat and an email from his substitute teacher, but nothing from Clint. James shook his head. “Nope.”

Steve sighed. “Well, we’re in Manhattan now. There’s has to be something for us to do.”

“You’re an artist, right?” James asked. “I got a MoMA membership for Christmas last year that I have yet to use. We can drop Ellie off with a friend of mine.”

Steve’s face lit up, but he quickly tried to reign in his expression. He shrugged. “Sure. I haven’t been since 1941.”

James laughed sharply. “Really?”

“Yes.” Steve said, smiling. “Bucky and I went before he shipped out.”

James tried not to think of the half-fond, half-pained look on Rogers’ face. “But you didn’t go back? Once you, y’know, unfroze.” James asked.

“No. I didn’t really have the time. For the first couple weeks it was all tests and acclimating to everything, then… well, aliens invaded.”

“Yeah, I remember.” James chuckled.

“I guess New York just didn’t really feel like home anymore. Everything was different and overwhelming and I just…” Steve shook his head. “And Natasha said that since the New York HQ was basically destroyed, she was moving to DC and needed a partner. It seemed like a pretty obvious decision at the time.”

“I moved to DC after the Incident, too.” James said. “I scared the shit out of myself killing those Chitauri things, plus my place got completely wrecked; so Elizabeth and I moved in with Sharon. After that, I just didn’t see the point of going back.” James shrugged.

“You fought the Chitauri?” Steve asked.

“Yeah.” James said. “I mean, I’ve got superpowers and training. I couldn’t just stand by and do nothing while people got hurt.”

There was a moment of silence and again, James could feel Rogers’ heavy gaze on him.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, and Elizabeth whined, begging for another piece of mango. James gave her a slice, and she licked his fingers gratefully.

“Uh, if we just take the F train we should be able to get there.” James said, clearing his throat. “I have a friend who lives nearby, she should be able to meet us there and take Elizabeth to the park of something.”

Elizabeth stood up and started wagging her tail when she heard the word “park”. Steve smiled at her, patting her head.

James texted Sarah, and she said she fine with taking Elizabeth for a couple hours or so. They walked down to the station, and James was amazed to discover that he still had his Metrocard, just sitting in his wallet.

They got on the F train, and thankfully, no one seemed to mind Elizabeth too much. A small child even wandered up and asked to pet her, and Elizabeth happily obliged until the girl’s mother
dragged her away when they reached their stop.

They got off at the 51st street station, and walked to the couple blocks to the MoMA. Sarah was standing near the entrance and James ran to greet her, picking her up in a hug.

“Hey, Baby Sarah.” He said, setting her down.

“James, we’re both adults with PhDs. You could at least spare me the indignity of that ridiculous nickname.” Sarah huffed, pushing up her glasses to try to hide her blush.

“You’re right, I'm sorry Dr. Baby Sarah.” James said with a grin, and she punched his arm.

“How’s my hero brother doing?” She asked.

“He's hanging in there. It's not easy, but he’s strong. He actually told me to check up on his genius sister.” James said, and she grinned, tucking hair behind her ear.

“If I'm the genius and he's the hero, what does that make Gideon?” She asked him.

“The only one who’s given Darlene grandbabies?” James tried.

“Oh yes, that's it.” Sarah concluded.

James looked behind himself and smiled at Steve, waving him over. “Baby S, this is Steve. Steve, this is Doctor Sarah Wilson.”

“Nice to meet you, Doctor.” Steve said, offering his hand to Sarah.

“So Sam wasn't making shit up.” Sarah said, raising her eyebrows. She took Steve’s hand. “It's an honor, Captain. If you ever need anything while you and Jamie are in New York, let me know.”

“Thank you.” Steve said with a smile.

Sarah leaned down and Elizabeth jumped up, greeting her excitedly. “Hi, Ellie. It's you and me, little lady.”

She stood and kissed James on the cheek. “Call me when you're done.”

“Alright, thanks again, Baby.” James said.

“Anything for family.” Sarah smiled, leading Elizabeth away.

Steve and James walked into the museum. James flashed his membership card and grinned back at Steve, who was already looking around excitedly.

James grabbed a pamphlet tour and lead Steve to the elevator, reading off the names of artists and collections.

They decided to start at the top level, where the older, post-impressionist paintings were. Steve gravitated to the first painting, which was a Cézanne. He started at it for what felt like an inordinate amount of time, studying each brushstroke and color. James wondered what Steve was thinking, how the painting made him feel.

Steve took his time with each painting, and eventually James got bored and went ahead of Steve, finishing the collection by sitting down in front of Van Gogh's Starry Night. He stayed there for long enough that he was worried that he had missed Rogers, and that they had somehow gotten
separated, but he found Steve just in the next room; examining a landscape of the seaside.

James stood next to Steve, watching him watch the painting. Eventually, he looked back at the piece, trying to see what Steve was seeing.

“Tell me about it.” James said, and Steve startled a little, like he had forgotten James was there, or perhaps didn’t notice his approach.

“What?” Steve asked.

“The painting.” James nodded toward the piece. “Tell me about it.”

“Oh.” Steve blinked at him, then turned to the painting. “It's *Grandcamp, Evening* By George-Pierre Seurat.”

“I know that.” James said, pointing at the little metal placard next to the painting’s frame. “What’s it for?”

“What it's for?” Steve repeated.

“Yeah. Like, why did this guy paint it? And why did he paint it the way he did?”

Steve smiled. “Uh, well. Seraut hated impressionism. He was pretty traditionalist when it came to technique, and he thought impressionists like Monet or Renoir were spontaneous and unmethodical.”

“So he was an uptight painter?” James asked.

“Yeah,” Steve laughed a little. “Yeah, exactly. See the way he used short, horizontal brushstrokes?” He pointed at the painting, and James leaned in, squinting.

“Oh, yeah! Yeah, the whole thing is just a bunch of dots. That’s crazy.”

“Seurat invented his own method of painting. He called it Divisionism. Instead of mixing colors together on his palette, like most people, he just applied unmixed paints to the canvas, so the viewer's eye has to mix the colors.”

“Huh.” James stared at the painting until it was no longer a landscape, but a collection of points of color. He vision went blurry and it became a seascape once again. “Okay, I think I get it.”

“What do you get?” Steve asked. He seemed so much lighter than he had when they first met. Maybe it was being back in New York, maybe it was being surrounded by art, but whatever it was, it was a good look on him.

“Why you stare at these things for 20 minutes at a time.” James answered. “If they all have stories like that, then yeah, I get it.”

Steve smiled. “Not everything needs a story to be interesting.”

“Sure it does.” James shrugged, then moved to the next piece. “Tell me about this one.”

All told, they spend four hours in the museum. Steve told James about the pieces he knew, and James introduced him to Frida Kahlo and Jackson Pollock and Georgia O’Keeffe and Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali and Jean Michel Basquiat.

Steve asked the very star-struck tour guide to tell him everything she knew, and she obliged, albeit...
nervously. However, once Steve started asking her questions about process and ideation, she lightened up. They talked mile-a-minute about art stuff, and just James hung back, taking in all the information.

They left around noon, and James checked his phone and realized that he had a missed call from Clint and several texts.

*Hey you're all clear*

*The apartment has been de-trapped*

*Kiddo, you good?*

*Okay you’re at the moma*

*We have eyes everywhere lol*

*Have fun!*

James rolled his eyes, typing out a quick response. “Hey, we’re safe to go back.”

“Oh.” Steve said. “Okay.”

“Let me call Sarah.” James said. “Do you want to get some lunch?”

“Yeah, sure.” Steve said, sticking his hands in his pockets. “Where to?”

They found a nearby cafe and waited for Sarah. James got a coffee and a fancy burger, one with arugula and a poached egg. Steve blinked uncomprehendingly at the menu for a long time, then just ordered the same thing as James.

Sarah arrived with Elizabeth and James bought her a panini. Steve shamelessly snuck fries to Ellie under the table, but James couldn't bring himself to mind.

They walked back to Brooklyn, at a far more sedate pace than how they’d left the borough. They reached the apartment, where Amira was waiting for them, arms crossed.

James smiled and greeted her with a hug. “It’s good to see you, Amira.”

“You too, honey.” She ruffled his hair. She had laugh lines, now, and it gave her genial look. “We cleared out all of Barton’s traps. It looked like he set most of them up when he was dead drunk.”

“That’s when he’s at his most paranoid.” James said, nodding.

Amira smiled at him, then turned to Steve. “Captain,” she greeted, offering her hand.

“It's nice to meet you, Agent.” Steve said, shaking her hand. “I've heard a lot of great things about you.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” She said, grinning. Steve laughed. “I’ve heard plenty about you, as well.”

“Well,” Steve chuckled. “I figure most people have.”

Amira shrugged. “I don’t care too much about most people, but I respect Romanoff, and she’s got
nothing but praise for you.”

Steve blushed, running a hand through his hair. “Oh, well, Natasha’s known for embellishing the truth.”

“Not when it’s important.” Amira said seriously. She smiled at James and winked. “I’ll get out of your hair, sweetheart. It was good seeing you.”

“Bye, Amira.” James hugged her again, then followed Rogers into the building and up the stairs.

The rest of their day was pretty boring. They went back to mostly ignoring each other, but James found himself wanting to turn to Steve and ask him something, or get his opinion on whatever James was reading. It was strange, how much James wanted to be his friend.

It was stupid, and it made him feel childish. James had never really had to make friends; when he was a kid, Sharon and Sam had always been by his side. He had no idea how to approach this. He just knew that he wanted it to be easy, to talk to Steve.

James made dinner for both of them, Darlene’s enchilada recipe. If it was enough to feed all the Wilson and Carter kids, it was enough to feed two hungry super soldiers.

“This is really good.” Steve commented. “Y’know,” He started, then shook his head.

“What is it?” James asked.


“What?” James pressed.

Steve sighed, putting his fork down. “I was just gonna say that Bucky could never cook for shit. He was always trying to feed me, but he was so god awful at it.” He smiled to himself, shaking his head.

“Really?” James grinned.

“Yeah. My ma tried to teach him once, and he almost burned down our whole building.” Steve said with a chuckle.

“Oh man.” James smiled. “Yeah, I had to learn how to cook pretty young. My mom was alright at it, but once she got sick; we were just eating a lot of junk food. Can you imagine being a 12 year old boy and being tired of McDonald’s? That was where we were at. So Mrs. Wilson, that’s Sam and Sarah’s mom, taught me how to do the basic stuff, like boiling rice and pasta, or frying bacon and making pancakes. It came in handy when Peggy started taking care of us, since she can’t cook to save her life.”

“God, yes! I’d forgotten that.” Steve laughed. “Christ, she was worse than Buck. She was worse than anybody I’ve ever seen.”

They talked back and forth about Peggy’s terrible cooking skills, but once they had exhausted the topic, conversation died down. James fed Elizabeth and Steve took their plates, cleaning them off in the sink. They awkwardly said goodnight to each other and retreated to their respective rooms.

James wished that they could talk easily. When they were in the museum and when they were talking about Peggy or Clint, it was simple, even fun to talk to Steve. But small talk and anything else was just so complicated.
James got ready for bed, and Elizabeth climbed in beside him, already circling her spot. She huffed and James laughed. “Yeah? Life's pretty tough for you, huh, baby?”

She scooched closer until her head rested on his chest. He patted her head and she gave him a big, goofy smile. James texted Sharon and Sam a good night, and they both replied, telling him to stop worrying about them and go to bed.

James slept, and for the first time in a long time, he dreamt of a white room.

He woke in the middle of the night, to Elizabeth whining and scratching at the door. James stood, rubbing sleep out of his eyes. “What's wrong, Ellie?” He leaned down to soothe her, but she ignored him, feverishly focusing on the door.

James frowned, standing. He trusted Elizabeth’s instincts, and her distress was worrying him. He went to the nightstand and grabbed his gun, checking the chamber.

He opened the door for Elizabeth and she bolted out of the room. He followed her, pointing his gun at the ground. She reached the guest room, standing outside of it, whining.

“Is it Steve?” He asked, and she yipped, scratching at the door.

There was a shout from inside and without thinking, James kicked open the door, aiming his gun. Elizabeth ran into the room and jumped onto the bed.

There were no attackers, no danger, just Steve sitting upright, flushed and panting, looking terrified. His eyes were open, wide and completely unseeing.

“Captain Rogers?” James whispered, lowering his gun. Elizabeth whined, moving closer to Steve. “Ellie, down.” James commanded. He knew what this was. He’d seen it with Sam, and he didn't want Elizabeth getting hurt in case Steve lashed out. She whined and jumped off the bed, coming to stand behind James.

Steve made a horrible keening sound, like he had after he had first seen James. It sounded like he was dying.

“Rogers, can you hear me? It's James.” James moved closer cautiously. He could handle it when Sam got violent after or during a flashback, but Steve was at least as strong or stronger than James, and far better trained.

“I-” Rogers started, then shook his head aggressively, hands coming up to cover his ears. “Buck, I don’t-”


James sat down on the bed, reaching up and lightly touching Steve’s bare shoulder. When Steve didn't react violently, James squeezed gently.

“Bucky?” Steve asked, blinking slowly.

“Not quite.” James said, smiling.

Steve shook his head again, rubbing his face. James nodded to Elizabeth, and she hopped up on the bed, pushing her head under Steve’s arm until she was on his lap, licking his face and whimpering
for his attention.

“H-hey, girl.” Steve said, petting Elizabeth. James realized that he was still touching Steve and pulled his hand away, curling his fingers into his palm, trying to ignore the lingering warmth from Steve’s skin.

After Elizabeth was reasonably sure that Steve was okay, she stopped grooming him and just rested her head on his shoulder. Steve closed his eyes, and James could hear his controlled breaths.

“Are you okay?” James asked quietly.

“Not really,” Steve answered honestly. He laughed bitterly and sighed. “God, I’m such a wreck.” James couldn’t think of anything to say. “Are you gonna be able to go back to sleep?”

“Probably not.”

“Me neither.”

Steve’s self-deprecating look turned guilty. “Sorry if I-”

“No, you didn't wake me up, I just... just had a weird dream.” James said. He thought back to the white room. “I guess you did too.”

“Not weird it was just-” Steve trailed off. “Upsetting.”

“Yeah.” James agreed stupidly. “I’m gonna make some tea. You want some?”

“Sure.” Steve nodded. James stood and padded to the kitchen, grabbing kettle and putting it on the stove. Natasha had a bunch of weird herbal teas, but James had grabbed some plain earl grey at the grocery store. It was a self-soothing technique he had picked up from Peggy.

Steve walked into the living room, and James was slightly disappointed to see that he had put on a shirt. It wasn't that he was sexually or romantically attracted to Steve, because that would be fucked in so many different ways. But James was a healthy queer man and he could appreciate the human form, and Steve form was all but perfect.

James pulled down two coffee stained mugs, putting the tea bags in and snorting at their custom purple designs with H’s on the front.

He showed one to Steve, and it made him muster up a smile.

“Do you have red white and blue kitchenware?” James asked.

Steve shook his head, laughing a little. “No, I'm not quite there yet.”

The kettle whistled, and James took the mugs and poured the hot water over the bags. He set them to steep and went to the pantry. “Do you take milk or sugar?” He asked.

“No.” Steve answered. “Just black.”

“Okay.” James said, pulling down a jar of sugar. He dumped some into his cup. Steve make a slightly disgusted noise behind him, and James laughed, putting the sugar back on it's shelf. “Yeah, I can't drink the stuff unless it's basically syrup.” He shrugged unselfconsciously. “Coffee’s even worse. I just don't like bitter drinks.”
He handed Steve his mug and leaned against the counter, picking up his own cup with both hands and breathed in the hot steam. He groaned happily, the warmth seeping into his bones.

He could hear Elizabeth’s paws clacking against the hardwood of the living room. She licked James’ leg half-heartedly, then walked back into the bedroom.

James laughed a little at her abrupt departure. “I guess she’s going back to bed.”

He went into the living room and scanned Clint’s shelves. “Wanna watch a movie?” He called to Steve.

“Oh, sure.” Steve said, walking over. “You pick one. I don’t really… I haven’t seen most things, so whatever you pick should be fine.”

James frowned, looking at Clint’s DVD collection. Now there was pressure on him to pick something good. “Have you watched Star Wars yet?”

“No. People keep telling me to, but-” He shrugged.

“Cool.” James grabbed a boxset of the original trilogy off the shelf. He loaded New Hope into Clint’s ancient DVD player. He settled down on the couch next to Steve. The rolling intro started and James grinned excitedly, glancing at Steve. He grabbed a blanket off the back of the couch. “Okay, settle in; Cap. This shit’s about to get hotter than the twin suns of Tatooine.”

Steve looked taken aback. “What?”

James laughed. “Just- watch the movie.”

Steve watched the menu screen of Return of the Jedi. They had watched all three Star Wars movies, but James had fallen asleep during the battle of Endor, and his head was resting comfortably on Steve’s shoulder. Steve didn’t dare move, not wanting to wake him. He felt voyeuristic, feeling the rise and fall of James’ chest, his soft breaths against Steve’s neck. It took all of Steve’s will not to hold him closer. He was so like Bucky, but so unlike him. It was such a… how had Barton put it? Such a “total mindfuck”. His instinct was to treat him like an extension of himself, because he and Bucky had been so intertwined, with both body and soul. But James was practically a stranger, and it wasn’t right. James wasn’t a carbon copy of Bucky, but it wasn’t like he was completely different from him, either. It would be more than weird to think of him as Bucky’s son, but that would be the closest relation Steve could think of.

When the 23rd cycle of the theme music started to play, James groaned and blinked awake. He rubbed his face against Steve’s shoulder, the way Bucky used to do when they slept in the same bed.

James sat up blearily and rubbed a crick out of his neck. He looked and Steve and flushed, looking away. “Sorry.”

Steve, trying to keep things from getting uncomfortable, pretended that he was just waking up as well. He faked a yawn and rubbed his eyes. He looked around for a topic of conversation, so that they didn’t have to linger on the fact that James had fallen asleep on him. Steve looked at the TV.
“So, uh… why was the first one called Episode 4?”

“What?” James squinted, then looked at the screen. “Oh, it’s-” He yawned. “In 1999, George Lucas put out Episode One: The Phantom Menace. They did a trilogy of prequels following Anakin Skywalker’s descent into the dark side.”

“Can we watch those next?” Steve asked, and James grimaced.

“We can if you want, but I’m warning you right now that they’re terrible.” James told him.

“Really?” Steve asked, feeling disappointed. James stood, walking to the kitchen and going through the pantry.

“Yeah, it was a huge let down. 11 year old James was devastated. My sister and I went as Luke and Leia for every Halloween, and I was a huge fanboy. I think I was so upset that I cried leaving the theatre.” Steve pictured a young James walking out of a movie theatre, dressed as a little Jedi, inconsolable.

James grabbed some cereal from the pantry and poured himself a bowl. “It was that bad?” Steve asked, walking into the kitchen.

“God, it was just terrible. You want some cinnamon toast crunch?” Steve nodded, and James handed him a bowl. James leaned against the counter and nursed his cereal. He was still in an undershirt and boxers, and Steve tried not to linger on his messy hair, or bare feet.

Elizabeth must have heard them moving around, and she walked out of the bedroom, tongue lolling out. James laughed and leaned down, grabbing her food bowl and scooping some kibble into it. He set it down and she descended onto it greedily and noisily. Steve snorted at her, shaking his head fondly.

“Mm. Weather looks nice.” James commented tiredly. Steve looked out the window and had to agree. The sun was shining brightly and the city looked almost cozy, almost sleepy. The kind of day that made you restless to do something.

Steve put his cereal down. “I’m gonna go take a shower.” He announced, somewhat stupidly. James looked over at him and raised an eyebrow.

“Okay. Have… fun, I guess.” He said, and Steve made a strategic retreat to the bathroom.

He turned the shower on; marvelling, as he does nearly every morning, over the instantly hot water. Steve stripped out of his shirt and pajama pants, stepping under the spray. The water pinked his skin, and he grabbed Natasha’s sweet smelling soap, squeezing some into his hand.

Steve wanted to take James to Coney Island. It was something he and his Bucky- the old Bucky- the Bucky from before- something they had always done together, usually in the summers when they got bored and the heat wasn't too bad. Bucky loved Luna Park, he loved to show off at the games, always grinning widely at Steve whenever he won something. Steve had loved to just sit at the beach, sketching passersby with the ocean’s breeze in his hair and the sand in his toes. He had loved to watch Bucky laze around with an arm over his eyes and the sun on his skin. Love the patches of freckles that Bucky would get.

Steve wanted that, that exact feeling again. The feeling of satisfaction, of happiness that cost him nothing. He wanted to share it with now with James. He wondered if it would be the same with him.
He didn’t know what had happened, if it was realizing that James wasn’t Bucky, but wasn’t wasn’t Bucky, or if it was the museum, or the movies, or just the time he had spent with James; but he wanted more of it.

Steve dried off and got dressed, walking out into the living room. James had already changed, and was sitting on the couch with Elizabeth.

“Hey, um, do you wanna do something today? Sitting around the house on a day like this has gotta be a sin.” Steve asked, putting his hands in his pockets.

James grinned. “Sure! What do you have in mind?”

“Uh, have you ever been to Coney Island?” Steve asked, then felt instantly stupid. Of course James has been to Coney Island. He’d grown up in Brooklyn.

“I love Coney Island. My sister and I used to sneak onto the rides all the time.” James answered.

“God, is the Cyclone still there?” Steve asked, and he must’ve been making a face, because James laughed.

“Oh man.” James said, grinning. “They’ve added a ton of rides since the 40’s. Ones that go upside down and everything.”

“No way.” James got off the couch, grabbing his phone and wallet. “Let’s go.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

“I was obsessed with those stupid cartoons when I was a kid, I thought you were infallible. Now I know the truth; you’re a…a pedantic, dog-stealing butthead.”

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! I know, it's been years. Here, have a chapter.

*blows kisses*

31 hours of interrogation. It took her 31 hours to get the location of the files from Brock Rumlow. Natasha was really off her game. Maybe it was because Rumlow knew her, knew what she was. Maybe it was because he’d seen her work before. He was certainly a pig, and under any other circumstance would easily fold under her usual charm. But he knew that she wasn’t just a pretty face, not just a body. He knew that she was a weapon, and a sharp one at that. He wasn’t going to fall into her web that easily.

Instead, she had to use the old fashioned method. She was pretty damned good at that, too; don’t get it wrong, but she just wasn’t a huge fan.

“Chert poberi,” She muttered, washing her hands. The water came away red. There was a knock at the door, and she tensed.

“Just me,” Clint said, walking into the bathroom. Natasha relaxed.

“This is the ladies' room.” She told him, because she couldn’t think of anything else clever to say. Clint wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. She closed her eyes, leaning back against Clint. “We need to move out, Rollins is still out there and he’s-” She broke off with yawn.

“Before we do anything, you need to got to bed.” Clint told her.

“No,” Natasha protested splashing water on her face. “No, we gotta go to California. Rollins has a hide out there. He’s got contacts with… with neo-Hydra.”

“Okay, we can do all that. In about 8 hours.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. When Natasha started to argue further, he picked her up. She sighed and wrapped her legs around his waist, holding on to his neck.

“What did you do today?” She asked him quietly.

“Remember the traps we set up in the Brooklyn apartment before we left for DC?”

“You mean the ones you made when you were hungover?” She asked, then realized what he had
said. “Oh, damn.”

“Yeah. Apparently, I got Cap pretty good. Cornflour bombed him.”

Natasha laughed, elbowing Clint in the side so he would set her down. He grunted and dropped her, and she easily landed on her feet. She leaned against him and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “You did good work, Nat.”

“I wouldn’t have had to if I hadn’t fucked up in the first place.” She sighed.

Clint shrugged. “What’s done is done. We just have to fix it.” He grinned. “I should really get that on a shirt. It could be SHIELD’s new slogan.”

Natasha laughed, then caught herself. She must be exhausted if she was actually finding Clint funny.

“C’mon, babe; let’s get you to bed.” Clint said, laughing a little.

“Okay, fine.” Natasha sighed. “But in the morning—”

“Yeah, yeah. In the morning, we gear up.”

James precariously carried the two ice cream cones over to the bench. He handed one to Steve, who took it with gratitude.

“I can’t believe you picked vanilla.” James complained. “There’s a million flavors of ice cream, and you picked the most boring one.”

Steve shrugged, licking the cone. “It’s classic.”

James sat next to him, rolling his eyes. “How many new flavors have you tried since you came out of the ice?”

Steve seemed to consider that. “Besides vanilla and chocolate?”

Steve scoffed.

“Yes, Steve.” James scoffed.

“Um, Natasha showed me one called, uh… rock something? It had bits in it.”

“Rocky Road?” James asked. Steve nodded. “Did you like it?”

“It wasn’t better than vanilla.” Steve said with a small smug smile.

James groaned. “Are you fucking with me? I can never tell.”

“Your ice cream is melting.” Steve remarked, and James cursed, licking ice cream off of his knuckles. Steve laughed at him, and James flipped him off.

“Peggy always said you were a git, but I never believed her.” James said, struggling not to laugh. “I was obsessed with those stupid cartoons when I was a kid, I thought you were infallible. Now I
Steve snorted, shaking his head. “Butthead? I had no idea that you were 8, James.”

“I’m a public school teacher.” James replied piously. “It’s beneath me to curse.”

“I’ve lived with you for a week now, and I can state for a fact that that’s not true.” Steve laughed.

“Whatever.” James said, licking his cone of cookies and cream.

He watched people pass by. There was a young boy sneaking up on a crowd of pigeons, walking slowly and carefully, trying not to startle them. James watched with interest as the boy crouched down, sitting in the middle of the hoard of birds. Some of them move away, giving him a wide berth. He sat still, practically holding his breath. Eventually, the pigeons decide that the boy’s not enough of a threat to keep them from their food. The boy slowly reached out, fingers barely grazing the feathers of one of the birds. It skittered away, but after a few moments, it allows the boy to pet it again.

James elbowed Steve, nodding towards the scene. Steve frowned until he saw the boy. He leaned forward intently, watching with his full attention. James smiled at him, then turned back to watch.

After a few minutes of stroking the bird’s feathers, the boy stood with the bird in his arms. It flapped its wings in panic, but the boy cooed soothingly; petting the bird’s head. It calmed, and the boy grinned, smiling from ear to ear.

He toddled over to a bench, where an old woman was sitting, reading a book. “Abuelita!” The boy whispered-shouted, cradling his prize. “Abuelita!”

The woman looked up, and the boy held the bird out to her, like an offering. She shrieked and stood, batting her book at the pigeon. “¿Qué estás haciendo? ¡Baja esa cosa!” The bird, startled by her outburst, flew off.

The boy’s face crumpled, and he looked as if he might cry. ¿Por qué hiciste eso? Why did you yell?”

The woman grabbed his arm, leaning down to scold him “¿Qué te pasa? ¿por qué toca Rías a ese animal asqueroso? ¿Sabes cuántas enfermedades tiene? Dios, muchacho, ¿por qué te he aguantado? Todo lo que haces es meterte en líos.”

The boy fiercely knuckled away tears. “I just wanted-”

“You ‘just wanted’” She repeated, rolling her eyes. “Vamos.” She grabbed her bag and dragged him away, walking through the group of pigeons, forcing them to scatter.

James sat back, quickly licking the melting parts of his ice cream. Steve leaned back as well, leaning close to James. “What did she say?”

“Hmm?” James questioned, watching the pigeons regroup.

“The grandmother. What was she saying to the boy?” Steve asked.

“Oh, you know, just chastising him. Asking what he thought he was doing, asking why she puts up with him, that sort of thing.” James replied.

Steve looked consideringly at his ice cream cone. “Why was she so upset?”
James shrugged. “She’s scared.”

“Of what?” Steve asked. “A bird?”

“Pigeons are carriers,” James said simply. “That bird could have all sorts of diseases on it. She didn’t want him touching it. She was just afraid of him getting sick.”

Steve had a faint smile on his face. “My ma used to shout me down like that. Never for getting into fights or—or for getting into trouble with Bucky, but for being stupid. Every time I did something dumb, she would yell to high heaven.”

“What kind of dumb? Dumb like getting experimented on? Or dumb like fighting aliens?” James asked, and Steve turned to stare at him, a strange look on his face.

“You know, sometimes you sound just like him.” Steve scoffed, shaking his head.

James blinked, then looked away. “Your ice cream’s melting.”

“It’s just vanilla.” Steve said, and James chuckled, staring at the ground. His ice cream dripped to the pavement. A lucky ant passed by the puddle of milk and sugar and scurried closer. James watched the insect rather than look back at Steve.

The strangeness that had lingered between them had shifted to a sort of tension. It wasn’t sexual or romantic or violent or anything, it was just… tension. It made James nervous. It also made him excited, in a stupid, kid-like manner. He was never quite sure what to do with himself around Steve.

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“God, I forgot how much I hated California.” Natasha sighed, stepping off of the quinjet.

“Hey, be nice.” Clint said, hopping down next to her. “I grew up here.”

“You grew up in the circus.” Natasha said, stripping off her jacket. “It’s fall, why is it 75 degrees?”

Clint smiled, tucking his hands into his pockets. “It’s San Fran, baby. It’s always 75 degrees.”

Natasha scoffed, rolling her eyes and trying not to smile. “Where’s Morse supposed to meet us?”

“Bobbi should be on her way.” Clint told her, checking his phone. “She’s been tracking neo-HYDRA movements in NoCal, and she thinks she’s pinpointed one of Rollins’ safe house.” It was difficult to hear anything over the sound of the quinjet’s engine.

“Great.” Natasha said, trying to keep the bite out of her voice. Dr. Morse was an esteemed agent, and the leader of their West Coast branch. She was perfectly competent and respectable, and she had done nothing to warrant Natasha’s ire. Yet-

“Hey, Hawkie.” Morse called, walking onto the helipad.

“Mockie.” Clint greeted with a stupid smirk on his face. He walked forward and greeted her with a hug.
“Come on inside, we can talk in there.” She said, wrapping an arm around his waist. Natasha grit her teeth and followed them.

As soon as the door shut, Natasha pushed her way between Clint and Morse. She walked quickly, letting them catch up with her. “We need all of your files on the neo-HYDRA movement in the north.” She commanded. “I want to move out right away, do you have a team?”

Dr. Morse was clearly startled by Natasha’s rude interruption, but she didn’t let it register on her face. She was good.

“Well, we’re not the Avengers; but I’ve got a good group, yeah.” She chuckled. “We can assist.”

“I’ll let you know if that’s necessary.” Natasha said, pursing her lips. Clint hooked his pinky finger into one of her belt loops, giving it a subtle tug. It was his way of telling her to stand down, back off. He was still her CO. She slowed her stride, slowing her quick pace to something more controlled. She purposely didn’t look back at Clint, just continued forward into the base.

Morse cleared her throat, leading them past a pair of armed guards. They saluted her as she opened the door. “I’ll get you everything you need.”

Steve sat next to James trying to keep himself from staring. James was sitting on the grass, legs crossed. He was reading a book, absentmindedly stroking Elizabeth’s ears. They had decided to have a picnic in Central Park, and had packed a bag of food. James was eating raspberries, his lips turning pink as his eyes scanned the pages. Steve was sketching, trying to draw the boy from yesterday, surrounded by birds. However, he kept getting distracted.

James reached the bottom of the box of raspberries, but it took him a few seconds to realize that it was empty, as he was so engrossed in his book. “Oh.” He looked down at the plastic container and frowned.

Steve hopped to his feet, grabbing it. “I’ll go throw this away.”

He jogged away, trying to find the nearest trash can. He tossed the thing in the trash, then turned to head back to their spot.

“Steve? Little Steve Rogers?” A voice croaked, and Steve spun around, looking it's the source.

There was an old lady sitting on a bench, a loaf of bread in her hands. She had wild, curly, silver hair and a pretty pink dress. Her skin was dark, with freckles across her nose and cheeks.

Steve squinted. “...Francine?”

The woman laughed, beckoning him over. “It really is you! Come here, let me look at you.”

Steve walked over to the bench, taking her hands. She examined him intently, almost like a scientist. She said nothing for a long enough that Steve began to worry.

“So, uh, how have you been?” Steve asked, then cringing at his own awkward behavior.

Luckily, Francine only laughed, touching his knee. “Christ, you’re exactly the same! A little bit
bigger, a little bit older, but just the same.”

Steve laughed disbelievingly. He tried to think of the last time he saw Francine. She had been one of Bucky’s favorite dance partners, and he had probably seen her in the week before Buck shipped out. God, he was so different back then. He had everything, he had Bucky, he had a roof over his head, he was still making art; he had every reason to be happy, to be content. But instead he was so arrogant, so impotently angry at the world. Steve wanted to go back and shake that kid, yell at him for being so goddamn stupid.

“I don’t feel the same,” Steve told her, and she patted his leg.

“Why not? You’re still fighting for the good guy. Back when I knew you, that’s all you ever wanted to do. Bucky, he always used to say that you were gonna save the world.”

“I guess you’re right.” He said, smiling at her. “But you- Jesus, Frankie, what have you been up to?”

“Oh you know, this and that.” She said, waving a hand. Steve chuckled.

“It’s been 70 years, surely you can think of something.” Steve suddenly thought of something. “What about Joey? Did the two of you stay together?”

Francine nodded. “Oh yes. 57 long years, the two of us had.” She showed Steve her left hand, and the simple wedding band resting on her finger. “We got properly married in ’79. We had a daughter.” She smiled. “Called her Jamie. She’s all grown up now, with kids of her own.”

“That’s amazing, Francine.” Steve said, unable to help his grin. “That’s really amazing.”

“I told her- when you were on TV, fighting aliens and the like, I told her, your mom and I used to go dancing with that boy.” She scoffed. “She didn’t believe me.”

“I’d be happy to give her a call, tell her the truth.” Steve offered, and Francine chuckled, shaking her head. She looked at him, studied his face. She became solemn, taking his hands.

“I stayed close with Becca, you know.” She told him quietly, and Steve’s breath caught in his throat. God, little Becks. Poor Rebecca. He had thought of her, of course he had sought her out, almost as soon off he got off the ice; but he was too late. He thought about going to see her and Gabe’s kids, or even their grandkids, but he could never bring himself to do it.

“How-“ Steve cleared his throat, trying to speak above a whisper. “How was she? After we… after we didn’t come home.”

“She was upset. Of course she was upset, you two were all she had, really. But she was a strong girl, she kept going. After the war ended, she met Gabriel and fell in love. I guess she figured since you and Bucky weren’t out there, fighting for what’s right, someone had to do it.”

“Yeah, I-I read about all the things she did. She was absolutely amazing.” Steve said.

“Steve! What the hell’s taking so-“ James ran up to the bench with Elizabeth at his side. He skittered to a stop when he saw Steve and Francine sitting close together.

Francine gasped and started to stand. Steve helped her, wrapping an arm around her back. James looked at Steve with wide eyes.

“Bucky?” Francine gasped, reaching an arm out. “But they said… you’re dead.”
Steve steadied her. “Frankie, he’s not-“

“They say a hell of a lot of things, don’t they?” James said, a crooked smile on his face. Steve blinked, staring at him. James ignored him. “They said he was dead, too.” He said, nodding toward Steve.


“God this place is a wreck.” Clint remarked. They were in a property owned by one of Rollins’ known aliases. It looked like it was owned by a hoarder, and not just a normal mentally ill person who had a compulsive hoarding disorder, but like a hoarder from one of those trashy reality schadenfreudian TV shows that Clint loved.

“Split up, see if you can find any organizational system in the mess.” Natasha ordered, and Morse’s team broke into groups, each taking a room of the house. She stepped onto a paper plate full of molding food and cursed. “And keep an eye out for traps!” She called out to them, trying to get the dirty plate off of her boot.

“I thought HYDRA was meant to be organized. Obsessively so.” Morse remarked. She carefully stepped around a stack of boxes, taking the first one down. It was a small shoebox. “This box is full of bills.”

“Is there any sort of pattern? What’s the name on the address?” Clint asked her, walking over to the box and taking the letter out of her hand. “Harry Balzac.” He said, then stopped. “Harry Balzac?” He laughed, covering his eyes. “Oh my god, that’s amazing.”

Morse took another one. “This one is to Jack Inoff.” Natasha blinked.

“Really?” She climbed over to the box, grabbing a bill at random. It was addressed to Pat Hiscock. “Ty che, blyad?” She muttered.

“Are they fucking with us?” Morse asked disbelievingly. “These are- they’re jokes!”

Clint laughed, and both of them turned to look at him. He held up an envelope. “Seymore Butts.”

“Idiot.” Morse sighed at the same time Natasha said, “You’re such a child.”

They looked at each other and Natasha held back her grin.

“Dr. Morse, Agent Romanoff, Agent Barton!” A junior agent stumbled out of the room, tripping over trash and clutching a handful of receipts.

“What is it?” Natasha asked, trying to walk over to the girl without stepping on anything.

“These receipts, they’re fakes.” The agent said, clearing some space on the floor.

“Yeah, tell me about it.” Morse scoffed, holding a handful of fake bills.

The girl sat, spreading out the receipts on the floor, pointing at each of them. “These prices, they
don’t make any sense,” She started.

“Well, it is San Francisco.” Clint said. “Everything’s pretty fucking expensive.”

“No, I mean; they don’t add up. The purchases and the prices, they don’t add up.”

Natasha walked over to the agent, crouching down next to her. “Show me.”

She had set out the receipts in order of the date. The first was from a pet store, for the purchase of two bags of dog food and a box of kitty litter. The dog food back were each 25 dollars and the litter was 15 dollars. However, the final price was only $22.59.

“Huh.” Natasha said, grabbing the next receipt. They were all wrong, ranging from $5.16 to $341.78.

“This one is the strangest,” The girl said, presenting Natasha with the last receipt. The total price was $32.105.

“Well that doesn’t make any sense.” Natasha pointed out, unnecessarily. She had a thought. “Morse? What’s the date on that bill?”

“Which one?” She asked, as she was holding several.

“Doesn’t matter.” Natasha said.

“Uh Anita Hardcok, August 28th, 2002.” She told Natasha.

“That matches!” The junior agent said, grabbing one of the receipts. “That matches, this purchase, at-at Trader Joe’s on August 28th, 2002 for two six packs of beer for $72.88.”

“Bring the box over here.” Natasha demanded, and Clint grabbed the shoebox of bills, coming to sit next to them. Morse followed, kicking trash bags and boxes out of her way.

They matched up the dates, and every receipt had a bill to match.

“What does it mean?” The girl asked, and Natasha shook her head.

“I’m not sure,” She told her. “It has to be some sort of code.”

Morse crouched down next to them. “We’re missing something.”

“It probably has to do with the stupid names, right?” Clint asked. “I mean, Ivana Hafsechs-“

“You what?” The junior agent laughed.

“C’mon kid, not cool.” Clint rolled his eyes, but he was smiling.

Natasha whistled loudly, without warning. Clint covered his ears and Morse and her junior agent jumped.

The rest of Morse’s team fought their way to the main room, wading through garbage. They were well trained.

“Has anyone found anything?” Natasha asked the assembled crowd. They stared blankly at her.

Morse stood, dusting the front of her pants. “Group Alpha; What have you found?”
“Mostly just trash, ma’am.” The young man at the front of the group reported.

“Keep looking. One man’s trash…” She said, waving a hand in a ‘you know the rest’ gesture. “Group Beta?”

Each of the five groups each gave reports of what they found, which was basically nothing. Morse was about to dismiss them, when Natasha stopped her. She stood, looking at them. “What about a book? Have any of you found a book?”

“Oh,” One of the members in the back of group Epsilon raised her hand. “I found one book, but I don’t think-”

“What is it?” Clint asked.

She stepped forward. “It’s just a joke book.”

Natasha grinned. “Perfect.”

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“How did you- I don’t-” Steve spluttered as they were walking back over the Brooklyn Bridge. Walking back and forth between boroughs had become something of a ritual for them.

James sighed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know what else to do. I really feel horrible for lying to that sweet old lady, but I couldn’t exactly tell her the truth.”

“But-” Steve started, trying to collect himself. “I mean, your face, your voice, you-you were just like him.”

James stuck his hands in his pockets. Elizabeth trotted alongside him. “When you visited Peggy, did she slip into one of her episodes?” He asked.

“What do you mean?” Steve asked.

James pursed his lips. “So that’s a no. You’re lucky.” He tried not to sound bitter. “Sometimes, when she’s sort of out of it, she forgets who I am, she gets confused. She thinks- she thinks that I’m him, that I’m Barnes. It makes no sense to try to explain who I am, and all it does is confuse her. So I just- I pretend. I’ve gotten pretty good at it over the past couple years.”

“That’s-” Steve couldn’t seem to think of anything to say. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” James shrugged. “Well, it’s not, it sucks. But, you know-” He shrugged again. “It’s Peggy. She’s a fighter.”

“Yeah, she is.” Steve said, bumping his shoulder into James’. “So’re you.”

“Nah,” James laughed, scratching the back of his neck. “I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

Steve shook his head, chuckling. “Is that so?”

“I’m more like my mom. Sharon’s the one who takes after Peggy.” James answered.
Steve was quiet for a few moments. “What was she like?”

“Peggy?” James asked. “You know her pretty well, I don’t-”

“Your mom.” Steve clarified. “What was she like? I don’t remember Peggy ever talking about a sister.”

“She’s a half-sister. Uh, she’s a lot younger than Peggy; she was born a few years after the war, in the States. Her name was Amanda.” James smiled to himself, thinking of his mom. “Same dad as Peggy, I think. They didn’t really know each other until my mom went to college at UC Berkeley. Peggy was living in California at the time, running SHIELD.”

James pulled out his phone, scrolling through his pictures. He moved over, getting out of everyone’s way, and beckoned Steve over to him. He found the black-and-white photograph of his mom and Peggy posing in front of the Golden Gate bridge. Peggy was wearing a professional pantsuit, and Amanda was wearing horrible 70’s clothes, high-waisted bellbottoms, a shirt with big flowing sleeves, and curly blonde hair pushed back by a large head band. He showed his phone to Steve, who laughed.

“That’s your mom? On the left?” He asked, grinning.

“Yeah,” James said. “I mean, she’s only 19 here, she wasn’t always dressed this terribly.” He scrolled through some more pictures, finding one of her circa 1999, with Sharon and James on either side of her. She was wearing normal people clothes, and smiling prettily at the camera.

“She’s pretty.” Steve remarked. “Your sister looks a lot like her.”

“Yeah,” James said, smiling sadly. “Yeah, she does.”

“Sorry.” Steve said quickly. “I didn’t mean to bring up bad memories.”

“No, don’t be.” James told him. “It’s good to remember. I have to remember her.”

Steve chewed his lip, looking down. “I guess you’re right.”

“It’s a book cipher!” Morse said excitedly. Natasha had already grabbed the joke book from the frightened agent. She turned back to the girl with the receipts.

“You! Give me the first price.”

“Uh, 22.59” She answered. Clint had his phone out, ready to write down whatever Natasha said.

“Page 22, word 59.” She muttered, flipping through the pages.

“Everybody out!” Morse ordered, gesturing to her team. “If you’re not clearance level 7 or above, I need you to clear the room.”

Some of the junior agents groaned, but they all followed her order, carefully filing out of the safehouse. The girl who had found the receipts looked confused as to what she should do, but Clint helped her to her feet and ushered her to join the others.
“Underneath.”
“42.20”
“Ground.”
“6.78”
“Island.”
“107.89”
“Prison.” Natasha looked up. “Island prison, that’s-”

“A lcatraz!” Clint said, grinning. “Babe, I told you I was gonna take you sightseeing.”

“Is there an underground of Alcatraz?” Natasha asked.

Morse frowned. “Yeah, the West Coast branch of the SSR had an experimentation sight underneath Alcatraz.” She winced. “It was pretty horrible. They did experiments on inmates, most of them black. A lot of people died. I guess they were trying to recreate the super soldier serum, or something. They closed it in the 50’s, when Stark and Carter took over. It was sealed off.”

“So HYDRA built a base right under their noses.” Clint shook his head. “Are there more?”

“Yeah, six more receipts.” Morse answered. “Uh, 295.12”

“Send.”
“19.22”

“Word.”
“89.09”

“Two.”
“25.91”

“Stone.”
“341.78”

“Lion.”

“Last one, 32.105.”

“Bird.”

“Send word to stone lion bird?” Clint asked. “What’s a stone lion bird?”


“What about stone?” Morse asked.

“I don’t…” Clint frowned. “Stone lion bird?”
Natasha snapped her fingers. “A Sphinx! A stone lion bird, the Great Sphinx of Giza.”

“Are they meant to send word to Egypt?” Morse asked.

Natasha shook her head, trying to focus. “It doesn’t matter. Right now we need to focus on retrieving the file.”

“Alright, then, ladies.” Clint said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s break into Alcatraz!”

“You’re such a cheater!” James accused, throwing down his cards. “Oh my god, Captain America, beacon of virtue is a huge fucking cheater.”

“I didn’t cheat!” Steve defended.

“Oh really? ‘Explain the rules to me again, James?’ ‘I don’t think I quite understand, James.’ You fucking hustled me!”

“Oh, but-” Steve was clearly trying not to laugh. “I technically never cheated.”

“I was going easy on you! Oh my god, you dick!” James was laughing now, he couldn’t bring himself to be angry; Steve had conned him so well. “I’m never playing cards with you again.”

They were both still laughing when James’ phone rang. It was Natasha.

“What’s up, tetushka?” He asked.

“What are you laughing about?” Natasha asked, a smile in her voice.

“Did you know that Steve is a big fat cheater?” He said, throwing an accusatory glance at Steve.

“Did he hustle you at rummy?” She asked him and James nodded.

“You too, huh?” James said.

“Yes, he’s an asshole. Listen, solnyshko, we got the file.” She sounded slightly out of breath, and if James tried, he could faintly hear alarms in the background.

“What?” He asked. There was a shout, and then some rustling.

“You’re coming home, kiddo!” Clint’s voice shouted through the phone. “You’re heading out tomorrow morning.”

“Oh.” He said. He turned back to Steve. “Uh, the mission’s over, I guess.”

Steve blinked, collecting the cards from the coffee table. “Oh.”

“You’re welcome.” Clint said sarcastically.

“Yeah, sorry Clint. Thank you, both of you, for helping me. I’m just- back to real life.” He laughed a little to himself, feeling stupid for feeling so disappointed. “I guess I’ve just,” He glanced at Steve again, who had stopped shuffling cards and was watching James. “I guess I’ve just missed
They stayed up again that night, binge watching the Godfather movies. James made waffles with chocolate chips in the morning, and Steve fed Elizabeth. They had fallen into routine so easily after only one week. It was spooky, how easy it was to be with Steve.

James and Steve packed their bags and headed toward the train station, because James flat-out refused to fly on a pilotless plane again. They arrived at Union Station to Natasha and Clint and Sharon and Sam.

They all ran forward, swallowing James and Steve into massive group hug. Steve coughed awkwardly, but James was used to this sort of treatment from his family. Elizabeth barked excitedly, happy to see all his favorite people. He just let each of them touch him, like a pack of dogs scenting their puppy. After a while, Steve got claustrophobic and wriggled out, blushing.

Eventually, they dispersed. Sharon and Sam grabbed his bags, dragging him off towards Sam’s car, talking mile-a-minute. Natasha and Clint walked with Steve, filling him in on the details of their mission. The two groups went separate ways, and James only had the chance to wave good-bye to Steve before being ushered away.

A week passed by. James taught classes, called his sister, visited his aunt, flirted with the history teacher, and cooked for his best friend.

Peggy was doing okay, but was confused about his absence. James asked Elliot to dinner on his first day back to school. Sam had finished his hunt for a place of his own while James had been away, and they helped him move. Luckily, he was only a few floors down from James, so that he could keep an eye on him. Still the apartment felt strangely empty without Sam, or-

Well.

He didn’t call Steve. He was tempted to, so many times, he was tempted to. Whenever he thought of something, he would turn to talk to Steve, but he was never there. When he was restless during the night, there was no one to watch movies with. When he walked Elizabeth, there was no one next to him, teasing him to run faster. But…

But he didn’t call Steve. And Steve didn’t call him either.

It was Saturday, and James was getting ready for his date. He nervously checked his hair, staring at his reflection. There was a knock at the door and he startled.

“Hey,” Elliot greeted, and James smiled at him.

“I promised I’d take you to dinner, didn’t I?” James asked, and Elliot laughed, taking James’ hand.

They went to a nearby indian food place. It wasn’t fancy, but it was one of James’ favorites.

“So, how has your past few weeks been?” James asked.

Elliot laughed. “You know Katie?”

“Robertson or Bishop?” James asked, wonder which of his students had caused trouble now.

“Bishop.” Elliot answered. “She shot an arrow into the tree in the courtyard.”

“An arrow?” James laughed. “No.”
“Yeah.” Elliot said, nodding. “They want to suspend her. You know her defense?”

“What?” James asked, leaning forward in anticipation.

“She said that if a white boy had brought a gun to school, no one would have cared. She said that
they’re unfairly persecuting an asian girl for “harmlessly” practicing her archery in the courtyard.”

“Oh my god.” James put his head in his hands, giggling. “Oh my god, Katie, no.”

“She also said that it was the school’s fault for not having an archery team.” Elliot laughed.

“Jesus,” James groaned.

“Jesus,” James groaned, stumbling through the door. Elliot nodded, rucking up James’ shirt.

“Where’s the bedroom?” Elliot gasped, lips against James’ collarbone.

James grabbed the front of Elliot’s shirt, dragging him into his room. They walked backwards until
they hit the bed, James falling backwards and Elliot caught himself, leaning above him.

“You know, I’ve been practicing some languages since you’ve been gone.” He told James,
pressing his lips against his throat.

“Oh, yeah?” James asked, tilting his head up to give Elliot better access.

“Yeah.” Elliot purred, grazing his teeth against sensitive skin. James shuddered. “I’ve been
working on my Russian.”

“Russian? Interesting.” James said, twining a hand into Elliot’s hair. “Why Russian?”

“I just thought it was cool, and one of those language websites was offering it for free.” Elliot
answered, then pressed a kiss to James’ jaw. He pushed James back onto the bed, leaning down to
hover over James.

“Let’s hear it.” James teased, wrapping his legs around Elliot’s waist.

“Zhelaniye.” Elliot whispered, sitting up to take his shirt off.

“Longing? That’s fitting.” James ran a hand over Elliot’s torso. He was unfairly beautiful. James
noticed a simple line tattoo on Elliot’s hipbone. It was a sphinx.

Elliot leaned back down to kiss James. “Rzhavyy.”

A strange tingling sensation ran from the crown of James’ head to the base of his spine. “Rusted?
What kinda website are you using?” He asked breathlessly.

“Semnadsat” Elliot sighed, and James sat up quickly.

“Sorry, there’s just- there’s something wrong.” James said, scratching his arms. Elliot put a hand
on his shoulder, squeezing it gently. James grabbed his phone.
“Rassvet.” He murmured, and James stood, pushing Elliot off of him and running towards the door. James held down the 1 button of his phone. He was almost to safety when Elliot smiled and said, “Pech’”

James fell to the floor, convulsing. “What are you doing to me?” He cried. Elliot crouched down, putting a hand on James face in a soothing sort of gesture.

“Devyat’” Elliot said, and James shouted in pain, dropping his phone and writhing underneath Elliot’s dispassionate state.

“Stop! Please, just stop.” He begged.

“Oh, James. I wish I could.” Elliot told him. “I really do like you.” He smiled at James, the same shy smile that he directed at James on the day they met. “Dobroserdechnyy.”

James spasmed, crying out. He couldn’t form words, couldn’t even think coherently. His mind wasn’t doing what he needed it to do. His body wasn’t, either.

“Vozvrashcheniye na rodinu.” Elliot said, and James stopped moving, stopped thinking. He just stopped. He just stared at Elliot, hatred burning behind his eyes. “Odin.”

Elliot opened his mouth to say the next word, but James couldn’t hear it. He had just enough time to think They’re coming for you, asshole before darkness closed in.
Sharon sat up with a bolt. Her phone was buzzing against the nightstand. She grabbed it, and saw the alert that she’s only ever seen 4 times in her life. It made her heart drop into her stomach.

She called James first, just in case he was drunk, like he was the 2nd time. The line rang. And rang. And rang.

It went to voicemail and she got out of bed, putting clothes on and grabbing her weapons. She called Natasha, who answered with a short, “I know.”

“She’s not picking up.” Sharon said.

“I know.”

“Natasha—“

“Zvyozdochka, I know. We’re heading there now.”

“Wake up Sam. He’ll want to know.” Sharon said. She didn’t mean to give Natasha an order, but this was her brother. This was her brother.

“We will. Get Rogers, too.” She said, the hung up.

Sharon made sure her guns were loaded, then walked across the hall, banging her fist on Rogers’ door.

The door creaked open, and Rogers peeked out, wearing his pajamas. “Kate? I mean- uh, Agent Carter?”

“James is in trouble.” She said simply, ignoring the fact that Rogers clearly couldn’t remember her name.

“What?” He asked, brow furrowing.

“James, he’s in trouble.” Sharon said. She didn’t have time for this, James could be hurt right now. “Natasha told me to get you. Hurry and get suited up, we don’t know how long he’s got.”
Rogers ran to his room, coming out moments later in his full Captain America gear, strapping his shield to his back. “Let’s go.”

They rode on his motorcycle, Sharon shouting directions in Rogers’ ear. They made it to James’ apartment in a matter of minutes, as the streets were mostly clear this late at night.

Sharon ran up the stairs, Rogers close on her heels. She reached James’ door, which was already open, she reached to draw her weapon, but Steve stopped her with a hand on her wrist. “Wait.” He whispered, raising his shield.

He opened the door further, the lowered his shield. He looked back at Sharon. “It’s friends.”

“Sharon?” A voice called, and Sharon pushed forward, past Roger, and ran into the living room to hug Sam.

He caught her and staggered back, burying his face in her hair. “It’s like we’re 11 again.” He murmured.

“We found him then and we’ll find him now.” Sharon said, fisting her hands in the back of his shirt.

“Sharon,” Clint called, and Sharon broke away from Sam, looking at him. He was sitting on the couch with a laptop.

“What have you found?” She asked “How long has it been? Have you check the security cameras? Were there any witnesses?”

Clint gave a half-hearted smile, “We know how to do our jobs, kiddo. I’m looking at the camera feed now.”

She deflated, walking over to peer over his shoulder. “Right, sorry.”

Natasha walked out of the bedroom, face grim. “The bed’s still warm. He couldn’t have gotten far.”

“Here!” Clint said, and everyone gathered around him, as he pointed at the screen. “There’s James.”

It was a blurry picture of James with his arm slung over the shoulder of a somewhat familiar man. Sharon squinted, trying to recognize him.

“That’s the dog guy.” Steve said, frowning and leaning down to look at the picture.

“The history teacher!” Sam said. “That’s the history teacher that James was dating.” He looked at Sharon. “What was his name?”

“Uh, shit. It was Eli? Elias?” She tried. She remembered now, the cute-in-a-nerdy-way guy that James worked with. What was the codename she had given him when they had been trying to retrieve Elizabeth? She had called him Mouse.

“Elliot!” Sam said.

“Yes, that’s it. Elliot.” Sharon said. “See if you can pull up the employee list of the school. He teaches-”

“American History.” Steve said, grimacing. “I met him a few weeks ago. I gave him…” His head
shot up. “Elizabeth!”

He stood, calling for Elizabeth. There was a whimpering noise from bathroom, and the sound of scratching against the door. Sam ran over and opened the door. Elizabeth ran out of the bathroom in a shot, and Steve crouched down, hugging her. She whined unhappily, and wiggled out of his grasp, running to the bedroom. Sharon got up and followed her.

She was pacing around the bed, whining. “He’s not here, baby.” Sharon said quietly. Elizabeth hopped off the bed growled. Sharon frowned and leaned down. “What’s in your mouth?”

She reached out, and Elizabeth’s growling intensified. Sharon held her hands up. “It’s just me. Just Sharon. C’mon, let me see.” She grabbed Elizabeth’s muzzle, forcing her mouth open. She grabbed a strip of fabric from her teeth. “What’s this?”

She looked at fabric, white cotton with a promising spot of blood on it. “Did you get him? You got him didn’t you? Oh, good girl.” She told Elizabeth.

Elizabeth whined, going back to the bed, clearly looking for James.

Sharon walked back into the living room. “Elizabeth took a bite out of our perp.” She said, holding up to scrap of fabric.

Clint grinned. “Good fuckin’ dog!” He came over with a zip-lock and bagged it. “We can send this to the lab, see if we get anything from it.”

“It’s probably mostly dog saliva.” Sharon shrugged.

“But it's something.” Clint said, smiling at her. “Nat, we have anything on that name?”

“Elliot Amir, AP US History at James’ high school. I’m running it through SHIELD’s alias database now.”

Sam was pacing behind the couch, and Rogers was hovering over Natasha. Sharon glanced at them, seeing the clear agitation in their posture. “Is there an address we can check out?”

“There is, but it's probably just a shell.” Natasha said. “His name and social security number are both faked, his place should be too.”

“I think I’ll check it out, just to be safe. Captain? Sammy? Wanna come with?”

Both men looked up, obviously relieved to have something to do.

“Yeah.” Sam said, and Steve was already stepping forward.

Natasha eyed them, and looked back to Sharon. “The place is in Anacostia. 129 Galen street.”

“Thanks. Sam?”

Sam tossed her his car keys, and the three of them headed out the door. They drove in silence, the soft sounds of soul music playing from the radio. In the passenger seat, Sam was jiggling his good leg anxiously.

“We’ll find him.” Sharon assured him, telling herself the same. “We’re gonna find him.” She couldn't lose James. Mom had gone a long time ago, and Peggy was only half still here. James was all she had.
“He’s never been missing this long before.” Sam whispered. “He could be dead.”

The car screeched to a halt in front of Amir’s address. “He’s not dead.” She got out of the car, slamming the door shut behind herself.

Sam struggled out of his seat. “But-“

“I would know.” Sharon ground out. “If anything happened to him, I would know. I would feel it.”

She walked to the door, digging through her jacket for her lockpicking kit.

“Stand back.” Rogers said, and Sharon startled. She had forgotten he was with them.

“I’m just going to unlock the-“

“No need.” He said, then kicked in the door. It flew open.

She looked at him. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” He started to enter with his shield raised.

“Wait.” Sharon grabbed his shoulder. She shined her phone light at the door, showing him the tripwire. “Careful.”

“Thanks.” He said.

“Don’t mention it.” She smiled. He stepped over the wire, and she followed, then helped Sam. She tried the lightswitch, but nothing happened.

“Power’s been cut.” She remarked.

“Someone hasn’t been paying their bills,” Sam said, bending down to pick up a stack of unopened envelopes. “They’re all addressed to Elliot Amir, so at least we’re in the right place.”

“Maybe Natasha’s right. Maybe it really is a shell.” Sharon frowned.

“Who decorates a fake house?” Rogers asked.

Sharon shined her light at the wall, to where a poster was hanging. It was framed National Geographic spread of the sphinx.

“Take that down.” Sharon ordered, and Rogers took the frame off the wall, revealing a small safe. Sharon grinned. Rogers lifted his shield, bringing it down sharply on the combination lock.

Sam turned on his phone light and started walking down the hallway. “I’m gonna keep looking.”

“Stay sharp, keep an eye out for traps!” Sharon called, and he gave her a thumbs-up.

Rogers was pulling things out of the safe; papers and passports and documentation.

“Let me see,” Sharon said, taking everything out of Roger’s hands. She flipped through them.

“Edward Asfour, Eric Assad, Ethan Amari-“ All of the names were like that, a Western name that started with an E and an Arabic last name that started with an A. She took pictures of all of the IDs and texted them to Nat.

“Sharon?” Sam called. “Found a laptop!”
“Perfect, bring it here!” She yelled back.

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“Bring it here,” The Commander demanded. E rolled his eyes.

“He is a person, you know.” He said, setting James down in the chair. His body slumped over limply.

“Not for much longer, Epsilon, not for much longer.” The Commander turned to one of the techs. “Get it hooked up.”

The science officers flitted around James, hooking him up to an IV and strapping him down One of them was slipping a mouthguard between his teeth. A hand clapped down on E’s shoulder and he jumped, turning to look at the Commander. “I’ve been waiting so long to have the Asset back in my possession, Epsilon. You will be rewarded for your success.”

“Right.” E said, watching the techs handle James with cold detachment. “Thanks.”

“Many great agents before you have failed,” The Commander said, and E had to keep from sighing. The old man had the habit of pontificating about HYDRA’s glory days, and it was easiest to just tune him out. Thankfully, he wouldn’t be in charge for much longer.

“We’re ready to start, Commander.” One of the scientists said, and E held back his grinned. He had worked at a high school full of shitty, terrible kids for months, tracked James’ habits and behaviors for longer, and finally, finally, everything had fallen into place.

“Prep it.” The Commander said.

There had been some setbacks, of course; James’ sergeant friend coming home, Captian America coming back to life (who could have predicted that one?), the fact that everyone James knew seemed to be SHIELD, and that stupid fucking dog.

But E was patient. He could sent the Black Widow on a wild goose chase. He could seduce the Winter Soldier. He was going to lead HYDRA into a second Golden Age.

James screamed. God, he screamed. E took a step back, resisting the childish impulse to cover his ears. The technicians turned off the chair, and James gasped heaving breaths, looking around wildly. The Commander stepped up to him, crouching down and taking the rubber guard from his mouth.

“Where- where am I?” James asked, sounding like a frightened child. “Who are you?”

The Commander pressed his lips together in a thin unhappy line and put the mouthguard back into James’ slack mouth. He looked toward a tech. “Again.”

She flipped the switch and the chair started up again, and James kept screaming. E closed his eyes.
“Damn, it's encrypted.” Sharon said. “After three wrong passwords, it’ll delete everything.” She shut the laptop. “I better get this to Natasha.” Sharon looked at Sam. “Did you find anything else?”

Sam shrugged. He had searched every room of the small house, and found almost nothing. It looked like the set of a movie, or maybe a house that a realtor had decorated. It was eerie how impersonal it was. “Pretty standard setup. I didn’t find anything weird, but I’m not, y’know, a spy.”

Sharon nodded. There was a loud sound, and the two of them looked up, startled. Captain Rogers had put his fist through the wall. “Uh, is everything okay?” Sam asked tentatively.

Rogers withdrew his hand, revealing a fistfull of papers. “Hollow walls.”

Sharon stood, walking over and taking paper from Steve. “These are blueprints.” She handed them so Sam and turned, peeling back wallpaper and plaster. Captain Rogers did too, and together, they tore down the whole wall, revealing a massive bookshelf behind it, lined with files.

“Shit,” Sam said, standing. His leg still bothered him, but the physical therapy was working and he could move without much trouble. “That’s… pretty cool.”

“Get a bag.” Sharon said. “We’re not gonna be to carry this all on our own.”

They loaded everything into Sam’s car, heading back to James’ apartment. Natasha opened the door to the apartment before they even had to chance to knock, and ushered them inside. Sharon and Clint sorted through the files, most of which were coded. Natasha worked on opening the laptop. Sam just stood in the back, trying not to get in the way of their work.

It was sort of infuriating, how helpless he felt. Nat, Clint, and Sharon seemed to know what they were doing, but Sam wanted to help, wanted to do something. This was James, for christ’s sake. Something terrible could be happening to James, and all Sam was doing was staying out of the way.

He didn’t know what he would do if-

The two great loves of his life had been Riley and the Carter twins. If the worst happened, if James was dead, Sam wouldn’t survive it. He just wouldn’t. Riley was gone, and Sam was coping, just barely coping, and that was only because of James. If he lost James too, he just wouldn’t be able to take it.

He knew Sharon would be broken by it, they all would be, but she was strong. Stronger than Sam, at any rate. When Amanda had died, she’d just gotten harder, more motivated. When Sam lost Riley, he just withdrew from himself.

“Hey,”

Sam startled a little, lost in his own thoughts. He turned to look at Captain America. He was leaning against the wall next to Sam. It was strange, how Sam hadn’t noticed him. This whole time, this whole night, Captain America has been there, and Sam hadn’t noticed, or at least- hadn’t really cared.

“Hey.” Sam replied.

Captain Rogers smiled weakly. “I don’t really know what to do with myself,” he admitted.
“Me neither.” Sam told him. “They seem to have everything under control, but-“

“But you wish there was something you could do to help.” Rogers surmised.

Sam smiled tightly at him. “Yeah. Exactly. I mean, it's James, he's my best friend.” And if we don't find him soon I'm gonna go fucking insane, and there's nothing I can do to help except stand in the corner and be useless .

“Yeah, I-“ Rogers shook his head. “This is probably gonna sound stupid, but me too.”

Sam felt bitterly, pettily jealous for two seconds, before feeling incredibly childish about it. It was like when they were in the 7th grade, and James was in French club and started hanging out with Monique Peterson, until Sam and Sharon left a note in her locker, telling her to back off. It had only been the three of them, only ever the three. They were a possessive, exclusive little group.

“He’s easy to love.” Sam said simply.

“He is.” Rogers said, hand going to his neck. It took Sam a second to realize he was absentmindedly playing with his dogtags. Well, dog tag.

“What happened to your other tag, man?” Sam asked.

“What?” Rogers asked, looking confused.

“Your tags, your dogtags.” Sam said, nodding towards Rogers’ hand. “One's missing.”

“I-“ Rogers looked down, cradling his tag. “I never noticed. How have I not noticed?” He rubbed his thumb over the face of the little metal tag and frowned. “It must have come off in the crash, or-or something.”

Natasha looked up at them both, quizzically. “What are you two talking about.”

Sam shrugged.

They pulled him out of the isolation tank, and he fell to the floor, body limp and hair wet.

Two techs rushed forward and helped him to his feet, dragging him forward. As he stumbled, an officer sighed and jabbed a candle prod into his side. He cried out, slipping on the wet tile and falling to the floor. The officer raised his prod again, but E grabbed his wrist, twisting it enough that the man grimaced in pain.

“For Chrissakes, that’s enough.” He demanded, dropping the officer’s wrist. He leaned down, and James- the Asset, flinched. “It’s okay.” E soothed, wrapping an arm around his naked waist. He helped him stand, and lead him to the examination table, grabbing a towel and patting him down gently. “Are you hurt?”

James shook his head quickly, not looking up.

“It learns quickly.” The Commander said approvingly, walking over. “Let’s see how it fights.”
“Sir, I don’t think he’s-” E protested.

“You’ve done your part, Epsilon. Let me do mine.” The Commander said. “Soldat, come with me.”

James looked at E for half a second, then stood, following the Commander. E hid his smile. The old man was losing his touch. The Asset was already looking for E’s approval.

The Commander led James, naked into a chamber, and shut the door behind him. It looked like he was behind prison bars, or was in some sort of cage. “You will fight, and you will win. Do not disappoint me.”

E stood, walking to the side of the cage.

A crowd had started to gather, everyone wanting to see their new Asset. To most of them, the Winter Solider was nothing but a bad dream, but to some, he was a living nightmare. Everyone was filled with curiosity as to how their replacement would measure up.

E watched with growing concern as a door opposite of James opened, and Beta entered.

Beta had gained the nickname “The Beast” over the years, not only for his large stature and his boorish manner, but for the intensity in which his fought, and his incredible kill count.

He was wearing full tact gear, and had a baton. James, who was easily half the other man’s size, was unarmed and naked.

“God, he’ll kill him.” One of the techs muttered, covering her mouth with her hand.

“He’s no use if he can’t fight. What good is a broken gun?” Another told her.

“If the fucking Beast beats him to death, we’ll have no gun at all!”

E shot them both a scathing look, and they shut up, turning their attention to the cage.

It wasn’t much of a fight yet, Beta was just slowly advancing on James, weapon drawn and a sick grin on his face. James had backed up against the corner, not quite cowering, but looking small and frightened.

Beta delivered the first blow, swinging the baton at James’ rib cage. James deftly moved out of the way, scurrying to the other side of the small chamber. He moved faster than any person than anyone E’s ever seen.

Beta turned toward James, baring his teeth. He lunged toward him, and James turned to the side, but the Beast grabbed a handful of his hair.

James cried out, and Beta threw him to the ground. He raised his baton to strike, but James rolled out of the way, and the weapon hit the floor with a loud clanging sound.

“C’mon, fight!” An agent yelled, rattling the side of the cage. E wished that the Commander had sent everyone away, because this was starting to feel voyeuristic.

James cried out, and Beta threw him to the ground. He raised his baton to strike, but James rolled out of the way, and the weapon hit the floor with a loud clanging sound.

There was the sound of bones snapping, and Beta cried out. James dropped to a crouch, sweeping
his leg out in a wide arc and forcing Beta to the ground.

Everyone was silent, now. A few people leaned in close with anticipation.

“He… that’s a Red Room move.” A girl to E’s left whispered. E smiled.

“They say he was trained by the Defector.” An agent next to her said excitedly.

The Beast snarled, swinging wildly at James away with his good arm. James stood, stepping on his hand. “Yield.” He demanded.

The Commander made a short grunting sound, starting to frown.

Beta grabbed James’ ankle and pulled. James didn’t fall back, but he stumbled, giving Beta enough time to stand and stagger back.

James was on the offensive now, stalking towards Beta like some sort of wild cat. Beta fumbled for his baton, swinging it in long arcs in the air, trying to keep James from advancing. James caught it in midair and wrenched it from Beta’s hand; snapping it in half easily, like it was a twig or a pencil.

He tossed the two halves of the weapon to the side, walking slowly towards Beta. The Beast, as an animal backed into a corner always does, lashed out. He lunged at James, tackling him around the middle.

They both crashed to the floor, Beta crying in pain as his broken arm smashed against the metal bars of the cage. His pain didn’t stop him from remembering his training, however, and he quickly straddled James’ waist, pinning him with a forearm across his throat.

James instinctively clawed at Beta’s arm for a panicked moment before lifting his knee and hooking his foot behind Beta’s ankle, flipping them so that he was on top.

He delivered two quick blows to Beta’s solar plexus, and E could hear ribs breaking. James stood as Beta coughed on the floor. He backed away, giving him space. “Do you yield?”

Beta yelled and got to his feet, charging James. James stepped out of his way and reached up, deftly snapping Beta’s neck.

The Beast crumpled to the ground, dead, and everyone cheered. James looked up, startled by the noise. Two guards came in, coaxing James out of the cage. People clapped him on the back and offered praise, all talking about the fight until the Commander raised a hand.

“Enough! Everyone get back to work.” He ordered, and everyone scurried to their stations.

“Put him back in the chair.” The Commander said coldly, walking away and gesturing for the guards to lead James towards the machine.

“But, sir-” E protested, following the Commander. “He won. He- he killed the Beast. He did well.”

“It asked Beta to yield. Twice.” The Commander said, shaking his head. “My Asset doesn’t show mercy.”

E stopped, grinding his teeth as James’ screams filled the room.
“This is all coded, but I think I’ve found all of Amir’s reports.” Natasha said, face lit by the blue glow of the laptop. “He’s sending them to someone he calls “Commander”. Most of the reports seem to be surveillance, with a couple small retrieval missions here and there. He’s been following James for a long time.”

“Son of a bitch.” Sharon muttered, pushing her hair back from her face. “How didn’t I catch this?”

“None of us did.” Clint said darkly. He took a stack of files and slammed them down on the coffee table. “HYDRA’s rebuilt itself right under our nose. And they’ve been building up to this, to creating a second Winter Soldier.”

“Don’t call him that.” Steve snapped, pushing off the wall. “The Winter Soldier is just a made up name, a title, like-like the Boogeyman. He had a name.”

“Steve, when they turned Barnes- he wasn’t himself anymore.” Natasha said, standing. “All those things he did, all that violence, your friend didn’t do that. The Winter Soldier did.”

“He didn’t become a different person!” Steve argued. “Bucky was still there, he was just-just buried.”

“Steve, I’m so sorry, but Bucky died as soon as the Winter Soldier was born.” Natasha said, reaching to put her hand on his shoulder.

“No, he didn’t.” Steve growled, pushing her hand away. “He can’t have.” His voice cracked. “Because if he did, if he did, that means-”

Steve closed his mouth and shook his head, storming out of the apartment, and slamming the door so hard it splintered.

“Fuck.” Natasha said, sitting on the arm of the couch. “I should go after him.”

“No, I-I’ll do it.” Sam volunteered. He walked into the hallway and found Rogers sitting with his back against the wall, knees drawn against his chest and head in his hands. Sam walked over and slid down the wall next him, not saying anything.

They sat together in silence for a few moments before Rogers turned to him. “I can’t lose him again.” He whispered. “I can’t lose Bucky and James. I just- I can’t. I can’t.”

“I understand.” Sam replied softly. Steve turned to look at him, studying his face for a few seconds before looking away and nodding.

“I guess you do.” Steve said, resting his chin on his knees. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Me neither, but… look man, I’ve gotta do something.” Sam told him. He stood, offering a hand to Steve. He looked at Sam and took his hand. He stood, smiling weakly.

“I guess you’re right.”

They walked back into James’ apartment. Clint was spreading files out on the floor in some sort of patter, and Sharon was helping him. Natasha was still looking at Amir’s laptop. Steve walked into the room, looking a little embarrassed about his outburst.

“See, here and here.” Clint was marking a few documents with a marker. “They’re disguised as
plans for municipal buildings, but when you put them together…”

“It’s a base.” Sharon said, grinning. “Plans for a base!”

“Don’t get too excited.” Clint warned. “We don’t know where it is yet.”

“But we have a map.” Sharon said. “We have all the entrances and exits, we can plan an attack.”

“We can’t trust it. There could be things intentionally left out, or put in as diversionary tactics.”

Clint said. “But it’s a start.”

Natasha made a grunting sound and frowned at the laptop.

“What is it?” Clint asked.

“There’s three days missing.” She said, furiously clicking at the keyboard. “Three days of reports, just gone.”

“What dates?” Sharon asked, standing to lean over Natasha’s shoulder.


“Maybe he was busy.” Sam offered. “Maybe nothing happened.”

Natasha just shook her head, chewing the inside of her cheek. “They just… disappeared.”

“Kinda like your tag, huh?” Sam told Steve, who smiled.

“What?” Sharon asked.

“Oh, he’s missing one of his dogtags.” Sam said.

“Yeah, it’s just-“ Steve shrugged. “Gone.”

“Your dogtags?” Natasha asked, putting the laptop on and standing.

“Just one of them.” Steve said, frowning in confusion.

Natasha walked over to Steve and hooked a finger underneath the chain and pulled. She examined the single tag as Steve blushed, trying to put some space between the two of them.

“I don’t get the big deal.” Sam said, looking at Sharon and Clint for support. However, they both had a similar look on their faces as Natasha.

Sharon stepped forward. “Is it-”

“It’s the same.” Natasha said.

Clint frowned. “Could it-”

“It might be.” She answered without looking up.

Steve cleared his throat, gently pushing Natasha away from him. “What’s happening?”

Instead of answering, Natasha jumped over the couch, grabbing her phone and pressing it to her ear. “Mateo? Get me the security tapes from the special medical wing, April 28th, 2011. Yeah, that’s the one. Sure, the whole day is fine. Thanks. Thank you. Alright, bye.”
She opened her own laptop, opening her email. Sharon and Clint crowded around Natasha, and Sam looked at Steve, who shrugged, tucking his tags back under his shirt. The two of them moved to look over Natasha’s shoulder.

She was scrubbing through what looked like security feed of a hospital. It took Sam a few moments to realize that the man in the single bed was Captain Rogers.

“What are we looking at, Natasha?” Steve asked, looking pale.

“While you were under, you kept asking for Barnes. Fury… thought it would be, I don’t know, interesting? If he brought James in to see you.” Natasha answered.

“He was dead set on James joining the team back then, and he thought he could make inroads through you, somehow.” Clint said.

“Oh, so he’s always been a manipulative bastard, then.” Steve said.

“There!” Sharon said, pointing at the screen. Natasha stopped fast-forwarding as a dark haired figure walked into the room, sitting in a chair next to the Captain’s bed. His knee bounced anxiously and he startled as the doctor walked into the room. They seemed to talk for a minute, before the James on the screen stood and undid the straps on the screen-Rogers’ arms and legs.

The doctor left, and James pulled the chair closer to the bed. He looked over Rogers and leaned in, touching something on his chest. “There, you see?” Clint said, pointing at the tiny screen James. “He’s grabbing the tags.”

The screen-James looked around and slipped something into his pocket. “He took it!” Sharon said excitedly. “James took the tag!” She grabbed Clint in a hug.

“What the hell?” Sam whispered, looking at Steve. Steve just shook his head in disbelief, still staring at the security footage. Sam looked back and saw the screen-Steve stirring, talking to the screen-James. James appeared to comfort him, holding Steve as he cried.

Sam looked away, feeling voyeuristic. “What’s so important about James taking Captain Rogers’ dogtag?”

Natasha closed the laptop, making Steve look up at her. “Once we got Steve off the ice and it seemed like he was gonna live, we… well, SHIELD, was weary of him. They weren’t sure he would work for us, and they didn’t like the idea of letting a superhuman run around New York without us having an eye on him.” She looked at Steve. “They replaced your dogtags with lookalikes. Trackers.”

Steve touched his neck, fingers brushing against the chain. His face went through a series of emotions- confusion, anger, sadness, realization, and finally, excitement. “And James has one of them.”

“Exactly.” Natasha said with a tight smile. “We can find him.”
Chapter 14

The Asset stood, breath heaving. He was surrounded by the three bodies of the guards, and blood was still sluggishly dripping from the sides of the cage and onto the pristine tile floor.

“Very good!” The Commander praised, opening the door. He cupped the back of James’s neck, like a mother wolf carrying her pup, and led him out of the chamber.

There was no crowd for this fight. It was just the Commander, E, James, and the two guards at the door, now. Apparently, the fewer people the Asset interacted with during this stage of conditioning, the better.

“You did very well, Soldat.” The Commander commanded, stroking a hand down James’ back. He looked over to E. “Get it cleaned up.”

“Yes, sir.” E said, taking James by the hand. He led him over to the table in the corner, gesturing for him to sit. He grabbed a washcloth and wet it in the sink, then walked over to James. “I’m just gonna get this blood off of you, okay?”

James nodded once, and let E wipe down his hands and arms, then his feet, and finally his face. E dragged the cloth across James’ cheek, and smiled when James leaned into the touch. E continued his ministrations even after the blood was long gone from James’ face.

“Are you hurt anywhere?” E asked as he walked around James, checking for injury. There was a nasty mark forming across one of his shoulder blades and his fists were impressively bruised, but E knew that the Asset could heal, and heal quickly.

“He’s doing well.” The Commander said, coming up and clapping E on the shoulder. He nodded at the two guards, and they walked up to the Asset, leading him away. “We’re lucky that our predecessors perfected the conditioning technology. When they first captured the soldier, it took months to break him. Now, we can just have him in our control with the flip of a switch. Now, he’s ours.”

“He’s always been ours, sir.” E said. “He was stolen from us, a long time ago; but he’s home now.”

The Commander laughed, slapping E on the back. “Right you are, Epsilon! Right you are.” He turned back to the guards. “Get it some clothes, and arm it. It’s ready.”

“I don’t understand.” Steve said, frowning at the computer. “How is he in the Atlantic?”

“Maybe they’re in a boat?” Sam tried.

“There’s no movement.” Natasha said. “There hasn’t been movement for hours.”

“They’re just sitting there?” Clint asked, frowning. “I mean, they’re just off the coast, but he’s just… sitting in the middle of the water.”

Sharon sat up with a gasp. She ran into James’ bedroom and came back with a large book. She sat
on the floor and started flipping through it. “Remember when James was in his school and he worked as a tour guide?”

Sam, Natasha, and Clint all nodded. Steve looked at Sharon with confusion. “So?”

“So, he was always practicing his spiel at home, and I always had to hear it. Fun fact: there are around 60 small islands off the coast of New York City.” Sharon said, opening the book to page filled with dots. “Lots of them are uninhabited, and most of them aren’t marked on normal maps.”

“So what’s that?” Sam asked, coming to crouch next to her.

“This is a fisherman’s map,” Sharon said with a smile. “All the islands are here, plus all the best catch. Natasha, what was the coordinates of James’ current location?”

“Uh, 40.6132° North, 73.5087° West.” She said. Sharon dragged her fingers over the lines of the map, and they met over a small land mass.

“That is… Snipe Island!” Sharon said excitedly. “We can save James, and catch some angler fish while we’re at it.”

“I’ll requisition a jet.” Natasha said, already picking up her phone. “We should move out right away. Get everything you’ll need for a fight.”

They drove to SHIELD HQ, loading into the jet. Clint punched in the coordinates, and they took off, everyone excited that they were on their way to get James, but anxious at what they might find.

“Sir!” A junior agent ran into the room, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

“Not now.” The Commander snapped.

“But, sir-” He gasped.

E turned to give him a scathing look. “You heard the Commander. Now isn’t the time.”

“We’ve had an unauthorized landing near the west entrance. We think it's SHIELD.” The agent gasped anyway.

“Son of a fucking…” E sighed, looking at the Commander. He was smiling. “Sir?”

“Get the Asset.” He told the junior agent, who nodded and ran off. He grabbed his comm. “Bring me the Alpha Squadron.”

E turned with a start. “Sir, I would advise-“

“A moment, Epsilon.” The Commander ordered. He turned to the security system, switching the feed to show the west entrance. A jet was settled on the grass, and about ten of their agents were surrounding it. The door to the jet opened, and a very recognizable shield flew from the open door, catching two agents and knocking them to the ground. The Commander leaned against the desk. “Computer, run face recognition.”
The computer told the Commander what E could have told him easily. They were dealing with Captain America, the Black Widow, the Archer, Agent 13, and the soldier. James’ family was here for him.

The Commander laughed. “Excellent.”

“Sir?” E questioned, watching the screen as the Widow jumped on an agent, wrapping her legs around his throat.

“These people, they’re here for someone they love, someone who no longer exists. When we send the Asset after them, it will kill them without mercy. And they will let it, because they won’t be able to bring themselves to fight it.”

We watched the security feed as the five intruders made their way past the guards and into the building. E swallowed, grabbing his gun and turning to the door.

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Rogers lead the fray, knocking people out of his way with pure strength. Natasha and Clint flanked him, and Sharon and Sam brought up the rear.

The five of them moved through the halls like a locomotive. Sharon was surprised by the lack of guards. They’d encountered maybe 20 people since they’d arrived on the island. Either this neo-HYDRA offset was extremely incompetent or they were heading directly into a trap. All of them seemed to be cognizant of this fact, but none of them gave a damn. They were here for James.

“Turn left,” Clint said. He and Natasha had memorized the base’s plans on the jet and figured the most likely place where they would be keeping James. “I’ll meet you guys there.” He said, jumping up and grabbing the grate of the air vent. “I need to get some higher ground.”

He threw the grate to the side and pulled himself up into the air shaft, waving cheekily to the group. Natasha shook her head, rolling her eyes fondly.

“It should be the 4th door down the 3rd hallway.” Natasha said as they turned the corner. “They’re probably waiting for us, so be ready.”

They reached the door and stopped, collectively taking a deep breath.

“Get behind me.” Captain Rogers commanded, and they all looked at each other, then crowded behind the man. He raised his shield and kicked in the door.

There was the sound of about 30 semi-automatics cocking, and one person slowly applauding.

Sharon stood on her tiptoes to look over Rogers’ shoulder. “A slow clap? Really? That’s just unoriginal.”

A very old man in a suit was standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by a semicircle of heavily armed men in tact gear.

“I could say the same about witty banter.” The old man said.

“Where’s James?” Rogers growled slowly, teeth grit.
The old man smiled. “Straight to the point, I like it.”

“Quit dicking around, Karpov.” Natasha sighed. “We’re just here for the boy.”

The old man looked at her sharply.

“That’s right, I know your name.” She said, and Sharon looked at her. She was stalling.

“Vasily Karpov, former HYDRA commander.” Sharon added, recalling from her vast knowledge of HYDRA. “You faked your death in the early nineties, right? Once SHIELD started weeding out you and your parasite friends.”

“Cut off one head-” Karpov started.

Sharon rolled her eyes. “Yeah, we know how it goes.”

“Face it, Karpov. HYDRA’s dead. This is just an old man’s half-assed attempt to relive his glory days.” Natasha said.

Karpov’s face turned red with rage and his fists balled up by his sides.

There was a whistling sound, then a solid thunk, and three guys to Karpov’s left collapsed. It happened again, and the three guys to his right fell. The six of them all had arrows sticking out of their backs.

A seventh arrow hit the ground in front of Karpov, and smoke filled the room.

“Herringbone!” Steve called, and the four of them split off into the room. Sharon ran up to the first armed guard she saw and jumped on his back, jamming a knife into his neck. She swung around, using the momentum of his falling body to twirl in the air and kick another guard in the head.

Sharon could hear gunshots, the sound of Clint’s arrows flying through the air, and the strange tuning-fork-like vibration noise of Captain America’s shield.

“I’ve got 9!” Clint yelled.

“Not fair, you had a head start!” Natasha yelled back.

“Them’s the rules, babe!”

Sharon grabbed the gun from the hand of a guard and smashed him in the face with the butt of it, then spun around to shoot the man at her 10’ o clock.

“Share, heads up!” Sam called, and Sharon turned around quickly just in time to catch a brightly colored shield. She stumbled back a ways with the force of the throw. The man to her left raised his gun and she ducked behind the shield. The bullets ricocheted off, and she shot back with her stolen gun.

“Cap, where you at?” She asked.

“Your 5!” Rogers’ voice called.

“Go long!” Sharon yelled, and she chucked the shield in his direction.

Sharon grabbed the gun off the guy who had taken pot-shots at her, and was now double-fisting two semi-automatic machine guns, firing wilding at any HYDRA agent who came near her.
Her back bumped into someone else’s and turned to see Sam grinning at her, a glock in each hand. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“God, I’ve always wanted to do this.” Sharon said, and they stood back-to-back, taking down guards one by one.

“Enough!” A voice yelled, and three bright lights turned on, almost like spotlights. The first landed on Clint and Natasha, who had been fighting side-by-side. The second on Rogers, who was by himself and holding his shield out readily. The third was on Sharon and Sam. There were HYDRA corpses littering the floor like candy wrappers on Halloween. The lights were hot and bright, and they all stopped, turning to look towards the source of the voice.

Karpov was standing in sort of a cage, and behind him, two men stood in shadow. “You wanted your precious James?” Karpov yelled. “Here he is.”

The man on Karpov’s left side stepped forward into the light.

“James!” Sharon yelled, dropping both her guns and sprinting forward.

“Sharon wait!” Natasha shouted, but Sharon had already jumped onto the cage’s platform, swinging the door open.

James stepped forward and for a moment Sharon thought he was opening his arms in a hug. She ran towards him to embrace him, but instead he grabbed her by the throat and lifted her in the air.

She gasped, legs flailing wildly. She clawed at James’ arms, trying to find some leverage, any leverage. Her airways closed, and tears filled her eyes. “Jamie,” she croaked.

He dropped her, and she collapsed into a heap on the ground, clutching her throat and coughing.

James stalked forward, stepping off the edge of the platform. He was wearing dark clothes, tact gear, and he was very heavily equipped. He reached down, grabbing a handgun from a thigh-holster.

He advanced on Natasha, who held her hands up and started backing away slowly. “James, it’s just me.”

While James walked towards his family with a weapon drawn, Sharon watched as Karpov smiled and started walking away with a tall, muscular man by his side. She reached into her boot for her knife.

“Solnyshko …” Natasha said calmly, switching the voltage level on her bracelets.

“Kiddo, you gotta snap out of this.” Clint said, not nearly as calm as Natasha. “I remember what it’s like, not being in control. I know it feels like your mind’s being pulled a million different ways, but you have to try.”

Sharon threw her knife, catching Karpov in the calf. He cried out and fell to the ground. The other man crouched down to help him, then looked up sharply. Sharon faintly recognized his face in the dark lighting. It was Amir.

“Soldat, ataka.” He commanded.

James quickly raised his gun towards Natasha and Clint and fired twice.
The sound of the bullets hitting the vibranium shield was like an alarm in the silent room. Rogers had moved faster than anyone Sharon had ever seen and thrown himself in front of Clint and Natasha like a human cannonball.

“James-“ Steve tried, but quickly ducked under the shield as James fired again.

Rogers threw his shield in a wide arc, catching James’ hand and sending the gun clattering to the floor. It slid a ways until it hit Sharon’s feet. The shield circled back to Steve, who caught it out of the air. “James you have to listen to me, this isn’t you.”

Amir was helping Karpov to stand, and Sharon grabbed the gun that had slid to her side, struggling to her feet. She stood and aimed shakily at them.

“Amir!” She yelled, voice hoarse. “Turn around slowly, hands where I can see them.”

“Trust me, Miss Carter, you don’t want to do this.” Amir said to her, turning around with a small smile.

“Actually, I think I do.” Sharon said, raising her gun “And it's Agent.”

“Soldat!” Karpov yelled. “Ubey yeye!”

Sharon ducked as a bullet flew through the air, hitting the concrete wall behind her. She turned and saw James, who had drawn a second handgun at her. Sam ran forward a few steps, and James turned quickly, aiming his gun at him.

“James, it's me. It’s Sam.” Sam plead, putting his hands in the air. James stared blankly at him. “I’m your friend. I want to help you. Please, Jamie. Please.”

James took stepped forward, then faltered.

Sharon charged forward with a yell, grabbing Amir in a tackle. They both fell to the ground and slid across the floor. When they stopped moving, Sharon pinned his arms under her knees, punching him across the face. His head jerked sharply to the side, and he spit out blood.

On the floor, Sam was slowly walking towards James, hands outstretched. “Alright, it's alright, James. We’re here. We’re gonna take you back home. It's okay.”

Sharon grabbed Amir’s hair, forcing him to look at her. “How do we fix him?”

James raised his gun at Sam, and Natasha sprinted forward, jumping onto James’ back.

“The damage is done.” Amir said, coughing a little. “He’s ours.”

Natasha wrapped her arm around James’ throat in a sleeper hold. He reached back and grabbed her belt, flipping her over his shoulder. She landed on her back, hitting the floor with a loud and painful sounding thump. Clint had an arrow nocked and aimed at James before Natasha had hit the ground. “James, you have to stop.”

Sharon grabbed the fringe of Amir’s hair and slammed his head into the ground twice, knocking him out cold. Karpov crawled backwards as Sharon stood and started advancing on him. He dragged himself away from her, leaving a trail of blood. He looked backwards towards James. “Soldat! Zashchiti menya!”

James whipped around, turning towards Sharon and Karpov. Clint let the arrow fly.
Rogers ran forward, jumping in front of James with his shield outstretched. The arrow bounced off of it uselessly, and Steve shot an angry look at Clint. “What the hell is your problem?”

“It was a taser arrow!” Clint whisper-shouted, running over to Natasha’s side. “It’s not like I would hurt him!”

Sharon jumped up onto the chain-link surrounding the platform she was on, climbing quickly as James ripped the door off the cage. She jumped over the top, landing painfully and rolling before managing to get to her feet. Sam helped her up, and she hissed a little, realizing that her rough landing had dislocated her shoulder. Sam looked at her and she nodded. He popped it back into place and she grit her teeth.

Clint was helping Natasha up, and the four of them huddled together, probably looking slightly pitiful. The only one who wasn’t holding someone they loved was Rogers, who was standing closest to the cage, seething.

James crouched down by Amir, picking him up easily and putting him over his shoulder. He grabbed Karpov, helping him to stand.

“James!” Sharon screamed. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

He turned to look at her, looking slightly taken aback. It was the first expression she had seen on his face. If there was one thing Sharon could do, she could shout. “You call yourself a Carter? Look at you! You’re taking orders now? The James I know wouldn’t be caught dead helping these assholes! You’re just gonna let them do this to you? You’re just lie there and take it? After everything, you’re just giving up?”

She staggered forward, standing by Rogers. “What would Peggy think? You’re a Carter, and Carters are stubborn assholes. We fight back. You have to fight back.”

Sam nodded, stepping up next to her. “C’mon, bud. You’re James Steven Carter. You’ve never let anyone get the better of you. Don’t stop now.”

Clint and Natasha both walked to stand next to them. “Please, solnyshko.” Natasha whispered, face pale.

“Don’t listen to them, Soldat! They’re enemies of HYDRA.” Karpov hissed.

Sharon shook her head. “Mom would be so pissed right now if she knew what was happening.” Her eyes filled with tears and she balled her fists at her sides, the way she used to argue when she and James were teenagers and would get into screaming matches over nothing. “Fight! Back!”

James dropped Amir and Karpov and yelled wordlessly, charging them.

Steve ran forward, meeting him half-way. James threw a punch to his head, and Rogers held up his shield, but doubled over as James delivered a sharp blow to his torso. James grabbed the edge of the shield and twisted it sharply. Steve moved with the motion, running up the edge of the cage’s platform and flipping around, landing behind James and aiming a kick to the back of his knees.

James stumbled forward a little, but caught himself with one hand on the floor, flipping in forward in a hand-spring and grabbing a gun from one of the scattered HYDRA corpses. He turned on heel and shot at Steve, who raised his shield.

There was a sharp ringing alarm, and Sharon looked up to see Karpov limping away from a control panel near a chair in the back of the room. She ran towards him, weapon. Before she could do
anything, however, more guards came rushing through the back doors.

“Fuck. Sam! Clint!” She called.

“I see it!” Sam yelled back, running to her side.

A few arrows flew overhead, catching the first few guys coming through the door. “I’ve got your back, kids, just take ‘em out!” Clint shouted.

Sharon grabbed the first guy on her right, holding his shoulder and quickly elbowing him twice in the head. To her left, Sam was holding his own against his own guard, punching him twice in the stomach, then shooting him in the head.

Behind them, Steve and Natasha were flanking James, and the three of them were fighting like one might expect three super-humans to fight. It was acrobatic, almost artful. They seemed to be equally-matched, although both Rogers and Natasha were clearly holding back, only using non-lethal force, while it seemed that James was actively trying to kill them both.

Sharon fought through this wave of HYDRA agents, trying desperately to keep track of everybody. Clint was attacking from above, Sam was by her side, Natasha and Steve and James were all behind her. There were about 5 guards still standing, Amir was still collapsed on the floor of the cage, and Karpov was…

“Clint! Do you have eyes on the old man?” Sharon yelled, delivering a round-house kick to a guard on her left, sending him to the floor.

“Yeah, give me two seconds!” Clint yelled, nocking an arrow and taking out a guard by the door. “Uh, 4 o’clock!”

Sharon spun to see one of the HYDRA guards helping Karpov towards a door. “No you don’t.” Sharon muttered, aiming her gun. She fired twice. The first shot missed, but the second caught the guard right in the head. He crumpled to the ground, and Karpov stumbled, catching himself against the door. He looked around wildly, trying to figure out who’d fired the shot. He caught Sharon’s eye and she smiled sharply and waved.

“Shut! Up!” James screamed, and Sharon turned to see him tackle Steve. He straddled Rogers’ waist and punched him across the face.

“Your name is James Steven Carter,” Steve was saying, breath labored.

“James,” Sharon said, and James whipped around to look at her, eyes wild. She started walking towards him, figuring that the more emotion he showed, the better. “James, that’s your name. You’re my twin my brother, my best friend.”

James yelled and charged her. Sam grabbed the back of her shirt and pulled her out of James’ path. He ran into a guard, who yelped in fear and scrambled backwards. James grabbed the man and threw him across the room with an angry shout.

“Your mom’s name was Amanda!” Natasha yelled, helping Rogers to his feet. James turned to her, teeth bared. He started advancing on them and Sam stepped forward.

“On the day she died you had your first kiss!” He said, and James looked at him sharply, clenching his fists.

“You’re afraid of eyepatches and you hate soda!” Clint added, shooting an arrow at one of the
remaining HYDRA agents, who had been slowly walking behind Rogers. Steve turned, watching the guard fall and nodding in thanks at Clint.

“You have a dog named Elizabeth.” Steve said, picking up his shield. “You’re a teacher. You speak a million languages. You grew up in Brooklyn. You like sci-fi movies.” As Steve started listing off, James stalked toward him. “You’re James.”

James threw a punch, and Steve ducked, backing away. “You like really bad music. Sometimes you have trouble sleeping. Fury tried to recruit you, but you refused because you don’t want to fight.”

James grabbed a gun, pointing it at Steve and emptying the clip. The bullets bounced uselessly off the shield.

“You’re a really good cook.” Steve said, and James threw his gun to the ground, yelling angrily and charging Steve. Steve sidestepped, and James ran into the chain-link of the cage, and it rattled loudly. He turned around and looked manically around the room.

“I-” He panted, eyes flitting from Steve to Sam to Clint to Sharon to Natasha, staring at each of their faces. “I’m-”

“Soldat!” Karpov yelled, and he was standing by the chair in the back of the room, leaning all of his weight on it. “Moy soldat.” He panted. “Idite syuda!”

James looked at him, then looked back at each of them. He seemed torn, and Sharon desperately thought that he looked more like himself.

Karpov sighed, then smashed his fist down on the control panel.

There was a horrible shrill sound and Sharon gasped, falling to her knees and quickly covered her ears. Everyone did the same, and Sharon opened her eyes, watching as Karpov seemed to shout orders.

The two remaining guards charged forward, each grabbing James under the arms and dragging him to the chair. Sharon tried to stand, tried to stop them, but she just stumbled, disoriented.

Machine parts descended onto James’s head and face, and he strained, and it looked like he was screaming. Sharon couldn’t hear, she couldn’t hear, but she knew he was screaming.

“Stop-” Sharon tried, but she couldn’t hear her own voice. James looked like he was in so much pain. She looked to see if there was some sort of mechanism, something she could see to stop it, when she saw that Karpov was talking. She couldn’t hear what he was saying, and she couldn’t read lips, but she knew someone who could. She waved Clint down, and he turned toward her, looking just as discombobulated as she felt.

WHAT HE SAY? She signed, pointing to Karpov. Clint looked at him, then immediately started signing, not turning away from the movements of Karpov’s mouth.


“What are you doing to him?” Sharon shouted, and she could vaguely start to hear herself.

Karpov started talking and Sharon focused on Clint’s hands. MACHINE TAKES MEMORIES.

Sharon tried to right herself, tried to get her bearings, but she stumbled.

The ringing in Sharon’s ears had started to clear, and she could faintly hear James’ screams. She yelled angrily, pounding her fists against the ground. She charged forward, only making it a few feet.

She could hear Karpov’s laugh, and then she heard a gunshot. Then another. Then a third.

Karpov and the two guards fell to the ground, holes in their heads. Sharon turned around, but no one had a weapon raised.

From the cage, Amir was on his feet, leaning heavily against the chainlink, barely holding himself upright. He blew the smoke from the gun cheekily, almost drunkenly grinning. He said something that Sharon couldn’t quite parse, then collapsed onto the floor.

Rogers ran forward clumsily, crashing into the chair and then falling down. He grabbed the edge of the chair, getting to his knees. He grabbed his shield and drove it down into the control panel over and over until James stopped screaming.

Sam crawled next to Sharon, and she grabbed his arm. Together, they struggled to stand and started to stagger forward.

"-

Everyone managed to get oriented, or at least, oriented enough to stand up and make it to James.

The machine had turned off, but he wasn’t moving. He wasn’t even blinking. He was just staring straight ahead, eyes glazed over. “Jamie?” Sharon asked softly, cupping his cheek.

They were all surrounding him in a tight circle, and almost everyone was touching him. Natasha had a hand stroking his hair, Clint had a hand on his shoulder, and Steve was crouched down next to him, holding his hand. Sam wanted to touch him, but he could tell there was something wrong.

Sam watched James’ muscles clench. “Hey, guys?”

No one heard him. “Guys?”

They were all so focused on him, but no one could see what was happening. “Guys, get him out of the chair. Get him out of it.” Sam demanded, pushing Sharon out of the way. “Stop touching him. Cap, give me a hand, here.”

They all moved back a little, and Sam gestured for Rogers to pick James up. He did so, lifting him out of the chair with a concerned look on his face. “What’s-“

“Just set him on the ground,” Sam directed, taking off his jacket. “Lay him down before he-“

James jerked in Rogers’ grasp, arm flailing wildly. Steve struggled to keep a hold of him.

“Put him down, put him down.” Sam demanded.

Rogers set James on the floor as gently as he could, and Sam knelt next to him, slipping the jacket
underneath his head. His arm was still moving, and Steve grabbed James’ wrist, trying to pin him down, trying to stop him from hurting himself, but Sam pushed him off. “Don’t touch him.”

“What’s happening?” Sharon asked, moving toward them. Natasha and Clint both started forward, and Sam put a hand out.

“Stand back.” He demanded. “Everyone, I know you want to help, but just- give him some room.”

The jerking of James’ arm spread to his legs and neck, and soon he was writhing, thrashing on the ground.

“He’s having a seizure!” Sharon cried, rushing forward. Natasha grabbed her shoulders, holding her back. Sam looked up at the three of them, at Clint, Natasha, and Sharon; at James family, and saw how terrified they were.

“What- what should we, what can we do?” Clint asked. “I read somewhere that we should put something between his teeth-“

“No, don’t put anything in his mouth. We just- we just have to wait.” Sam said.

“For what?” Rogers asked. He was still hovering over James like he wanted to stop him from moving.

“For it to stop.” Sam said. He ran a hand over his face, sighing. “Fuck.” He’d seen all sorts of medical problems working pararescue, and he had been damned good at handling whatever situation he came across. But it had never been James.

Sam shook his head. He needed to get his shit together. He stood, pointing at Sharon. “Share, the jet’s equipped with first-aid, right?”

She nodded. “Where’s the nearest SHIELD approved hospital?” Sam asked.

“I, uh…” Sharon ran a hand through her hair. “Shit, I can’t think. We’re so far away from everything, I-”

“Figure it out.” Sam said. She nodded and rubbed her eyes, then straightened and grabbed her phone.

Sam switched his focus. “Clint, do you have Dr. Khan’s number?”

“I think so.” He said. “I, yeah, I do.”

“Call her and let her know what’s happening. She’ll be able to figure out what that machine did to him.” Sam ordered.

“Natasha?” Sam called. She was the palest he’d ever seen her, and she was just staring at James’ thrashing body. “Natasha.”

She looked up at him, blinking.

“You should probably deal with that Elliot guy, right?” He asked.

She glanced back at where Amir was sitting, blinking slowly at the scene, clearly very concussed. “I- yeah. Actually, uh, I’ll meet you guys at the hospital. I need to take him in. Lyubov moya, I’m calling a lift.” Clint, who was on the phone, nodded at her.
She spared one last look toward James, face unreadable. Then she walked over Amir, who smiled at her lazily. “I killed him.” He slurred.

“You did.” Natasha said, then zip tied his wrist and grabbed him under the arms, lifting him in a fireman’s carry.

“What should I do?” A voice asked softly, and Sam turned to see Captain Rogers sitting by James side, holding his hand. He wasn’t holding James down, or trying to prevent his convulsions, just-holding his hand, as if he couldn’t bare not to.

“Can you carry him?” Sam asked. Steve nodded. “Okay, we just have to make it to the jet. You hold him close, make sure he doesn’t hurt himself. Don’t drop him.”

Sam signaled to Sharon and Clint to follow them and watch their backs. He was pretty sure that they had managed to take out most of the people on the base, but it never hurt to have someone on your six.

They made it to the jet unaccosted, and Sam directed Steve to lay James down on the floor. Clint started up the jet, and Sam cushioned James’ head, then strapped himself into one of the seats. Steve refused to move from James’ side, sitting on the floor on of the jet. He still looked slightly frantic, like he needed something to do.

“Hey, Steve?” Sam asked, and he looked up at him. “You got a watch?”

“Yeah, I’ve got one.” Steve answered.

“Okay, you tell me every time 5 minutes have passed.” Sam said.

“Why?” Steve asked.

“If he seizes too long he can go into something called convulsive status epilepticus. We don’t want that.” Sam answered. He saw Rogers’ slightly horrified look, and amended, “Hopefully, we’ll be at a hospital long before that happens, so that people far more competent than me can deal with it.”

Sharon called the hospital, and Sam shouted instructions, briefing the doctors on the other line about the situation. The jet was fast, fast enough that Steve marked the passage of five minutes only once. They landed on the helipad and Steve carried James out, with Sam right on his heels. There were people waiting for them just inside with a stretcher and a fosphenytoin injection.

They followed the stretcher to a room, where Dr. Khan was waiting. “I want an EEG, an MRI, a cerebral angiogram, and a cerebrospinal fluid analysis; right away.” She ordered.

The four of them stood back as doctors rushed through the room, surrounding James, and pushing them to the side. Sharon grabbed Sam’s hand and he looked at her. She was covering her mouth with a hand, looking extremely pale. For a moment, Sam thought that she looked like Amanda; deeply tired and deeply concerned.

A nurse approached both Sharon and Rogers, who were both looking a little worse for wear. Sharon was still holding her arm at a strange angle and Steve was slightly bloodied from his fight with James, but they both shrugged her off.

“You’re not gonna do him any good by refusing help.” Sam whispered, but neither of them looked at him.
The doctors wheeled James away, and they all started to follow, but Dr. Khan stopped them. “We have a room set up for him downstairs. You four should wait there.”

“But-” Sharon started.

“Sharon, if you follow us, you’ll only be in the way.” Dr. Khan said bluntly. “Get some rest. Room 548.”

They waited. They waited and waited and waited.

Steve paced the room, still in his full gear with his shield strapped to his back. He checked his watch every few seconds, willing something to happen.

“Steve,” Clint sighed, where he was slumped in the corner. “Buddy, I love you, but you need to sit down.”

“I’m sorry, I just-” Steve ran a hand through his hair.

“Yeah, I know.” Clint said.

“It’s been two hours.” Steve said.

“I know.” Clint said again, patting the chair next to him. “Come on, have a seat.”

Sam and James’ sister were sharing a chair, the closeness looked natural on them, and it was clear that they had comforted each other before, clear that they were family.

There were footsteps outside the door, and all four of them looked up hopefully.

“It’s just me.” Natasha said tiredly, leaning against the doorframe. Clint walked over to her, wrapping her in a hug and kissing her temple.

“It’s good to see you.” He murmured.

“I brought company.” Natasha said, and she whistled. Elizabeth jogged into the room, wagging her little nub tail.

“Hey, girl.” Steve said, and she ran up to him, chewing his fingers. He scratched behind her ears, trying to muster up some excitement.

“Where’s James?” Natasha asked.

“They’re doing a million tests on him.” Clint explained.

“What kind?” She asked.

“Some scans, and some neurological evaluations.” Sam answered. “Trying to figure out what the hell that machine did to him.”

“Right.” Natasha sighed, walking over and stealing Clint’s chair. “Fuck.”
Elizabeth whined and jumped into Steve’s lap, then leaned across the chairs to get Natasha’s attention. She grimaced and patted her head.

There was a quiet knock and they all looked to see Dr. Khan standing in the door. Steve, Sharon, and Sam all stood; and it was clearly all they could do not to immediately pounce on her and demand answers.

“As far as we can tell, most of the damage appears to be psychological. We didn’t find any signs of physical harm, though the electric impulses in his brain are slightly elevated. He did wake up momentarily, but he didn’t reply to any stimuli, and he attempted to attack a nurse.”

“What are you- what can we do? How do we fix him?” Steve demanded.

Dr. Khan pursed her lips. “We’re going to put him in a medically induced coma-”

“What?” Sharon asked, as Clint said, “Hold on-”

“We’re going to put him into a medically induced coma.” Dr. Khan repeated. “For his own safety. He’s disoriented, he’s confused, and he may fall into more seizures. We’re not going to just put him under and do nothing. We’re going to run some more tests, bring some experts in. We’re going to help him.”

“You fucking better,” Natasha said, getting to her feet.

Dr. Khan didn’t look impressed. “I will.”
Chapter 15

James groaned, struggling to sit up. It took him a moment to take in his surroundings. He was on a couch, a shitty uncomfortable couch that he’d never seen before. He felt sharply dizzy.

“Woah, woah, woah.” A hand settled on his shoulder and pushed him back down onto the couch.
“Don’t try to get up.” A cool, damp cloth settled over his forehead. “How’re ya feeling, kid?”

“Pretty shitty.” James answered honestly, settling back down on the couch. He stared at the ceiling, it had water damage and a strange yellowing color, with a crack running along one of the corners.

“Yeah, they got you pretty good.” A hand stroked his hair gently, and it was comforting. James relaxed, closing his eyes.

“Where am I?” James asked.

“Well,” the voice paused, taking the cloth from James’ head. “Let’s just say you’re safe.”

James felt safe. This voice was familiar, and he trusted it.

“Okay, pal. You should be safe to sit up now. Just, take it slow.”

The hands guided him until he was upright. A wave of vertigo overtook him, and he groaned.

“Yeah, it’s gonna be pretty rough for a couple minutes. Just take it slow.”

James blinked his eyes open, vision blurring. The man crouched in front of him had dark hair and light eyes, with a strong jaw. James rubbed his eyes and looked at him. “Oh.”

The man smiled. “I know. Pretty weird, huh?”

“You’re…” James trailed off.

“Nice to finally meet you in person.” He said kindly, and stood, offering his hand to James, who took it. He helped James to his feet.

“I- I don’t know what to call you.” James said, leaning heavily against the man. They were in an old-looking living room, with wood floors and a TV in the far corner. He’d never been here before.

“Bucky’s fine.” He answered, leading James into a small kitchen.

“Right.” James said, and Bucky helped him to the counter. He rested against it, and Bucky let him go; heading towards a stove top and grabbing a kettle. “So, um-”

“You’re not dead or anything.” Bucky said quickly, not looking back at James. “This would be a pretty disappointing afterlife. I think you’re just… not home, right now.”

James exhaled sharply, somewhere between a laugh and a sigh. “I don’t… I’m confused.”

“It’s confusing.” Bucky told him easily. He poured the hot water into a purple mug and handed it to James.

James took it with both hands and sipped it, then immediately made a face. “God, what is this?”

“This is Clint’s mug.” James said, staring into the dark liquid.

“The arrow guy? I like him.” Bucky walked back into the living room, sitting on the couch. He put his mug down on a coffee table. Actually, he set it down on a coffee table that James used to have. He had found it on the side of the street and lugged it home, proudly setting it up in the living room of the first apartment he ever rented.

“Where are we?” James asked, following Bucky. He sat on the floor, figuring it would be more comfortable than the couch.

“I’m not exactly sure.” Bucky answered. “It looks like where Stevie and I used to live before the war, but some parts of it are just sort of just… wrong.”

“This is mine.” James said, touching the wood of the table. He felt underneath it, for the spot where he had carved his initials into it when he was drunk one night. He could trace out the familiar feeling of the JC.

“I figure this place is made of memories. Some yours, some mine.” Bucky explained.

“Oh.” James said. He was still dazed. “Why are we… what’s happening?”

Bucky looked down, chewing his lip. He looked upset; and it was strange, seeing his own face, his own tells. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I-” James thought. There was too much, too much. He could remember everything, he could remember things that he shouldn’t know, things that he couldn’t know. He gasped in pain, clutching his head. “I don’t-”

Bucky stood, coming to crouch by James. He held James’ shoulders. “Oh, James. I’m sorry. Don’t think so hard. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked you to remember.”

“There’s so much.” James whispered, squeezing his eyes shut.

Bucky held him close, in a strange, comforting hug. “I know, I know.”

“It hurts.” He leaned into Bucky’s embrace.


James nodded, hair brushing against Bucky’s chin. “I’m sorry,”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for.” Bucky moved back, giving James his space. He smiled gently.

“No, I’m sorry for-for what happened to you. It wasn’t fair. None of it. None of it was fair.” He shook his head angrily.

“Oh.” Bucky leaned against the coffee table, looking at James. “Thanks.”

James drew his knees to his chest, hugging himself. “They got me. HYDRA, they finally got me.”

“I had help.” James said, resting his chin on his knees. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to think about it. “God, I fought them. I hurt them. I hurt my family. I could have killed them and I wouldn’t have even known.”

“You didn’t, though.” Bucky told him. “You broke through the programming so you didn’t have to.”

“Where am I, right now? Not, not here; but physically, where I am I?” He asked Bucky.

“I hate to break it to you, but just because I’m dead doesn’t mean I know everything.” Bucky answered. “I can only guess that whatever those bastards did to you fucked with your head somehow.”

“Are you real?” James asked, grabbing his coffee, just to have something tangible to hold on to.

Bucky shrugged. “Real as you are.”

“Great.” James said sarcastically, and Bucky laughed.

“I hate to be so fucking enigmatic, but I’m trying to hide the fact that I’m just as lost as you.” He said.

“Oh, good.” James sighed. “At least I’m with the ghost of my carbon copy.”

“Hey, man; I’m not the clone.” Bucky chuckled. “Isn’t that some Asimov shit? I never thought I’d have kids. Always thought I’d just be the weird uncle to whatever little ones Stevie had.”

James smiled. It was setting in how incredibly strange this was. Not just the dreamscape that he was in, or the situation, but talking to Bucky Barnes. Since he was 15, he’d wished he could have a conversation with the man. Now he was sitting on the floor next to him, sharing terrible coffee and talking about Steve.

“I can’t picture him with kids.” James said quietly.

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “Really? He always wanted kids. He was great with them. Becca practically worshipped him.”

“Huh.” James said.

Bucky looked at him, a slight frown on his face. “How is he?”

“I don’t- I have nothing to compare him to. I didn’t know him, before.” James looked away from Bucky. “He misses you. A lot. I think, I think losing you nearly killed him. He crashed that plane-”

Bucky made a noise, and set his mug down sharply on the floor. “Dumbass,” He muttered. “I’m sorry, he just, he’s just so-” Bucky shook his head. “Fucking asshole, I made him promise.” He voice broke, and he sighed harshly, knuckling his eyes.

“He’s-he’s getting better, I think.” James said. “He’s got friends, he’s coping. And, you know, fighting evil and all that.”

Bucky smiled sadly. “That sounds about right. My Stevie was always gonna save the world.”

“He has.” James said. “More than once,”

“I know.” Bucky said. He pulled his knees to his chest, mirroring James’ posture. “It’s funny, I
never believed in the afterlife or nothing, that was always Steve’s thing; but—he sighed, scratching
his eyebrow. “Well, I don’t know. I don’t know if I’m here because of you, if-if there’s some
science behind it or if it's supernatural…”

“Have you been haunting me?” James asked, only half-joking.

“I—I’m not sure. It’s confusing, all these memories in my head. I’m not sure what’s you and what’s
me. If I’ve been, I don’t know- watching over you, or if it just seems that way because of- well,
everything.”

“I’m starting to get that.” James said, nodding. “I’m not really sure what’s... real.”

They both jumped as the TV in the corner of the room turned on. It was an old boxy television set
with stickers on the side; and it looked like one that he and Sharon had in their room when they
were kids. An episode of Animaniacs clicked on, and James walked over, crouching down in front
of it.

He turned the volume up, squinting at the screen.

“It’s that time again!” Yakko announced cheerfully

“To remember that Alamo?” Wakko asked, in his deep accented voice.

“To do one of our cute little skits?” Dot asked.

“No,” Yakko sighed. “It’s time to learn today’s lesson. And to find out what it is, we turn to… the
Wheel of Morality!” The cartoon wheel appeared on screen, and Yakko spun it, chanting. “Wheel
of Morality, turn turn turn, tell us the lesson that we should learn. Oh, number 3!”

The moral printed out from the side of the wheel, as it did every episode. “And the moral of
today’s story is... ‘early to rise and early to bed makes a man healthy but socially dead’”

James chuckled, and turned the knob to change the channel.

“What is that?” Bucky asked, walking over to join James.

“Uh, a cartoon from the 90’s that my friends and I watched when we were kids.” James answered.

“It looks like Steamboat Willie.” Bucky said, and James laughed.

“Yeah, I guess it kinda does.” He said. He flipped through the channels, recognizing shows like
Fresh Prince and Legends of the Hidden Temple, things he used to watch when he was a kid.

“Wait, stop!” Bucky called, as James channel-surfed faster and faster. “Go back.”

James turned it back a few channels until Bucky told him to stop. The Wizard of Oz was playing. “I
know this one.” Bucky said.

“Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore.” Dorothy said.

“No kidding.” James said. Bucky looked at him and chuckled.

He switched to the next channel, which was playing an episode of ER. “The patient is in a coma,”
George Clooney said solemnly.

James changed the channel quickly. The X-Files was playing and Mulder was talking excitedly to
Scully, who stared at him disbelievingly.

"Don’t you understand, Scully? She’s a clone! They’re all clones!"

"Mulder-"

James changed the channel again. “Okay, this is getting weird.”

He reached for the power button to turn the TV off, but jerked his hand away, gasping. His hand was slippery and wet, and when he looked down at it, it was red with blood.

“What’s wrong?” Bucky asked. “Are you hurt?” He grabbed James’ hand and went pale.

“This- this isn’t mine.” James said. “It’s not my blood.”

Bucky dropped James’ hand and stood quickly, looking around. “Shit. Shit, I didn’t think he’d be here.”

“Everything in this place is a mix of your memories and mine, right?” James asked slowly.

“Stay behind me.” Bucky commanded in a harsh whisper. James stood, still looking at the blood dripping from his palm.

“This isn’t mine, but I don’t think it’s yours, either.” James said, feeling strange, disconnected.

“You’re right, kid. We’ve got a visitor.” Bucky said softly, and an old-fashioned browning appeared in his hands. His button-up shirt and suspenders changed into his iconic blue wool jacket.

“How do I do that?” James whispered, amazed.

“It’s your head, pal.” Bucky answered.

James tried to focus, but nothing happened. He was still barefoot, still wearing jeans and his old Columbia sweatshirt, and still unarmed. He sighed and stood behind Bucky, grabbing a pillow from the couch and holding it in front of him like a shield. “What’s going on? Who’s here?”

Bucky looked back, holding a finger over his lips and signaling for James to follow. He walked deftly over the old wood floor, avoiding loose floorboards. It was strange, because a part of James knew where to step so the floor wouldn’t creak, though he’d never walked across it before.

They walked down the hallway, which seemed to stretch on forever, like it was in a horror movie. Doors lined either side, and they were all strange and different, some that were old and well made, some with locks, some that had signs on the front. He recognized some of the doors, and some of them were completely unfamiliar to him.

Bucky kicked open the first door, revealing a small room with an open window and an unmade bed. It was no where James had ever been, but Bucky seemed to recognize it. “Not here.”

They opened the second door, and James blinked at the clean room. “Fuck.” He whispered.

“Know it?” Bucky asked.

James nodded. “This is the hospital room where my mom died.”

“Shit, that… that’s rough.” Bucky said. “I lost my virginity in the last one.”
James snorted, looking back at the first room. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Bucky smiled, ducking his head. “Much nicer memory.”

James tried to focus, and when he closed his eyes, he could feel warm breaths panting against his mouth. He could hear his own voice, much younger, but still his, saying: “okay, just- go easy on me Stevie.” A low chuckle, a smile against skin. “I’m always easy on you, Buck.”

“Oh.” James blushed, scratching the back of his neck.

He looked up at Bucky, who was peering into the hospital room. “I’m sorry about Amanda. She seemed a good woman.”

“The best.” James said, smiling at him.

Bucky kicked open the next door. “Yours?” James looked inside, seeing a small concrete room with a messy desk covered in books and highlighters with an ancient laptop sitting in the middle of it.

“Yeah, my freshman dorm.”

They worked through 14 more rooms, some that James recognized, like his and Sharon’s childhood bedroom, or the Wilson’s dining room. There were others that Bucky knew, like the first bedroom that he shared with Steve, or the strategy room where the Howling Commandos would plan strikes on HYDRA.

Bucky moved to open the next door, but James grabbed his hand. “Wait.”

“What is it?” Bucky asked, voice hushed.


“No, no, no, you’re a civilian, kid.” Bucky said. “You’re staying behind me.”

“I’m an enhanced human that’s been trained by two of the world’s deadliest assassins.” James said. “I can hold my own.”

He opened the door, and his breath hitched. He was standing in front of the white room, the one from his dreams.

“What is this place?” Bucky whispered.

“This was where I was born.” James answered. He took a cautious step into the room, raising his pillow shield carefully. Behind him, Bucky took a sharp breath.

“He’ll be here.” Bucky said. “You should stay outside, you don’t know what he’s capable of.”

“No, I…” James shook his head. “I know who lives here, now.” He took a step forward.

“James, don’t-” Bucky tried to grab his shoulder, but James was already walking into the room.

He walked slowly, not making a sound. There was a small, militaristic bed in the middle of the room. James closed his eyes, and in his dreams he remembered being small; so small and so scared, hiding underneath the bed.

James walked to the bed crouching down slowly. There was movement, and James held out his
hands non threateningly. “Hey.” He said softly. “It’s okay. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“James,” Bucky said waringly, taking a few steps into the room. “Be careful.”

“He’s not gonna hurt me.” James said. He turned back to the bed. “You’re not gonna hurt me, are you?” He slowly reached out a hand. “It’s alright. We’re your friends.”

“He’s a murderer. He’s not my friend.” Bucky hissed. “And he’s not some frightened child.”

“It wasn’t his fault.” James said. “It wasn’t your fault. Come on out from under there, buddy.”

A hand crept from under the bed. It was flesh and blood, not the metal that James had been half expecting. A finger dragged across James’ palm gently, and it took him an embarrassing long time for him to realize that it was tracing Cyrillic letters into James’ skin.

б-е-з-о-п-а-с-н-о-?

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s safe. обещаю.” James whispered. He looked at Bucky. “It’s safe, right, Buck?”


The hand that had been resting next to James’ retreated back under the bed. A head of messy, long, dark hair peeked out, and a pair of cold blue eyes met James’, then quickly flitted away. James stood and backed away as the man dragged himself from under the bed.

He stood, shoulders hunched, looking at the floor. He was wearing tact gear and James was slightly surprised to see that one of his sleeves was completely empty.

“Hello.” James said carefully, taking a step closer. Bucky’s arm jerked, like he wanted to grab James and pull him back. “I’m James. That’s Bucky. What should we call you?”

The man, who was still staring at the floor, his hair falling in his face, shrugged. James chewed his bottom lip. “How ‘bout, um- how about we call you Winter?” He winced and looked at Bucky. “That’s not a name, uh-”

“Зимний сойдет.” The man whispered, so quiet that James almost didn’t hear it.

“Are you sure?” James asked. The man nodded. “Yeah, okay. Winter it is.”

“Do you want to come to the living room with us, Winter?” Bucky asked, looking around at the sterile white walls and small bed uncomfortably. “This place gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

Winter just glanced up at him briefly, then looked back at the floor. James nodded at Bucky, and Bucky led the way back down the hallway. James glanced back a few time to make sure Winter was still following them, because the man moved silently; like a ghost.

The three of them sat in a triangle in the living room, identical faces staring at each other. James was sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table, Bucky was on the uncomfortable couch, and Winter was in the corner. There was a heavy silence in the room.

James cleared his throat awkwardly. “So…”

They both turned to look at him. “Um, I’ve got nothing, I just-“ he trailed off.

“Right.” Bucky clapped his hands together, and both James and Winter jumped. “We better figure out how to wake the hell up.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

James didn’t stir. He hadn’t stirred for days.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait! Finals and pneumonia and the holidays have kept me away from this story. Much love for you all!!!

“Then the Swallow flew back to the Happy Prince, and told him what he had done. “It is curious,” he remarked, “but I feel quite warm now, although it is so cold.” Steve read from the small book, the same book that had once been given to him as a gift when he was ill with Scarlet Fever. This wasn’t that copy, but one of the first things he’d bought himself when he’d woken from the ice. He wasn’t one for fairytales, but this story reminded him so much of Bucky. “That is because you have done a good action,” said the Prince. And the little Swallow began to think, and then he fell asleep. Thinking always made him sleepy.”

James didn’t stir. He hadn’t stirred for days. The doctor kept telling them that she was getting closer, that she could bring him back; but Steve wasn’t sure he believed her anymore.

While Natasha and Clint had been working tirelessly, Sharon had hardly left James’ side in the hospital. She was there now, dozing off in the uncomfortable chair next to the bed, her slack fingers tangled in James’.

Steve closed the book, watching the rise and fall of James’ chest. He was so pale, the pallor of his skin almost matching the white of the sheets. He could hear Bucky’s voice in the back of his mind, saying “See? See how much I worried over you? Doesn’t feel good, does it, punk?”

Steve tried to smile, but it fell flat. He shook his head. “I know. I’m sorry.”

There was no response, because Bucky was gone. Steve closed his eyes, listening to the incessant beeping of all the machines and monitors.

There was a soft knock at the door and Steve opened his eyes, then frowned. “What are you doing here?”

“A man can come to visit his friend in time of crisis?”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “I had no idea we were friends.”

Tony shrugged, leaning against the door jamb. “Some cancer kids wanted to meet Iron Man, and it’s not like I’m completely heartless.” He tapped the spot over his chest where the the arc reactor sat. “I heard you were here, figured I’d drop by.”

“Did Clint tell you I was here?” Steve asked, tucking his book away.
“Peggy, actually.” Tony answered.

“I didn’t know that you knew her.” Steve said.

“Yeah. She and dad were like this.” Tony crossed his fingers. He glanced uncomfortably at Sharon, then James, then looked back to Steve. “Sorry about your... friend.”

Steve looked back at James, who predictably hadn’t moved in the last few minutes. “Yeah, thanks.”

“I-“ Tony took a step into the room, then stopped as Sharon jerked awake. Her hair was wild and her eyes were bleary as she squinted at Tony.

“You.” She said, stumbling over to him and grabbing him by the collar.

“Uh-“ Tony looked over in panic at Steve as Sharon dragged him further into the room.

“Sharon?” Steve questioned as she grabbed her backpack and started digging around.

“Here.” She brought out a file and spread papers along the bed. She pointed to one, then to Tony. “Tell me about this.”

Tony frowned, then leaned over to inspect the paper. “It’s blueprints.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” She sighed. “It’s the machine that did this to my brother. You’re a genius, right?”

“Well, yeah.” Tony answered, then looked back to the blueprint. “Oh.” He sat down. “Do either of you have a pen?”

Sharon dug around her bag some more and came up with a pen. Tony took it, then started writing on the paper. “This is out of ink.”

“Here.” Steve tossed him a charcoal pencil. Tony caught it then frowned, looking at it.

“Okay.” He muttered, then looked down at the blue print. “So this is some sort of mind alteration machine, right?”

“Yeah.” Steve said, standing to look over Tony’s shoulder.

“No, don’t do that.” Tony said, and Steve glanced at Sharon, then backed off. “So the electrical impulses go into the brain, right? It’s supposed to override the long term memory, which lives in the... front brain? That’s not right, I need a neurologist. Jarvis, call Shrek.”

There was the sound of the phone ringing, and Steve looked around the room confusedly. “Where’s your phone?”

“I’m leading the world in personal tech, Cap, I don’t need a phone to call people.” He tapped the side of his stupid sunglasses.

“Hello?” A tired voice crackled over... some sort of speaker.

“Hey Bruce, you’re on speaker.”

“Tony?”
“Doctor Banner?” Steve asked.

“Captain? What’s going on? Why are you and Tony together? Is it another apocalypse?” Banner asked frantically.

“Nothing quite that dire, Jolly Green.” Tony said, and Sharon looked like she wanted to protest. “Hey, is one of your million phds in neuroscience?”

“No, but I know a bit about it.” Banner answered. “Why?”

“Where are you right now?” Tony asked.

“Ohio.” Banner said slowly. “Why?”

“I’m flying you into New York. I need your help with a project.” Tony said, getting out a small screen and started tapping it.

“Project?” Sharon and Steve asked in angry unison.

“Woah. I pissed off the blondes.” Tony said. “Sorry, I meant… I need your help with-” He trailed off. “I’m genuinely sorry about this, but I can’t think of a better, more politically correct way to say ‘Captain America’s long dead lover’s clone’s coma’.”

“What?” Banner asked.

Tony winced. “Yeeeah, I’ll explain it when you get here. The jet’s on it’s way.” He motioned in the air and the line went dead.

Steve put his head in his hands, sighing heavily.

“Have you tried true love’s kiss?” Tony asked sheepishly. Sharon looked like she wanted to deck him.

“Oh, yeah, this is gonna go well.” Steve sighed.

“I’m absolutely positive that none of us here are neither psychologists nor neurologists.” James said. “Am I right in that assumption?” He looked at both of them. “Bucky? No? Winter? No. Okay, see? I’m not being unreasonable, here.”

“We have to find some way out of here.” Bucky argued. “I don’t see you coming up with any other ideas.”

“Okay, but you need to think about it, see, because this is my brain.” James gestured wildly, indicating the space around them. “No offense to either of you boys, but your bodies- or body… bodies? The body that you both inhabited is is dead, and this brain that we’re all chilling in right now? This living breathing brain? It’s mine.” He started pacing. “If your plan doesn’t go the way you think it will go, which is likely, since- as previously established, you’re not in anyway an expert- if we break my brain, we’re all fucked!”

Bucky huffed and crossed his arms. He looked Winter for support. “What do you think, Winter?”
Winter looked at him, then looked at James, then looked back at Bucky. He mumbled something under his breath, then tucked his knees against his chest.

“What’d he say?” Bucky asked, looking at James.

“He said ‘James is right in all things ever, and we should listen to him because we’re not paying rent in his brain house.’” James said, stomping over to the kitchen.

“Я этого не говорил.” Winter grumbled.

“You’re right, sorry.” James apologized, sighing. He opened the fridge to find it fully stocked with all the things he would need to bake an apple pie, which was exactly what he happened to be craving. He fiddled with the oven, but nothing was happening. “How the hell do I work this thing?”

“It's wood-burning.” Bucky sighed, standing and walking over to the kitchen and opening a cabinet and grabbing a box of matches. He opened a port of the stove and held the flame to the wood until a fire started up.

“How do I preheat this?” James asked. Bucky shrugged helplessly, putting the matches away.

“We just used it to warm up the apartment.”

James sighed. “Forget it.” As soon as the words were out, the fire in the stove extinguished. He looked at Bucky, grinning. “Did you see that?”

Bucky chuckled, patting him on the back. “Yeah, kid, it was the tops.”

James reached into the fridge, handing Bucky an apple, then walked back into the living room. “Winter, catch.” He tossed an apple to Winter, without thinking about the fact the man only had one arm. Thankfully, he caught it, then inspected it curiously.

James hopped over the couch, sitting on it's back. He took a bite out of his apple, and it was delicious, juicy and crisp and sweet and tart. It was perfect, and James thought that it was almost like the idea of an apple rather than the actual thing.

Winter made an excited sound, looking at the apple with wide eyes.

“Good, right?” James said, and Winter nodded emphatically.

“I just know that we have to get out of here sooner rather than later.” Bucky said, picking up the argument and sitting on the couch, nudging James’ feet out of the way.

“I’m sure they’re working on it.” James said. “The professionals, I mean. The people who are actually qualified. I bet Dr. Khan is there, and maybe Dr. Cho. They’ll fix me up.”

“James,” Bucky sighed. “Something’s happening to you that’s never happened to another person in the world. That head of yours-” He poked James’ temple. “Is being inhabited by three consciousnesses. That’s 200% too many consciousnesses. You’re being overwhelmed.”

James shrugged, looking around at the strange, hodge-podge dreamscape, the mix of old and new. “I still don’t think it’s a good idea. If we destroy this place, where would we be? Besides, it’s kinda nice here. Comfortable.”

“Comfort can be a dangerous thing.” Bucky muttered. He hopped off the couch and started pacing.
He was beginning to look older, not simply a well-dressed, clean-cut mirror of James, but more grizzled. His jacket was showing some wear, and he had lines around his eyes.

James looked away, drumming his fingers nervously against the back of the couch. He glanced at Winter, who was still chewing at the core of the apple. James hopped off the couch, going to sit next to him.

Winter glanced at him sideways, then looked away, scooting imperceptibly closer to James. Bucky sighed heavily, then climbed off the couch, coming to sit next to James. The three of them sat side by side by side, staring at their odd memory apartment.

“Мне нравится это место.” Winter said quietly with a small shrug.

“Winter likes it here.” James said.


The corner of Winter’s mouth briefly quirked up on one side. It was a strange approximation of a smile, and it was slightly awkward and uncomfortable looking. “It’s okay.” Winter replied softly. “Я все это уже слышал.”

James closed his eyes and felt the impact of a boot against his ribs, a cruel laugh as he struggled to right himself. A baton fell across his back and he fell back to the floor, confused and in pain and naked and cold. “Look at it go!” A male voice shouted, and several people laughed. A hand fisted in his hair and viciously yanked him backwards until he was forced to stare at the man who was only a few inches from his face. The man raised his hand and James couldn’t help it- he flinched. The man in front of him chuckled lowly, and James could feel the man’s breath on his face. The man patted his cheek gently. “Aren’t you sweet, Soldat?”

James shook his head sharply, trying to dislodge the memory from the forefront of his mind. Tears stung his eyes, and to his left, Bucky was clenching and unclenching his fists, looking pale.

“Winter,” James whispered, wanting to reach out to him, to draw him close. The world had hurt him so badly, and everyone in his life had failed him. It was deeply, painfully unfair. He remembered what Natasha had told him, when he first found out about the Soldier. She’s said he was like a lost child. “Can I-”

He reached out to Winter, slowly and gently wrapping him in a hug. Winter made a small, surprised noise, then leaned into the touch, resting his cheek on James’ shoulder.

“Прости.” Winter murmured.

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for.” Bucky said fiercely, getting to his feet. He continued his pacing, walking back and forth behind them couch, his hands in his hair.

“Bucky?” James asked slowly, watching him grow agitated.

“I’m not letting this happen again.” Bucky said, and he looked angry and desperate all at once. “We can’t keep doing this. It’s unfair. It’s- it's bullshit. This-” He gestured wildly between the three of them, at the space around them. “This ends here. This cycle of pain and suffering and-and God shitting on us? I’m sick of it.”

“I don’t understand.” James said slowly. He stood, and Winter followed. “What do you mean?”
Bucky made a frustrated sound. He looked at the two of them and stopped, leaning heavily against the couch. He rubbed a hand over his face, and he looked exhausted, like a man who’d been fighting a war. “I-I died, and that’s… it’s fine, I made my peace with that a long time ago. And Winter—” Bucky shook his head. “Winter, you went through absolute hell, kid, and I’m sorry. But this end here.” He turned, grabbing James by the shoulders. It wasn’t malicious, but his fingers still dug uncomfortably into James’ skin. “I lost everything, and he never even had a chance. Now you’re here, and I’m not letting the same thing happen to you.”

James swallowed, nodding. Bucky was pale, eyes damp and hands shaking. James could feel the emotion, the anxiety and anger and fear and commitment. “Okay.” James agreed. “Okay. What do we do?”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

"I don't care, just fix my brother."

Chapter Notes

This turned into a chapter of just me BS-ing science with the Science Bros and my favorite lady Doctors. There will be more plot in the next ones, I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So the slices don’t show any abnormalities…” Dr. Banner held the MRI image to the light, squinting at it. “Let me see the blueprints again?”

Sharon wordlessly handed Banner the print, and he pushed up his glasses, surveying the schematics carefully. “So it applies the electrical stimulations directly to the prefrontal cortex and the medial temporal lobe, essentially deactivating the memory centers of the brain, but I don’t see how…”

“Wait a minute,” Sharon muttered, grabbing her bag and digging through it. She came up with thick minella folder, and started flipping through it. “It’s here somewhere… got it!”

She pulled out a copy of an old black and white photograph of a brain. “Let me see that.” She demanded, reaching over James’ bed to grab the scan from Banner.

“What are we looking at, Jayna?” Stark asked, and Banner, Sharon, and Steve all looked at him with confusion. “From the Wonder Twins?” He rolled his eyes when no one laughed. “Whatever.”

“It’s a scan that Khan did of James’ brain when SHIELD rescued him back in 1990. See this?” She pointed at the part of the picture that had been circled by black marker.

Banner frowned, picking up the photograph and frowning. “Is that some sort of implant?”

“Wait, Dr. Khan?” Steve asked.

“Yeah.” Sharon said distractedly. “She’s been a part of SHIELD since she was a med student.”

“We should bring her in.” Steve said. “She probably knows more about this than any of us.”

“Why doesn’t this device show up on the second MRI?” Banner asked.

“Is that the hospital’s copy?” Sharon asked. “It’s probably been edited, so that the non SHIELD approved staff don’t suspect anything.” She glanced over at Steve. “Yeah, call Khan. She could help.” He nodded, already putting his phone to his ear.

“This is a neural implant.” Stark said. “1990, you said? He would have been... how old?”
Sharon grit her teeth, still looking through files. “Three.”

“Who would do that to a child?” Banner asked, horrified.

“HYDRA.” Steve answered, setting his jaw. “Khan’s on her way.” He glanced around the crowded room, at the two geniuses muttering over blueprints and medical documents, at the angry woman who just wanted to protect her family, and at James, who was in the middle of it all, pale and small.

Steve felt overwhelmed by everything that was happening. He wanted to take James and hide him away from everyone, wanted to make his Ma’s old stew, wanted to protect him. Steve knew logically that there was nothing that he could do to help, that it was out of his hands, but he’d never been good at letting certain things go. James would probably call him a control freak for it.

Dr. Khan knocked shortly on the door, peering inside. “This is far too many people in one room.” She stated, not stepping inside. “Certainly too many for the hospital’s regulations.”

“I own part of this hospital.” Stark said with a shrug. “I can have as many people to a room as I’d like.”

“That very well may be, but I’d be much more comfortable if we used one of the conference rooms.” She said, looking slightly uneasy.

“Fine.” Sharon started taking all the files and stuffing them in her bag. “Whatever. Let’s just get all you guys working on fixing my brother.”

She slung her bag over her shoulder and started walking down the hall. Steve glanced at Stark and Banner and started following her.

Doctor Khan kept pace with them. “I’ve also taken the liberty of calling one of my colleagues, Dr. Cho.” She told Steve. “She’s one of the brightest young scientists of her generation.”

“Well, then I’m glad she’s working with us.” Steve said as they reached the conference room.

There was already a young woman in there, talking to Sharon. She looked, up at their entrance and smiled.

“Ah, Captain. It’s good to see you again.” She greeted.

Steve frowned. “Have we met?”

“Yes, well sort of.” She shook her head, “Or, not exactly.” She extended her hand. “I’m Doctor Cho. It’s nice to see you when you’re… awake.”

Doctor Khan smiled tightly. “Doctor Cho was instrumental in your… defrosting, Captain.”

“Oh.” Steve blinked. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Doctor.”

“How are you feeling, by the way? Would you say you’re adapting well?” She asked, and Steve looked around for an escape.

“Oh, well, um-”

“Helen,” Dr. Khan coughed. “I have some scans I’d like you to look at.”

“Of course.” She said, taking the clipboard from Khan. “This is Dr. Carter, yes?”
“Yes,” Banner said, taking off his glasses and cleaning them. “Dr. Khan, Steve said you know a bit about this neural implant?”

“Dr. Carter, Dr. Cho, Dr. Khan, Dr. Banner, man you guys are really clinging to that honorific, huh?” Tony remarked, spinning in one of the conference chairs. “I have three phds and you don’t see me.”

Steve sighed deeply, rubbing his temples. “Dr. Stark,”

Tony threw his hands up in the air. “Thank you!”

“Why don’t you use one of your three doctorates to figure out what the hell this machine does.” Sharon said, tossing the chair’s blueprints in front of Stark. “It’s engineering, physics, and having your head up your ass, right?”

Steve’s mouth quirked up the the side. Banner actually chuckled.

“Fair enough.” Stark said, grabbing the blueprints. “Okay, so if this machine sends electrical impulses to stimulate certain parts of the brain, how does it interact with the thing in the kids head?”

“It's an inhibitor.” Khan said. “I discovered it when James was a toddler. I’ve never seen it in action, but I have a vague idea of what it does. When triggered, it sends out signals that temporarily disable a specific part of the parietal cortex, essentially disabling the self-determination centers of the brain. Or, more simply put-”

“It turns him into a puppet.” Steve assumed, anger burning low in his stomach.

“Precisely.” Cho agreed.

Dr. Banner hummed consideringly. “Low grade electrical impulses acting as neurons… that’s-”

“Pretty damn genius, is what it is.” Stark muttered.

Banner coughed. “I was gonna say inhumane, but… well, yeah.” He looked up at Khan. “It can’t be sustainable though, can it?”

“The device only disables him for about five hours.” Khan said. “That is, without re-triggering the entire process.”

“The brain simply won’t allow it.” Cho added. “It's a stubborn organ, and from what little I know of Dr. Carter, he is similarly strong-willed.”

“You’ve got that right.” Sharon scoffed.

“So they use the chair to keep him under their control.” Tony said slowly, like he was trying to figure something out. “I thought that the chair suppressed the subject’s agency, but that wouldn’t make any sense with this placement, see? Here and here, that just wouldn’t work.” He pointed at the schematics. “But if what you’re saying is right, then they don’t have to make him obedient because the implant’s already done that work for them.”

“So they use the machine to wipe the memory.” Banner said, looking up. “Without memory, he’s got no sense of self. He completely loses what makes him himself. He has to obey because he’s got no reason not to.”
“The old man, he said, uh, something about the chair taking memories.” Steve said. “He said that he was giving them back. All of them. James, but Bucky too.”

“And the Winter Soldier.” Sharon added darkly. “He said the strain of it would drive him mad.”

“But the machine couldn’t just… have all those memories. They’re not physical things, not something you can just store, right?” Steve asked. At this point, he wasn’t certain of anything.

“No, you’re absolutely right.” Banner agreed. “Memories aren’t tangible. There’s no way he could have restored one person’s memories into another person’s head.”

“Except-“ Dr. Cho cut in. “It’s not entirely a different head.” She started pacing. “James is a clone, possibly the only one in existence. I’m not an expert in the field of reproduction, but he should be an exact genetic copy of Barnes. Right down to his very DNA. So it stands to reason that they would have identical brains.”

“If you put a memory-wipe machine in reverse, what would it do?” Stark muttered quietly, seemingly to himself. He had his eyes shut tightly, like he was trying to picture something very clearly, or like he had a headache.

“I imagine it would flood the system,” Khan said. “Unfamiliar signals and neurons flying wildly, completely overwhelming the mind.”

“But not entirely unfamiliar,” Cho argued. “His brain would recognize it, because they’re his signals, his memories. Their origin point would be from the same brain, even if they had never crossed James’ mind.”

“I don’t understand, how would that work?” Steve asked. Without warning, Tony spun in his chair and threw something small directly at Steve. Steve reached out and caught it without a second thought.

“Muscle memory,” Stark answered. Steve looked down to see a small Iron Man figurine in his hand. “You don’t even think about it. Your body knows what to do, even if you’ve got no idea of what’s going on. Your buddy’s brain knows this confusing jumble of signals, even if it doesn’t know it yet.”

“Do you just- carry these around with you?” Steve asked.

“Cancer kids, Cap.” Stark said. “But that’s not the point.”

“What is the point?” Sharon asked.

“The implant!” Stark said, spinning dramatically in the chair.

“The implant keeps him in check, see?” Stark said excitedly. “Because it only needs to be triggered the once.” He spun back to them and looked at Sharon. “He’s never been held by HYDRA before, right?”

She seemed taken aback “Well, they’ve tried to get him before, sure, but-”

“But the device had never been activated before, am I right?” He asked.

“Yeah, yeah. I-I think that’s right.” She answered.

He turned back to the table, surveying everything in front of him. “See, this is why I work with
machines. They’re so much more reliable. There’s room for failure, sure, but always calculated, always predictable. With humans?” He shook his head. “Humans are tricky. They’ve got intricate little brains with all these conflicting parts.”

“What is it?” Steve asked. Tony had that look in his eye, one that Steve recognized from Howard. “You’ve got something. What is it?”

“The implant. It’s function can’t just be to keep him calm for a few hours until they get him to this chair thingy. No, it’s gotta be something more.” He picked up a pen from the table and started clicking it rapidly, like the annoying sound would help him think.

“It appeared to be completely harmless in the most recent MRI.” Khan said, leaning over the table to grab a few scans. “It wasn’t emitting any sort of signal or radiation.”

“No, it wouldn’t.” Banner said suddenly, sliding his glasses back on and grabbing the scan. “It’s probably been dead for days. The chair would have-“

“The chair would have fried it, exactly.” Stark cut in. “It’s a small chip, the electricity from the machine would have completely killed it.”

“But if that’s true, then why…” Cho looked over the table, eyes flicking rapidly over all the documents. “Oh! Oh. The chair interacts with the brain, yes, but it also-”

“It also sends signals to the implant.” Banner said slowly, starting to grin. “The chair wipes the memories-”

“And the implant does the rest.” Tony said with a grin.

“It sends out one big burst of obey.” Cho said!

“But if we reverse the signal-” Tony started.

“Yes!” Cho said excitedly. “A machine that runs the opposite electrical frequency of the chair,”

“I can hack the chip, turn it into a sort of communicator, so we can get a way to talk to James.” Stark replied.

Banner shook his head. “I see where you’re going, but that wouldn’t work. The device would need to be active and it’s been static for…” He counted on his fingers. “What, 13 days?”

Tony scoffed. “Please. I’m Tony Stark. You don’t think I can jump-start the implant?”

“Oh, so you suddenly know how to perform neurosurgery?” Khan asked, crossing her arms.

“Well,” Stark wavered.

“It would be an incredibly risky procedure.” Cho started. “But, I think between the four of us, we could accomplish it.”

“You’re talking about sending electricity to a piece of metal in my patient’s brain in hopes of powering a device that has been proven to be detrimental to his health.” Dr. Khan looked at them. “I’m sorry, but I simply cannot allow such a thing to happen. You said it yourself, Doctor Stark, you know machines, not people. James is under my care. Without consent from his family, you just can’t do such a-”

“Do it.”
Everyone turned back to look at Sharon. She was on the far side of the room, arms crossed. “If you’ve got a way to fix my brother, you do it.”

“Miss Carter-” Dr. Khan tried.

“I’ve got power of attorney.” Sharon said. She turned to Steve. “Do you trust him?”

Steve looked back at Tony, who had taken apart the pen had gotten ink all over his hands. He sighed. “I trust him with this.”

Sharon nodded. “Then let’s do it.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey, you ever notice how everyone in this fic with a first name that starts with S loves James? Sam, Sharon, Steve. Weird. Maybe it’s just that EVERYONE loves James, lmao.
“Something’s… wrong.” He whispered, frowning.
He felt Bucky’s hand on his shoulder. “James?”
He could feel the apartment changing, shifting without his consent. “Someone’s here.”

Winter jerked his head, moving closer to them. Suddenly, he pushed both James and Bucky behind him, like he was guarding them.

“What is it?” Bucky asked. “What’s happening?”

James looked up and saw the landscape of the apartment changing. It was like the air around them was moving, shaping something. A vision, almost like a ghost, appeared, translucent and flickering just by the window, in front of the TV.

“What the hell…” James muttered.

“будь осторожен!” Winter hissed, pulling James back. He could see the faint outline of a metal arm appear on Winter’s left side, and some sort of weapon glinting in his hand.

The form was gathering, becoming clearer, more opaque and defined. It was small, around 5 feet tall, and skinny. It was facing away from them, and the light from the window was streaming through it’s translucent form.

“Jamie?” A feminine voice called, and James frowned. The voice was familiar, so familiar that it stirred something instinctive in him, but it sounded like it was coming through a radio tuned to the wrong frequency.

“H-hello?” James asked, and both Bucky and Winter turned back to him, signalling him to be quiet. They both had weapons drawn, readying themselves for a fight.

The form turned to them, and it appeared to be a small girl, around 11 years old. She was wearing a soccer uniform and had blonde hair pulled into a ponytail.

James gasped, starting towards her.

“Wait!” Bucky called, and Winter darted forward, grabbing James’ arm.

“It’s okay!” James whispered, starting to grin. “It’s okay. It’s Sharon.”
“Sharon?” Bucky asked, the glanced over at where her body was still flickering into form. “Oh.”

He nodded at Winter, who let James go. James jogged over to the little Sharon, crouching in front of her. He couldn’t help but chuckle at her, at how small she seemed. “What are you doing here, Share-Bear?”

She didn’t seem to register him, still looking around, slightly confused and slightly worried.

“I’m here.” James assured her. Up close, it was obvious that she wasn’t tangible, that she wasn’t in the apartment the way James and Bucky and Winter were. She was somewhere else, trying to reach him.

The tiny Sharon put her hands on her hips, pursing her lips. She looked just like she did when they were kids and he would do something to annoy her.

She flickered, almost like a TV switching channels. Suddenly, she was an older version of herself, about half a foot taller with short cropped hair, ugly jean shorts, and an oversized t-shirt. James would put her at around 19 or 20.

“I- don’t think it’s- listen, Sta- not wor-” She asked.

“Barely.” James answered. “Can you hear me?”

“I- don’t think it’s- listen, Sta- not wor-” She sighed, turning away from James. It looked like she was talking to someone that James couldn’t see.

“Sharon?” James said, reaching out to her.

She flickered again, changing again. She was older still, his age now, the way she was when he last saw her. She looked frustrated, on the verge of tears. She was always an angry crier. “Son of a bitch!” She yelled. “It’s not-- fuck.”

“Sharon, I’m right here.” James whispered. “C’mon, buddy, I can see you. I can hear you. Talk to me.”

Sharon turned away, then disappeared completely. James sighed, shoulders slumping. He turned back to Bucky and Winter. “She couldn’t hear me.” He said, voice hitching me. “What if-”

Bucky took two steps forward, pulling James into a hug.

“What if I never see her again?” James asked weakly, tears pricking his eyes.

“You will. I promise, you will.” Bucky told him. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Sharon yanked the helmet off her head, throwing it to the side. “God fucking dammit!”

“Sensitive equipment!” Stark reminded, wincing. He picked up the helmet, checking it for damage. Dr. Khan was by Sharon’s side and was already strapping a blood pressure cuff to her arm.
“How is he?” Steve asked worriedly. He knew he was hovering over James, but he couldn’t help it.

“How are you feeling, Sharon?” Banner asked, looking over at her. She was pale, with a sheen of sweat on her face.

“Yeah.” Steve answered. Tony was too busy muttering over the device to notice anything else.

“Okay, I think we need to increase the power by about, eh, 18 percent?” Stark told Banner.

“I don’t know, uh, Miss Carter? How are you feeling?” Banner asked Sharon who was still fuming. Dr. Khan was still taking her vitals. She looked up, taking her stethoscope out of her ears.

“She’s not doing well.” Khan sighed, as Sam ushered Sharon into a chair. Steve had been too busy hovering over James that he hadn’t noticed that she was pale, with a sheen of sweat on her face.

“I’m fine.” Sharon growled at Khan. “I’m fine.” She added softly to Sam, who was looking rather pale himself.

“Your vitals are all over the place.” Khan muttered, taking the cuff off of Sharon’s arm.
Sharon shook her head. “I can do it.” She looked at Stark. “Put me back in.”

Stark, who was holding the second helmet close to his chest, looked back and forth between Sharon and Khan. “Uh, I don’t think that’s a great idea, kid.”

“Sharon, you can’t” Sam started, and she turned to him, grabbing his arm.

“Sam, I saw him.” She murmured harshly. “It was a split second, but I saw him. He was there. I have to go back.”

Sam looked torn. He cupped Sharon’s face briefly, then glanced at James’ sleeping form. “I can’t lose you too.” He whispered.

“I can bring him back.” She told him quietly. “I can save him.”

“Your system will overload.” Khan said factually. “James can stand it because of his enhancements, but you’re only human. It’s too dangerous, Sharon.”

“I have to try!” She said, and there were tears in her eyes. “He’s mine, he’s my brother and I have to save him.”

There was a silence in the room as Sharon buried her face in Sam’s chest and sobbed.

Steve cleared his throat. “I’ll do it.” He reached out his hand, beckoning Tony to hand over the helmet. “I can do it.”

“Captain Rogers,” Cho started, looking concerned.

“I’ve got similar enhancements as James. I’ll be okay.” He said. “Tony?”

“Yeah, yeah. You uh,” Tony turned back to the machine, twisting dials and pushing buttons. “You should be perfectly fine.” He handed the helmet to Banner, who passed it to Steve.

“Okay, I’m powering it up now, prep him.” Stark said, and Banner but the helmet over James’ head, buckling the chin strap.

“Everything’s in place.” Banner said, glancing up at the monitors.

“Vitals are good.” Dr. Cho said, looking at Steve. “You should sit down.”

Steve nodded, taking a deep breath. He sat down in one of the uncomfortable hospital chairs, cradling the helmet in his lap.

“Captain,” Dr. Khan sighed, looking more than exhausted. “I know that I’m not going to be able to talk you out of this, but I want to express my firm opposition to this plan.”

“It’s been noted, doc.” Tony replied, flipping a couple switches on the machine. “Alright, Cap. You ready?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah.” He put the helmet on, looking across the room at Sam and Sharon. “I’ll find him, I promise. I’ll do whatever it takes to get him back.”

Sam looked at him with gratitude. “Thank you, Steve.” Sharon just watched him, eyes glistening. She didn’t say anything, but Steve knew what she was trying to convey. He nodded to her and she nodded back, smiling weakly.
“Okay.” Steve said to Tony, closing his eyes. “Okay.” He heard Banner softly counting down, then the sound of Tony dramatically throwing the lever.

Then-

Then there was nothing.

- 

James focused his whole being, armed outstretched. He strained his mind to it's very limits, concentrating on his task.

“You’re trying too hard.” Bucky said, smacking James’ hand down. “You’re not Darth Goddamn Vader, you’re not using the force.”

“You've never seen Star Wars.” James panted.

“You have.” Bucky replied, poking James right between the eyes. “About 500 times.”

Winter softly pat James on the back in a conciliatory manner. Since they had hugged, he had been finding little, innocent ways to touch James. Just harmless reminders of his presence, a brush of skin here, a gentle graze there.

James didn’t say anything about it, because, honestly it was kind of sweet. Plus it was clear that the man was starved for positive human interaction and touch. James would gladly provide that for him if that’s what he needed.

“Okay.” James sighed, running a hand through his hair. “What do I need to do?”

“Just focus on the image.” Bucky told him. “You’re overthinking it. Just breathe. It’ll come naturally.”

James took a deep breath, closing his eyes. “Okay,” He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to think “Uh, what should I make?”

“Try for something small.” Bucky said.

James nodded, and after a moment, he pictured an orange. The texture of the rind, the citrus smell, the task of peeling and eating it, the sensation of juice running down his chin, the stickiness it leaves on his fingers.

“Woah, kid. You can take it easy now.” Bucky said, laughing a little. James opened his eyes to see around 20 oranges littered across the floor.

“Oh.” James said, and a smile grew across his face. “Awesome.”

Winter bent down and picked up an orange. He grinned at them both excitedly. Bucky smiled, patting Winter on the back. “Here, let me peel that for you, pal.”

As Bucky and Winter walked into the kitchen, James closed his eyes again, trying to focus on disappearing the excess oranges. Bucky had been training him, trying to show him how he could shape the world around him, create things, change how things appeared. Bucky could do little
things, but he could only change things about himself. They had theorized that James would be
able to alter things a bit more, since it was his head.

After he was done clearing the mess, he clapped his hands together, smiling. Bucky and Winter
walked into the room, both eating orange slices. “What’s next, kid?” Bucky asked.

“It’s time for some creature comforts.” James said. He had so many things that he wanted to make,
he wanted to go totally wild, like a white suburban mom on Black Friday. A soft blanket for
Winter, a Gameboy Color for Bucky, some books and a better couch for all of them - he made
things that he could share. It was getting easier, more natural for him to change their dreamscape.

“I think you’re just showing off now,” Bucky said with a warm smile.

James shrugged, laughing. “Maybe a little bit.”

“Make a gramophone next.” Bucky demanded excitedly. James grinned and closed his eyes,
focusing on Bucky’s memories of dance halls and race records. He was just about to reconstruct
the space around him when he sensed a disturbance.

“Something’s… wrong.” He whispered, frowning.

He felt Bucky’s hand on his shoulder. “James?”

He could feel the apartment changing, shifting without his consent. “Someone’s here.”

“Hello?” A masculine voice asked softly, and James’ eyes flew open.

Bucky looked up. He gasped, and when James glanced at him, he looked young again, back to
wearing a button up shirt and suspenders with his hair slicked back and a charming smile lighting
up his face. “Stevie!”

He let go of James and ran past him towards a small blond man standing next to the window. It
was obviously Steve, though Steve like James had never seen him before. There were the obvious
things, he was short and thin, small and pale and fragile looking. But there was something else
about him. He was younger looking, without a certain sadness behind his eyes, without a weight on
his shoulders.

Bucky rushed over to him, grinning. “Damn, is it good to see you, ya little punk.” They looked like
they belonged together, both young and happy looking, both wearing the clothes of their time
period. Even their appearances complemented each other. Bucky’s dark hair with Steve’s towhead,
Bucky’s sinewy muscle with Steve’s thin frame, they even had freckles that mirrored. It was as if
God had sculpted them from the same clay, specifically for each other.

Steve flickered, and suddenly he was big, in modern, 21st century clothing, the Steve that James
knew. He was facing the three of them, though it was clear he was completely unaware of their
presence. James joined Bucky’s side, and Winter followed.

“Steve.” Winter whispered. He slowly reached out, but his hand simply passed right through him.
He withdrew his hand, staring at it. Steve’s form flickered again, and he was dressed in the goofy,
garlish Captain America costume from the 40’s.

He frowned, looking concerned. “I can’t- working”

Bucky looked over at James. “Okay, like we talked about, kid. You have to focus on him, make
him more tangible.”
“Okay,” James breathed, nodding. “Okay.” I can do this. He thought, closing his eyes. Steve. Steve’s laugh. Steve’s eyes. Steve’s smile. Steve hustling him at cards. Steve looking at him with that look, the one that said, ‘I think I know you’

“James,” Steve’s voice, saying his name, clear as day. “James?”

James opened his eyes to see Steve, present and corporeal, standing in front of him. He was wearing a white t-shirt, dark jeans, and a leather jacket. “Steve?” James asked, and his voice came out as a whisper.

“James!” Steve said excitedly, grabbing James and pulling him into a hug. James wrapped his arms around Steve’s torso, resting his cheek on his massive shoulder. It felt good, right. James closed his eyes and breathed it in, the warmth, the closeness, and the smell of Steve.

The hug went on long enough that Bucky cleared his throat. James blushed and pulled back, glancing over Steve’s shoulder at him. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Steve said easily, smiling at James.

Bucky just chuckled wryly, shaking his head. “You too, huh?”

“What is this place?” Steve asked, looking around the apartment. “It looks familiar.”

James glanced back at Bucky and Winter. “Why can’t he see you?” He whispered.

Bucky just shook his head, and Winter didn’t even respond, both staring at Steve with their entire attention.

“It’s um, a memory.” James explained, turning back to Steve. “Or, well, a bunch of memories. Some mine, some… not.”

“This is the Red Hook apartment!” Steve realized. He wandered around through the living room, dragging his hand along one of the walls. As he was walking, he passed straight through Bucky, like one of them was a ghost.

“Well, the living room and the kitchen, yes.” James replied, looking at Bucky nervously. “And there’s a bunch of stuff from my childhood home, plus my old place in Brooklyn and my DC apartment.”

“That’s amazing.” Steve whispered. He turned to look at James. “It’s good to see you.”

“What’s, uh?” James made a willed a of water to appear in his hand, handing it to Steve. “What happened?”

“Thanks.” Steve said, taking the glass with no small amount of wonder in his eyes. “Uh, you were kidnapped by HYDRA.”

James waved a hand. “No, I know that part. Elliot, or-or who ever he is, took me to HYDRA. I was… I don’t know, brainwashed or something, and I-I fought you. But after that it’s a little,” James gestured to his head. “Fuzzy.”

“You had a seizure.” Steve answered, staring into his glass to avoid looking at James’. “We took you to the hospital, and uh, you’ve been in a coma since.”

“A coma?” James asked, raising his eyebrows “How could I be in a coma? I mean you’ve gotta be
unconscious for at least a day, right? At least 10 hours, I’d think.”

“James,” Steve frowned. “You’ve been asleep for two weeks.”

“Two-” James heavily sat down on the couch, blinking. “Oh.” Winter walked over and sat beside him, putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Is everyone okay? Sharon, Sam, Natasha, Clint?”

Steve sat on James’ other side. “Yeah, yeah, everybody’s fine. Sharon and Sam are actually sitting by your bedside right now.”

James smiled weakly. “Yeah, that sounds like them.” He shook himself, looking over at Steve. “How are you here? I mean- I saw Sharon for a few seconds, but I don’t know how either of you..” He trailed off.

“Uh, Stark.” Steve answered. “And Banner and Cho and Khan. They all worked together to get me here. It’s really complicated, but basically they figured out how to reverse engineer the chair and send a signal from me to you.” He looked absolutely uncertain about everything he was saying.

Bucky chuckled softly, walking to Steve’s side. “He has no idea what he’s talking about.”

“You’ve got no idea what you’re talking about.” James repeated, and Steve laughed. It was a nice laugh.

“It all goes over my head, to be honest.” Steve said. “They said, um…” He looked past James, then at the floor, then at his glass. Anywhere but James. “They said that you might have old memories. I mean, memories that you don’t, that are-”

“Bucky’s?” James asked. Steve looked up, nodding. “I do, yeah. It's a little…” He gestured. “Strange. Like it all happened underwater. But if I focus, it's there.” He tapped the side of his temple. “All of it.”

Steve looked worried. “All of it all of it?”

“Yeah. All of it.” James said with a grimace. Behind his eyes, he falling, falling and falling forever. Then, in a flash, he was strangling a child with his bare hands. She had been in her about 11 or 12 and her mother had watched, horrified and screaming in Latvian. She had been the mistress of a Russian dignitary, one with connections to HYDRA. When she refused to continue seeing him, he had sent the Soldier after her.

“I’m sorry.” Steve said.

James tried to look reassuringly at him. “It’s not all bad.” Sunshine and snow on a winter day in Brooklyn, running hand-in-hand with a small blonde boy.

“No it was not.” Bucky said, smiling faintly. “I would say that it was mostly good.”

Steve stood, pacing around the apartment. It was like he couldn’t help himself. He touched almost everything there, both old and new. “This place is really amazing, James.”

“Thanks,” James laughed. “I’m glad you like it.”

“I’m almost sad we have to leave it.” Steve joked.

James glanced back at Winter and Bucky. “Yeah. Yeah, me too.”

When he looked back, a door had appeared. It was solid wood, with a strong brass handle. It was
warm and welcoming, but the sight of it terrified James. He took a couple steps back, bumping right into Bucky.

“Hey, you’re alright.” Bucky said, grabbing James’ arms to keep him steady.

“I don’t think I am.” James breathed. He shook his head. “No, no. I can’t”

“James?” Steve called, sounding far away. When he looked at Steve, he was out of focus, like a TV with bad reception.

“James, bring him back.” Bucky demanded. “The door’s disappearing, you need to focus or you won’t be able to leave!”

“What if I don’t leave?” James asked seriously.

Bucky shook James’ shoulders. “Don’t be ridiculous, you have to.”

“But-” James stammered, looking at them both. “But-” He blinked back tears. “But what will happen to you?”

Bucky let go of James shoulders. “Oh, kid.” He sighed.

“If I go back, what will happen to both of you?” James demanded. “Will you what, just disappear? Go back to being dead? I’m sorry, I can’t let that happen. It’s not fair.”

“You have to go back.” Bucky told him. He cupped James’ cheek and smiled gently. “You have people who love you, you have to think of them, think of your family.”

“You’re my family, too.” James choked out.

“James.” Winter whispered, stepping closer to him. “It’s time to go home.”

“Besides,” Bucky wiped his own cheeks with a small, sad chuckle. “You’ve got my Steve to look after.” When James tried to speak, Bucky stopped him. “It’s okay. I know. There could never be a version of me that doesn’t love him. You have my blessing. Now, bring him back.”

James nodded, wiping his face. “Okay,” He whispered.


“What happened?” Steve asked, looking alarmed.

“Bad connection.” James answered. “Are you ready?”

Steve smiled, taking James’ hand. “Let’s go.”

They walked towards the door hand-in-hand. James reached for the knob with a shaking hand.

“Wait.” James said quickly, “I have something I need to show you before we go.” He glanced back at Bucky.

“What is it?” Steve asked. James held out his other hand to Bucky. Bucky looked at him, eyes full of gratitude. He took James’ other hand.
Steve was about to ask what James was doing when everything disappeared. They were still in the Red Hook apartment, they one where he had lived before the war. But everything was gone. The couch, the television, all of the furniture, and James. It was just an empty apartment.

“What-” Steve breathed, and he heard someone behind him. He whipped around to see… “Bucky?” It was undeniably him. Steve could just tell that he was different from James, though there was no visible difference between the two men.

“Hey, punk.” Bucky said, smiling stretching across his face.

“You- you jerk.” Steve choked. He took two steps forward and collided with Bucky, wrapping his arms around him. He fisted his hands in the back of his shirt, as Bucky buried his face in Steve’s neck.

“We only have a little while.” Bucky murmured. “Jamie can’t sustain us for long.”

“Buck,” Steve pulled back, cupping Bucky’s face and kissing him fiercely. Bucky held the nape of Steve’s neck, running his thumb against the small hairs there. When they finally parted for breath, they rested their foreheads together, breathing each other in.


Bucky pulled back, laughing. He ran a hand over Steve’s hair. “Stevie.” He grinned, grabbing Steve’s face and kissing his once more. “I fucking love you, you self sacrificing idiot.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” Steve apologized, not able to do anything with his face but smile.

“You goddamn better be.” Bucky said, poking him in the chest, also still grinning.

The room around them was slowly fading, but they just clung to each other, staring at each other’s faces and smiling. “I’m sorry,” Steve finally whispered.

“What for?” Bucky asked in the same quiet tone.

Steve rested his cheek against Bucky’s hair. “I don’t know. Everything.”

“You didn’t let me fall. I always would have fallen.” Bucky said knowingly. “The only thing that you’re guilty of is giving me the best possible life I could have ever asked for.”

“I don’t know what to do without you,” Steve said quietly, voice catching. “I don’t think I can do it alone.”

“You beautiful dumbass,” Bucky sighed, pulling back to look him in the eye. “You’re not alone. You’re surrounded by people who love you. Peggy, Natasha, Clint, Sharon, Sam, hell, even Stark.” He stood on his tiptoes to kiss Steve lightly on the lips. “Right now, you’re sitting next to the bed of a kid who would do anything for you, and I should know, I’ve been living in his head for the last couple of weeks.”

“James isn’t you.” Steve said quietly.

“No, he’s not.” Bucky agreed. “He’s his own person, and a great one at that. And I’ve seen the
way you look at him, Rogers. That look isn’t just because he has my face.”

Steve glanced down, blushing.

“See?” Bucky laughed quietly, cupping Steve’s face. “You deserve to be happy Steve. More than anyone, you deserve it.”

Steve nodded, taking Bucky’s hands and pressing a kiss to them, eyes watering. “Thank you, Bucky Barnes. Thank you for everything.”

Bucky gently kissed Steve’s cheek, slowly walking backwards into the fading background. Their fingers were still tangled together. “Take care of him, will you?”

Steve nodded, tears falling down his face. “Of course. I promise.” They both had their hands outstretched as Bucky was pulled backwards.

“And yourself.” Bucky said, their fingertips finally separating.

“Yes.” Steve agreed, choking back a sob.

Bucky smiled as he was slowly enveloped by the nothingness. “I love you, Steven Grant Rogers.”

Chapter End Notes

I was thinking of making a sequel to this work made up of deleted scene from this work. Things like: Natasha, Clint, and Bobbi breaking into Alcatraz, Epsilon backstory, more scenes from Bucky and James' childhood, Sharon doing SHIELD training, James in college, more Riley and Sam, and other ideas that I scrapped. Would anyone want to read that?
Steve gasped awake to complete and utter chaos. All the monitors was beeping shrilly, everyone was trying to talk over each other, and Elizabeth was on her feet, barking loudly. He tried to stand, but became sharply dizzy and sat back down. He fumbled at the helmet, taking it off his head.

“What’s happening?” He asked, ears ringing. No one turned to look at him, all surrounding the bed. They were all blocking Steve’s sightlines.

He couldn’t see James.

“James,” Steve said, gripping the arms of the chair and trying once again to get to his feet.

A hand landed on his shoulder, pushing him back in the chair. “Woah, easy now, Cap.” Banner murmured. “Your head is probably still spinning.”

“Is James okay?” Steve demanded, letting Banner help him to his feet. They staggered to the bed, where James was sitting up, awake. He was still pale, still looking like he’d been through hell, but he was awake. Sharon and Sam were both on one of his sides, peppering him with affection and worry. Dr. Khan and Dr. Cho were on his other side, trying to get a word in edgewise.

“Oh, Jamie.” Sharon had nearly her entire body wrapped around James. “Oh my god, James. I love you so damn much, I’m so glad you’re awake.”

“Sharon?” James asked blearily, already wrapping his arms around her. He buried his face in her hair briefly, taking a deep breath. He looked up and smiled at Sam over Sharon’s shoulder. “Sammy.”

“Hey, JC.” Sam greeted warmly, leaning down and wrapping both Carter twins in a hug. Elizabeth growled, and after a while, the two of them let go of James and allowed the dog lunge forward, throwing herself onto James’, licking his face.

James laughed, pushing her away. “Hi baby.”

“Elizabeth, down.” Sam called, and she whined but obeyed, jumping off the bed and going to Sam’s side.

James looked around the room, blinking slowly. “Is, uh, is Steve here?”

“Hey,” Steve said softly,shouldering his way closer to James.

“Hey.” James replied with a warm smile. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too,” Steve said stupidly, unable to keep a smile from spreading across his face. “James, listen, I wanted to say-”

James nodded. “I know.”
They looked at each other for one silent moment, and time between them seemed to freeze. Even the air was standing still. They had so much to say in that moment, but all they could do was look at each other.

“Professor Carter, we’re going to have to take some readings from you,” Cho interjected, shattering the frozen, burning look between the two of them. “And I suppose you’d be more comfortable if we removed the IV’s and the feeding tube and the, uh,” She glanced down. “Well. Nevertheless, we should check your reflexes and brain function.”

“We’re going to have to test you for any brain damage, James.” Dr. Khan told him, and she looked relieved and happy to see him awake. “This a unique case, and I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Of course,” James said, nodding. He was looking more and more overwhelmed by the moment. He glanced back at Sam and Sharon, then looked at Steve. He tried to give them all a reassuring smile, but it fell a little flat. “Uh, I guess we’ll do that, then.”

Dr. Khan looked at the assembled group. “If you could give us the room, please.”

Sharon looked like she wanted to protest, but James put a hand on her arm. “I’ll be here when you get back. Five minutes.”

Sharon sighed, resolve melting at her brother’s quiet request. “Okay.” She leaned down and kissed his cheek.

They filed out of the room, Elizabeth bounding out behind them with sudden energy. Steve did a quick head count, then turned to Banner with confusion. “Where’s Tony?”

Banner gave a wry chuckle, taking off his glasses and cleaning them with the hem of his shirt. “Ah, you know Tony. He doesn’t like to be thanked, not sincerely. He saw that things were looking good for you and Mr. Carter, so he made up an excuse and ran away.”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t think I’ll ever understand him.”

“I don’t think a single person on this planet will ever understand Tony Stark.” Banner said with a smile. “Hell, not a person in the universe. Thor sure as hell doesn’t get him.”

Steve laughed. Banner slipped his glasses back on and put his hands in his pockets. “I guess I should be off as well. I hope your friend makes a full recovery.”

“Bruce,” Steve reached out, shaking Banner’s hand. “Thank you. Seriously, thank you. Words can’t express how much this meant to me. And if you see Tony, give him my gratitude as well.”

Banner nodded, patting Steve’s arm. “See you around.” He walked down the hallway, and disappeared into the elevator.

“Steve?” He turned around to see Sam. Sharon was behind him, pacing and holding a phone to her ear with Elizabeth on her heels.

“Hey, Sam.” Steve said. “What’s up?”

“Are you, um, are you doing okay?” Sam asked tentatively.

Steve frowned. “Of course I’m okay. Why wouldn’t I be okay?”

“It’s just that-” Sam leaned in, speaking softly. “When you were… when you had the helmet on,
“Oh.” Steve said quietly, looking down.

“What happened?” Sam asked. “Sharon had a hard time describing what it was like for her. And she was only in for like 5 minutes. You were under for almost an hour.”

Steve was quiet for a moment, trying to think. “It was... strange. It was like we were in this sort of... dream. For a minute it was like, I don’t know,” He shook his head, chuckling to himself. “Sorry, I guess it’s pretty hard to explain.”

Sharon walked over, smiling, with tears in her eyes. She looked at Steve, then suddenly wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him. “Thank you, Captain. Thank you.” She whispered fiercely into his skin.

“Oh.” Steve said in surprise, patting her back. “You’re, uh, you’re welcome.”

She pulled back, nodding. She turned to Sam, clearing her throat and wiping her eyes. “Clint and Natasha are in their way.” Sharon told him. “And I called Peggy’s home. She’s asleep right now, but they’re going to tell her when she wakes up.”

“Great.” Sam said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and kissing her temple. “We’ll have him back home in no time.”

“I know.” She whispered.

The door opened, and Dr. Khan stuck her head out. “He’s ready for you.”

Sam and Sharon nodded, separating and heading towards the hospital room. Sam gestured for Steve to follow him, and Steve shook his head. “No, actually I think I’m just gonna head back.”

Sam frowned. “Are you sure?”

Steve told him, smiling reassuringly at him. “Yeah. I’ll be fine. You go on.”


“See you around.” Steve said, and Sam nodded, following Sharon into the hospital room.

Steve watched them disappear behind the door, then turned away, heading for the stairwell.

“I’m okay.” James said, delighted to see his family, but utterly exhausted. “Sharon, really. I’m fine.” She was hold his hand with both of her own, searching his face for any signs of pain. “Doc, will you tell this woman that I’m perfectly fine?”

He resisted the urge to ask where Steve had gone. It was childish, but he felt slightly betrayed that he had left. But more than that, he just wanted to make sure that Steve was okay. He felt anxious now, not having Steve in his direct line of sight. Something deep in him just needed Steve nearby.

“I’m afraid that we can’t be sure of your condition until we finish running these tests.” Dr. Khan
replied, and James threw his head back onto the pillow with a massive sigh. Elizabeth happily thumped her tail against the bed.

“How many more tests?” James asked, and Sharon patted his cheek with a smile.

“As many as it takes to make sure you’re okay.” She told him, and he rolled his eyes.

James looked to Sam for help. He raised his hands, backing away. “Don’t look at me, man. She’s the boss.”

“Can I please get up and walk around at least? I want to get out of this bed, I’m going stir crazy.”

Dr. Khan looked at Dr. Cho, who shrugged. “I suppose. You should try to be careful, though. Move slowly. We don’t know if your enhancements have kept your muscles from atrophying or not.”

“Okay.” James set his hand on the mattress and lifted himself up, swinging his feet over the side of the bed. He set his feet on the tile floor, gasping at the sudden cold. Suddenly, Sam and Sharon were at his side.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“Is something wrong? Are you hurt?” Sharon demanded.

“What do you need?”

James laughed. “It’s cold, that’s all. Just a cold floor.”

Dr. Khan smiled, then looked away. “There should be some socks in the leftmost drawer. Middle shelf.”

Sam walked over and opened the cabinet, tossing James a pair of balled-up hospital socks. James reached up to catch it, but fumbled, and it bounced uselessly to the floor.

“Huh.” James muttered, slowly closing his hand in a tight fist. Elizabeth jumped off the bed, skittering across the tile floor and grabbing the socks in her mouth. She brought it to James, nub-tail wagging. “Thanks, girl.”

“So your hand-eye coordination is a little bit off,” Cho surmised, writing something down on her clipboard. “Are you dizzy at all?”

“No.” James sighed, putting his socks on. They were soft and fuzzy, with sticky grips on the bottom. He wiggled his toes, smiling.

Moving felt good, having a body felt good. It was strange, but when he was… when he was asleep, he hadn’t noticed the strange, weightless, almost disassociated way he had felt. Now that he had his physical self back, he was grateful for it. He patted his chest, feeling the warmth of his own skin, the firmness of the muscles there. It was both grounding and overwhelming. The physical sensation of it leaving gooseflesh on his skin.

“Are you okay, James?” Dr. Khan asked quietly.

“Yeah, I just,” James shook his head. “When we- when I was asleep, it was different. I’m just, getting used to… being back.”

He could feel both Sam and Sharon’s concerned looks. He tried to smile reassuringly at them. “I’m
fine. Here, help me up.”

He gripped Sam’s arm, levying himself to his feet. Sam swayed with James’ weight and chuckled, slapping him on the back. “Alright, take it easy now.”

James grinned and took a few tentative steps, still holding onto Sam. When he didn’t fall, he let go, taking longer, more confident strides. He paced the width of the room, stretching his arms out as he did so, shivering with pleasure at the newfound limberness of his muscles. “Christ.” He murmured, rolling his neck. The bones cracked satisfyingly.

Sharon coughed, and James turned to look at them. Cho was looking at the floor, blushing. Khan was deeply focused on a blank piece of paper on her clipboard, and Sam was staring at him with open appreciation. Sharon looked unimpressed. “Your ass is hanging out.”

“Oh.” James looked back at the open hospital gown. He looked back at Sharon. “Do you have any clothes?”

Sharon laughed at him. “Clint’s bringing some.”

“Oh.” James repeated. “Good.” He leaned against the side of the bed, feeling slightly embarrassed. Elizabeth walked over to his side, tail wagging. He smiled down at her, patting her head gently. She set her chin on his leg, looking up at him with big watery eyes. James sighed and glanced over the the doctors. “Let’s get this over with.”

Cho smiled. “All your samples looked good, but I’d like to run a few neurological tests. And your most recent scans were…” She trailed off, looking back, trying to find his charts. Dr. Khan pat her shoulder, already holding a clipboard.

“We did a MRI and a CT scan when you first arrived here and we’ve been doing EEGs every two days.” Khan told him. “Your scans looked fine, and your EEGs were typical for any normal coma patient.”

“Well, that’s… good.” James said cautiously. He was completely out of his depth here. He planned to simply nod and just go along with whatever the two of them told him to do.

“So there’s no signs of physical brain damage, but, well, we can’t be too sure about anything.” Dr. Cho said.

Khan nodded in agreement. “We’re going to take every possible precaution, which means-”

“All the tests.” James assumed. He sighed, collapsing back onto the bed and covering his face. Sharon came and sat next to James, patting his knee conciliatorily. “How soon do you think I can go home?” He asked.

“Within the week.” Cho answered.

“A week?!” James sat up quickly, almost taking Sharon’s head off. “No, doctor, no. I wanna go home now.” He was whining, and he knew that he sounded like a little kid begging his mom to leave her friend’s party early, but he didn’t care. He was tired of this hospital. He wanted to go home.

Dr. Khan sighed, taking her glasses off and pinching the bridge of her nose. “James, we need to keep you under observation. What you’ve been through is literally unpresidented. You need to be examined thoroughly. We have no idea what the after effects of what was done to you are.”
“We don’t even know if there’s still HYDRA programming running through that pretty little head of yours.”

Sharon got to her feet, pulling a knife from her boot. Sam pushed himself in front of Dr. Khan and Dr. Cho. Even Elizabeth’s hackles rose.

“At ease, 13.” Fury said, stepping into the room and out of the shadows.

Sharon relaxed slightly, but didn’t sheath her knife. She nodded at Sam, who stood down. James just rolled his eyes. “What’s up, Nick?” He patted the bed and Elizabeth jumped on it, curling up in front of him, though still eyeing Fury with guarded suspicion.

“Professor Carter,” Fury nodded. “Glad to see you’re awake.”

James sighed, rubbing his eyes. He tried to look bored, annoyed. Not terrified. “What do you want?”

Fury tilted his head. “I just wanted to check up on you. See how you’re doing. I hear that having your brains scrambled can be pretty rough.”

“I wouldn’t particularly recommend it,” James said with a shrug. He started petting Elizabeth’s fur, just in case Fury noticed that he was shaking.

Dr. Khan stepped in front of James. “Director, we need to start running tests. Our patient might have suffered permanent brain damage after being subjected to dangerous levels of electricity and methods of mind-control that could be labelled as torture. Unless you have any important business here, you should leave.”

Fury looked at the woman who was nearly a foot shorter than him, and raised a slightly impressed eyebrow. Then he looked over her shoulder at James. “The man that called himself Elliot Amir is in SHIELD custody and has fully cooperated with all lines of questioning. He’s being held in a secure facility, where he’ll await trial. He’s informed us of a few remaining scattered HYDRA cells, which we’re currently investigating and preparing to shut down.”

“Oh, um.” James blinked, a little taken aback. “Thanks for telling me, I guess.” He felt cautious, there had to be something more that Fury wanted from him. “Is there… anything else?”

Fury shook his head. “That’s it for now. I just thought you should know.”

James nodded. “Thanks. I guess, uh, I guess I’ll see you around.”

“For your sake, I hope not.” Fury said, then turned on heel, trench coat swishing dramatically as he disappeared down the hallway.

Sam turned to Sharon. “Your boss is way too intense.”

She sighed, putting her leg up on the bed and unzipping her boot so that she could sheath her knife. “Technically, I report to Deputy Director Hill.”

“Right.” Dr. Cho said, looking nervously at the door. “We’ll start with cranial nerve examination. I’ll just test things like your senses of hearing, smell, and sight, and I’ll ask you to do things like raise your eyebrows and move your tongue from side to side. But first, I’m just gonna do a brief examination of your skull.” She slipped on a pair of purple latex gloves. “I want to make sure you don’t have any nerve damage from the,” She gestured awkwardly. “From what happened.”
“Right.” James took a deep breath, steeling himself. Still, as Cho reached for his head, he flinched. She froze, hands hovering in the air around his head. She looked just as panicked as he felt, his heart hammering against his chest. He had to control his breaths, and Elizabeth stood, whining at his distress. He tried to focus, tried to ground himself, but it wasn’t working.

He was in the chair. There was nothing but pain as the old man watched him impassively, a small smile on his face. He was in the ring, fighting, taking down every person who stood against him, snapping their bones with his bare hands. He was back in the chair, screaming his throat raw.

A warm, dry hand grabbed his, and James looked up to see Sam by his side. “It's alright, buddy.”

“I don’t- where…”

“You’re in the New York Presbyterian Hospital, with me and Sharon and Dr. Khan and Dr. Cho.” Sam said quietly, slowly squeezing his hand. “Where are you?”

“I’m in the… I’m in a hospital room.” James said, looking around the room.

“Great.” Sam said. “You're doing great. Can you tell me 5 things that you can see?”

“Um. You. Ellie. The IV. That chair. Sharon.” James listed dutifully. Sharon was standing next to Sam, wringing her hands as she watched James’ panic. For a moment, he thought that she looked like their mom.

“Good. Now how about four things you can touch?” Sam asked gently.

James’ fingers in Sam’s hand twitched. “You.” He pet Elizabeth’s head with his other hand as she whined and pushed her cold nose into his neck. “Dog.” He wiggled his toes in his socks. “Hospital socks. Blanket.”

Sam nodded. “That’s four. Alright. Now three things you can hear.”

“Beeping.” James said. “Elizabeth panting. Um… cars outside.”

“Two things you can smell.”

James took a deep breath. “Sanitizer and…” he wrinkled his nose. “You. When was the last time you showered?”

Sam laughed. “It’s been tense around here. Don’t judge. Tell me something you can taste.”

“Taste?” James frowned.

Sam shrugged. “Yeah, you been asleep for like, two weeks. How’s the inside of your mouth right now, man?”

James smacked his lips, making his face. “Tastes like ass.” He blinked, then slowly smiled at Sam. “You’ve been going to therapy.”

“Well,” Sam shrugged. “Someone guilted me into going and then fell into a fucking coma, so,”

James laughed, then shook his head, trying to shake off the residual feeling of the old man’s hand on the back of his neck. He looked at Dr. Cho. “Sorry, I just-”

“It’s perfectly understandable.” She said quietly, looking over at Dr. Khan. “Amelia, should I-”
“I’m fine.” James insisted. “I’m okay. It was just a, um, just a flashback, I guess.” There was no point in hiding what they had all just seen. “I’ll be okay. You can go ahead.” He gestured uncomfortably. “Do your thing.”

Dr. Cho looked at Dr. Khan, then at James, then at Sam; like she was looking for confirmation that she wasn’t about to cause James to have a breakdown right there. James wanted to sigh. “Come on, let’s just get through this.” Cho looked at him with concern. He met her eyes. “Please?”

“Alright,” She said cautiously.

About 20 minutes in to the first test, Natasha and Clint arrived. As soon as they entered the hospital room, they rushed to James, enveloping him in a hug. It was nice, warm and familiar.

“Hi, guys.” James said, voice muffled by Clint’s shoulder.

Natasha stroked a hand through his hair briefly, squeezing the back of his neck. “It’s good to see you, solnyshko.” She whispered.

“Yeah, you too.” James wheezed, because Clint was kind of crushing him.

Clint chuckled, patting James on the back and giving him some space. “Sorry, kiddo.” He handed James a duffle bag. “Brought you some stuff.”

James excitedly unzipped the bag, pulling out some of his own clothes, a couple of his favorite books, a soft blanket that he recognized from Natasha’s apartment, along with a toiletry bag that held with his toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, a razor blade, and a comb. “Did you guys go to DC for all this?”

Clint shrugged, ruffling a hand in James’ hair affectionately. “It’s not that far out of our way.”

Natasha held out a tupperware carton still warm soup. James grabbed it quickly, opening it and putting his face in the steam, groaning in pleasure. “Oh my god. Is this Darlene’s?”

“She wanted to contribute.” Clint answered with a shrug. He turned to Sam. “You should probably call her. She’s pissed that she found out that he’s awake from us.”

“Oh.” Sam looked pale, searching for his phone.

James turned to the two doctors, who had been mid-test when the Barton-Romanovs had barged in. Cho only looked slightly taken aback, and Khan just looked resigned. James figured that they’d been having to deal with his crazy family long enough to be used to all the antics.

“Can I go take a shower?” He asked pleadingly.

Khan sighed. “After we’re finished.”

“Okay.” James replied cheerfully. He chatted with with Clint and Natasha as Cho and Khan poked and prodded at him. They carefully didn’t bring up anything about the case, or what had happened to James. As they made conversation, James had trouble keeping focus.

Every time he looked at Natasha, he didn’t just see the woman who he grew up with, the person who had protected him his whole life; he also saw a young girl, about 11 or 12, with dark red hair and a vicious talent for hand-to-hand. He wondered what Natasha knew about the Soldier.

“Jamie?” Sharon, who was sitting next to him on the bed, eating his leftover soup, gently placed a
“Yeah, I just-” He shook his head, rubbing his temple. “Just a little tired.” He turned to the doctors. “How much longer?”

“We’re just about done.” Khan said with a smile. “You can go ahead and shower. The hospital staff will want to move you out of the ICU and into the rehabilitation wing. Helen and I are going to leave for the day.”

“Oh, okay.” James looked around the small room, glancing out the window at the setting sun. He looked at Sharon, Sam, Clint, and Natasha. “You guys should head home, too.”

As Sharon and Sam started to protest, he held up a hand. “You guys look exhausted. Go home. Get some rest. Eat some real food. Take my dog on a walk. I’ll be fine. You can see me tomorrow.”

They both tried object, but James could tell it was half-hearted. Natasha and Clint both squeezed him tight, pressing kisses to cheek and promising to come back tomorrow. James hugged everybody once again, sending them on their way. Sam promised to bring him more soup.

“I love you,” Sharon said, crushing him slightly.

“I love you too, Sharon.” James wheezed. “Now go the hell home.”

After he was finally alone, he sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Fuck.” He breathed, pushing himself up from the bed. He walked into the adjoining bathroom, with the non-slip floors and the safety bars.

When he caught sight of himself in the mirror, he jumped, mistaking his reflection for... for someone else. His hair has grown shaggy, and he had a thin layer of scuff on his face. He rubbed his cheek, grimacing at the uncomfortable sensation of razor burn. Some medical tech or nurse must have been shaving him, and not well.

He leaned over the counter, getting so close to the mirror that it fogged with his breath. “Hello?” He tried softly. “Bucky? Winter?” James waited carefully, tracking the movements of his face for any sign of the others, but nothing happened.

James sighed, pushing back from the counter and grabbing the bathroom bag Natasha and Clint had prepared for him. He pulled out the razor and shave gel, then began lathering his face. Once he was clean-shaven, he brushed his teeth, then clipped his nails, feeling more and more human with each action.

Finally, he stripped out of the flimsy hospital gown and turned on the shower with the water as hot as it could possibly go.

Once he was under the hot spray, he finally let himself break down.

Steve only stepped out of the shower after the water had gone cold, something that took an impressively long time in the fancy Manhattan hotel he’d been staying in. Barton had offered to let him stay in his guestroom back in Bed-Stuy, but Steve knew he couldn’t stay there, not when the
entire apartment reminded him of James.

He dragged his hand across the foggy mirror, not meeting his reflection’s eyes. He grabbed a towel, patting himself down, then wrapping it around his waist. He left the bathroom, trying to decide if just ordering room service and not leaving his hotel room for the rest of the week would be cowardly or not when he caught something out of the corner of his eye.

“Jesus!” He startled, glad his reaction time was good enough that he didn’t try to kill Natasha, who was sitting on his bed, smugly flipping through the TV channels. She looked up lazily at him, raising an unimpressed eyebrow.

“You were in there a long time.” She complained, looking back at the television.

Steve’s towel slipped and he struggled to cover himself. “Why are you here?” He demanded.

She shut off the TV and turned to face him, sitting cross-legged. “You ran outta there awful quick.”

Steve shrugged, turning her back to her and grabbing an undershirt. “I didn’t think I was needed.”

“Hm.”

He pulled the shirt over his chest, turning back to her. Steve grabbed the towel, looking pointedly at her. “Do you mind?”

She sighed dramatically, but dutifully covered her eyes. Steve quickly pulled boxer briefs and pants on, grabbing a t-shirt and holding it protectively in front of him. “What do you want?”

Natasha opened her eyes, tilting her head. “Just wanted to know why you left the hospital as soon as James woke up. You didn’t even stay to see if he had brain damage.”

“He doesn’t.” Steve said. He put the shirt on, then leaned against the wall, crossing his arms.

Natasha did the same, and in finally set in. Leading questions, mirroring movements. It was completely by the book. She was interrogating him. Badly. “How do you know that?”

“I was there.” Steve walked over to the bed and sat down next to her. “What’s going on, Nat?”

“When you say you were there,” She turned her head to look at him, hair falling over her shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“I was at the hospital.” Steve told her easily.

“Yeah, but you barely spoke to him.” She said, almost argumentative.

“Natasha,” He sighed, tired. “What do you want to know?”

She looked down at her hands. “You were in his head, right?”

“Yeah,” He said cautiously. “I think so, yeah.”

Natasha nodded, pressing her lips together. She looked unhappy. Steve was on high alert. “What is it? Does SHIELD want the technology? Did Fury send you to see what-”

Natasha chuckled, shaking her head. “Stark already destroyed it. I mean, I thought I was paranoid, but that guy is really next level crazy.”
“It's not paranoia if they’re really out to get you,” Steve said, repeating something that Howard had said to him once. He sometimes wondered what his old friend had done to his kid to make Tony the way he was.

“I guess,” Natasha agreed quietly. There was a long stretch of silence before she said, “I need to know what you saw.”


She made a pained face, and Steve suddenly felt a deep, loving warmth for her. The fact that Natasha was trusting him enough to blatantly display her emotions in front of him was astonishing. He recognized how hard it must be for her. He remembered what Bucky had told him, that he wasn’t alone. Steve was starting to think that maybe that was true.

“I didn’t see a lot.” Steve told her. “We were in this place, it was an apartment that Bucky and I had back before the war. But it was different, sort of… fluid. James said it was made of memories. He has a lot more of them now, his, plus, plus Bucky’s, and the um, the other ones.

But they had all manifested in this really beautiful sort of collage of a place. There were a lot of things like, um, like there was a couch there, and it was this horrible, god awful couch I had in my first apartment, and, and James had this coffee mug out, one of those dumb novelty Hawkeye mugs that Barton bought a million of.”

Natasha smiled fondly. “I hate those things.” She looked at Steve searchingly. “But you didn’t see anything,” she paused, like she was looking for a word. “Potentially dangerous?”

“You mean any latent HYDRA programming?” Steve asked, and she nodded. “No, I didn’t see anything that… is that something that could still be an issue?”

“Fury has some concerns,” she said diplomatically. “But he trusts my judgement and I trust yours.”

“But you’re also worried about something,” Steve said leadingly.

Natasha laughed. “This is supposed to be my interrogation, Rogers. Don’t try to pull this move on me, I invented this move.”

Steve shrugged. “I learned from the best.”

She shook her head. “I’m just worried what… what inheriting the Winter Soldier’s memories will do to James. It's not easy, having a past that’s that soaked in blood.”

Steve put a hand in her shoulder, squeezing it briefly and letting go. “If it's hard for him, then, well, he’s not alone. We’ll help him. No matter what.”

When she looked at him with gratitude on her face, he knew she understood that his double meaning

They sat in companionable silence for a bit before Natasha got up to order room service. After awhile, a rather starstruck bellboy arrived with their food, probably calculating how much he could sell the story that he found Captain America and the Black Widow in a single bed hotel room together, sharing meal.

Steve tipped him and sent him away, sitting on the bed across from Natasha, grabbing a plate of fries and dipping it into some ketchup.
“You’ll stay then?” She asked, taking a fry off his plate. “You’re not gonna keep running from him?”

Steve smiled ruefully to himself. “I have a promise to keep.”

The room in the rehabilitation wing was much nicer than the ICU. It had a comfortable bed, nicer visitor chairs, and there was nothing sticking in James, so he was pretty happy. Still, after 3 days, being able to wear clothes and walk around wasn’t doing anything to end his cabin fever. Every chance he got, he bothered Dr. Khan, asking when he would be able to leave the hospital. She always replied with patient exasperation and a terse, “Soon.”

“Dude, chill out.” Sam sighed, picking up the book that James had been reading and tossing it at him.

James caught the book easily. “I can’t, I’m going crazy. I’m going like, full-on insane.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “You’re such a drama queen. You’re getting paid time off to just chill.”

“I’m in a hospital!” James exclaimed. “After being kidnapped and brainwashed! That’s not chill.”

“Yeah, but you’re fine, so it’s no big deal.” Sam said, laughing. He set his feet up on the bed, looking at James somewhat seriously. “I talked to Cho, since Khan is being so tight-lipped about everything. She said that all of your tests look really good. They don’t really need to keep you for observations much longer. I think you’ve got like, a couple more things, then you’re good.”

There was a knock at the door, and Sharon stuck her head in. “You taking visitors?” She asked with a grin.

“For you, always.” He replied.

She opened the door the rest of the way, pushing a wheelchair into the room. “Peggy!” James said, surprised to see her. He scrambled off the bed, bending down to hug her.

“Oh my goodness,” She laughed, patting his back. “It’s good to see you too, James.” She ran a hand through his hair, rubbing the ends of his hair with her fingertips. “Look at your hair. It’s getting long.”

“Yeah I’ve been thinking of growing it out,” he said, smiling. “What are you doing here?” He asked, looking up at Sharon. “You brought her? Were her doctors okay with her leaving?”

Peggy scoffed. “It’s not a prison, dear.”

James looked at her. “This hospital is.”

“She wanted to come see you for herself.” Sharon said with a shrug. “I wasn’t gonna stop her.”

“I think it’s rather nice,” Peggy said looking around the room. “You’ve got cards and flowers and everything.” He smiled, glancing back at the side table where he had gifts and cards from many of his students. Peggy laughed, pulling down on his shirt. “Come here, let me look at you.”

It was strange, because as he looked at her, he could see a young woman, brash and beautiful and
brave. There was a strange sort of feeling behind those memories. It wasn’t quite resentment or fear, but it felt similar. James almost laughed as he realized that Bucky had felt threatened by her.

“What is it?” Peggy asked with a small smile.

“You heard what happened?” James asked hedgingly, wanting to know if she was told and if she actually remembered.

“Yes, I’m familiar.” She said with a smile.

“Do you remember?” His voice broke, suddenly overwhelmed by the emotion of the memory. “Do you remember, in 1943 in an Allied bar in Perugia, you made a promise to someone, and he made the same promise to you.”

“I remember,” Peggy said softly, looking at James curiously. “Do you?”

James wondered if this was what it was like for Peggy, past and present intertwined confusingly.

“Yes.” He told her. “Yeah, I do. I just, the person who you made that promise to, he would want me to thank you.”

She cupped his face, concern in her eyes. He smiled, leaning down and kissing her cheek. “I’m fine, Pegs. I’m great actually. The hospital says I’m the healthiest person to ever walk the earth.”

Sharon rolled her eyes. “You always have to be the best at everything.” She glanced at Sam. “How’s he doing?”

“He’s a little stir crazy today.” Sam said.

Sharon sat down on the bed. “What else is new?”

James rolled Peggy further into the room, parking her by the bed so that she could see everyone, then sat next to Sharon. “Sammy says I could be able to leave today.”

Sharon raised her eyebrows. “How did he find that out?”

“She told me.” Sam said.

“Helen?” Sharon asked. “She’s Helen now?”

Peggy laughed, looking between them. “Who’s Helen?”

“Dr. Cho. She’s one of my doctors.” James answered. “Who Sam’s on first-name basis with, apparently.”

He knew that they needed to tread this line of teasing carefully. Sam still wore his engagement ring, after all.

He shrugged easily. “Yeah. You were asleep for awhile, JC. I needed someone who wasn’t Sharon to talk to.”

“Hey,” Sharon said, mock-offended. She turned to Peggy, crossing her arms. “Peggy, Sam’s being mean to me.”

Peggy just laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. “Oh, children. I have missed you.” James grinned, squeezing her shoulder softly.
“Besides,” Sharon said, turning back to Sam. “You’ve sure been getting pretty close with Cap.”

James looked at Sam, raising an eyebrow. “You didn’t tell me that you and Steve were friends.”

“Yeah, we're mad tight.” Sam said sarcastically, though he had a small smug smile creeping across his face. He turned to Peggy. “Plus, I sort of met Tony Stark and the Hulk. I’m all kinds of famous these days.”

“You didn’t meet the Hulk,” Sharon said, rolling her eyes. “If you met the Hulk, you would be paste. You met Dr. Banner, who was super helpful in fixing James.”

“Semantics.” Sam said, waving a hand. “I’ve now met every member of the Avengers.”

“You’ve never met Thor,” James pointed out helpfully.

“Fine.” Sam said with a sigh. “I’ve met all the Avengers that are currently on Earth.”

“Oh!” Sharon said, suddenly realizing something. She slipped her bag off her shoulder, pulling out a brown paper bag. “I brought lunch.”

They ate, talking and arguing easily, as they almost always did. After awhile, another nurse came through to take his vitals, a ritual that James was now used to. The conversation and company made James feel more comfortable, like maybe everything could go back to normal, eventually.

A doctor came in, kicking everybody out so he could run some more tests on James. He’d gone through everything. Reflex testing, nerves testing, neurological test, a psych eval, all the crazy tests the Cho and Khan had come up with, and every scan imaginable.

“Alright, Mr. Carter, as always, everything looks great.” Dr. Johansson said. “I spoke to Dr. Khan and she signed off your release today.”

“You don’t know how happy I am to hear that, doc.” James said, grinning. “When can I go?”

“Well, you can just sign this sheet here, then head over the billing department and you’ll be good to go.”

“Really?” James grabbing the clipboard that the doctor was holding out. “Man, you guys have been great, but if I don’t see another doctor ever again, it’ll be too soon.”

Dr. Johansson laughed, taking the clipboard back from James. “You got anyone special you’re excited to see?” He asked, helping James get his stuff together.

James thought about it,.shouldering his bag. “Yeah, I-I think I might.”

Steve was back in DC, back to work with Natasha and Barton, running down the last vestiges of HYDRA. It had been pretty simple, and they probably didn’t need much of his help, but it was sort of therapeutic to be back running missions.

Still, after a week, his life had gone back to it’s fairly depressing monotony. He ran missions, ordered food, read books, worked out, ignored his friends’ pestering, rinse and repeat. Steve
thought that he was beginning to resent DC. Really, it was just that he missed Brooklyn and New York, and maybe, he missed being there with James.

There was a knock at the door and Steve sighed, finishing his set of push-ups before getting up and grabbing a shirt. Natasha had probably swung by to bother him some more.

He opened the door, already saying, “Nat you could have at least called.”

James was standing there, shifting from foot to foot awkwardly. “Hi,”

“Hey.” Steve replied, a little dumbfounded. “What’re you, uh, what’s up?”

James shrugged cheerfully. “I was wondering if you’d like to go out for dinner with me.”

“Oh,” Steve said. “Yeah, I’d-I’d love to.” He caught James’ smile and couldn’t help but smile back. *Yeah, he thought, I’d really love to.*
“James?” Steve called, looking around the bedroom. “Have you seen my shield?”

“What do you need your shield for?” James asked, shouting from the kitchen.

Steve crouched down, checking under the bed. Marcel, the cat, who had been napping comfortably on top of James’ pillow, grumbled unhappily at him. Steve ignored him. “Y’know… just in case.”

The floorboards creaked and Steve looked up to see James leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed. “It’s dinner.” He said. “There’s nothing to fight at dinner.”

Margaret, their black mutt puppy, ran into the room, nails tapping against the hardwood floor. She overshot, sliding clumsily and crashing into the door. Still, she happily bounced off, running over to Steve, tail wagging. “Hey, little lady.” Steve grinned, picking her up. Her bright blue leash that matched the pretty blue of her eyes dangled on the ground as Steve pressed excited kisses to her nose. She wiggled in his grasp, tongue catching Steve’s cheek. Marcel hissed at them, hopping off of the bed and zooming out of the room.

He passed Elizabeth as she padded into the doorway, sitting heavily next to James. She watched Marcel disappear underneath the couch, then looked at Steve and Margaret, sighing wearily as if to say *kids these days*. James smiled, leaning down and patting her head. “I know, right? Those two are insufferable.”

Steve set Margaret down, and she ran over to Elizabeth, sitting in front of her, tail thumping against the floor expectantly. James looked back to Steve. “You don’t need to bring your shield.”

“But what if-” Steve started, already knowing that he sounded ridiculously.

“If there’s danger, we’ll deal with it.” James answered, walking into the room and helping Steve to his feet. Steve swayed closer to James, wrapping his arms around James waist and resting his cheek on James’ head. “You don’t have to be nervous about it.” James said, poking Steve in the ribs.
“I know,” Steve muttered, pressing a kiss to the crown of James’ head. “I just am.”

“She’s gonna love you,” James said, letting Steve squeeze him around the middle. James laughed, leaning back and taking Steve’s hands, tugging him out of the room.

“Should we bring something?” Steve asked, even as James led them out the door.

James shook his head. “It’s fine, Steve. C’mon, we’re gonna be late.” He quickly scooped kibble into Marcel’s bowl, and the cat came out of hiding to quickly thank James and hiss at Margaret when she tried to eat his dinner.

James dragged Steve out of the apartment, both dogs on their heels. Margaret got tired after about two blocks, so Steve picked her up, tucking her under his arm. “I don’t get why we’re meeting at a cafe,” Steve complained happily, as James swung their joined hands between them. “They only live upstairs.”

“It’s sweet,” James defended. “They’re making sure everyone’s comfortable.”

“Neutral ground,” Steve agreed, as Margaret started wiggling restlessly.

James pulled them to a stop, looking up at the brick building in front of them. “This is the place.”

2012

“This is the place,” James said, nodding towards a tiny, bare-bones, counter service pizza place. He walked over to the counter, leaning against it. Steve lean down, looking through the glass. Lights were shining down on beautiful pizzas that made Steve’s mouth water.

“Due fette di pizza bianca, per favore, Salvestro.” James said to the guy inside, who was tossing dough. The guy looked up in surprise, then smiled.

“James! Cosa stai facendo qui? Come stai amico mio?” The man asked heartily, wiping his hands on his apron.

“I’m good, Sal.” James laughed. “Just in town for a few days. Can I get a couple slices for me and my friend?”

Sal glanced back at Steve, and if he recognized him or cared, he didn’t show it. “Of course! Anything for you, James.” He pulled a couple slices from the glass case, sliding them into the fire oven with long practiced ease. “Anything to drink?”

“A beer for me, please.” James glanced back at Steve. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Uh, lemonade.” Steve said.

“Sal makes the best pizza in New York.” James told Steve easily, turning to him and leaning with his back against the counter.

“You’re too kind!” Sal said, grinning and sliding the two slices and the drinks across the counter.
James pulled out his wallet, sliding a ten back to Sal.

“Keep the change, Sal.” James said, handing the lemonade and a slightly greasy paper plate to Steve. He followed James into a small park, where they sat down on a bench. It made Steve think of that day in Central Park when they watched the little boy catch pigeons.

“I like this place,” James said quietly. “I remember when…” He stopped, shaking his head. “It’s kinda funny, uh, I keep wanting to-”

Steve realized where they were. “This is where we buried those apple seeds and Rabbit dug them up.”

“Argos.” James quickly corrected, then laughed. “Stupid,” He muttered, taking a bite of his pizza. “You know It wasn’t me, right? Who ran with you.” James finally added after a long pause.

“I know,” Steve said quietly. “James, thank you, for-”

James nodded. “Of course.” He opened his beer, taking a sip and making a face. “He, um, you-both of you deserved a chance to-to say goodbye.”

Steve looked sideways at Bucky, at the tears that seemed to be falling down his face without his knowledge. “James?” He whispered, taking the hand that felt so familiar in his own, yet so new.

“Sorry.” James said, laughing self-consciously and wiping his face with his sleeve. “Sorry, I don’t even know why I’m crying, it’s just…” He trailed off, not moving his hand from Steve’s.

“You miss him, too.” Steve assumed, and James just nodded, curling his fingers into Steve’s, neither of them acknowledging the contact.

“I miss both of them.” Steve didn’t quite know what he meant, so he stayed silent. James took a sip of his beer, then picked up his pizza, staring at it wistfully. “It’s funny. I’ve been coming to Sal’s since I was a kid, running in this park with Sam and Sharon when we were little, and I never knew.”

“Maybe some part of you did,” Steve said, taking a bite of his pizza. It was ridiculously good.

“Maybe,” James repeated softly. The two of them sat in silence for a while, just holding hands and eating side by side, surveying the park as the sun set over Brooklyn.

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2018

The cafe had a charming little outdoor patio, and was very dog friendly. “There they are.” Steve pointed out nodding to the table in the corner. James smiled, walking over to them excitedly.

“Hi, tetushka.” James greeted, and Natasha stood to hug him. Clint half-stood, letting the little girl on his lap slide to the ground. James crouched, greeting her. “Hi, Katie.” he said softly, offering a hand.

She just grinned, throwing her arms around his shoulders. James was a little taken aback, he was
expecting a shy child, afraid of strangers and large men. This girl was nothing like that, enthusiastically greeting James. “Hi! It’s nice to meet you. Natasha said you were really nice, and Clint said you were awesome, but I think that you’re kind of pretty.” She paused so she could take a breath, then stopped, looking over James’ shoulder and gasping. “Is that a puppy?”

Kate pushed past him, walking over to Steve and Margaret with visible excitement. James smiled and stood, walking over to a chair. He smiled as he watched Steve to struggle awkwardly to introduce himself to the tiny girl.

“How’s it been?” James asked Clint, who just smiled dopily.

“The best, man. Just the best. She’s keeping us on our toes, but…” He shook his head, grinning from ear to ear. “It’s the best.”

James looked at Natasha. She smiled tiredly, but the smile was genuine. “She’s amazing.”

He had been surprised when Clint and Natasha had announced their intentions to foster a kid, but it made sense. He remembered when he was young, how they’d seemed like the single coolest people he’d ever meet. They were the greatest; they had stayed by his side after rescuing him from that lab, had been his protectors. Of course they’d make great parents.

Elizabeth sat down on the ground next to James, looking up at him with big brown eyes. “Yeah, yeah.” James patted her head.

There was a happy squeal, and James looked up to see Kate hanging off of Steve’s arm. He was smiling, too, and swinging her around. Margaret was running in circles at their feet, barking excitedly. James’ heart clenched a little at the sight, unable to keep the smile off his face.

“Hey, guys, sorry we’re late.” Sharon said, walking over with Sam in tow. “Sam took forever to get ready.”

“I was at work,” Sam replied. James stood, giving them both a hug.

“Hi!” Kate shouted excitedly. Clint laughed, leaning down and scooping her up so that she could greet everybody at eye level.

Sharon smiled, shaking her tiny hand. “Hello! It's lovely to meet you, Kate. I’m Sharon.”

“I’m Sam.” Sam added, bowing a little, like he was meeting royalty. Kate giggled, kicking her legs out until Clint set her down. She ran around, chasing Margaret around the table.

James let Sharon take his seat, as Steve dragged a few chairs over from a nearby empty table.

“Thanks,” James said as Steve offered him a seat.

“So how goes it at the VA, Sam?” Steve asked, settling into his own chair.

Sam smiled, absentmindedly touching his chain, the one that held his tags and wedding ring. “It’s going really well. Attendance is at an all-time high, thanks to you.”

“Oh, well.” Steve blushed looking down at the table, humble as always. “All I did was show up. You’re the one who’s actually helping people, Sam.”

“You’re still doing a lot of good,” Sam said. “For yourself and everyone else in group.”

The waitress came by to take their orders, politely stepping out of the way of Margaret and Kate as
they almost ran her down. She left with a small, slightly annoyed smile, not even acknowledging that she was bringing dinner to half of the Avengers.

“How was… Liechtenstein?” James asked Sharon who laughed, shaking her head.

“I was in Monaco.” She replied, “There was this peace conference. I was there to do some recon on an African prince.”

James sighed dreamily, and she laughed, batting his arm. “It wasn’t like that. Wakanda is the most technologically advanced country in the world. Stark wants to cut a deal with them, but they’re notoriously secretive.”

“Wouldn’t you be, too if you were an African country? Especially if you were rich in resources like Wakanda?” Sam asked, and Natasha nodded sagely.

She looked at Sharon and they began discussing tactics to gain trust from T’Challa. Clint raised his eyebrows, looking at the rest of them. “I didn’t know that my wife knew a crown prince so well.”

“Papa Clint! I’m tired.” Kate declared loudly, climbing into his lap. He passed her his water, and she started drinking it greedily. She looked up, waving across the table at Steve and James. “I like your puppy. And your big dog, too, even though she’s tired.” Margaret walked over to Elizabeth, flipping down exhaustedly in front of her, tongue lolling out.

“Me too.” James said with a grin. “We also have a cat, but he doesn’t like to go on walks.”

“You and Mr. Captain America?” She asked, and Steve laughed.

“You can just call me Steve, Kate.” He said, and she giggled, wrinkling her nose.

“Why would I call you Steve-Kate?” Kate questioned, and James snorted, smacking Steve’s bicep.

“She got you.” He sing-songed gleefully. “She got you good.” Kate laughed triumphantly

“I got you!” She announced, pointing at Steve.

He smiled, raising his hands in defeat. “You got me.”

“Captain America, finally bested by a Tiny Hawkeye.” Clint said, a smug smile on his face. “Hell yeah, Katie.” He held out a hand for a fist bump, and she grinned, pounding it. Clint shook out his hand, like she had hurt him with her pure, unbridled strength.

Natasha laughed, covering her mouth with her hand and smiling at the two of them with open affection. Kate slid off Clint’s lap, walking over to James. “Can I see a picture of your cat?”

James nodded, grabbing his phone and opening his camera roll. It was filled with pictures of the dogs and Marcel, so it was easy to find good pictures to show Kate. She “oohed” and “ahhed” at them appropriately until the waitress returned with their food.

She waited until James and Steve had both started eating before asking, “Are you married?”

James had to pound Steve’s back as he started choking.
“Where have you been saying since you left the hospital?” Steve asked once they’d made it back to his hotel. They’d walked across the Brooklyn bridge. It was peaceful, calm, and the dark water had reflected the stars above. Neither of them mentioned that they were both walking towards Manhattan. It was like they had made an unspoken decision to make their way back to Steve’s hotel room.

“We’ve all been hanging out at the Wilson’s place. I think Darlene’s happy to have people to look after again.” James answered, taking off his sneakers and sitting on the bed.

“It’s you, Sharon, and Sam?” Steve asked, taking off his jacket and hanging it on the door.

James smiled, scratching the back of his neck. “And Peggy. And the dog. It's a little crowded, to be honest. I could always just go up stairs and hang out with Natasha and Clint, but that comes with its own set of discomforts.”

“You’re feeling smothered?” Steve asked sitting next to him on the bed. James laughed, shaking his head.

“It makes me sound like a terrible person, but yeah. I haven’t really had a moment to myself since I woke up. But like,” he sighed. “I guess I almost died, so of course they’re feeling a little clingy.”

He pulled his hoodie tighter, like he was cold. Steve unconsciously moved closer to him. “You don’t have to feel bad. I think it’s natural to feel overwhelmed.”

James shrugged, looking down and digging his socked toes into the carpet. He rubbed his eyes tiredly, like a little kid. “Steve?”

“Yeah?” Steve asked, turning to him. James had his eyes closed, face turned to the ceiling. He shook his head.

“Never mind.” He said quietly, a small smile on his face. “I was just thinking about something.”

“What about?” Steve asked, voice low, and James opened his eyes slowly, leaning in the two inches it took to press his lips to Steve’s.

It was just a warm touch of lips, but it ignited something in Steve. He held the back of James’ head, fingers tangling in his hair. James cupped Steve’s cheek, running his thumb gently along his jawline. They parted, nothing but their shared breaths between them.

It didn’t get farther than a few chaste kisses, it was late, and they were both tired. They climbed into bed, lying back to back. It was the first time either of them were able to fall asleep easily since James had left the hospital.

Of course, they both had their respective nightmares. Steve dreamt of falling, of war, and of fighting an all too familiar face. James dreamt of killing, of torture and programming. They woke up in the dead of night, both of them pale and unhappy, neither of them wanting to talk about it.

James grabbed the remote, silently turning on the TV, frantically flipping through the channels until he stumbled on TCM. To Kill A Mockingbird was on, and James looked over at Steve, asking him if he’d seen the film. He shook his head, and James quickly explained what they had missed. Luckily, the movie wasn’t too far along, so Steve was able to enjoy it without feeling too
lost.

They both slowly relaxed, Steve’s muscles eventually loosening and James’ shaking eventually stopping. He leaned against Steve’s shoulder, sighing. “Thanks,” He muttered, and Steve looked at him, brows furrowed in confusion.

“I didn’t do anything.” He whispered.

James shrugged. “You were here.” For the last week, he’d been waking up with terrible nightmares, unable to calm down even after hours had passed. Now, he could easily doze off, unafraid of what might happen if he were to fall back asleep.

After the movie ended, Steve turned the television off, easing James back onto the bed. He fell asleep with his arm wrapped around James’ waist, feeling safe for the first time in a long time.

2018

“She sure was a spitfire, huh?” Steve asked, and James laughed, spitting out his toothpaste.

“I can’t picture a better match for Nat and Clint.” He answered, drinking from the tap. The dogs had settled in for the night, and Elizabeth was already snoring softly.

Steve wrapped his arms around James’ waist, kissing the side of his face. “I’m gonna go to bed.”

“Okay, you old man.” James teased, smiling at their reflection. “I’m gonna grade some papers, then I’ll join you.”

“Night. Love you.” Steve kissed his temple, then retreated into the bedroom.

“Love you, too!” James called, splashing water on his face. He walked into his office, turning on the lamp and slipping on his reading glasses. He had a junior professorship at NYU, but he still taught at the local public school.

After everything that had happened, had been pretty clear that both James and Steve would rather live in Brooklyn than anywhere else. It was home for them, familiar in a way that DC could never be. It had been pretty fortunate that James’ childhood apartment was still available to rent, though part of him suspected that Clint (or perhaps Darlene or Amira) had scared any potential tenants away. The empty apartment had stood as an empty memorial to Peggy and Amanda for too long, and James and Sharon had worked together to renovate it, though Sharon stayed in DC with SHIELD. Steve just let the twins to whatever they needed to, and when the time came, he and Sam worked together to move them in as quickly and painlessly as possible.

“Oh, Jorge, what are you doing?” James muttered mournfully over a student’s paper. He sighed, setting the giant stack of papers aside. “Why do I assign essays?”

He stood, stretching. His back popped gruesomely, and he yawned. It was well past midnight, and he and Steve were going on a run in the morning. James turned off the lamp, padding silently into the bedroom.
James picked up Marcel, who was resting on his pillow. The cat hissed half-heartedly, but started purring as soon as James cradled him to his chest. He laid down, and Steve murmured unintelligibly, turning over and wrapping his arm over James. He smiled, pressing a kiss to Steve’s forearm.

He slowly fell asleep, and when he woke up, it was on a familiar couch, covered in a familiar soft blanket. He pushed himself up groggily, smiling. “Hi, boys.”

Bucky grinned, patting him on the back. “How’s it going, kiddo?”

James nodded, and Winter helped him to his feet, wrapping him in a hug. “Hey, Winter.”

They sat down, Bucky treating them to a terrible supper of irish stew, insisting that he was trying to perfect Sarah Rogers’ recipe. James told them about Kate, and Winter informed him about the book he was reading, even though it was one James had read several times before.

Eventually, the alarm started ringing, and they said their goodbyes. “See you tomorrow,” Bucky said, beckoning James to the door. “Give Steve a kiss for me.”

“And me,” Winter added, stealing another quick hug from James.

“All right,” James said, smiling at them. “See you later.”

He woke up, pressing his face against Steve’s back. “Alarm.” He muttered, and Steve rolled over, hitting the alarm. He sat up, pulling James with him. “C’mer,” He said, taking Steve’s face in his hands. He pressed a kiss to his right cheek, “Bucky,” then pressed another to his left, “Winter,” he kissed his lips. “Me.”

Steve smiled against the kiss. “Morning.” He mumbled into the kiss.

James pulled back, thumbing Steve’s chin. “Morning.”

Chapter End Notes

I had about ten million different endings prepared for this fic, but none of them could encapsulate the absolute love I have for these characters and this story, as well as you, my beautiful readers. I hope this satisfies. (if not, keep an eye out for my Have To Put Him On A Shelf Extras/Deleted Scenes. I'll probably be posting that sooner rather than later)

End Notes

I love you all and thank you for reading! Seriously, you guys are literally the best people in the world and I love you all very much. I couldn't wish for better readers.

Edit: I made a Marvel twitter! Go follow me @buckshitup
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!