The Star Upon His Brow

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Summary

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He stares after the carriage, something like longing on his face. “I’m going to be a Witch one day.”

James hisses, hunching down in his arms.

“I will!” Steve gives the cat an indignant glare. “I’m not going to spend my life as a street sweeper, I’m going to make a difference, just you wait and see.”

Notes

Cobaltmoony: Great thanks to Trish and Alby's concrits and handholding for the arts and being so sweet and supportive and awesome. Most of all Thank you fox for indulging my fantasy, cat bucky is very much one of my favorite tropes and I get to art it and most importantly THE FIC PEOPLE, I have no words, its everything.

Fox: Thank you Moony for letting me take your sketch of Bucky and running off with it. And thank you for putting up with me being so annoying about history and Paganism! And the art, holy crap the ART!

Thank you to Trish and Krycek for reading and enthusiasm, and to Eidheann for kicking the words into shape.
You can find me on Tumblr reblogging the same five pictures of Sebastian Stan's damnable face.
Steve Rogers was born with Mars in his blood. He came into the world with his fists raised. His father went to war in some far distant land before Steve came into the world and never returned, leaving no one to teach Steve how to take a hit or throw a punch. Steve could never walk away from a fight. Unfortunately while Mars filled his veins with battle, he had neglected to tend to Steve’s body and give him the physical strength to match his iron will. He learned how to fight the hard way, the slow way, if he ever learned at all. Steve Rogers was skinny and small, with a bad heart and worse lungs. Every winter, when frost formed inside the windows of their rooms, his breaths came harsh and shallow. In the spring he could breathe again. And he could never walk away from a fight.

By the time he was eleven, he had gotten used to hiding his injuries from his mother. The black eyes and split lips he couldn’t hide, but the bruises on his ribs and the sprains on his wrists could be hidden under his shirts. Not that she could see them anymore, not now she was under the cold earth.

It is a late summer morning when he first hears the cat’s yowl. It trembles on the edge of his hearing, a low rumble that pulls him along the street, dodging the Hansom cabs as they trundle past, the horses tugging on their reins and sidestepping around the boy while the driver shouts and fights to get them under control. Steve scrambles out of the way, pressing up against the row of shops, his back against the window of the bakery as he waits for the horse and carriage to pass. There is a rap against the glass, and Steve turns to see the baker shooing him away, shouting about urchins messing up the glass, and Steve hurries on.

The yowling sound fades, but there is a wisp in the air. Something gossamer-thin, like smoke or low lying mist, winding through the streets.

The other people going about their business in town don’t notice it, walking blithely through the wisps, though the smoke does not disperse in the air like smoke should.

Steve follows the trail, around the back of the pub and across the street, and down a dark alleyway. He finds a handful of older boys at the bricked up dead end behind the dispensing chemists, throwing rocks at a cat cowering among the dustbins.

Steve yells at the kids, his fists raised, and gets the tar beaten out of him for his troubles.

The boys grow bored and wander off, leaving him face down on the cobblestones, his mouth filled with his own blood.

Steve doesn’t get up, and resolves to just lie and bleed a while. It’s not like he’s in a hurry to get anywhere, or has a place to go.

Slowly, warily, the cat peeks out from the bins, its blue eyes wide, and sniffs the air. When Steve does nothing more than bleed and moan softly, it creeps out from its hiding place. The cat pads silently across the cobbles, and touches its nose to the Steve’s mop of blond hair, breathing in the scent of him. Steve makes a high, wet sound and swallows, and the cat, with infinite care, gently swipes away the blood and tears and dust.

Steve opens his eyes and stares at the ragged little creature in front of him. Stippled fur the colour of wet sand and paws too big for the rest of it’s body, with dark brown tufts of hair at the tip of its ears. It is the strangest cat he has ever seen. The cat lets out a soft chirp and touches its nose to Steve’s split lip. He sits up, rubbing the back of his hand over his eyes and swallowing audibly. The cat jumps back at the sudden movement, its fur standing up on end along its spine. Steve sniffs, and looks at the cat hopefully.

“Hello, puss,” he whispers, his voice cracking.

The cat flicks its whiskers and blinks as Steve holds out his hand, rubbing his thumb and finger.
together coaxingly. The cat twitches its ears, the tufts of fur at the tips twitching, and moves closer. It creeps forward, belly brushing against the cobblestones, ready to run at the slightest hint of danger. Steve keeps perfectly still, blood welling in the cut on his lip and trickling into his mouth, as the cat stretches its neck and touches its damp nose to the tip of one outstretched finger. When Steve doesn’t make a grab for it, the cat stretches out one overlarge paw, holding it in midair for a moment before setting it down again, moving a little closer and taking another sniff. It seems to come to a decision, and rubs its nose along the underside of Steve’s fingers, pushing its flat head into the palm of his hand. Steve lets out a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob, stroking lightly down the cat’s back. When his fingers touch the base of its tail the cat shivers, its tail flicking up and curling into a question mark. It steps back, pushing its head under his hand again, silently asking for affection. The sound Steve makes this time is closer to a laugh, and he strokes the cat, fingertips catching on the mats and tangles in the sandy fur.

“Where did you come from?” he asks as the cat puts its front paws on his knee. “Are you lost?” He feels around the cat’s neck for a collar, and finds none, not even dented fur or a bald patch where a collar would rub the skin.

“I guess you don’t belong to anyone, huh?” he says as the cat purrs, offering its chin for a scratch. “Like me. I’ve got no one either.” The cat climbs into his lap, putting two front paws on his chest and stretching up to touch its cold nose to his chin. It flicks its tongue over a scrape from where Steve hit the cobblestones before he could bring his hands up in time to protect his face, then gives him a sharp nip. Steve recoils, rubbing his hand over his face. “Ow!” he laughs. “What was that for?” The cat flicks its ears and purrs a little louder. Steve scratches it behind the ears, and its blue eyes slowly close, tilting its head and pushing into Steve’s hand, demanding more.

“You need a name,” Steve decides. “What’s your name, puss?” The cat cracks one eye open, then shuts it again, shifting its head so Steve is scratching it under the chin.

“James,” Steve says decisively. “I’m going to call you James.”

Steve picks the cat up gently, cradling it in his arms. It yowls at being carried on its back and twists around in his grip, setting its front paws in the palm of his hand and the back paws on the inside of his wrist, tucking itself into a ball and curling its tail over its paws. For a moment Steve thinks of the cat statues in the British Museum that have come all the way from Egypt. The ones the desert people once prayed to.

“That how it is, huh?” he mutters as James purrs contentedly. Steve carries James carefully down the alleyway and out onto the street. James hisses and digs his claws into Steve’s hand, and he flinches, turning just in time to notice the horse drawn carriage racing down the street towards them. He recoils, pressing his back against the brick wall behind him, holding James to his chest. The cat’s ears flatten against his head as the carriage thunders past, midnight black with a silver eagle embossed on the door. Steve stares down the street after it, mouth open in awe as pedestrians scatter before it.

“Did you see that, James?!” he asks. The cat hisses softly at the retreating vehicle. “That was a Witch.”

Steve takes a couple of steps down the cobbled street after the carriage, watching as it turns a corner and disappears from sight. Around him people grumble quietly about the noise and fuss, and go about their business.

“It must be going to Whitehall,” Steve strokes James head until he settles down. “That’s where the Witches work. That must have been one of the Security Council, the carriage had the Shield.” He stares after the carriage, something like longing on his face. “I’m going to be a Witch one day.” James hisses, hunching down in his arms.

“I will!” Steve gives the cat an indignant glare. “I’m not going to spend my life as a street sweeper,
I’m going to make a difference, just you wait and see.” He looks down the street again, though the carriage is long out of sight. “We’ve all got to do our part in the war effort.”

Steve walks down the middle of the cobbled street, stepping clear of the occasional horse and cart as they clatter past, and following the path of the long departed carriage up to Victoria street. To the right is a great church built in white stone, surrounded by neatly-trimmed lawns and tall trees, their leaves tinged with yellow and red.

“That’s the Abbey,” Steve tells the cat in his arms. “All the great Witches are buried there. The kings and queens too.”

He turns away from the Abbey, crossing the street and walking past a small park.

“Over there is Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster, and the Thames,” he looks down at James. “Big Ben isn’t the tower, it’s the bell inside the tower.” Steve looks pleased with himself. “I read that. In a book.”

James flicks his ears, the tufts at the tips twitching as Steve walks to the end of the street and looks up.

Across the road is a huge, white stone building. It towers over the street, blocking out the sunlight and casting a deep, grim shadow.

“This is the Council, where Shield fights to keep the country safe, keep the whole world safe.”

James yowls, low in his throat, and climbs up Steve’s shoulder, tucking his face into his shoulder.

Steve strokes his soft fur.

“Shh, it’s okay. There’s no bad Witches here, none of them would ever dare to attack London.” James digs his claws into Steve’s shirt, pricking against his skin.

“Alright, alright, we’ll go.” Steve soothes. He doesn’t turn back the way he came, but takes one of the winding, narrow streets away from the Abbey and the Council.

“Cats can feel magic, isn’t that right?” Steve asks. James climbs up onto his shoulder, sniffing at his hair before lying down across his shoulders.

“Old Mrs Henderson used to say that cats can see the dead.” Steve falters, coming to a standstill. “Can you see ghosts, James? Can you see my ma?”

James doesn’t respond, just stretches out across his shoulders and purrs softly.

Steve makes his way north through the twisting backstreets. He starts wheezing, barely audible at first, but slowly getting louder the further they walk, until James digs his claws into Steve’s shoulder and yowls loudly. Steve finally stops for breath, leaning against the black-painted iron railing outside a house.

“Sorry,” he rasps, trying to suck in gulps of air and not quite managing. “Sometimes it… gets hard… hard to breathe.”

James curls around him, and nuzzles against his chin, licking and nipping at his jaw. Steve laughs breathlessly and strokes James soft, brindled fur. After a minute he finds he can breathe more easily, and starts walking again.

“Are you hungry?” he asks the cat. “I don’t have any money, can you catch mice or something?” James yowls derisively.

“Alright, no mice.” Steve weighs up his options. They couldn’t go begging or asking for alms, the special constables would be all over him this close to Whitechapel, and that would mean questions. Where did he live? Where were his parents? And before you know it, he’d be dragged to the nearest poorhouse and set to work breaking stones until he dropped dead from exhaustion or disease.

Steve shakes his head, dismissing the idea, and turns east, following the familiar streets until he reaches a row of shops. A boy a few years older than him walks past with a handful of newspapers over one arm. He holds up one of the papers, shouting the headlines as he wanders up and down the street. Steve half-listens to the reports of the latest invention by Charles Babbage and news of the war overseas.

James yowls as they walk past the butchers, and Steve scratches him behind the ear.
“Sorry, pal, but we’re not going in there.” James rumbles, low in his throat, and Steve smiles. “We used to live ‘round here, me and Ma. Rented a room on Old Pye Street. There was black mould on the walls, and I got sick every winter.”

Steve screws his eyes shut and takes a deep breath. He remembers the sour odour of sweat and fear, wrapped up in blankets and still shaking, the cold sunk into his bones. The sharp liquorice flavour of the bronchial syrup she used to spoon into his mouth when he coughed so hard it set off his lungs and every breath was a battle. The way she sang in the mornings when getting ready for work, the smell of her soap. Memories all tangled together, bitter and sweet.

“Oi, Rogers!” a voice shouts from across the street.

Steve tenses up, ready to start running, until he sees who is calling out to him. A man with a large walrus mustache and a frayed bowler hat pushes a cart down the street, the sign on the side reading ‘Dugan’s Eel Pies’.

Steve crosses over, one hand keeping James steady on his shoulder.

“Evening, Mr Dugan.”

Dugan looks down at Steve with a frown, taking in the bruises and the dirt. His expression softens slightly.

“Good to see you still alive and kicking, m’boy.”

Steve nods silently, scratching James behind the ear.

“Terrible shame what happened to your mother. She was a good sort.”

“She was,” Steve agrees.

Dugan harrumphs and shakes his head. “I can’t take you in, boy, you understand? I’ve got children of my own, and barely enough to keep them fed as it is.”

“I don’t need charity, sir,” Steve puffs up a little. “I’m doing fine.”

Behind the mustache, Dugan’s mouth pulls down. “That you are, laddie.”

He reaches into the cart and picks out a pie, wrapping it in paper and handing it over.

“Oh no, sir!” Steve takes a step back. “You don’t—”

“Take the damn pie,” Dugan huffs. “If only to soothe my conscience.”

Steve gives him a lopsided smile, and reaches out to take the pie. It’s still warm, the heat soaking through the paper into his hand. “Thank you, sir.”

Dugan sniffs loudly. “Well, you’d best be moving along. Some lady came sniffing around the other day looking for you.”

Steve’s grip on his pie tightens enough to make the pastry crack, the gravy seeping out and soaking into the wrapping. “Excuse me?”

“One of those posh do-gooder types,” Dugan scowls. “You know the sort, think they can ease their guilt with charity. Doesn't matter that the rest of us live in the gutter if they snatch up little kids with talk about giving them a better life.” Dugan takes up the handles of his cart. “Takin’ them away from everything they know and love. So you’d best be moving along, if you know what’s best for you.”

“Don’t worry sir, I will,” Steve promises. “They’ll never catch me.”

“See that they don’t,” Dugan fixes him with a hard stare. “You run along, lad. Don’t let your pie get cold.”

“I won’t sir,” Steve says, and hurries up the street, heading north again.

He cuts through an alleyway and up to Hyde Park, keeping clear of Rotten Row where the rich people gather of an evening. James scrambles down from his shoulder, landing lightly on the grass, his tail held high and twitching at the tip.

Steve sits down in the shade of a tree to catch his breath, his hand pressed to his chest as his heart trips and kicks like a March hare. He laughs as James bounds around on the grass, chasing after insects and sitting up on his hind legs to bat them out of the air.

James comes padding back when Steve unwraps the eel pie, sniffing the air as he breaks off a piece of crust. Steve pops the morsel of pastry in his mouth and chews, and Bucky noses at his
fingers, his tongue darting out to lick up a trace of gravy. Steve tugs at another piece of crust, chewing it slowly and plucking out a chunk of the filling. James stares intently, whiskers twitching, as Steve carefully separates the flesh from the bone. He holds out a chunk of deboned eel and James sniffs it thoroughly before snatching it up and swallowing it down.

“No so fast,” Steve chides as he holds out another piece. “You’ll get a stomach ache if you eat too fast.”

James seems to understand, and chews the next scrap of meat a little more slowly. They sit in silence as the day draws to a close, eel bones piling up in the grass as Steve feeds the cat, chewing slowly on the tough pie crust.

It’s only fair, it seems to him, cats need meat, not pastry. James eats up every scrap offered, and crawls into Steve’s lap to lick his fingers clean when they have finished. James is warm and soft in his lap, and Steve finds himself dozing.

“Come on,” he picks James up and gets to his feet, stroking his fur when he yowls irritably. “Stop fussing, we can’t sleep here.”

James grumbles but curls up against him, too sleepy and full to complain about being cradled like a baby. Steve walks between the trees until he reaches a large, sprawling yew.

“Don’t go chewing on the leaves, okay? They’re poisonous,” Steve tells the cat. “I read that,” he adds proudly.

James yawns, and Steve pushes through the sharp-scented fronds, dense enough to keep out the worst of the weather. There is shelter under the canopy, a patch of bare earth circling the tree trunk, a bundle of blankets tucked up in one of the lower branches of the tree.

Steve reaches up with his free hand and grabs the bundle, pulling it down and shaking it out in case any small creatures have decided to bed in it for the night.

“It’s not Buckingham Palace,” he says quietly, kicking the blankets into position at the base of the tree. “But it’s dry.”

He lies down on the makeshift bed, keeping on his boots and jacket, and carefully places James on his stomach, before pulling the covers around them. His chest feels tight, like he can’t quite catch his breath. James chirps softly, pushing through the threadbare wool and settling on Steve’s chest, his face close enough that Steve can smell his eel-breath.

James purrs loudly, and there is a sharp pain under Steve’s ribcage. He should push the cat away, roll over and try to breathe, but he can barely lift his hands.

James lets out a throaty hrrrp and Steve can breathe a little easier. He wraps his arms around his cat, warm and soft, lulled by the low rumble of his purr, and slowly falls asleep.

“Come on, darlin’. No need to be coy.”

Steve sits up and looks across the street, jostling the cat curled up in his lap. James yowls and sits up, giving Steve his best glare, though it goes unnoticed.

Over the street a young woman, tall and well-dressed with long, elegantly curled brown hair and cherry red lips scowls at the man propositioning her. She slaps his hand away. “I’m not interested, thank you.”

Steve is on his feet in a second, James tumbling out of his lap with a yelp and landing lightly on his feet.

“Hey!” he shouts, marching across the street. “The lady said no.”

The man dismisses him with a laugh and turns back to the woman, taking a slow, swaggering step forward. The woman doesn’t flinch away or give ground, squaring up to him in a way that Steve instantly admires.

Across the street James whines, pacing back and forth on the pavement, but doesn’t follow Steve.
Steve's hands form into fists as the man reaches out and paws at the woman's arm.
“Come on, I'll show you a good time.”
“Unhand me!” The woman grabs his hand and pulls it slowly from her sleeve, gritting her teeth and glaring at the man. She hisses, a sibilant sound like the rustling of dry leaves, and his hand trembles. Pale blue flames lick across his fingers, growing in size as they curl around his wrist and lick up his forearm. He lets out a shriek as the flames hiss and spit, sending out sparks as he stumbles backwards, waving his arm back and forth as if he could blow the flame out.
“Witch!” the man yells at the people walking past. They ignore him, keeping their heads down and walking faster.
The man stumbles, falling to the ground with a yell. He scrambles to his feet, keeping his flaming hand out as far away from his body as he can, and runs off down the street in search of water, screaming bloody murder as he goes.

“You're a Witch,” Steve gasps.

Behind him, James lets out a plaintive little howl, and flattens down on the cobblestones, looking dejected.
The woman turns to Steve with a glare, and her expression softens when sees his delighted look.
“I am, yes.”
“How did you do that?” Steve blurts out. “Is he hurt? It didn't smell like burning, it was like… that smell of snow? I know people say snow doesn't smell of anything but it does.”
“He'll be unharmed,” the woman smiles. “It's a cold flame, it will wear off just as soon as he's learned his lesson.”
“I saw your mouth moving, was it a spell? Was it hard? Can you teach me?” Steve stumbles over his questions, and the Witch laughs.
She murmurs under her breath and holds out her hand. Blue flame dances along her fingers.
“Can I…?” Steve whispers.
James yowls as the Witch tips the fire into his outstretched hand. The flames tickle, flickering across his fingertips. Steve gathers them into the palm of his hand and blows, and the flames dance and spark.
“You're a natural,” she murmurs, almost to herself.
Steve curls his fingers around the flames, and the woman watches as he works out how to manipulate them, making them expand and contract.
“Are your parents Witches?” she asks as Steve gathers up the flames and hands them back, looking wistful as she presses her palms together and snuffs them out.
“No ma'am. My father was a soldier, my Ma was a nurse.”
“Was?” her interest catches on the word, and then her eyes widen. “You're Steve.”
She reaches into her coat pocket, where a cartwheel is stitched in red thread, and pulls out a round brass box with a star design on the lid. She opens it up, revealing a compass inside. The black arrow doesn't point north, it is directed unerringly at Steve. There is an image of a woman tucked into the inside of the lid.
Steve points to the picture, his heart thumping in his chest in a way it hasn't done for weeks. The woman in the picture is younger than she had ever been when Steve knew her, but he would never forget her face.
“That's… that's my Ma.”
The Witch looks at the picture fondly. “Yes, it is.”
“What are you doing with a picture of my Ma?”
She crouches down until she's the same level as Steve. “I knew your mother, Sarah. Did she ever tell you about me?”
Steve shakes his head. “No, ma'am.”
“My name is Peggy, Peggy Carter. Your mother and I grew up together. When she found out that she was sick, she sent me this compass. It belonged to your father.” Steve blinks rapidly, his fingers twitching with the urge to reach out to touch it. “She worried about what would happen to
you after she was gone, and I swore that I would find you, that I would take care of you.”
“She did?” Peggy nods, and Steve purses his mouth, considering. “Will you teach me magic?”
“Yes,” she says decisively. “I will. There is a scholarship program for children with an aptitude for
magic, which you certainly have.”
Steve stares at her, and after a moment remembers how to speak. “Can we go now?”
“Yes we can,” Peggy laughs.
“Can I bring my cat?” Steve frowns. “I’m not going anywhere without James.”
Peggy looks around, spotting the cat skulking across the street. “Is that your cat?”
Steve looks after her and nods. “Yes, that’s James. James, come here.”
The cat hisses and thrashes his tail.
“What an unusual creature,” Peggy murmurs as Steve crosses the street to scoop up his irritable cat
and bring him back. She reaches out to touch his tufted ears and James swipes at her hand with a
growl.
“James!” Steve scolds, and the cat curls up in his arms, shoving his damp nose in Steve’s ear. “Be
nice.”
“What about your belongings?” Peggy asks.
“Don’t have any, ma’am, it’s just us.”
She closes the compass and presses it into his hands. “This is yours, Steve,” she says firmly.
Steve nods and slips the compass into his pocket. James yowls again, claws pricking though
Steve’s shirt.

They take a Hansom cab across the city. Steve, who has never ridden in a cab before, leans out the
window to watch the streets go by, pointing out places where he and James had gotten into fights.
Peggy listens in amusement, though keeps an eye on James, hunched up in Steve’s lap and fixing
her with a glare.
“Your cat doesn’t like me very much,” she says when Steve finally sits back to scratch James
behind the ears.
“He’s not my cat,” Steve rubs James’ soft nose. “He’s his own cat.”
Peggy nods absently. “He seems very fond of you.”
“He’s my best friend,” Steve says proudly. “Used to be I couldn’t play with cats because their fur
made my eyes itch. Doesn’t happen with James. And I can breathe better too.”
“He sounds like a good pet.”
Steve gives her a withering look. “He’s not my pet, he’s my best friend.”
The cab comes to a stop, and Peggy opens the door and climbs out, pushing it closed after Steve
clammers down with James curled around his shoulders.
They are further south of the city than Steve has been, he would never dare set foot in a fancy
place like Chelsea. Merchants didn’t parade up and down these narrow streets selling pies and
papers. Beggars didn’t sit on these doorsteps, begging for alms. The street is quiet, lined with tall
houses built of red brick and lined with white-framed windows.
James lets out a curious prrp and stands up, wobbling a little on Steve’s shoulders.
“Ma’am,” Steve says warily. “I thought we were going to magic school.”
“We are.” Peggy says with a smile and walks up to the brick arch doorway of one of the houses.
She knocks three times on the door. “This is the finest magical school there is.”
Steve reaches up to James, and the cat climbs down into his arms. “Was this your school?” he
asks.
“It was,” Peggy says proudly.
Steve looks over the building thoughtfully. She was able to make cold fire come out of nowhere, so
he figured it was probably good enough.

The door cracks open, and a smartly dressed man looks out. He nods politely to Peggy, and glares
at Steve and James.
“Shoo,” he hisses, flapping his hand and making James hiss, baring his teeth. “There’s nothing for
you here. Begone or I shall summon the police.”

“They are with me,” Peggy says sharply, her polite expression brittle around the edges.

“Miss Carter?”

Peggy motions for Steve to come closer. “We’re here to see the Colonel, Jarvis. Is he in?”

The man at the door splutters. “Really, Miss Carter. I don’t think-”

“In his office?” Peggy gives Steve a gentle shove, pushing him, and James in his arms, through the door. “Thank you, Jarvis. Come along, Steve.”

The man closes the door and trails after them, wringing his hands as Peggy guides Steve down the hallway.

Steve stares, his mouth slack, into the rooms as they pass. There are studies, the walls lined with bookcases filled with leather bound volumes, and comfortable armchairs. Apothecaries with bunches of dried herbs hanging from the ceilings and jars of dried roots arranged neatly on long wooden tables. In another room two students work on sheets of beaten copper and gold, carefully scratching symbols onto their strips of metal with awls. With every room they pass James sinks lower into Steve’s arms, his growl a barely audible rumble in his throat.

Peggy comes to a halt in front of an ornately carved door. Before knocking she turns to Steve, taking in his appearance and pursing her lips. She seems about to speak, but gives her head a minute shake, and raps sharply on the door.

“What?!” a voice growls from the other side.

Peggy puts on a bright smile and pushes the door wide open.

It leads to an office. Behind a desk, half buried under parchments and papers and tapping slowly on a typewriter with one index finger, is the Colonel.

To Steve’s eyes, he looks a thousand years old, with his grey hair and craggy features. He glowers at Peggy, and his expression sours further when he sees Steve next to her, James in his arms.

“What in the hell…?”

He sits back in his chair, his typing forgotten, and stares long and hard at Steve.

Steve stares right back, tilting his chin up a little. He’s never met an American before, and he is in awe of the Colonels accent.

“Carter, what in the blazes-”

“This is Steven Rogers, I’m sponsoring him.”

The Colonel stills for a moment, then shakes his head. “You are not serious. This is some kid you picked up off the street.”

“Colonel Phillips,” Peggy steps forward. “As a member of Shield, it is my right to sponsor gifted children in Magical training. Steve is gifted.”

“He’s a street kid. I bet he can’t even read!” The Colonel waves a hand at Steve. “He probably just played some trick on you.”

“I know my letters, sir,” Steve speaks up. “My Ma was a nurse, she taught me.”

The Colonel glowers and points to the wall behind him, where a framed piece of parchment hangs, an inscription written on it in curling script. He taps his finger on a line of text.

“You say you can read, kid? Prove it.”

Steve glances at Peggy, who gives him an encouraging nod. Steve squeezes James a little tighter, and starts to read aloud.

“mind the Three-fold laws you should, three times bad and three times good. When misfortune is enow, wear the star upon your brow. Be true in love, this you must do-”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the Colonel mutters.

Peggy gives Steve a proud smile, and the Colonel sighs.

“Fine, send him up to Erskine. He’s free since that Stark boy got expelled.”

“Tony?” Peggy asks, though she doesn’t sound too surprised.

Colonel Phillips nods ruefully. “The boy managed to possess a Hansom cab and crash it into Tower Bridge. He’s damn lucky they didn’t throw him in the Tower.”

Peggy tries very hard not to laugh. The Colonel lets out an exasperated sigh and hunches over his
typewriter.

“Go on, get. Before I change my mind.” He gives Steve a last look. “Don’t you let me down, boy.”

Steve puffs up a little. “I won’t sir, I promise.”

Peggy pulls Steve out of the office and directs him through the house. She looks inordinately pleased with herself as she ushers him up the stairs, pointing out the features of the house as they go.

“This school was formed over three hundred years ago, and houses the foremost collection of Magical plants.” She points to one of the windows, and Steve looks out onto a huge walled garden, divided into neat squares by low box hedging. “The school maintains over five thousand varieties of plants and more than a hundred varieties of trees. The Glasshouses house species from the tropics to the far side of the world.”

“Wow,” Steve presses his nose to the glass, leaving a smudge. “Didn’t know there were that many plants in the whole world.”

“Well, you will learn about them all, as well as many other things.”

“That’s a lot to remember,” Steve rubs his sleeve on the smudged window, but only succeeds in spreading the mark around and giving it some mud for company. “My Ma taught me how to use dock on nettle stings, and comfrey when I got my nose broken.”

Peggy smiles to herself. “Those are simple magics, taking the energy within those plants and transferring them to your injuries. Here you will learn so much more.”

“Ma’am if you think those are no big deal, you’ve never tripped and fallen in a nettle patch.”

Peggy laughs. “True, I haven’t.”

James squirms out of Steve’s arms and jumps down, landing lightly on the stairs, his tail held up and bristling. He trots up the stairs, his whiskers twitching.

“Do you work here, are you a teacher?” Steve asks.

“No,” Peggy shakes her head. “I work for Shield. Have you heard of them?”

“Yes, you protect us from rogue Witches, and enemies of the Empire.”

Peggy’s mouth twists up a little. “Something like that.”

They reach the top of the stairs, and Peggy leads the way down another corridor. “Dr Erskine is a fine teacher, he’ll take good care of you. You’ll be provided with room and board during your education, and—”

Steve comes to a stop. “I won’t be staying with you?”

Peggy turns to him and shakes her head. “No, Steve. You can’t stay with me.” She crouches down until they are face to face. “Now you must listen to me.”

Steve reaches out blindly, and James comes to his side, rubbing his head against the palm of Steve’s hand. The cat’s touch settles the nerves in his stomach. As long as he has James, he can survive anything.

“My work with Shield takes me all over the world, but when I am in England again I promise I will come and see you. Is that alright?”

Steve squares his shoulders and does his best to look brave. “Alright.”

“While I am away you must stay here, you understand? Do as your teacher tells you, work hard.”

She smiles. “Make me and your mother proud.”

Steve nods solemnly. “Yes, ma’am.”

She straightens up again. “And you must call me Peggy.”

“Peggy,” Steve says with a grin.

At the far end of the corridor is a door. The wood panels are simple, lacking the elegant scrollwork or carved designs of the others they had passed along the way. There is a simple wooden plaque with Dr Abraham Erskine burned on it in plain letters.

“Wait here just a minute,” Peggy says, knocking once on the door and entering, leaving Steve and James waiting on the other side.

James wanders back the way they had come, stopping at one of the white-framed windows and looking out onto the gardens. Steve looks at the wooden door briefly before going to join him.
The cat watches the birds nesting in the nearby tree, letting out hungry little eh-eh-eh noises. “You can’t eat the birds,” Steve chides. “You heard Peggy, we gotta behave ourselves here.” James gives him a withering look, and meows when Steve picks him up, but lets himself be carried back. The door opens and Peggy waves them in.

Dr Erskine’s office is cramped and cozy, and every surface is covered in books. They fill the bookshelves that line the walls, are stacked in wobbling piles under the window and behind the door. There is a small table tucked in one corner, covered in loose sheets of parchment weighed down with half empty cups of cold tea. Every surface is cluttered, even the bookshelves are scattered with pieces of metal and stone and fired clay.

In the centre of it all is his new tutor. Dr Erskine is tall and grey haired with kindly, careworn features and wire-rimmed glasses. On the breast pocket of his coat is a geometric design embroidered in fraying silver thread. He doesn’t frown at Steve’s appearance, or the cat in his arms. Instead he smiles and offers Steve one of the two comfortable-looking armchairs in the room.

“Please, take a seat.” His voice is soft, and thickly accented. “Just move those books to the floor.” Steve puts James on the arm of the chair and picks up the half dozen books on the seat. He reads the spines before placing them carefully on the dusty floorboards. The Book of the Dead, The Odyssey, a book on pest control and several seed catalogues. He sits on the chair and flicks through the seed catalogue while James climbs into his lap.

Erskine nods, looking satisfied, and turns to Peggy. “Thank you, Miss Carter. I’m sure we will be fine.”

Peggy places her hand on the back of the chair, though from the way her fingers twitch she seems conflicted, uncertain about offering anything more than words.

“I’ll see you again before the year is out.”

Steve frowns. “That’s so far away,” he mutters.

James yowls and sits up, snagging the cuff of Peggy’s coat with a great paw and tugging. She lets out a sharp sound of alarm, and James tugs again, pulling her hand down until it touches the top of Steve’s head and letting go with a satisfied prrp. Peggy smiles and ruffles Steve’s hair, and he feels guilty about how tangled and greasy it must be, but not so guilty that he wants her to stop. Peggy doesn’t seem to mind, wishing him good luck before saying her farewells and slipping out the door.

Steve wraps his arms tightly around James. They had only met a few hours ago, but with Peggy gone he suddenly felt lost, stranded in a strange house in a part of the city he didn’t know. James purrs and rubs his head against Steve’s chin until Steve strokes the cat’s tufted ears.

“As long as we’ve got each other, right?”

James makes a soft chirruping sound, as if in agreement.

“Well now,” Erskine rearranges the papers on his table. “Let us begin.”

Steve looks up expectantly as he walks around the room, picking books off the shelf seemingly at random. “I trust you can read and write, yes?”

“Yessir.” Steve twists around in his chair to watch as Erskine tucks book after book under his arm.

“But no Magical education thus far.”

“Nossir.”

Erskine completes his circuit of the room, stopping in front of Steve’s chair. He hands over his selection of books, one by one, reading out the names on the spines as Steve piles them in his lap.

“Culpeper, you’ll be needing that. Every student is granted a parcel of land for their studies, and you will be expected to keep it in good order.” Another book is pulled off the shelf. “Astronomy, pay close attention to the lunar phases. The Golden Bough, essential reading. Art, of course, a general history will suffice for now. Hmmm, Budge is unreliable, take his words with a little salt,” a book of Egyptian Magic is placed in Steve’s hands. “Charms and Talismans. You’ll need to start reading on symbolism, there’s some information in there on Solomon, pay close attention.” He taps
the heavy, leather bound book absently, looking closely at Steve. “Are you familiar with Teutonic myth?”

Steve shakes his head, feeling suddenly very dumb and out of place.

Erskine gives him a pat on the shoulder. “*The Elder Futhark* I think. We have another student here you might wish to meet, he excels at Runic script.” Erskine’s features crease in amusement. “You will like him, he is quite the character.”

Steve looks down at the books weighing down on his legs. “I… I can’t read all this.”

Erskine perches on the edge of the table and looks at Steve patiently. “My dear boy, you’ll be doing nothing but reading.”

At that Steve purses his mouth, stroking his hands across the spines of his books. “But I thought I was here to learn Magic?”

“*You are!*” Erskine says. “*You are at the very beginning of your training. You must gain knowledge, and how do you do that?*”

“By reading?” Steve looks hopeful. “*If I read all these books I can do Magic?*”

Erskine smiles. “*If you read all these books you will gain knowledge, but to do Magic, you must understand.* Knowledge is nothing if we do not understand.”

James jumps down to the floor and rubs against Steve’s scuffed boot.

“*Like Bootblack Bill in Devil’s Acre?*” Erskine makes a questioning sound. “He’s a shoe shine boy. Ha’penny for each shoe, or cross his palm with a penny. Give him four farthings and he don’t understand, nor a thrupenny bit.” He reaches down to scratch James’ head. “He knows the coin, but he doesn’t understand them.”

“That’s right,” Erskine hums to himself. He shakes himself off and claps his hands together. “Well, we should take these to your room.”

Steve jerks in his seat, almost spilling his books onto the cat lying at his feet. “My room?”

Erskine takes a handful of books from his lap. “Every student is provided with room and board. The dorms are on the far side of the garden. Come, I’ll show you.”

As much as James hates the inside of the school, he loves the garden. The second Erskine takes them outside he leaps down from his perch on Steve’s shoulders and goes running off through the dense shrubbery.

“He’ll be fine,” Erskine reassures Steve. “Just keep him away from the lillies.”

They walk along the manicured paths, Steve listening intently as Erskine points out plants and features along the way.

“How long before I can do Magic?” Steve asks, watching James climb up an olive tree, only to yowl at him to be lifted down.

“Patience,” Erskine chuckles. “It takes years to become adept. You must learn about the moon and the stars. You must forge your own talismans and write all that you learn in a Grimoire, bound by your own hands. You must grow a tree from seed and harvest it at Midsummer to make your first wand.”

Steve offers his shoulder to the cat and James climbs carefully down from his bough. “And then I can do magic?”

“You will be able to do some magics. Divination, healing, that kind of thing.” Erskine rubs his thumb across the olive bark. “A Witch cannot perform great and powerful magic until they obtain a familiar. That can take a lifetime.”

“A familiar?” Steve asks. “A familiar what?”

“A familiar is a Witches companion. An Magical creature bound to the Witch, who aids them in their spellcrafts. There is only so much we can do with herbs and stones, our influence alone is subtle, and true Magic comes from the bond between a Witch and their familiar.”

Steve looks at his cat. “Like James.”

Erskine shakes his head, though his expression is kind. “A familiar is a being of great power, a creature that can change form at will. James is just a cat.”

There are too many books in Steve’s arms to stroke James, so he turns his head so the cat can give
him an affectionate headbut. “You’re not just anything, are you pal?”

Erskine smiles and points to one of the red brick buildings. “This way.”

Steve adjusts the pile of books he’s carrying and hurries along, wincing as James digs his claws into his shoulders, as if to chide him for being in such a rush to leave the gardens.

“What’s your familiar like?”

Erskine clears his throat. “I don’t have one,” he murmurs, so softly Steve barely catches it.

“You don’t?” Steve hurries to catch up to him. “I thought you were a Witch?”

“My dear boy, I am.” Erskine says. “Though my skills are more theoretical than practical, I am more than capable of clairvoyance and I can work with the energies of herbs and stones.” He looks disappointed. “I am not able to perform great feats of Magic.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve says quietly.

“You shouldn’t be.” Erskine gives him a small, genuine smile. “It is an honour to learn the Art, and I have been blessed.”

James lets out a soft chirp, as if in agreement.

Steve is given a room on the top floor of the dormitories, with a window overlooking the garden. There is a bed against the wall, as well as a desk and a hard wooden chair in front of the window. A small bookcase and clothes chest at the end of the bed complete the room. There are scorch marks on the ceiling

“Younger predecessor fancied himself an inventor,” Erskine explains, piling Steve’s books on the desk.

“The one who ran a carriage into Tower Bridge?”

Erskine smiles. “You were paying attention.”

James sniffs the room thoroughly before making himself comfortable on the bed, taking up as much space as possible.

“There is a canteen on the ground floor, the meals are twice a day.” Erskine gestures to the hallway. “A washroom is at the end of the hall. You’ll want to get cleaned up and changed.”

Erskine pauses, and when he speaks again, it’s carefully. “I take it you came here with just your cat and your boots?”

Steve lifts his chin defiantly. “The best in all the land, sir.”

Erskine takes off his glasses, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket and polishing the lenses. “I will have a word with Jarvis, see to it that you get some new clothes.”

“I don’t think Jarvis likes me much.” Steve mutters sourly.

“There’s not much Jarvis does care for.” Erskine perches his glasses on the bridge of his nose.

“Lessons begin at nine am sharp, we will begin with the quarters and cross-quarters.”

Steve has no idea what that means but nods anyway, wishing Erskine a good day as he leaves. He shuts the door and looks at the piles of books on his desk, then the cat stretched across the bed.

“What do you think, James?” he asks as the cat purrs. “Do you think we’ll be okay here?”

He sits down at the desk and looks over the books, flicking through them absently until one catches his eye, illustrated with detailed drawings of plants. He smooths down the first page and starts to read.

“James, off!” Steve flaps his hand at the cat scratching at the soil. “Come on, I just planted that thing!”

The cherry is barely a sapling, no taller than the distance from Steve’s thumb to his forefinger, and he tends it carefully. He had tended the oak and apple seedlings before it, right up until the moment James had dug them out of Steve’s patch of garden and chewed them up.

James yowls and pads away, lying down on the tilled soil and flattening the heliotrope.

Steve sighs and starts building a little cage of twigs around the cherry, using the sharpest sprigs of
blackthorn and mayflower he could find in his search of the gardens. Growing magical herbs was
damn near impossible with a cat, especially the lolloping great beast James was growing into. Even
Jarvis had commented on how big he was getting, though Steve knew about the kitchen scraps he
fed James when he thought no one was watching.
Steve smiles to himself, and James, sensing that he’s no longer in trouble, comes over for attention.
“You’re a right terror, you know that?” Steve says, pulling the cat into his lap.
His garden was in a poor state compared to the other students, James being fond of digging up his
carefully cultivated herbs. He has at least left the lavender and rosemary in peace, and not even a
tufty-eared hellbeast could destroy the mint or sage.
“Please leave this one alone?” Steve sighs as James squirms out of his grip and stalks over to the
unfortunate cherry and its wall of thorns.
“Steven!” A loud voice carries across the lawns, preceding a tall boy a few years older than Steve.
As well as twice his size. “Well met!”
Steve sits back on his heels, collecting up his gardening tools. “Morning, Thor.”
“Ib!” Thor scoops up James and cradles him in his arms like a baby. “Hilsener, vakker gutt,” he
“You know he can’t understand you,” Steve smiles as Thor lets James chew on his fingers.
“Nonsense!” Thor booms. “Cats are very wise, and understand all tongues. <Ja, du kan.” he
wriggles his fingers and James latches onto them, kicking at Thor’s hand with his back legs.
“Well, at least one of us can,” Steve sighs.
Thor gives him a sympathetic look. “You still have troubles with your Elder Futhark? Fear not, my
friend, it will come in good time.”
Steve snorts. “Why runes, though? I’m better at Malachim. I’m better at hieroglyphs.”
Thor chuckles as Steve throws his equipment into his toolbox, the trowel clattering against the
sliver boline. “Because neither Egypt nor Greece are in your blood. Yes, you may understand the
shapes and forms, but you are not bound to them. Your ancestry lies north, and you must follow the
great river that flows through your veins, to the heart of who you are.”
“I’m from Old Pye Street,” Steve says firmly, picking up his toolbox and giving his garden a last,
frustrated look.
“Aye,” Thor agrees, carefully placing James on the ground to chase after butterflies. “But there is
power, old power, in the blood that flows through your veins. You must learn to harness it.”
Steve sighs. “So you keep reminding me.”
Thor claps him on the shoulder, nearly sending him tumbling. “I have a little time to spare, would
you accept my help in this matter?”
“Yes,” Steve sags with relief. “Thank you.”
They walk along the gravel paths to the potting sheds, where Steve puts his toolbox on the shelf
with the others, and checks on his mandrake seeds, in the faint hope that something might have
sprouted.
He clicks his tongue, disappointed, while Thor makes reassuring noises.
“James?” Steve calls as they head towards the school. He whistles, but gets no response.
“Leave him be,” Thor says, “He’ll return in good time.”

James does not reappear for dinner, even though it’s fried fish and potatoes. Steve carefully fillets
half his fish, pulling out the bones and peeling off the skin, before wrapping it in a napkin to give
to him later.
The dining room is full of whispers about a Shield agent found dead in a rented room on the other
side of the river.
“I heard he’s been dead for months,” Scott hisses as Steve listens intently. “There was hardly
anything left to identify him by.”
“What about his familiar?” Sam is a few months younger than Steve, and there is a cautious
friendship forming between them. “Shield agents have familiars, they don’t let you join without
one. What happened to it?”
“All familiars are registered,” Thor says through a mouthful of potato. “Kept track of, who their masters have been, and for how long. Whatever it was, it will be on the register. Though if someone has killed him, most likely it was killed too.”

There is a whisper of alarm. “You can kill familiars?!” Scott gasps. “Aren’t they made of magic?” The slice of potato suddenly feels like a lump of clay in Steve’s mouth. He swallows and pushes his plate away, his appetite gone.

He slips from the table, leaving the other students to their gossip, and takes his napkin full of fish with him.

James isn’t dozing on the bed, or in any of the studies. Steve even risks a peek in Jarvis’ room, in case he’s asleep in there.

He takes a lamp from the library and goes outside.

The garden looks strange at night, the clouds overhead blocking the moon and offering no light or comfort. Steve walks up and down the paths, checking every twisted shadow and under every rose bush.

“James?” he calls, and the only response is the click of bats and hoot of owls. “James!”

He listens as hard as he can, listens for a soft chirp or a low growl, but there is nothing.

The cherry trees grows, and in it’s fifth year Steve cuts it down to make his first wand.

He never sees James again.
Willows At The Waterside

Chapter by littleblackfox

Chapter Summary

There is a creature in the water, lifting him up. It is limned in moonlight, it’s features lost in deep shadows. Bare skin, pale under the stars. A broad chest and strong arms that hold him steady. Wet hair that hangs down past its shoulders, two large, tufted ears positioned high on its head, angled forward like a cat.

*My familiar*, Steve thinks deliriously. *I called and you came.*

He pushes a finger into his mouth, where blood still gathers, and reaches up to the creature's arm. This time his hand does not shake as he inscribes the star on the creatures left shoulder. The words of the binding spell come easily, as if they had been waiting on his tongue.

Steve lets his hand drop back into the water, and the last sound he hears is the creature cursing under its breath.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Eidheann for beta reading, and screaming in the right places
Special thanks to the amazing Moony for the stunning artwork and to Trish & Krycek-asks for reading through and pointing out the fails.

Steve straightens the collar of his frock coat. He hates the formalwear these events require, preferring his work robes or at least a comfortable shirt.

“You look fine,” Sam hisses. “Stop messing with it.”

Steve gives him a half-hearted glare and folds his hands behind his back. Sam looks impressive in his black and red robes. Though Steve hates dressing up for these events, he hates even more that he’s not a part of it. Ten years of studying the craft and he’s still a spectator, and not a participant.

The Abbey of Westminster has stood on the banks of the Great River for a thousand years, a sacred place built in white marble in the form of a *Naudiz* rune, a long hallway crossed at the center where the altar stands. Beyond the altar is the inner sanctum, the secret hall that only the Witches of Shield may enter, and soon Sam Wilson will be among them.

The hall is lit up with a thousand candles, arranged on wrought iron stands along the walls and in chandeliers hanging from the vaulted ceilings. The last of the daylight shines through the stained glass windows, lighting up the depictions of Witches in great battles and their familiars. Red and green dragons dance across the windowpanes, basilisks and cocarices do battle with ifrits and demons while their Witch masters look on, wands and swords raised.

Steve swallows and turns his gaze to the chessboard tiled floor. He is happy for his friend, he truly is. But something lodges in his throat, something bitter and hard, to see his former classmates gain their familiars and join the ranks at Shield.

Sam has worked hard for his place, and had spent months tracking down the bird perched on his shoulder, finally trapping it and binding it with spelled cord. The falcon had fought viciously, clawing him so badly that even with the poultices and hieroglyphs inked across his body, Sam still
limped a little when he walked. He would heal in time, and the creature at his shoulder, the leather band around its leg etched with binding and summoning spells, sits obediently.

“Smile,” Sam mutters in his ear. “This ain’t a funeral.”

Steve huffs and shoves his hands in his pockets. “I’m proud of you, Sam,” he says quietly. “Damn right, you are!” Sam whispers back.

Sam slaps on a smile as another Witch walks up to them, an older man rugged features and a welcoming smile. There is a timber wolf familiar at his heel. He nods at Sam, ignoring Steve completely.

“Mr Wilson, I believe you will be joining us this evening?” he says, holding his hand out.

Sam gives it an enthusiastic shake. “Secretary Pierce, it’s an honour.”

Steve withdraws as the two fall into conversation. Alexander Pierce, Secretary of the Witch Council, doesn’t even look at him as he wishes Sam good evening.

Steve walks along the pews, searching through the throng of Witches and politicians for Peggy. The ceremony is due to start soon, and he’ll have no chance of getting to talk to her after that. He catches a glimpse of red and pushes through the crowd.

Peggy looks radiant as ever in a form-fitting dress, blood red like her lipstick. She is in a hushed, harried conversation with the Deputy Prime Minister, a placating hand on his arm as he speaks. Steve can see the shimmer under her hand as she smiles, her words soothing and bland. Her smile turns genuine when she notices Steve.

He waits patiently until their conversation ends, trying not to listen as the Deputy mutters about the Accords and the workings of Parliament. Peggy soothes him with gentle words and subtle spells, until the Deputy looking less aggrieved but slightly bewildered, thanks her for her time and wanders away.

Peggy sighs audibly and beckons Steve over.

“Peggy,” he says with a smile. “You look beautiful.”

“Oh hush, you,” Peggy tugs his crooked collar into place. “You look very handsome too.”

Steve runs a hand through his hair and flushes. “Yeah, I scrub up well, don’t I?”

Peggy takes in his broad shoulders and singed fingers. “Seems like only yesterday you were a little ragamuffin tearing around the streets with that ill-tempered cat of yours.”

Steve’s smile turns down a little at the corners. “James,” he says wistfully.

Peggy glances around, making sure that no one is listening in before she speaks. “Have you made any progress with—”

“No,” Steve says quickly.

He looks away, not because he’s angry with Peggy for asking, he just can’t stand to see her pity.

“I don’t understand,” Peggy murmurs, almost to herself. “Erskine has always said you were his brightest student.”

“I tried everything, Pegs,” Steve says, and he knows how churlish he sounds. “Invocations under the full moon, the Rites of Solomon. I’ve drawn cold flame in a pentacle on the Thames, I’ve spilled my blood on the clay.” He shakes his head. “I even looked in the registry for available names and picked one.” It wasn’t exactly illegal, but it was frowned up, and had required calling in every favour he had. It had been a waste of his time. “Nothing has worked.”

Peggy looks shocked. “Nothing?” She leans closer. “You must have at least seen something, I know you’re adept.”

Steve grits his teeth. “I seen plenty, Pegs. I can call them from the ether. But they take one look at me and….” he waves his hand in the air. “They’re gone.”

Peggy takes an involuntary step back. “Gone?”

Steve folds his arms across his chest. “Gone. Like they… don’t stick or something.”

Steve wants more than anything for the conversation to be over, but Peggy reaches out and lightly touches his arm. He can’t help but glance surreptitiously at her fingers, looking for any sign of a spell. “Steve…”

“It’s fine,” he says quickly. If he says it often enough, he might even one day believe it. “It’s fine.
Some people aren’t meant for practical Magic. I still do my part.”
She gives him a fond little smile. “You do. Your work in-”
“Carter, there you are!” A man around Peggy’s age, chewing on a cigar half hidden by his mustache, damn near elbows Steve out of the way. “You seen Tony?”
“Howard,” Peggy says, clearly biting her tongue. “Have you met Steve?”
She holds out a hand to Steve, drawing Howard's attention to him. “Steven Rogers, this is Howard Stark.”
Stark gives him the briefest glance, looking down at Steve’s breast pocket where his personal sigil, a five pointed star, is embroidered in red thread.
“A pentacle? That the best you could come up with?” he mutters before dismissing him and turning back to Peggy. “Tony said he’d be here, he gave his word.”
Peggy gives Steve an apologetic look as Stark chews on his cigar. “He’s all up in this Age of Reason nonsense, Peggy. He thinks science is the future of Magic. Can you believe that crap?”
“I would be more concerned about the Prime Minister believing in ‘that nonsense’ as you describe it,” Peggy says sharply.

Steve takes a few steps back, giving Stark and Peggy some privacy. He bumps into the someone and turns around, muttering an apology.
“Oh, hey Steve.” The man dressed in ceremonial robes turns and smiles at him. “Still not up on the podium?”
“Scott,” Steve reaches out to shake his hand. “How’s Anthony?”
Scott is something of a rarity. It is said that in the old days a familiar came to the Witch when they were ready. In more modern times Witches actively pursued familiars. Scott, however, woke up one morning to find his waiting on his pillow.
“He’s good!” Scott taps his ear, where a winged ant is perched. “Say hello, Anthony.”
The ant raises a leg into the air, and Steve can’t help but wave back. Steve likes Scott, he’s hardworking and cares deeply for Anthony, despite the way other Witches look at him for having an insect familiar.
Fools, Steve thinks to himself. Anthony has proved his worth time and again, a spy no bigger than a thumbnail.
Scott gives him a weak smile. “Well, who needs Shield anyway?”
Steve nods, keeping his expression neutral. All he has ever wanted was to join Shield and fight for his country.
“How are things in the East?” He asks instead.
“Oh, the fighting?” Scott shrugs. “Same as always. Some days we give ground, others days we take a little back.” Scott frowns. “Wasn’t your old man over there for a while?”
Steve nods. “Still is, I imagine. Only thing that came back was his compass.” He reaches into his breast pocket and pulls out the little round tin, snapping it open and showing Scott the compass inside.
“Aw, hell.” Scott mutters, scuffing the tiles with his boot. “Sorry.”
“It’s alright,” Steve slips the compass back into his pocket. “Long time ago.”
The Abbey bells start to ring, and Scott straightens his robes. “I gotta go. How do I look?”
“Like a Witch,” Steve says with a wry smile.

Steve moves to the back of the Abbey for the ceremony, half-listening to the drone of voices at the high altar as the censers are lit and the quarters are called.
He could not pinpoint the moment he felt awe become indifference. When he had first completed his studies, and Erskine brought him to his first ceremony, he had felt awe. He felt like he had glimpsed the wheels of the universe turning, that he could look upon a blade of grass and see the vibrations of energy in every atom.
The room is crowded and humid with the press of bodies, and he wants to be outside in the night air, under the stars, and preferably not wearing an itchy frock coat.
He sighs and thinks of home. Of his garden, the roses he planted along the back wall to catch the afternoon sun.

The ceremony comes to a close, and the Witches who are not members of Shield assemble outside to sup ale and break bread. Inside, Sam and the other Witches who have gained familiars will be undergoing their Initiation rites, and become a part of that last great Secret Society.

“Secrets and lies,” a voice whispers in Steve’s ear.

He jumps, spilling his ale over his damned frock coat, and turns to see Erskine, holding an unlabelled bottle of liqueur. Erskine smiles warmly, taking the cup from Steve’s hand and pouring it on the ground.

“Let us call this a libation, yes?” He pours liqueur into the cup and hands it back. Steve takes a surreptitious sniff, under the pungent tang of alcohol it is subtly perfumed, like apples and honey.

“Thank you,” Steve murmurs. He takes a sip, and just about manages not to cough. “What were you saying?” he asks, clearing his throat.

Erskine waves the bottle to the Abbey. “Nothing. Nothing at all. Blessings be upon you.”

Steve chucks, and lets Erskine lead him away from the gathering. They walk through the gardens, their way lit by lanterns strung through the trees, and Steve waits for Erskine to gather his thoughts.

“How are your studies, my boy?”

“Good,” Steve nods. “Keeping me busy.”

Erskine nods thoughtfully. “You are working through the ancient texts?”

“The Lemegeton.” Steve chews his lip.

Erskine’s expression brightens. “Ah! You’ve no doubt noticed that it has been heavily excised?”

“The Goetic portions are missing entirely!” Steve bursts out. “A complete hatchet job. And as for ancient text, it’s no older than I am.”

“Throw it on the fire where the damned thing belongs.” Erskine suggests sympathetically.

“It’s not my copy,” Steve mutters. “I doubt Mr Wong would appreciate my burning library books.”

“Well then,” Erskine sloshes more liqueur into Steve’s cup. “Take it back, read The Clavicle of Solomon instead.”

Steve bumps the rim of his cup against Erskine's bottle. “I’ll do that.”

Steve wakes up the next morning with a pounding headache and a scrap of parchment with the title of a sixteenth century French manuscript in his hand. He also has a backache from falling asleep in his armchair, though at least he had the foresight to take off his damned evening coat before sitting down.

He gets up and stretches, wincing as his body protests and his bones pop and crack, and goes down to the kitchen to make some tea.

He dozes a little, asleep on his feet like a horse, while the tea steeps, ginger and peppermint to clear his head and settle his stomach. He carries the cup to his workroom and sets it carefully on his desk.

The desk is older than he is, and it wouldn’t surprise him if it were older even than London itself. Made of cherrywood, with a green leather top that is scuffed in some places and wax-stained in others. Steve yawns and and gathers together his supplies before sitting down at the desk to work. Every Witch is required to write a grimoire. Thus far Steve has an entire shelf of them, handwritten and bound in leather.

He gathers together the folded pages of his latest manuscript, detailing the uses and properties of fruit trees, and checks that each page is in order before squaring them off and punching neat rows of holes at the folds with an awl. With a length of linen thread he sews the folds together, checking to make sure they are even and aligned.

He works quickly, his movements sure and confident, pausing occasionally to take a sip of tea, and moves on to the leather binding. He checks the folio against a rectangle of leather, picks up his awl and gets to work, punching neat rows of holes along the leather for stitching.

It’s slow and laborious, but keeps his hands busy and his attention focused.
By late afternoon he is ready to start sewing, but his back aches from being hunched over the desk and his hands are sore. He looks at the scrap of parchment on the edge of the desk, and comes to a decision.

The Great Library is housed in the center of the British Museum. A round hall lined with heavy oak bookcases, with additional bookshelves in pine and applewood arranged on the marbled floor in concentric circles, all underneath a domed ceiling in gold and blue. If viewed from above, the eccentric layout forms a Seal of Solomon, one of the most powerful magical symbols in Witchcraft.

The Librarian, Mr Wong, gets irritable when the tables are moved, and the seal is broken. Steve suspects that, in an ideal world, he wouldn’t have to deal with people messing with his books at all. Steve takes his copy of The Lemegeton to the front desk and places it down carefully, trying to look as harmless as possible when the Librarian bustles over. Wong looks over the manuscript carefully, checking for tears or ink stains. Satisfied that it has been returned undamaged, he looks up at Steve with a scowl.

“Well then, what do you want now?”

Steve hands over the piece of parchment, and Wong studies it closely. “Hmmf. This way then.”

He leads Steve around the outer circle of shelves, muttering under his breath as he counts the shelves. He comes to a stop, and Steve has to step back to keep from bumping into him. Wong hums to himself, running his finger just in front of the row of books. The soft hum ends in a sound of confusion, then frustration.

Wong goes back to the start of the row, checking the books much more slowly this time. He turns on Steve, looking furious. “Is this a joke? Put it back!”

Steve nearly rocks back on his heels with the force of Wong’s demand. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, very funny. Move the books and then watch me run around looking for them,” Wong glowers. “Now, where is it?”

Steve shakes his head. “I have no idea. Dr Erskine recommended the book to me yesterday.”

Wong huffs and turns back to his precious books.

“Could it have been put on the wrong shelf?” Steve asks.

Wong gives him a withering look, and for a moment Steve feels like he’s ten years old again.

“You think sixteenth Century books on love spells are that popular?” Wong snorts.

Steve frowns. That’s what the missing chapters were? Love spells? He had studied the manuscript for its guidance on the use and creation of pentacles. Wong doesn’t seem to notice his confusion, searching carefully through the shelves.

“Love, theft, grace, envy, mockery and invisibility spells,” Wong says absently.

“You need spells for mockery? I thought just existing caused that?” Steve says. Wong doesn’t reply, or even crack a smile, so Steve keeps his mouth shut.

There is something in the air. A faint aroma just on the edge of perception. Wild honey, rich and bittersweet, and cinnamon leaves. He waits for Wong to go looking elsewhere for the missing book, uttering a stream of curses, and takes a closer look at the shelf. There is the faintest smudge, barely visible against the old wood worn smooth with use. He rubs his finger against the mark and sniffs it. The powder is pungent and spicy, and makes his eyes water. Whatever stole the book wasn’t human, and no demon or familiar would bother stealing Magical tomes for their own ends. Magic flowed through their veins, they had no need of grimoires or clumsily translated Latin. They must have been working under the orders of a Master.

Steve sniffs at the smudge on his finger again. What manner of creature had done this? He glances around, trying not to look too obvious as he checks that Wong is still a safe distance away, checking the other shelves for anything else that has gone missing.

Steve pulls a slip of parchment out of his coat, checking again that he’s not being observed, and rubs the powder from his finger onto the parchment. He draws his finger along the shelf, gathering up what little remains of the substance and transferring it to the parchment, folding it carefully into
an envelope and slipping it into his breast pocket. He steps back from the shelves, his hands behind his back, and tries to look innocent as Wong returns.
The fold of parchment feels heavy in his pocket. He’s meddling, he knows he is, a missing book is a library matter, and no concern of his. But still, he keeps silent, and nods patiently as Wong leads him back to the front desk, convinced that the disappearance is no more than a book being placed on the wrong shelf.
Steve makes his excuses, wishing Wong good luck in its recovery, and leaves.

He doesn’t hurry home, keeping his pace calm and measured through the busy London streets. His fellow adepts and students have often commented on his avoidance of horse and traps, favouring crossing the city on foot. Steve pays little attention to their sly remarks and scorn. There is Magic seeping through the cracks of the cobblestones on every London backstreet, thousands of years of wishes and curses and incantations, all soaked into the stones. It is not a power he knows how to tap into, and truth be told he would not be so discourteous. But he walks the streets as often as his duties permit, finding little truths and epiphanies in the narrow maze of streets.

He keeps a handful of coins in his coat pocket when out walking the city, ever mindful of his origins, and slips silver into the hands of beggars. He wishes he could do more. If he had a familiar he could do so much more, provide shelter and warmth for them, give them clean clothes and heal their ills. As a Witch without a familiar there are things he can do. He has his books. He can make amulets and talismans. He knows the names and properties of over a thousand herbs and plants, and can blend teas and make salves to treat many ailments.

But he cannot control the weather like Thor, or fly like Sam.

Steve pulls another coin from his coat and drops it into another pocket to be found later when it’s most needed. There are so many of them, people lost and alone, and every year there are more. And no one seems to care.

When his pockets are empty Steve finally turns towards Chelsea and walks home.

He tends to his duties, despite the fold of parchment weighing in his pocket, catching up with his correspondences and checking on the status of the garden. He gathers the last of the summer roses, carefully stripping the petals and washing them in spring water before laying them out on drying racks for later. While he’s in the kitchen, he makes himself a cup of Lemon Verbena tea, for clarity, and takes it up to his workroom.

There are many spells for wisdom. Spells for the exposing of secrets, for the revealing of mysteries. Spells for identification are much more rare.

Steve clears the books and papers from his desk, stacking them on his armchair, and moves everything but the desk to the edges of the room. The armchair, the stacks of books, the hard wooden chair behind the desk, they all get moved out of the way. He arranges his tools on the desk: a candle, a quill made of a barn owl feather, a sheet of parchment. Next he pours a circle of salt on the floor around the desk, making sure that he is both within the circle, and there are no gaps in the line of salt. When he is satisfied that the circle is unbroken he lights the candle, white for wisdom. On the parchment he inscribes a Dagaz rune, and takes the little envelope of mysterious powder from the library, careful not to spill any, and places it on top of the rune.

He hums, tunelessly at first, searching for the pitch that will resonate with the rune and the burning candle.

The parchment trembles, and Steve follows the fine thread of energy, keeping focused on his intention as the air crackles with static. The candle gutters and blows out, snuffed by an unseen wind.

Steve holds his breath, and waits. The parchment starts to curl in on itself, the edges blackening as if being held to a flame. For a moment Steve worries that the fold of powder will be lost to the spell, and reaches out to grab it. There is a sharp crack, like a thunderclap, and the parchment bursts into flame.

The fire lasts for less than a second, flaring up and burning out. The parchment is nothing more
than a thin film of ash that flies away when Steve finally breathes out, leaving the fold of powder unharmed. There isn’t even a scorch mark on the desk.
Steve picks up the envelope, it is still cool to the touch, and unfolds it.
Fire. The spell had been clear on that. Whatever stole the book had been a fire demon. He takes a cautious sniff of the powder; wild honey, bitter and rich, and warm spices. Underneath, almost completely masked by the strong spices, is a hint of salt and river mud.
He folds up the envelope and slips it back into his breast pocket. A fire demon.
He clears up the remnants of the spell, gathering up what is left of the ash and taking it into his mouth, and sweeping up the salt. It goes back into the box on his shelf, ready for the next time it is needed.
He puts everything back in its place, and looks through his shelves, picking out books and setting them on the desk. He lights the lamps as the day draws to an end, and reads everything he can find on Ifrits.

After much consideration, Steve settles on Hyde Park for the summoning spell.
It is not the largest park in London, nor is it the most powerful. In an ideal world, he would perform the rite in St James, close to the place of his birth. But any spells performed in sight of Buckingham Palace would draw unwanted attention, not only from the Palace Magicians but from Shield, who would look dimly on a Witch without a familiar attempting to perform magic. The last thing he wants is to be dragged to Whitehall for questioning by the Council.
Hyde Park is reasonably close to his home in Chelsea, little more than a mile away. The Serpentine River cuts through the center of it, and its presence should weaken the Ifrit he intends to summon.
It is a little crass, he has to admit, summoning a fire demon in the presence of a river, but without a familiar to protect him or aid him in the summoning, Steve will use whatever advantages he can.
Steve does most of his work at home, but when working away, ritually gathering materials or consecrating tools, he takes his apothecary case: a wooden box he made himself with cherrywood and leather, with compartments for the items he needs.
He drops down the lid and fastens the pair of leather buckles, then performs his ritual cleansing.
He undresses and washes himself with springwater and rosemary, using the crushed leaves to draw a five pointed star on his chest, and dresses in his conjuring robes. They are blue and white, the colours of moonlight and water.
When the sun has finally set, Steve slips the details of the conjuring into his sleeve, tucks his case under his arm, and sets off.
The streets are quiet as he walks north, the full moon hanging low in the sky. Steve checks his pocketwatch and sees that he still has an hour before midnight, and increases his pace a little, his eyes adjusting to the gloom.
The gates are locked for the night, and he throws his case into the bushes on the other side before climbing carefully over the wrought iron gate. He drops lightly onto the footpath, snatching up his case and walks down to the river.
The River Serpentine is wide and deep, though the waters are mirror flat in the moonlight, the moon and the stars reflecting on the surface. Steve stares out onto the water and feels a moment of disorientation, the sky below him and above him and the whole world an infinite stretch of starry night.
He feels himself list forward, like a ship in treacherous waters, and takes a hasty step back, shaking his head, and starts walking, following the river as it curves to the right.
The thick forest of trees alongside the river are like jagged patches of darkness in the moonlight, looming over him. Steve shivers and swallows, his hands clenching into fists, and he keeps
walking, keeping his eyes on the ground, wary of taking a misstep and ending up in the water. The footpath leads right up to the water's edge, with no bank or rail to keep an unwary wanderer from tumbling in.

At the bend in the river is a stand of willow trees, the tips of their overhanging branches trailing in the water. He sets down his case under the canopy, and sets to work.

He unfastens the case and checks through his items, opening the tin of ointment and daubing a star onto his forehead before applying a smear to his wrists and ankles. He slots the tin back into the case and unwraps the stick of chalk before pulling his notes from his sleeve.

The sigil is complex, a star decorated with symbols and letters within a circle, and outside of that circle interlocking geometric designs and finished with concentric circles, each marked with protective symbols. He works slowly, despite the lack of time. He cannot risk making a single mistake. The chalk symbol will hold the Ifrit in place, so long as the outer circle is unbroken, keeping it long enough for Steve to question it. When he is done he will dismiss the demon, sending the creature back to wherever it came from. But he is working alone, and should anything go awry there is no one to come to his aid.

When the last symbol is in place, Steve gets to his feet, pressing both hands to the small of his back and straightening his spine. He twists his neck, cocking his head from side to side until his stiff muscles loosen up.

He takes each candle and dresses them with oil before arranging in a line, spacing them six inches apart, and checks his watch. Six minutes to midnight. He watches the seconds tick past, keeping his breaths slow and even as he walks counterclockwise around the outside edge of the chalk circle.

He hears the chimes of Big Ben, marking out the Witching Hour, and begins the invocation.

The words feel strange on his tongue, heavy and dry. They fill his mouth, and for a second he fears he might choke on them. With every recitation he feels dusts gather in his lungs, and swallow down the urge to cough. His mouth fills with sand, grit under his tongue and fine grains catching between his teeth, but still he chants.

Rust coloured sand gathers at the corners of his mouth, spilling down his chin as he takes the envelope of powder and throws it into the circle.

The air grows cold around him, tendrils of frost creeping out from the circle in glassy lace patterns on the path, and when Steve breathes out his breath fogs before him. The air becomes heavy, and charged with static. The tree above him creaks and groans, the branches drawn down towards the circle.

Sweat gathers on Steve’s brow, trickling down his frost-rimed skin, and he blinks it out of his eyes. The trees start to shake, and beside him the river starts to froth and roil, the waves white-tipped, rising up and crashing down on the path.

The envelope in the circle shivers, its edges curling up and turning brown and crisp, and with a dull sound like a distant clap of thunder it bursts into flame.

The fire flares up, white-bright in the moonlight and Steve turns away, shielding his face with a raised arm as the light burns his eyes. The fire dies out, sending up a thick column of smoke that twists and spins, pushing right to the edges of the chalk circle.

Steve lowers his arm, blinking the tears out of his eyes, and takes a step back. The column of smoke rises up and up, twisting and turning like a living thing, and drops back down again.

Steve raises his right hand and spits out a mouthful of sand. “Demon, reveal yourself.”

The smoke turns sharply, twisting in his direction, and Steve glimpses a shape in the center of the storm. He sees a figure, its pale body striped with tattoos, silver rings on its fingers and in its ears. Its torso is the colour of bone and chalk, of long dead things under the ocean, not the warm copper tones of an ifrit. Below the waist he briefly glimpses shining scales before the smoke obscures the figure again.

Steve’s hand shakes, and he feels the blood in his veins turn to seawater, cold and crushing.
The demon isn’t an Ifrit. It’s not a creature of fire and sand and ruins, it can’t be constrained by running water.

It’s a Marid

A Marid. A Djinn, far more powerful than an Ifrit. It takes its strength from water, not fire, and Steve has summoned it on the banks of a river.
The water will not save him, nor will the willow trees around them. The Marid throws back its head, its mouth stretched wide in a great boom of laughter. It’s mouth is filled with teeth in jagged, serrated rows, like the jaws of a shark.
It raises both its hands in the air and roars, and its voice is the howling of storms. The river rises up with it, the waves frothing white and as high as Steve can reach, they dash against the bank, tearing up the grasses and reeds until the water is thick with debris. Steve watches, frozen in something between awe and terror as the water tear through the land, clumps of grass and cobbles dragged down into the water. Waves smash onto the path, and the stones and gravel crumble and are washed away.
It’s breaking free, Steve realises. As long as it is within the chalk circle, it can’t touch him, but the moment the chalk line breaks, or is washed away, the demon will be free.
He stumbles back, the thought of running not even occurring to him. He raised the creature from the pit, and it’s his duty to stop it before it does any harm.
His apothecary case is out of reach, between the circle and the river. He watches as a wave snatches it up and bashes it against the stone path, the contents spilling out and shattering on the ground.
Steve takes a breath, focusing his thoughts, and with one finger traces a five pointed star in the air. It crackles and sparks in a blaze of phosphorus, and hangs in mid-air before him. Sweat soaks into Steve’s hair, it trickles down his spine. He feels like he’s on fire, like every inch of his skin is ablaze, and his fingers start to blister as he draws a circle around the star. Blue fills the circle, a stark contrast to the white star, and Steve presses the palm of his hand to the spell. It burns, searing his skin, but he pulls it out of the air at the same moment the Marid slips free of the circle.
The water surges around it, obscuring its scaled lower half. Steve throws the spell at the creature, and it spins through the air like a discus, slicing into the creature's shoulder. The Marid roars and thrashes, black blood spilling from its wound.
Come back, Steve thinks, holding out his hand. Come back to me.
There is a high ringing sound, like a wet finger drawn across glass, and the spell spins through the air, landing in the palm of his hand.
Steve can smell his own flesh burning, acrid and sickly sweet, but he grips the disc and throws it again. The Marid reaches out to catch it, and the spell slices through two of its fingers. When they touch the ground they make a splash, returning to the water they are formed from. The Marid roars at him, sending a shockwave that knocks Steve off his feet. He falls to his knees, gasping for breath as the Marid slinks closer, raising its hand to strike.
Steve rolls out of the way as the Marid's fist comes down where his head was a moment before, water sloshing in the crater it leaves behind. He scrambles to his feet, calling the spell to him again. It soars through the air, landing in his palm, and he throws it immediately. The Marid is ready this time, and grabs the disc out of the air. It stutters and sparks in its grip, and the demon crushes it in his grip until its thready silver light is extinguished.
Steve stumbles back, sketching out another star. The Marid roars again, and the shockwave hits him full in the chest, sending him sprawling into the dirt.
Steve’s hands shake as he tries to draw another star. He can’t focus, his mouth filling with blood. He spits onto his hand, and presses his palm to the dirt. Blood magic. Old and crude, but effective. The trees seem to gather around him, their branches offering shelter. The Marid knocks them away one by one, branches snapping and wood splintering.
Steve rolls onto his front, coughing up blood, and the Marid grabs him by the hem of his cloak,
dragging him back to the water. He kicks out, grabbing onto stones and branches, anything to slow them down. The creature will drown him, he has no doubt of that. If he is lucky it will eat him after, not before.

He grabs a low hanging tree branch and the Marid grunts, tugging on his leg and twisting it, and Steve feels the bone strain and snap, throwing back his head and screaming. He goes limp, the world drifting in and out of focus. The scrape of stones against his back and the spreading numbness through his body. He touches his finger to his mouth and it comes away wet, his blood black in the moonlight. *Help me*, he thinks, and touches the black blood to his chest, over his heart. The smudge he leaves only bears a passing resemblance to a star, crooked and smudged, but it is all he has left. *Someone please. Help me.*

The river is cold and mirror-flat, and it barely ripples when he is drawn in. The moon and the stars reflect back on themselves, and for a moment he is unsure where sky ends and the world begins, and then realises that it doesn’t matter, he is no longer a part of it. He slips below the surface, and the world falls to darkness. The cold soothes the burns on his hands, and washes away the spells and the rituals. And the riverbed is no worse a place to lie down on than the streets of London. The waters stir around him, and the Marid lets him go. Steve blinks slowly. He can’t see. The water is churned up, thick with mud and reeds, and he can’t see. He can taste something in the water, thick and oily, and remembers the black blood pouring from the Marid’s shoulder. There is a dull boom as the Marid sends a shockwave through the water, followed by a high warbling sound that is suddenly cut short. There are claws pricking at his skin, and he feels himself rising up, up to the surface. He blinks and chokes, and he sees the stars again. There is a creature in the water, lifting him up. It is limned in moonlight, it’s features lost in deep shadows. Bare skin, pale under the stars. A broad chest and strong arms that hold him steady. Wet hair that hangs down past its shoulders, two large, tufted ears positioned high on its head, angled forward like a cat. *My familiar*, Steve thinks deliriously. *I called and you came.*

He pushes a finger into his mouth, where blood still gathers, and reaches up to the creature's arm. This time his hand does not shake as he inscribes the star on the creatures left shoulder. The words of the binding spell come easily, as if they had been waiting on his tongue.

Steve lets his hand drop back into the water, and the last sound he hears is the creature cursing under its breath.

“Come on, wake up!” a voice whispers harshly. A hand strikes Steve in the center of his chest, forcing river water out of his lungs. Claws prick at his bare skin. “Come on, idiot, breathe,” the voice whispers again. Male, pitched low, with the rough edges and slurs that he recognises from his days on Old Pye Street. Steve opens his mouth to complain, but his throat spasms, and he feels his stomach cramp. Water spills out of his mouth and he chokes, gagging for breath and convulsing until he is rolled onto his side, a warm hand pressed between his shoulders as he throws up on the grass. The taste of bile and muddy water make him cough and splutter, sucking in great gulps of air as the hand at his back moves in gentle circles, sharp nails scratching lightly at his skin. His robe has gone, no doubt sunk to the bottom of the Serpentine, and he is naked and shivering. “That everything?” the voice asks with a hint of impatience. Steve manages to nod and gets pushed onto his back again. He blinks, his vision blurred, and tries to sit up. It only gets him pushed down again.
“Hold still, stupid. Still gotta fix your leg.”

His familiar, Steve realises. It’s his familiar smoothing rough hands across his calf, curling around his ankle. His familiar who pulled him out of the river and carried him to safety.

“The Marid,” Steve manages to whisper. “There was a Marid…”

“Yeah, I saw,” his familiar mutters, pressing its thumb to his ankle and pulling his foot straight.

“It’s gone, just so you know. Don’t go rushin’ to thank me or anything.” The familiar sighs heavily. “You’re a real piece of work, y’know? A Marid of all things, fuckin’ hell.”

Steve closes his eyes. He should admonish the familiar for his vulgar language, set a good example. “I thought it was an Ifrit.”

The familiar snorts. His voice is rough from disuse, but has an edge to it that reminds Steve of blackberries hidden in a tangle of thorns, sharp and sweet.

“This is gonna hurt, but that’s the price you pay for being an idiot.”

Steve opens his mouth to protest, but the familiar pulls his leg straight. The pain is blinding, like his nerve endings have been struck by lightning. He lets out a scream, and the familiar tells him to hush, rubbing hands up and down his leg. Steve’s skin warms to the touch, then becomes uncomfortably hot, like a friction burn even though the hands are moving slowly. He grits his teeth, clenching his fists as he feels the bone knit back together, the sensation strange and deeply unsettling.

His familiar finally withdraws, and Steve gasps for breath, feeling weak and vulnerable in a way he hasn’t since he was a child.

The familiar pats him on the chest, his sharp nails leaving pinpricks over Steve’s heart, where there is still the faintest smear of blood. Steve cracks his eyes open, and the world is a blur of grey. He blinks rapidly as his familiar leans over him, and everything snaps into focus.

His familiar is beautiful, Steve thinks, clamping his mouth shut before anything stupid slips out, and stares at his familiar's handsome face. Clear blue eyes framed by dark lashes. Dark brown hair, dripping with river water, that falls down to his shoulders. Full, pink lips, that when quirked in a smile reveal sharp canine teeth, and atop his head cat-like ears with dark brown tufts at the tips. A long tail flicks back and forth behind him, patterned the same chestnut and sand colours as his ears. On his left shoulder is a mark, a five pointed star stained red, a stark contrast to his creamy skin.

“Are you mine?” Steve whispers, and as soon as the words are said he wants to take them back.

His familiar sits back on his heels and glances at the star on his shoulder before giving Steve a sour look.

“No good deed goes unpunished, eh?”

The words, along with the bitter twist to the familiar's mouth, are like a dousing of cold water, and Steve feels ashamed. He struggles to sit up, the movement making him light headed and in danger of throwing up again. The familiar reaches out to grab his shoulder, keeping him from toppling over again.

“Thank you,” Steve mumbles, shivering.

The familiar's hand is warm on his skin, and Steve fights the urge to lean into the touch. He’s so cold, and exhausted from the battle with the Marid, and fears that he can barely stand. He shudders and his teeth begin to chatter, so he clenches his jaw, forcing his body under control.

“Familiar,” he says, his teeth clicking together. “What is your name?”

The familiar raises his eyebrow. “What?”

Steve takes a deep breath. His chest aches, his lungs burn. “What am I to call you?”

The familiar laughs, a short, harsh bark. “You summoned me, don’t you know?” he scowls. “Is this some kind of test?”

Steve shakes his head, and for a moment is too dizzy to do anything but put his head between his knees and wait for the nausea to pass.

“I didn’t call you by name,” he says as he sits up again. “I just asked for help. I didn’t think anyone…” he trails off. It had been a desperate last effort of a dying man, hopeless and helpless.

“Buchanan,” the familiar says with a sigh. “That is my name.”
“Steve. Steve Rogers.” Steve gives his familiar a lopsided smile. “I will call you Bucky.”
Bucky lets out a low growl of annoyance. “You’re gonna be nothing but trouble.”

“I… I need a robe.”
At Steve’s hesitant request, Bucky pulls one of the shadows from beneath a tree and wraps it
around his shoulders. Steve would have expected a shadow to feel insubstantial and cold, like a
fine, low hanging mist, but it is soft and feather-like to the touch. Steve tugs the shadow more
tightly around himself, and glances at Bucky briefly before his gaze darts away again, spots of
colour high on his cheeks despite the cold.
“You need one too,” Steve says quickly, keeping his eyes firmly shut as Bucky repairs the
damaged path with a wave of his hand. He is still naked, and although the moonlight doesn’t
display everything he has to offer, the pale light heavily implies what’s there. His hair is burnished
with silver, moonlight cast across the breadth of his shoulders and the fine hairs cresting his ears.
Bucky doesn’t acknowledge Steve’s command, but gathers up the deep shadows at the waterside
and wraps it around his waist, turning with lithe grace as they mould to his body, forming a pair of
soft, loose-fitting trousers, slung low on his hips. His tail thrashes back and forth just above the
hemline. He combs his fingers through his hair, pulling the wet tresses into a loose ponytail.
Bucky gives a little curtsy. “Does this please you, my lord,” he asks with a sly smirk.
“Uh.” Steve pulls the robe more tightly around himself. “Steve. Call me Steve.”
Bucky’s smirk turns sharp at the edges. “It is improper for a familiar to address their Master so
informally.”
Steve shrugs. “I must be improper then.”
For a moment Bucky’s smile softens, becomes something a little more genuine, then is gone. His
expression becomes impassive as he stands with his hands behind his back, awaiting his next
command.
After a few minutes of Steve staring dumbly at him, his hands drop down to his sides.
The corner of his mouth quirks up, and Steve can see a flash of sharp tooth.
“Steve… Is this your first time?” Bucky tips his head to one side, looking innocent.
Steve hates how easily his face reddens, and knows exactly what his familiar is implying.
“Yes,” he stutters. It’s the truth either way.
The honesty seems to surprise Bucky. His ears flicker once, and he takes the formal pose again.
Back straight, head lowered, his hands folded behind his back. “This is the stance of a familiar
awaiting a command from its Master. Either dismiss it or give it instruction.”
The ‘it’ grates on Steve’s nerves suddenly. He has read the tomes, and thought nothing of familiars
being referred to as ‘it’. But with Bucky standing before him, warm and alive and more than he
could possibly have imagined, it feels like ash on his tongue.
“Or you can just leave me like this,” Bucky adds flatly, and Steve wonders how long previous
masters had left him waiting, hands behind his back.
Steve shakes his head, and winces when a wave of nausea hits. He gasps for breath, and without
awaiting instruction Bucky is at his side, resting a steadying hand on his shoulder.
“Steve, I would like to go home,” he whispers.
Bucky helps him to his feet, pulling Steve’s arm around his shoulder and supporting him at the
waist. They limp slowly back down the path, the river still and silent, though Steve finds it hard to
look at the water too closely. Shame, hot and bitter, burns his throat. He had been stupid, and
nearly let a Marid loose on the city. Steve swallows hard, willing the sensation away.
They reach the entrance, and the gate swings open at Bucky’s touch, clanging closed behind them
once they have passed through.
“Chelsea,” Steve says as Bucky pauses, looking across the street.
“Figures,” he grumbles, and starts walking them both southwards.
Steve trips and stumbles on the cobblestones, but Bucky keeps a tight grip around his waist, and
doesn’t let him fall. Steve feels an overwhelming sense of relief to see the familiar shape of his
home, and leans into Bucky’s side as he pushes open the front gate. He reaches out as they walk to the front door, his fingers brushing against the rosemary and lavender planted either side of the door, their resinous scent lingering on his skin. There is a night-flowering jasmine growing over the door, the last blossoms of autumn pale and fragrant. Bucky makes a grudging noise of approval at the garden, and puts his hand to the door. It swings open silently, though Steve could swear that he had locked it when he left.


There is an odd sense of trepidation, of uncertainty, that makes Steve hesitate before pushing open the door to his workroom. Are his papers in order? Has he left books piled on the armchair? Bucky shoulders open the door and helps Steve limp into the room. There are papers stacked in the armchair, and Steve feels like a poor host. He manages to make his way to the desk unaided and pulls out his chair, sitting down with a sigh.

After a moment he realises that Bucky is looking at him expectantly, and he straightens up.

“Oh. Do you want to sit? Just move the papers, it’s fine.” He starts to get up, but Bucky shakes his head, looking amused. “Tea? Do you want some tea? Are you hungry?” Bucky’s ears flicker, and he turns away so Steve can’t see his face as he thumbs through the books, humming to himself. He picks out a book of familiars and flicks through the pages, finding the section on active familiars and noting how Steve has marked the top of each page. There are crosses in pencil where Steve had tried and failed to summon an available one. Bucky gives Steve a shrewd look, and flips to the back of the book, where the demons are listed, the Marid and the Kobold and the darker forces in the realm of magic. He checks them one by one, searching each page for an unobtrusive little tick or cross, and finds nothing. His gaze lingers on the final page, and a baleful creature glares up at him.

“The Red Skull,” Steve blurts out. “The most powerful demon ever to walk the world. They say it took an army of Witches to bring him down.”

“No, I can’t see his face as he thumbs through the books, humming to himself. He picks out a book of familiars and flicks through the pages, finding the section on active familiars and noting how Steve has marked the top of each page. There are crosses in pencil where Steve had tried and failed to summon an available one. Bucky gives Steve a shrewd look, and flips to the back of the book, where the demons are listed, the Marid and the Kobold and the darker forces in the realm of magic. He checks them one by one, searching each page for an unobtrusive little tick or cross, and finds nothing. His gaze lingers on the final page, and a baleful creature glares up at him. “The Red Skull,” Steve blurs out. “The most powerful demon ever to walk the world. They say it took an army of Witches to bring him down.”

“Do they know?” Bucky mutters, almost to himself.

“It was a long time ago,” Steve admits. “They say the Red Skull is not dead, only sleeping.” Bucky snorts and puts the book back on the shelf, trailing his fingers over the leather bound spines. “There’s a guest bedroom at the end of the hall,” Steve adds. “My room is across the way. Not that you’d be…” Bucky glances over his shoulder, the tip of his tail flicking.

Steve falls silent, and rummages through his desk for his journal, buried under parchments and pamphlets. He searches for a quill and his pot of ink, shifting uncomfortably in the silence.

“I’ll show you in the morning. I mean the house! Not my…” Steve clears his throat, turning to a fresh page in his journal. “There’s a kitchen downstairs.” Bucky gives him a sly grin. “You expecting me to cook for you?”

“No, I can cook well enough,” Steve says hastily. “Not well, I mean. Fine. I’m better at making salves and essential oils. My rose pomade is highly sought after.”

“Pomade.” Bucky murmurs, walking over to the window. His sharp eyes can no doubt make out the rose garden below. Steve makes a note of the day’s date at the top of the page, and starts to detail the events of the night.

“Rose pomade. You steep fresh rose petals in oil for several weeks, straining and replacing the flowers as they give up their fragrance.” Steve dips his quill in his inkwell, his gaze lingering on the play of muscles on Bucky’s shoulders as he reaches up to take a book and flick through it. Dick Whittington, of all things. He makes a pleased little noise, almost a purr, and knocks the papers off the armchair and sits down to read. Steve smiles to himself, despite the papers scattered at Bucky’s feet. A whole library and he had been drawn to Steve’s favourite book. It wasn’t a book of spells or a dry tome on Magical languages, but a children’s story about a boy seeking his fortune with his loyal cat.
Bucky makes himself comfortable and turns a page. “Seems like a lot of fuss. Can’t you just enjoy them where they are?” Steve looks momentarily blank. “The roses,” Bucky reminds him. “Oh. Well, rose oil is used in many different spells. It can be worn to aid healing, or when diving the future. In love spells…” Steve looks down at his page. His hand had been at work while his mind had wandered, sketching out the curve of a spine ending in a long tail held high in the air. Broad shoulders pulled back, and toned arms, the muscles cross-hatched in black ink. The head is bowed, pointed ears caught mid-flicker. On the page Bucky looks back at him out of the corner of his eye, his mouth ticked up in a smirk. “Love spells,” Bucky murmurs, and casts him the same sly grin, the children's book lying open in his hands.
“What’s the hard way?” Steve asks warily.
“A lifetime of study.”
Steve snorts. “And the easy way?”
“Oh, now there’s a question.” Bucky’s mouth stretches wide, displaying sharp teeth.
“There’s two methods, quick and dirty, to raise energy. One is blood…”
“But blood is dangerous,” Steve gives up any pretence of practicing. “It is part of your very essence, part of your soul. Use too much and you might never recover.”
Bucky rubs his shoulders, where the red star is just visible under the white linen of his shirt.
“What’s the other way?” Steve shifts from foot to foot. “You said there were two.”
“Come on, Steve,” Bucky chides. “You can’t be that slow. Quick and dirty, but powerful when you do it right.”
Steve frowns, and Bucky shifts in the chair, running the tip of the pencil across his lower lip. His tongue darts out to touch the blunt end, and Steve knows exactly what he means.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Eidheann for beta reading, and Trish for the screaming
Special thanks to the amazing Moony for the stunning artwork and Krycek-asks for reading through and pointing out the fails.
Want to see the same three pictures of Sebastian Stan's impossibly pretty face posted over and over? Find me on Tumblr

Steve walks through the kitchen, spotting the empty cup left on the table, tea with milk and far too much sugar. He takes it to the sink and gives it a quick rinse, setting it on the side to dry.
Bucky doesn’t exactly need food to survive, Steve is a little uncertain of the finer details, but he has a sweet tooth that Steve sees no harm in indulging a little. He had expected to be irritated by the teacups left in the kitchen and the garden, the pastry crumbs in the library and all over his favourite armchair. But instead they bring him comfort. Steve has lived in solitude for so long, they remind him that he is no longer alone. They are a breadcrumb trail, like in the fairytales he read as a child, that takes a meandering path through his home, their home. They reassure him that his familiar, who came into his life so suddenly, is still nearby.
There is a weight in his chest, wrapped around his heart. Steve knows the binding by the shape of it, knows that it will remain until he severs the bond himself. But a Witch and their familiar can be bound and be thousands of miles apart, and the biscuit crumbs and warm dregs in teacups reassure him that Bucky is still near.
Steve checks the pantry, half expecting to find him searching the shelves for the last of the biscuits. But the room is empty, the storage caddies of flour and sugar and jars of preserves
undisturbed.

He ventures outside, looking for Bucky amongst the herbs, bare stemmed and brown after the first frosts of winter. There are bald patches in his carefully tended garden from where Bucky took offence to several of Steve’s valued specimens and pulled them up for the compost heap. Bucky is not hidden in the roses, which have yet to cause him offense, or dozing in the branches of the cherry tree.

Steve sighs and rests his hands on his hips. He could perform a summoning. Draw a pentagram and a circle and say a few words, then Bucky would be standing before him. But the idea of dragging him out of whatever hiding place he has tucked himself away in, calling him to heel like a dog, leaves a sour taste in Steve’s mouth.

He pulls his pocketwatch out of his coat and checks the time as he goes back into the house.

“They’re going to be late.”

He clumps up the stairs to his workroom, shouldering the door shut and leaning against it.

Damn it.

He glances at the books piled up on the floor, and there in his favourite armchair sits Bucky, Steve’s copy of *The Book of the Dead* open in his lap. He is shirtless, curled up on the chair with his feet tucked under him, twirling a pencil in his fingers as he reads.

He had not been in the chair five minute ago, when Steve had noticed the time and hurried off to find him.

“Where have you been?” Steve blurts out.

Bucky glances up, his eyes crinkling in amusement. “I was here.”

“You were not! I checked!”

Bucky’s attention returns to the book in his lap. “I was. Just didn’t feel like being seen.”

Steve slumps against the door. Of course he didn’t. Bucky hums and crosses out a line of text.

“Bucky,” Steve sighs. “Not my books.”

“Lepsius doesn’t know shit about hieroglyphs. Nor does Champollion,” Bucky says absently, crossing through another line of text.

“Bucky, these are great scholars. Men who have devoted their lives to the study of Egyptian Magic.” Steve tries not to whine, but sometimes Bucky makes it extremely hard not to.

“Still wrong.” Bucky holds up his book and points to an image of a man with the head of a bird.

“He actually thinks they were walking around with animal heads! These are *metaphors*, Stevie. They appeared in both human and animal form, it’s trying to show you the… the…” Bucky drops the book in his lap and gives up on trying to find the right word.

Steve approaches the armchair and peers down at the page. Most of the translations have been angrily crossed out, with new ones provided in Bucky’s neat, copperplate script.

“These are men who specialise in the study of magic, Bucky. They know what they’re talking about.

“Oh yeah,” Bucky scoffs. “What would I know about familiars.”

It’s a throwaway remark, designed to wound, but it pulls Bucky’s ire into sharp focus.

“They weren’t gods, they were familiars,” Steve mumbles.

“They were both,” Bucky huffs “Back when you people…” he swallows down whatever else he had planned to say, and scratches through another year of painstaking research. Steve doesn’t tell him off, but leans over his shoulder for a closer look.

Most familiars do not shift from their animal form, or maintain them for long periods. To do so requires power and knowledge. Even the great basilisks and wyverns of old could not, despite their brute strength.

It is easy to forget, with his sharp tongue and troublesome ways, that Bucky is something of a rarity.

Steve wonders what his other form is like, if he will ever see it.

“It’s… duality?” Steve asked hesitantly. “The animal head is an expression of their dual nature, the human form and the animal.”
Bucky nods, there is something approving in his eyes. “You’re still an idiot.”
The laugh when it comes is unexpected, and Steve clutches the back of the armchair to keep from tipping over.
“Come on, we’re gonna be late,” he says, gently chiding.
Bucky sniffs. “We wouldn’t be late if we took a carriage.”
“No carriages,” Steve says with a shake of his head. “Come on, you can fix my poor books later.”

Bucky lets himself be hustled out of his chair, grumbling quietly as Steve puts the books away.
“Go,” Steve waves a hand at him. “Get dressed.”
Bucky gives him a flirtatious look. “I am dressed.”

Steve turns away so Bucky can’t see him blushing. He’s wasting his time, it’s like Bucky can sense the embarrassment clouding around him. “Put on a shirt at least,” he tells the wall.
Bucky makes a soft sound, low in his throat like a purr. “Don’t you like what you see?”

Steve does, may the Gods forgive him. There is a drawer in his desk sealed shut with spells and cold iron that attests to how much he does. Pages and pages in pencil and ink, hastily sketched in his moments alone and hidden away unfinished. The shape of Bucky’s mouth, the twist of his ear. The curve of his shoulder and the red star emblazoned on his skin. Every one of them evidence of his guilt and yet he can’t seem to stop himself.

“There’s a forecast of snow tonight,” Steve clears his throat loudly. “You need a coat.”

Steve finds a Chesterfield coat in the back of the wardrobe. Single breasted, in a navy so deep it might as well be black finished with a velvet collar. The heavy wool is warm, though, and Steve shakes it out and holds it up to Bucky, who scowls.
“I’m fine,” he mutters, folding his arms across his chest, his ears pulling back.
“It’s freezing outside,” Steve argues, and gives the coat another shake. “Please?”
Bucky’s shoulders loosen a little. “Damn you,” he mutters half-heartedly, and turns around, his arms out.

Steve is gracious in victory as Bucky threads his arms through the sleeves and allows Steve to settle the coat on his shoulders, making sure Bucky’s tail can move freely, and turns him around.
“It looks good on you,” Steve murmurs, smoothing down the lapels.

Steve pulls up the coat and starts rummaging around inside, keeping half an eye on Bucky as he stalks around the room, touching each item he sees with his fingertips. He is at his most catlike when he is curious, keeping his weight on the balls of his feet and moving with silent grace, his ears twitching.

He pulls open the wardrobe doors and starts looking. He pulls open the drawers in his desk sealed shut with spells and cold iron that attests to how much he does. Pages and pages in pencil and ink, hastily sketched in his moments alone and hidden away unfinished. The shape of Bucky’s mouth, the twist of his ear. The curve of his shoulder and the red star emblazoned on his skin. Every one of them evidence of his guilt and yet he can’t seem to stop himself.

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He half-expects Bucky to make some kind of remark, but he just tugs his hair out from under the collar and preens a little at the attention.

Steve looks down at Bucky’s bare feet, his claws scoring the dark wood floorboards. “I’ll see if I can find you some boots.”
“No,” Bucky hisses, his ears flattening, his tail flicking back and forth.
“Bucky…”

Bucky crosses his arms, his teeth bared in defiance, and Steve lets the matter drop.

“Where are we going?” Bucky asks as Steve pulls the front door closed. There are spells for protection and concealment on the door to deter any thieves, Bucky had placed them there himself, muttering all the while about how the same thing could be done with a perfectly good lock.
“We’re going to see my friend Peggy,” Steve walks down to the street, heading east along the King’s Road, glancing over his shoulder as Bucky follows.

He walks a few paces behind Steve, his hands behind his back. He hasn’t fastened up his coat, so it hangs open at the front, revealing a slice of bare chest. The cold doesn’t seem to trouble him, and
his claws click against the cobblestones as they walk.
“Peggy?” Bucky smirks. “Trying to impress your sweetheart, eh?”
“It’s not like that!” Steve says quickly. “She’s a friend, I’ve known her since I was a kid.”
Bucky mutters indistinctly, and Steve turns to face him, walking backwards along the street.
“Do I have to walk like this the whole way?” he asks, more amused than exasperated.
“A familiar must walk three paces behind their master, to better remind them of their place,” Bucky says stiffly, his ears flickering.
Steve is starting to learn Bucky’s tells. His ears are more trustworthy than his mouth; when they are flattened against his head, he is unhappy and when pointed forward, he is intrigued. When they flicker he is angry about something, though trying to hide it. Steve doesn’t have to think long to know what’s bothering him, and in truth he can understand Bucky’s ire. The list of expectations and requirements of a familiar is long and, as far as Steve’s concerned, unnecessary. He looks to Bucky as his companion, his teacher, perhaps in time his friend. Not an animal trained to perform tricks or an obedient pet.
“That’s ridiculous,” Steve says flatly. “Come on before I slip on the ice and break my damn neck.” Bucky shoves his hands in his pockets, a look on his face that Steve doesn’t recognise, and quickens his pace until he is at Steve’s side.
“So where does this Peggy of yours live?” Bucky asks, jostling Steve’s shoulder with his own.
“Belgravia,” Steve answers, jostling him back.
“Ugh, we should take a cab,” Bucky mutters.
Steve chuckles. “It’ll take half an hour, Buck. Fresh air will do you good.” Bucky grumbles, but his ears remain proud and facing forward.
Steve takes a minute to fiddle with his hair and straighten out his coat before knocking on the door.
“You sure you’re not sweet on this girl?” Bucky murmurs.
“No,” Steve’s voice pitches a little too high for his liking. Bucky’s tail twitches irritably, but he holds his tongue as Steve takes a deep, steadying breath, then touches his fingers to the wrought iron cartwheel hanging on the door and waits for an answer. As much as he tries to deny it, he is nervous. Nervous of what Peggy will think of his familiar, of her ever finding out how Steve got him. Most of all he worries that she’ll decide, after all these years of trying, that Steve cannot join Shield. Other Witches with familiars have been rejected before, and their friendship is no guarantee of him becoming a Shield agent.
The door opens, and they are greeted by a familiar. She is small and slender, with curled brown hair and a collar of purple-black feathers. Around her neck is a black velvet collar with a silver cartwheel fixed to the front.
“Hey, kid,” she says brightly, and gives Bucky a wink that he pointedly ignores.
“Hello, Angie. We’re here to see Peggy,” Steve says with a slight bow. She steps back and gestures them in. “Hey English, you got company!” she calls down the hallway. Steve wipes his feet on the doormat, shrugging off his coat and handing it over. Angie shakes it out and drapes it over her arm before flicking her fingers at Bucky impatiently to hand over his.
“Oh, no,” Steve says quickly, painfully aware of how little Bucky has on underneath. “That won’t be necessary.” Bucky rolls the coat off his shoulders, letting it slide gracefully down his arm and into Angie’s hands. She whistles appreciatively as he holds his hands demurely behind his back.
“Well, ain’t you a sight for sore eyes,” Angie is shameless in her admiration, though Bucky doesn’t respond to it, and Steve feels an unpleasant sting of jealousy. He has always adored Angie, her bright feathers, her sharp tongue and her thick American accent that as child was the most exotic thing he had ever heard. He tamps down on the ugly sensation and manages a smile.
“Is Peggy…?”
“Oh, yeah,” Angie finally tears her gaze away from Bucky and waves down the hallway. “In the library. C’mon.” They follow her along the carpeted hall, Bucky pausing to look at the paintings on the walls.
Peggy has always had an eye for art, and her collection is one of the many things Steve admires about her.

“Whistler,” Steve says softly as Bucky looks at an etching of a bridge at Westminster being built. “Documenting a city in a state of change.” he explains as Bucky looks unimpressed. “The great philosophers said that time is a long and winding road we travel along backwards. We cannot see what lies ahead, only what has passed.”

Bucky snorts. “You walk backwards down a road, you’ll land in the ditch.”

Steve chuckles, it’s a good point. He leads the way to a door at the end of the corridor, and knocks lightly, waiting for the call to enter before opening the door.

Steve has spent many hours in the Carter library, carefully transcribing passages from the ancient tomes and copying keys and symbols, first in pencil and, as he grew older and more adept, in spelled ink.

Today his own collection of works rivals Peggy’s, or at least it did until he ended up with a familiar determined to deface them all.

Peggy is sat in one of the armchairs by the window, a book in her lap, and looks up with a smile when she sees Steve come in. Her mouth drops open when Bucky follows, his tail flicking irritably.

“Peggy,” Steve says warmly as she sets aside her book and gets up, walking forward to take both his hands in hers.

“You’ve brought company,” she answers with a smile, and turns to Bucky, Steve’s hands still wrapped around hers.

“I have,” Steve makes his introductions, almost tripping over himself in his haste. “Peggy, this is Bucky. Bucky, this is Peggy Carter, Director of the Shield War Council.”

“Co-Director,” Peggy chides softly.

Bucky bows his head, hands folded behind his back. “M’lady.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Steve has been searching for a familiar for many years, however did you find each other?”

She is looking at Bucky, but the question is directed to Steve.

“It was just like how you said it would be, Pegs. When I needed him, when I was ready, there he was.”

Bucky rubs his arm, his fingers tracing the red-stained star. “He summoned a Marid and begged for help.”

There is a soft thwump behind him as Angie drops her armful of coats. Peggy’s mouth opens and closes a couple of times as Steve screws his eyes shut.

“Yes. Thank you Bucky,” he hisses.

“Steven,” Peggy says slowly. “Is this true?”

“Pegs, I can explain,” Steve says, holding up both his hands placatingly. “Erskine recommended a book to me from the Library, but it had gone missing. Whatever took it left a trace, a residue…”

“And how exactly did this necessitate summoning a Marid?!” Peggy’s voice rises a little.

“I didn’t know it was a Marid, I thought it was an Ifrit.”

“Is that supposed to make things any better?” Peggy pinches the bridge of her nose and breathes in sharply. “A fully trained Shield agent would think twice before summoning an Ifrit, half a dozen of our strongest, a Marid.”

Bucky folds his arms across his chest and sniggers, and Angie slaps him again.

“Where is it now?” Peggy looks around as if expecting the creature to appear at any moment.

“It’s gone, Peggy. Bucky took care of it.”

“Yeah, I took care of it, and what thanks did I get?” Bucky chimes in, and Angie slaps him again.

“Steven,” Peggy sighs. “This reckless behaviour of yours…”

“Sounds like you could all use a cup of tea,” Angie says loudly, her voice brittle and overly bright. Peggy rubs her eyes, pulling herself together. “Yes, of course. Angie, do be a dear and fetch some
Angie smacks the back of her hand against Bucky’s shoulder. “C’mon, trouble. Give me a hand here.”

Steve opens his mouth to argue, then snaps it shut again. He needs to get used to Bucky being out of his sight, but can’t help wonder what the two familiars would get up to in private. He swallows down whatever he was going to say and gives Bucky a curt nod, and stares at the door long after they have gone.

“Steve, come sit down,” Peggy says when the silence has stretched on for too long. He tears his gaze from the door, and takes the chair opposite her, propping his elbows on his knees and resting his chin on his hands.

“Angie will take good care of him, he’ll be fine,” she reassures him. “Now tell me what happened.” Steve straightens up, placing his hands in his lap. “I found this residue in the library by the missing book, and took it home with me for study. I performed a spell to reveal the truth and … misinterpreted the results.” Steve sits back and shakes his head. “It was a stupid mistake. It won’t happen again.”

Peggy frowns. “But you summoned a Marid.”

“Yes, I know, I’m sorry—”

“No, I don’t mean that.” Peggy waves a hand dismissively. “I do mean that. But my point is how did you summon a Marid?”

“I used a Pentacle from the Cavicule of Solomon, drawn in chalk soaked in my own blood.”

“Your blood?”

“Yes, well…” Steve blushes. “It require the blood of a… you know…”

Peggy sits up a little straighter and clears her throat. “But how did you summon a Marid? How did you even perform a spell for revealing the truth? These are rites of High Magic, they require the aid of a familiar, how did you do them?”

Steve bows his head. “I don’t know.”

They sit in silence a while, until Steve glances at the door. “How long does it take to make tea?”

Peggy gives him a small smile. “I couldn’t bear to have Angie out of my sight when we were first bound, I was quite insufferable,” she admits. “Are you both getting along?”

Steve huffs. “He pulled up my Dracanea, the one I grew from seed? Said I’d been sold the wrong species.” He hums thoughtfully. “Which would explain why it looks nothing like the examples in some of my books. And my books, Pegs! He’s mutilated my copy of Petit Albert, called it a ‘rattle-bag of charlatans’!”

Peggy smiles, despite herself. “Well, you’re both something of a mystery. Have you registered him yet?”

Steve shakes his head. “I’ll get it done, I swear.” “See that you do, sooner rather than later. Find out who his previous Masters were, where his allegiances lie.”

Steve nods, resting his cheek against the ball of his fist. “I will, Pegs.” “And get him a collar. With your mark on it.” “He’s not a dog,” Steve mutters sourly. “It’s the rules, Steve. You know that.” Peggy says reproachfully. “You shouldn’t have brought him out without a collar.”

“He has a mark on his shoulder, he doesn’t need a collar!” Steve argues. “These are the laws by which we live, Steve.”

Steve doesn’t reply, and picks a loose hair from his trouser leg. It’s the colour of clover honey, and he tucks it into his pocket.

“I have a familiar, Peggy,” he says quietly. She smiles. “You do.” “Is there a place for me in Shield?”
The door opens, and Angie marches in with a tea tray while Bucky hovers in the doorway, looking pensive. She places the tray down on a side table, jostling the plate of biscuits, and sets to work filling two cups.

“There you go, doll,” she hands Peggy a cup. “Don’t say I don’t do nothing for ya.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Peggy smiles.

“Here you go, kid.” She hands Steve his cup, and steps back, asking Peggy if she needs anything before retreating from the room, giving Bucky a pointed look before pushing her way past him. Steve looks down at his cup, and after a moment of considering, takes a sip.

“Bucky, is it?” Peggy calls. “Why don’t you join us?”

Bucky shakes his head sharply. “I’m fine right here, M’lady.”

Peggy doesn’t press the issue, and makes Steve wait until she has finished her cup of tea before answering him. Bucky leans against the doorframe and glares at the bookshelves as if they have personally offended him.

“You’re reckless,” Peggy says finally. “And stubborn, and are too easily led by your heart.”

Steve fights the urge to sink down into his chair, and sits forward, placing his cup down on the table. He pours fresh tea for Peggy and himself, adding milk to both cups and two lumps of sugar to his own before stirring.

“I don’t say these things easily, Steve. But you must be aware of your own failings.”

He nods silently, tapping the side of his spoon to the cup and placing it in the saucer before holding it out to his familiar.

“Buck?”

Bucky glances over, and straightens up at the offer of tea. “Any biscuits?”

Steve huffs and picks up a thin, almond scented biscuit from the plate and places it on the saucer.

“What, is there a shortage or something?” Bucky gripes.

Peggy lets out a peal of laughter, and Steve adds a couple more biscuits to the plate before handing it over.

Bucky sits on the arm of Steve’s chair and dunks a biscuit in his tea. “I tell him his failings all the damn time, M’lady. He don’t listen.”

“Bucky, shush,” Steve hisses, trying to push him off the chair and failing. Bucky just smirks at him, so he stops.

Peggy helps herself to a biscuit. “I do think you two are well suited,” she muses. “God’s help the rest of us at Shield.”

It takes Steve a minute to catch on to what she is saying. “Wait. What?”

“I’ll inform the rest of the Council. You’ll be initiated with the other new recruits at the Midwinter festival.”

Steve’s expression falters. “But that’s not for weeks. Isn’t there something you can do, get me moved up somehow?”

Bucky hisses, and Peggy shakes her head firmly.

“Initiations are only performed on festival days, Steve. You know that.”

Steve slumps back in his chair, but finds it hard to be too disappointed. Bucky kicks his shin and hands him back the empty teacup, rather than put it on the table himself.

“We should be going,” he says, putting the cup down. Bucky takes advantage of his momentary distraction and snatches another biscuit, stuffing it into his mouth with a grin before Steve can stop him.

“Angie will fetch your coats,” Peggy gets to her feet, picking up the plate and holding it out to Bucky.

“Peggy, that’s not necessary,” Steve says quietly.

“Nonsense, a little sweetness goes a long way. At least in the early days, though you mustn’t overindulge them.” She gives the plate a shake, and Bucky pokes at the biscuits, choosing carefully.

“He needs a collar,” she repeats, giving Steve a stern look.

Bucky drops the biscuit he had chosen like it had burned his fingers.
“Come on, Buck,” Steve says, putting his hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “We should go.”

Bucky is silent while Angie hands over their coats, pulling on his own without any assistance from Steve.

“Button up, buttercup,” Angie pats Steve on the cheek. “It’s cold out.”

“Thank you, Angie,” Steve murmurs, buttoning his coat up.

“And you,” Angie gives Bucky a stern look. “You think about what I said.”

Bucky mumbles indistinctly, and Angie looks unimpressed, opening the door and waving them out.

“Try an’ stay out of trouble, Rogers,” she calls out before shutting the door.

Steve starts walking down the street, and after a moment Bucky catches up to him, falling in by his side.

They don’t walk straight home, much to Bucky’s confusion.

“What’s going on?” he mutters as Steve crosses the street, heading north to the slums.

“Nothing,” Steve replies. “Just taking a walk.”

The line between rich and poor in London is as thin as a razor’s edge. The distance between too much and not enough no more than a cobbled street. They leave the white stone buildings of Belgravia and enter the sooty red brick of the slums. The walls are adorned with advertisements for cheap goods, and posters advertising cinematographs and Science fairs. The people lining the street, pie sellers and knife sharpeners and beer merchants, still offer goods for sale despite the late hour. Bucky watches silently as Steve buys a book of matches from a girl warming herself by a brazier, where a weary looking man roasts chestnuts in their shells. Steve buys a paper wrap of hot chestnuts, their split shells curled outwards in the heat and singed on the edges, and offers one to Bucky.

Bucky picks out a nut, cursing at the heat, and peels off the shell, tossing it from hand to hand until it’s cool enough to eat, while Steve chuckles and peels his own chestnut.

They walk side by side, and Bucky makes no comment about the silver coins slipped into pockets of the people they pass, or how Steve just so happens to have a pocketknife that needs sharpening, or another box of matches, or has a sudden thirst for a mug of sour-tasting dark ale.

The ale merchant, a stick-thin man with a bushy mustache and a trace of French accent, bows to Steve when he comes over.

“Mr Witch, good evening. Ale for two?” he says, and doesn’t bat an eyelid at Bucky’s tufted ears or twitching tail. “Monsieur Chat.”

“Bonsoir,” Bucky answers, much to Steve’s surprise.

“Ale for two, Mr Dernier,” Steve confirms, and pays for two pewter tankards of sweet milk stout, handing one to Bucky before sipping his own.

“Merci,” Dernier drops Steve’s coins into his pocket. “And how is the Witch business?”

“Well enough,” Steve takes a sip of stout, rich and bittersweet. “And you?”

As well as selling ale, Dernier makes a living touting magical goods on the black market. For the most part they’re harmless enough, scraps of parchment and old trinkets. On occasion he’ll slip something into Steve’s hands with a raised eyebrow and a glitter in his eye, knowing that if it’s something of value, Steve will pay well for it and ask no questions. If it turns out to be worthless, then there are plenty of commoners who can’t tell muck from gold.

“Quiet,” Dernier admits. “Not much call for old books when you’ve got Hydra touting the latest inventions.” He gives Steve a sideways glance. “Much less trouble to be had for it an’ all.”

Steve thanks him for his time, and hands over the empty tankards before going in search of Dugan and his pie cart.

When Steve has no more silver to spend, they turn south, and follow the road down to the river, and home.

“What was all that about?” Bucky asks, his mouth full of eel pie.

“Hmm?” Steve shrugs. “Nothing.”

Bucky purses his lips, then offers Steve a piece of pie crust. For a moment Steve feels shaken, lost
in the memory of feeding morsels of eel to James while he chewed on pie crust. He pulls himself
together and accepts the offer.
“Can I ask you a question?” Steve crumbles up an edge of pastry and tosses it to a pair of sleepy
pigeons.
“Well, if you want to get technical, that in itself is a question.” Bucky says primly, then ruins the
effect by loudly spitting out an eel bone. “Go on. Out with it.”
“What did Angie say to you?”
Bucky spears a chunk of eel with a sharp claw. “And if I don’t wanna tell you?”
Steve shrugs. “Then don’t tell me. It’s fine.”
Bucky looks unconvinced, chewing slowly before he speaks again. “She said I could do worse.”
Steve frowns. “Worse than what?”
Bucky tilts his head to one side. “Worse than you.”

Steve is restless in the days leading up to the Winter Solstice festival. He clatters about the house,
picking up tasks only to leave them unfinished. The kitchen table is a clutter of papers and plant
clippings and pieces of silver.
Bucky makes two cups of tea, adding milk and sugar while Steve sits at the far end of the table,
laboriously punching holes in a strip of soft leather. Bucky picks up one of the pieces of jewellery;
a silver star, polished to a high shine. He turns it in his fingers thoughtfully before setting it back
down on the table.
Steve glances up as Bucky pushes the tea towards him, and puts down his hammer and awl.
“Thank you,” he murmurs, and flexes his fingers, trying to ease his cramping muscles.
Bucky doesn’t ask what he’s making, Steve’s guilty countenance tells him enough. He picks up a
silver disc with a star design punched out of the center, and casts it aside. Steve clears his throat,
but before he has the chance to speak, Bucky pushes a piece of silver towards him.
“This one,” Bucky’s voice is barely audible, with an edge of something indefinable. Resignation,
maybe.
It is another disc, polished smooth, with a paper thin slice of garnet carefully cut into a star shape
set into the silver. Steve considers it his best work, and under any other circumstances he’d be
proud to have it picked out. The idea of Bucky wearing a collar, like some sort of pet, bothers him.
There is also a small, terrible part of him that is thrilled by it.
Steve gets up, the chair legs scraping loudly on the stone floor, and leaves without another word,
clopping up the stairs to the workroom.
Steve picks through his papers, reading through and revising his spells before even that can’t hold
his attention, and resolves to work on his shield.
He pushes the desk up against the wall and clears the floor, giving himself plenty of space to work
in, rolling up his shirt sleeves as he paces back and forth.
It had been a shock when he had first made the shield, scrawling it into the air at midnight on the
banks of the Serpentine, and every attempt since had been a failure.
He breathes deeply, screwing his eyes shut as he grounds and centers himself. He raises his right
hand and sketches a star in the air, breathing out slowly and opening his eyes.
There is a faint trail of mist before him that, if he squints hard enough might pass for a star.
He shakes out his shoulders, closes his eyes and tries again. There is the slightest spark and crackle
against his eyelids, but when he looks there is nothing there.
The door opens and Bucky peers in, looking askance at Steve before padding over to the bookcase
and selecting his latest victim. Steve ignores Bucky getting comfortable in the armchair, and tries
again.
Sparks and smoke, but still no shield.
“Your technique is dreadful,” Bucky says as he scratches a line through the first page of *Dragon Rouge*.

Steve purses his lips, breathing in slowly and clearing his mind of intrusive thoughts. When he opens his eyes, there is a trace of phosphorus in the air before him that gently disperses with his frustrated huff.

“Dreadful,” Bucky scribbles another line in what was, a few minutes ago, a first edition in mint condition.

“Aren’t you supposed to be helping me?” Steve grumbles.

“I am.” Bucky makes a note in the margins. “I’m fixing your library.”

Steve adjusts his stance. “I mean when performing Magic. I thought having a familiar meant gaining Magical powers.”

“You’d get a dog and learn how to bark?” Bucky snorts and turns the page. “Soon as a Witch gets a familiar they stop doing Magic, just get the familiar to do it for them.”

“That is not true,” Steve’s hands drop, and a weak arc of lightning crackles from his fingertips. “I don’t want you doing things for me, I want to know how to do them myself.”

Bucky looks up from the unfortunate book, his lips quirked up in a smile. Steve knows that look, it’s nothing but trouble.

“You do, huh?” Bucky twirls the pencil around. “Well there’s the hard way and there’s the easy way.”

“What’s the hard way?” Steve asks warily.

“A lifetime of study.”

Steve snorts. “And the easy way?”

“Oh, now there’s a question.” Bucky’s mouth stretches wide, displaying sharp teeth. “There’s two methods, quick and dirty, to raise energy. One is blood…”

“But blood is dangerous,” Steve gives up any pretence of practicing. “It is part of your very essence, part of your soul. Use too much and you might never recover.”

Bucky rubs his shoulders, where the red star is just visible under the white linen of his shirt.

“What’s the other way?” Steve shifts from foot to foot. “You said there were two.”

“Come on, Steve,” Bucky chides. “You can’t be that slow. Quick and dirty, but powerful when you do it right.”

Steve frowns, and Bucky shifts in the chair, running the tip of the pencil across his lower lip. His tongue darts out to touch the blunt end, and Steve knows exactly what he means. Sex Magic. Vulgar, undisciplined and highly effective.

“Oh.” Steve turns pale. “Oh, well that won’t be necessary.”

“Are you sure?” There is a purr in Bucky’s voice that sets Steve’s teeth on edge. “It’s easy enough. Just come here, I’ll show you.”

Steve wipes his hand across his forehead. It’s far too warm all of a sudden. He goes over to the window, cracks it open and sucks in a lungful of frozen air. He’s too hot, his skin prickling under his shirt.

“Or I could get down on my knees-”

“Shut up!” Steve snaps.

Steve bows his head and gasps for breath, and doesn’t say anything more until his breathing is less ragged.

“I’m sorry,” he rasps.

“Try again,” Bucky murmurs.

Steve blinks, feeling slow and stupid. “What?”

“Try again.”

Steve rubs the sweat from his eyes with the cuff of his sleeve and straightens up. “Excuse me?”

Bucky opens up his book and flips to the right page. “Stop asking questions and do it. Don’t think about it.”

With a soft exhalation Steve reaches out and draws a five pointed star in the air between them, his motions clumsy and stuttering. The air sparks and crackles, and lines of cold flame flare up in the
freezing air.
“How did I…”
I said stop asking questions,” Bucky scratches through another line of text. “Keep going.”
Steve draws a circle around the star and splays out his hand, and deep blue light forms around the star, a shimmering haze against the sharp crackle of white. He reaches out and touches the circle of cold fire. It prickles, like pins and needles on his skin, and fits neatly in his hand. It doesn’t burn like the first shield, but feels pleasantly cool to the touch.
“It works!” he gasps.
“Of course it works,” Bucky scratches out another line as Steve tosses the shining disc from hand to hand, letting out a little cough of delight when he catches it. “You had pent up energy, you channeled it.”
Steve flips the star up into the air and catches it. “What do you mean?”
“Well, back at the river it was fear. Fear is powerful, you learn to harness it, it’ll never control you. At the time, you were more concerned with being alive than being afraid, so you used that power.”
“But I wasn’t afraid.” Steve frowns. “I mean, I was at the river. But just now I wasn’t.”
“No,” Bucky smirks. “But you were frustrated.”
Steve flushes pink, and the star sputters and fades. He looks down at his empty hands and clears his throat.
He had been frustrated, unable to look at Bucky’s wide mouth or the column of his throat without…
Steve loudly clears his throat, pushing away the thoughts before they cause any more trouble.
“How was it that time?”
Bucky taps the pencil against his teeth and grins, wide and teasing. “Dreadful.”
By the eve of the Winter Solstice, Steve just wants to get the whole damn thing over with. The past week has been taken up with fittings for his new ceremonial robes, the customary white for the new initiates overlaid with blue. At Bucky’s suggestion, he orders a wide band around the waist in red, the colour of his star, though wearing it makes Steve feel like he’s dressed up in a flag.
“Stop fussing, you look fine,” Bucky snaps as Steve paces around the kitchen, fussing at his collar.
“I look terrible,” Steve grouses. “Should I fasten up the front?”
Bucky huffs and puts down his cup of tea. “Come here.”
Steve shuffles over and stands at attention, trying not to fidget as Bucky adjusts his sleeves and unfastens his red band. He holds his breath while Bucky wraps the fabric around his waist, keeping it neat and even.
Bucky steps back and looks at the clothes critically. “Looks perfect. Shame the contents are so damn ugly.”
Steve gives Bucky a half-hearted glare. “Charming. You planning on wearing a shirt?”
“Aw, Steve. Don’t you want to show me off to your friends?” Bucky gives him an innocent smile, and sips at his tea.
Steve reaches into the folds of his robe and pulls out a strip of soft, black leather. He holds it out to Bucky, his fingers trembling enough to make the silver pendant dangling from it shiver.
“You.” He swallows. “You should wear this.”
He doesn’t explain that it’s not his choice, that it’s the rules they live by. The words would only taste bitter.
Bucky’s smile slips, and he nods once, sharply, getting up from his seat and turning his back to Steve. He runs his fingers through his hair and pulls it to one side, exposing the back of his neck.
“Put it on for me?”
Steve straightens out the leather and quickly draws it around Bucky’s throat. It fastens with a slim silver buckle at the back, and Steve tucks a finger between the leather and the nape of Bucky’s neck, making sure it’s not too tight.
“Is that okay?” he asks. “Does it hurt?”
Bucky lets his hair fall, and shakes his head. It feels like a lie.
He turns around. Steve’s mark, a red star on a silver disc, rests at the base of his throat.
“Bucky…”
“We should go,” Bucky says flatly. “Don’t wanna be late for your big night.”

In a city under frost and snow, the Abbey is a blaze of light and colour for the Winter Solstice. Boughs of holly and ivy twine up the walls, and red and green candles light the way inside. Bucky is grudgingly impressed, staring up at the stained glass windows as Steve guides him through the throng of Witches, one hand laid gently on the small of his back. Bucky keeps his coat on, but leaves it unfastened, revealing a teasing strip of firm, honeyed skin and the red and silver mark of ownership at his throat. He holds his head up high and proud, his hands in his pockets. But the line of his shoulders is stiff. His tail twitches from side to side, and his ears flicker constantly, so Steve stays close to his side.

Their path is blocked by Secretary Pierce, his wolf familiar, Rumlow, skulking at his heel. “Mr Rogers, so you’ll be joining us at last?” Pierce greets Steve with a warm smile. He holds out his hand, and Steve takes it. Rumlow growls, his hackles raised, and Bucky’s ears draw back.

“Mr Pierce,” Steve gives his hand a shake, and tries to put himself between Bucky and Rumlow. “I wondered if I might have a word?” Pierce gestures for Steve to come with him. “In private?” Steve can’t refuse a request from a member of the Witches Council, but is unwilling to leave Bucky alone. “Go find Peggy,” he murmurs in Bucky’s ear. “I’ll be right with you.” Bucky grimaces, but nods and slips into the crowd.

“I understand that joining Shield has been something of childhood dream for you,” Pierce says, leading Steve into a quiet corner and sending Rumlow to stand guard.

“Yes sir,” Steve glances around warily, and wonders what the hell is going on.

“Ambition is good, and to be encouraged.” Pierce smiles again. “I can help you there.” “I’m not sure I understand, sir,” Steve watches Bucky moving through the crowds, his head bowed, his ears flat.

“It’s very simple,” Pierce keeps his voice warm and light. “It has been my fortune to obtain a number of familiars. Yes, I know it’s uncommon, but I highly recommend it. There is no one familiar that is perfect for all a Witch’s needs” Pierce tips his head to one side. “There was a time when familiars were beings of unimaginable power, great Wyvers and and Basilisks, the Red Skull. Just think of what we could achieve with those creatures at our sides.” He points to his wolf. “Rumlow there is loyal and brave, but he is something of a blunt instrument.” Pierce looks bitterly disappointed for a moment, then smiles again. “For someone like you, at the start of a long and illustrious career in Shield, you’ll need something... better.” Steve turns to face Pierce. “Excuse me?” “I have in my possession an excellent familiar, an owl,” Pierce opens his arms wide. “She has seen the library of Alexander, spread her wings over the bronzed sea. She is wise and beautiful, and a patient tutor to one ready to listen.” Pierce draws his hands together. “I would gladly trade.” “No, thank you,” Steve recoils at the offer. “I have a familiar, one that came to me.” “You have a troublemaker,” Pierce snaps, his kindly expression souring. “Did you know his last Master was murdered? That he disappeared? Went into hiding, and no one knows where, or what he did.” “How do you know all this?” Steve asks, struggling to keep calm. How dare he? How dare he speak ill of another Witch's familiar?

“I make it my business to know these things,” Pierce shrugs. “You keep this one you'll be found dead before the next festival, by some unfortunate… accident.” Steve doesn't miss the implied threat. “Bucky would never hurt me.” “Don’t be stupid, boy!” Pierce snarls, and for a moment looks horribly like his wolf. “Given the chance any one of them would kill us! That is why we keep them bound!” Steve clenches his fists. “Thank you sir,” he hisses, barely able to control himself. “But I must
decline."
“"You listen to me, boy-"
“"Alexander?"
Steve turns to see Peggy, dressed in a red evening gown, her arms crossed. Bucky is at her side, looking troubled.
“Is something the matter?” Peggy asks with a brittle smile.
Steve hates the thought of backing down from a fight, but he hates to see Bucky looking so discomforted more, and hurries to his side.
“Nothing to concern you, Carter,” Pierce smiles, all white teeth and dull eyes. “We were just talking.”
Bucky grabs Steve by the sleeve, pulling him away from the Council members.
“Don’t,” he hisses, his claws gouging ragged holes in Steve’s robe. “Don’t lock me away, please.”
“What? Send you away? Of course I won’t,” Steve promises. “You know the Secretary? You’ve met him before?”
“I’ll be better, I swear. Don’t send me away,” Bucky pleads, his grip on Steve tightening.
“Shh, it’s alright,” Steve pulls Bucky into his arms, crushing him in a fierce hug. Bucky doesn’t squirm or try to push him away, just tucks his head under Steve’s chin and shivers.
“You found me, remember?” Steve soothes, gently stroking Bucky’s flattened ears. “You think you’re getting rid of me so easily?”

The initiation ceremony passes is a blur.

At either side of the high altar are gilded doors that lead to the inner sanctum. An adept enters through the left door, and exits the right as a member of Shield.
Peggy leads them through the inner chamber, thick with fragrant smoke, and together stand before the Tesseract. Steve should be awed to be finally in the presence of the most powerful source of Magic the world has ever known, the relic that keeps Britain at the heart and center of the world of Witchcraft. But the pulsing blue light of the crystal makes his eyes water, and his head ache.
He is vaguely aware of the sweet aroma of frankincense threading through the smoke, of a slick of scented oil at his forehead and a low susurration of chantings. Of Bucky pressed to his side, eyes screwed shut like the oil they daub on his skin hurts.
Steve recites the incantations, and swears the oaths that bind them both to the cause. He is given a cup of ale sweetened with honey, and bread sprinkled with salt. Without thinking, he breaks the bread into two and gives one half to his familiar, and the room falls silent.
Peggy gently pulls Steve to one side, and the next initiate steps forward to be anointed. A girl, her familiar a dark red mist that curls around her shoulders.
“Come,” Peggy whispers. “You still haven’t registered.”
Steve shakes his head, trying to dispel the fog of incense and oils that are clouding his thoughts as Peggy walks him away from the ceremony, Bucky still clinging to the sleeve of his robe.

The Book of Shadows lies on the great altar in the main hall. A heavy tome bound in oak and iron, with the name of every Witch that has worked for Shield and their familiar, dating back more than a thousand years.
Steve runs his fingers across the faded lines of ink, and sees the names of familiars appear again and again, passed from Master to Master. He searches through the familiars for the name Buchanan. Ten years, Pierce had said. Ten years since he had last been bound.
He turns the pages, noting the lines struck through the Witches lost in battle, their familiars reassigned to new Masters. The past decade takes only a handful of pages.
“There are so few,” Steve whispers.
“We have lost many in the war.” Peggy says sadly. “Familiars are becoming harder to find. When I first joined Shield there would be at least a dozen new initiates every festival. Now they are few and far between.”
Steve finds the name Buchanan, and his Witch, a soldier named Falsworth. Steve wonders what
the man was like.
“He had a mustache,” Bucky murmurs. “Like a damn caterpillar crawling on his face.”
Steve coughs out a laugh, and turns to the present day. He signs his name, and prints the name
Buchanan alongside it.
“There,” he sets down the quill. “It’s done.”
“Fuck,” Bucky mutters. He does not sound entirely disappointed.

Steve politely declines the offer to stay and celebrate, and makes his excuses.
“Go home, get some rest,” Peggy says sympathetically. “It’s been an eventful evening.”
Steve thinks of Pierce, and how his charming demeanor had quickly turned threatening, and says
nothing. Bucky needs no encouragement, and hustles Steve out the door, rubbing the anointing oil
smears around his forehead with his sleeve.
The night sky is overcast, and the streetlamps reflect off the snow in a diffuse amber haze.
Bucky elbows Steve in the ribs, making him yelp.
“Ouch,” Steve rubs his side. “What was that for?”
“You’re moping,” Bucky grumbles. “Stop it.”
“I am not moping,” Steve insists.
“You are moping,” Bucky bares his teeth. “I can smell it on you, even under all the fucking
myrrh.”

Bucky flaps his coat as if he could waft the clinging scent away, and gives Steve a look that can’t
be argued with.
Steve sighs. “All my life I just wanted to do what’s right.”
Bucky stops, his bare feet digging into the snow. He stares at Steve incredulously, like he can’t
believe what he’s hearing. “You can’t possibly be real,” he mutters, on the cusp of Steve’s hearing,
before he starts walking again.
What is that supposed to mean?
“So, what?” Bucky bumps his shoulder against Steve’s. “You were expecting the mysteries of the
universe to unfold before you, and instead you got a headache from all that fucking incense?”
Steve gives Bucky a crooked smile. “Pretty much.”
“You’re an idiot,” Bucky laughs. He looks about to say something else, but shakes his head.
“Come on, you can sulk at home where it’s warm.”
Bucky tucks his hand into the crook of Steve’s elbow, and pulls him along the street.
Later, much later, when Steve has washed the oil and incense smoke out of his hair, and written
down the event of the day in his journal, he will think back on Bucky’s words.
Home, he’d said. Home.

Steve had wondered if being registered with Shield would make Bucky better behaved, if the collar
around his neck would make him more obedient. After all, he’s had Masters before, Witches who
fought in the war. Bucky knows the law, but refuses to obey it, and Steve finds himself less
inclined to make him.
What Steve doesn’t expect is for Bucky to get worse.
He refuses to wear his collar. He wrecks the herb garden, digging up the mint and valerian root.
The mint will recover, and Steve can grow more valerian in the spring, so he keeps his mouth shut,
and gathers up the damaged plants for the compost heap. When Bucky pulls up half of his rose
bushes, Steve finds it harder to hold his tongue. He can use the wood, at least,stripping the inner
bark and arranging it on trays in the kitchen to dry. Some of the wood he sets aside for use later, to
be made into wands or runes, the rest he adds to the fire, and it fills the kitchen with perfumed
smoke.
Bucky goes through Steve’s library, and picks out the books he considers irredeemable. He leaves
the books on horticulture, herbal remedies and fairy tales. He even leaves the Book of the Dead.
All the other books of Magic he considers beyond salvation. He builds a bonfire in the garden,
right in the middle of the overwintering hellebores, and sets it alight.
He does it all while Steve is working on his shield, and doesn’t notice what’s happening until a charred page from the *Lemegeton* flies through the open window and slaps him on the face. The shield crackles and fades, and Steve peels the burning page from his cheek and storms outside. “It’s full of shit, Stevie,” Bucky says with a forced smile, and throws another book on the fire. “They’re all full of shit.”

Steve goes back into the kitchen and drinks chamomile tea until the urge to scream passes. When the ashes cool he rakes them around what is left of the roses, and goes back to working on his shield.

“Bucky?” Steve wanders into the workroom, the morning’s post in his hands. More news of Hydra lobbying parliament, demanding a change in Magical regulation. He screws up the pamphlet and tosses it into the fire, taking some satisfaction in watching it burn.

“Bucky? Have you seen—”

The rest of his letters fall to the floor, and Steve takes an involuntary step back.

Oh.

Bucky is lying across the desk. Sprawled across the desk, on top of Steve’s parchments, smearing wet ink across the pages. He is wearing nothing but a sleeveless white robe, the sheer fabric splayed out underneath him, and underwear, cut high at the leg and low on the hips, that leaves little to the imagination. Steve can clearly see the outline of his cock, soft and cupped up delicately against his balls, through the thin white cloth. Bucky’s skin is as pale and creamy as clover honey against the cherrywood desk, and he stretches, his sharp teeth pressing against his plush lower lip.

“Hmmrr?” Bucky purrs, his tail curling into a query mark. “Did you… want… something?”

Steve lets the back of his head thunk gently against the wall, and wonders if there is enough chamomile tea in the whole of England for this.

He bends down and picks up his letters off the floor, studiously ignoring Bucky writhing on his desk.

He has a sudden urge for a glass of cold water. Not to drink, or even to douse himself with. No, he’d pour it over Bucky, just to hear him yowl.

But then he knows what happens to white linen when it’s wet, and shakes away the notion.

“What’s the matter, Stevie?” Bucky smirks. “Am I making you uncomfortable?”

Steve shakes his head. “Roll over,” he says flatly.

Bucky’s grin stretches wider, predatory and sharp. “You want me on my front?”

“No,” Steve huffs. “You’re crumpling my correspondances.”

Bucky shifts onto his side, and Steve tugs his letters free. They are illegible, and need writing out again. Steve puts them on one of the empty bookshelves, wiping his ink stained fingers on his trousers as Bucky rolls onto his back again and stretches his arms over his head.

“Put on some clothes, Bucky,” Steve puts the post with his ruined letters. He’ll deal with them later.

“Aww, Steve,” Bucky plucks at the waistband of his underwear, inching it down his hip. “Don’t you like it? I got it for you.”

“It’s very nice,” Steve fetches his coat from the back of his chair and shrugs it on. “But go out in that and you’ll get frostbite.”

Bucky sits up suddenly, the robe slipping from his shoulders and pooling around his waist. “We’re going out?”

“I want you to meet a friend of mine,” Steve drops a handful of silver coins in his pocket. “He’s got lots of books, maybe he’ll let you burn a few.”

Bucky lets out a delighted laugh, then winces, reaching under his robe and pulling out Steve’s favourite goose feather quill. It’s bent almost in half, the barbs crooked and crushed.

“Oops,” Bucky says, and for once looks contrite.

“And I need a new quill,” Steve sighs.
“So who’s this friend of yours?” Bucky buttons up his coat, the weather too cold even for him.
“Erskine,” Steve answers truthfully. “Abraham Erskine. He was my teacher.”
Bucky sniffs. “He as dreadful as you are?”
Bucky’s tone is teasing, and Steve doesn’t take his words to heart.
“Well, you’ll soon find out.” Steve claps his hands together, trying to keep warm. “Behave yourself around Jarvis, mind.”
Bucky bristles, and bares his teeth. “You bossing me around now, Rogers?”
“Not at all,” Steve grins. “Jarvis is the only one with the keys to the pantry.”
Bucky grumbles softly, and promises nothing.
It’s a short walk to the school, even through the snow. Steve’s heavy boots crunch through the frozen surface, sinking a little with each step, while at his side, Bucky seems to barely make an impression on the piled snow, just a faint indentation of his feet and a scrape of claws.
Jarvis answers the door and frowns at the sight of Steve. “I thought you graduated?”
Bucky sniggers, and Steve shushes him. “I did, Mr Jarvis. Some years ago, remember?” Steve tries his best to keep a straight face with Bucky chuckling beside him. “I’m here to see Mr Erskine.”
Jarvis looks deeply suspicious, but opens the door a little wider. “Come in, then. And wipe your feet.”
Steve dutifully scrapes his boots across the doormat, and Bucky follows suit, scrubbing the soles of his bare feet across the bristles while Jarvis looks aghast.
“Thank you, Mr Jarvis,” the fixed smile on Steve’s face is in serious danger of slipping. “We can manage from here.”
“Very good, sir,” Jarvis mutters, his expression saying anything but. “I’ll be along with tea shortly.”
Steve leads Bucky through the maze of corridors, hustling past the study rooms where a handful of students are bent over their books, and up the stairs to Erskine’s cramped little office.
Steve knocks on the plain wooden door, and waits for a call to enter.

“Steven, my boy.” Erskine gets up from behind his cluttered desk and holds his arms open. Steve doesn’t hesitate, stepping carefully through the piles of books and papers to clasp him by the forearms in greeting.

“I missed you at the Solstice celebration,” Erskine pats Steve on the cheek. “I hear you have joined the ranks of Shield.”

“I have,” Steve confirms.

“Ah, well then,” Erskine shrugs, and catches sight of Bucky still hovering in the doorway.

“Where are my manners,” he chides himself, and gestures for Bucky to come in. “Come! Come, let me look at you.”

Bucky looks to Steve for reassurance, and at his nod of encouragement steps into the room. Erskine takes Bucky’s hands in his own, squeezing them gently as if he could divine Bucky’s very nature by touch alone. It wouldn’t surprise Steve if he could.

“So, you are Buchanan, yes?” Erskine asks. “Something of a wildling if Miss Carter is to be believed.”

Bucky snorts, and bows his head. He looks flustered by Erskine’s kindness, and more than a little charmed.

Steve waits for the sting of jealousy at the sight of Bucky talking to another Witch. Instead he feels only guilt. Guilt that his own presence doesn’t calm Bucky’s nerves or soothe his ill temper.

“Yes, I have heard much about you. Put all the Witches of London together in one room and you will hear no end of gossip.” Erskine gives Bucky’s hands a last squeeze and lets go. “Come now, sit.”

Bucky chooses an overstuffed armchair in a corner by the windows to curl up on, his bare feet tucked under him. Steve takes the chair opposite Erskine’s, much like he did in his student days. Jarvis comes bustling into the room, a tea tray in his hands. He fusses over the state of Erskine’s desk, waiting with the tray held high until a space is cleared for him, and sets it down with a clatter.

“Thank you, Jarvis. I’m sure I can manage.”

Jarvis sniffs, like he doubts very much that Erskine can be trusted to get dressed of a morning, let alone pour tea, and leaves them be, closing the door behind him.

There are only two cups on the tray, so Steve drinks his tea while it’s still scalding, and pours a second cup. Erskine watches in silent amusement as Steve adds sugar and tucks a few biscuits onto the saucer before passing the cup over to Bucky. He takes it silently, and crunches his way through the biscuits with a contented purr.

“I must admit I did not expect to see you for a while, my boy,” Erskine remarks, waving a biscuit in the air between them. “I would have thought you would be out having adventures, secret missions and so on.”

“Shield is unwilling to send me out in the field until I…” he swallows, and the words taste sour. “Have my familiar under control.”

“Under control?” Erskine chuckles. “Does he seem out of control to you?”

Steve closes his eyes and slumps in his chair. “Shield is unwilling to send me out in the field until I...” he swallows, and the words taste sour. “Have my familiar under control.”

Steve looks over at where Bucky sits, staring out of the window. He looks at peace.

Steve wonders, not for the first time, if he made the wrong choice. If Bucky would be happier with a different Master.

“No doubt you have been offered many unhelpful suggestions,” Erskine gives Steve a shrewd look. “I should provide more discipline,” Steve mutters sourly.

Steve doesn’t mention the other, more old fashioned methods he has heard for taming a familiar. The ones that make him feel sick to his stomach. The brandings and the beatings and the taking by force.

Steve shudders, and folds his hands across his stomach. Erskine hums to himself, coming to a decision.
“Buchanan?” he calls, and Bucky looks up. “Could I trouble you to take the tray back down to Jarvis? And ask him for an extra cup this time?” Erskine puts his cup back on the tray. “And if I remember rightly there are some honey cakes that would go down nicely.”

The promise of cake is enough to get Bucky on his feet, and he takes up the tray without complaint, much to Steve’s surprise.

“You’re good with him,” Steve says softly, once Bucky has left the room.

“And you think you’re not?” Erskine tuts and shakes his head.

Steve sinks deeper into his chair and fiddles with the hem of his shirt.

“He was gone what? Ten years before he came to you?” Steve nods at Erskine’s question. “Has he told you where he was in that time?”

“No,” Steve mutters.

“Have you asked?”

Steve’s mouth pulls down. “He wouldn’t tell me if I did.”

Erskine studies him for a moment, in a way that makes Steve feel like he is being peeled apart, layer by layer.

“Did I ever tell you about my familiar?” Erskine asks.

“What?” Steve sits up, attentive. “No, I didn’t think you had one.”

“I don’t.” Erskine sighs and pushes his papers across the desk. “I was a young man, younger than you are now, when he came to me. A strange creature, called himself Zola. He came to me when I was at my weakest, at my most fearful.” Erskine pauses for a moment, staring into space. “He made many promises. Big, fancy speeches and… visions of a better tomorrow. He claimed to know where the Red Skull was imprisoned, and how to free him. That there would begin a new world order, with myself at the center of it all.”

“What happened?” Steve asks, his voice hushed.

Erskine shrugs. “I sent him on his way.”

Steve bites off a sound of surprise, and Erskine smiles wearily. “You ask yourself why?”

“It’s what every Witch hopes for.”

“Every Witch but myself,” Erskine gestures to the books lining the walls. “I only wished to learn.”

Steve looks to the door, knowing Bucky could return at any moment. “Would you ever reconsider? If a familiar would be better off with you?”

“My boy,” Erskine says gently, and Steve knows from the kindness of his tone that the words will hurt. “They are not pets to be passed along when we tire of playing with them. They are our equals, and we keep them in chains.”

There is a thunk at the door, and Erskine looks up. “That will be our tea.” He raises his voice. “Just one moment please.”

Steve can hear Bucky grumbling from the other side of the door.

“What please…”? Erskine asks, and Steve nods, getting to his feet.

“Give him time,” Erskine says, low enough so Bucky can’t hear. “We cannot begin to imagine the things he has endured.”

Steve hesitates, his hand on the doorknob. “He came to me,” he says quietly.”That must count for something.”


After the visit to Erskine, Bucky seems to settle down a little. Steve suspects that it’s due to running out of things to destroy in the house, rather than a change of heart. He wouldn’t put it past Bucky to start shredding the curtains or the upholstery just for the sake of causing more damage.

Steve searches through what’s left of his library for a slim volume of recipes for the home, and learns to make biscuits.

The first batch come out far too sweet, and strongly scented with vanilla, but Bucky eats every last one.

The second refuse to turn crisp, not matter how long Steve leaves them to bake. By the time he
gives up and tosses them on the counter, they are blackened around the edges. Bucky still eats them. He leaves one on Steve’s desk, the edges carefully scraped clean of charcoal. It is a small thing, compared to the herbs and the books and the life he grew from nothing, but it is enough. It is more than enough.

“Bucky?” Steve checks the kitchen, but can find no sign of his familiar, not even a half-empty cup of tea on the table. He goes out into the garden, though he doubts even Bucky would try to pull anything out of the frozen ground. Steve checks the greenhouse and the potting shed, but can find no sign of him, and walks back to the cherry tree, its bare branches coated in a thin layer of snow. “Bucky?”

“Yeah?” the answer comes from right above him, and Steve lets out a yelp of alarm. Bucky is draped along one of the lower branches of the tree, his tail dangling down and flicking back and forth. At least he’s wearing a coat.

Steve checks the tip of Bucky’s tail between finger and thumb and gives it a tug. “I’m going to the library.”

Bucky growls, low in his throat, and twitches his tail loose. “What do I care?”

“Are you coming with me?”

Bucky chews the inside of his cheek. “Wong hates me.”

Steve can’t help but smile. “He hates me more.”

Bucky rolls off his branch, twisting in midair and landing lightly on his feet. He shakes out his coat and gives Steve an impatient look. “So, are we going or what?”

The day is cold and crisp, and the street sweepers have cleared the worst of the muddy slush from the cobblestones. Bucky, still resolutely barefoot, treads a delicate path along the street, avoiding the slippery patches of ice.

They reach the library in one piece, though Steve slips on one the the steps leading up to the building. Bucky is quick enough to catch him, grabbing him by the scruff like a mother cat with a wayward kitten. Steve manages to find his feet again, stuttering an apology while Bucky snorts and continues up the steps to the main entrance, and Steve feels slow and clumsy in his wake.

Mr Wong is hunched over his desk, and his head snaps up when the door opens.

He points his quill at Bucky. “Out!”

“Excuse me?” Steve asks, put out. Bucky sidesteps, putting Steve between himself and Wong as the man comes barreling towards them.

“I’ve heard all about you,” Wong snaps. “Meddling with books! Go on, shoo!”

Wong flaps his hands like he’s trying to scare off a stray tomcat. Bucky’s ears pulls back and he bares his teeth in a hiss.

“Mr Wong,” Steve raises his hands, placating, as Bucky and Wong scuttle around him, locked in a spiteful orbit. “I assure you, your books will come to no harm.”

“I want that thing out of my library!”

Bucky yowls. “Damned Witches, clucking at each other like hens.”

“Bucky, that’s enough,” Steve murmurs, before raising his voice to Wong. “I’ll ask you not to speak to my familiar in that way again.”

“Your familiar?” Wong spits. “It’s not even wearing a collar!”

Bucky growls and advances, and Steve throws out an arm to block him. Bucky could probably tackle him, if he were so inclined, but he retreats. All the same, Steve keeps his arm raised.

“I’m just here for a book,” Steve tries to explain.

“You can’t have it,” Wong points his quill at Bucky. “You can’t have any books while that thing is in your house.”

“I just need Agrippa,” Steve tries to reason with the man. “I’ll not even take it out the building, I’ll make notes-”

“Fine,” Wong scowls. “That thing has to wait outside.”
“Fine,” Bucky mutters, giving Steve a foul look and turning for the door. “Bucky…” Steve sighs, but Bucky stalks out, slamming the door shut behind him. He bites back a curse, and wonders how exactly Bucky intends to make him pay for this. He’ll probably start vomiting frogs or something before the day is out. “Agrippa?” Wong says, pulling Steve out of his fretting. Steve nods, and Wong goes off in search of the book. Steve takes a minute to breathe deeply, and try and figure out a way to settle things with Bucky, before Wong comes storming back across the room. “You think you’re funny? Is this a joke to you two?” He waves his finger under Steve’s nose. “Sir?” “My book,” Wong hisses. “What have you done with it?”

Steve finds Bucky outside, sprawled on the steps. “Come on,” he shouts, thundering down the steps and towards the street. Bucky stares after him, and when Steve doesn’t come back to fetch him or chivvy him along, lopes along after, tail twitching curiously. “Steve?” he calls out, catching. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?” “I gotta see Peggy,” Steve mutters, leading them south towards Whitehall. “What?” Bucky gives Steve a gentle shove. “She gonna get you back your library card?” Steve clenches his jaw, and doesn’t say another word. Bucky opens his mouth to make another cutting remark, then snaps it shut again, and falls into step alongside him. They hurry south, away from the library and down towards the river. The red brick walls covered with Hydra posters campaigning for an Age of Reason soon give way to imposing white stones. The newsboys selling the evening edition, shouting out the latest reports on the war effort, traipse up and down the cobbled streets. Steve marches like a soldier, one foot in front of the other with no heed to their changing surroundings. They cut through parks and cross back alleys, taking the shortcuts only a man who had grown up on the streets of London would know. Bucky keeps pace at Steve’s side, and doesn’t even complain when they reach Whitehall, following him up the limestone steps to the Shield headquarters. They are stopped at the entrance by security, two grim faced guards who insist on checking Steve for concealed spells, and when they find nothing in his pockets but a handful of silver, they reprimand him for not putting a collar on his familiar. Bucky bares his teeth, and Steve nods impatiently, muttering assurances until the guards finally lets them pass. Steve doesn’t wait to be escorted, and charges down the halls to find Peggy. “Peggy!” Steve hammers on the door to Peggy’s office. “Peggy?” The door opens, and Angie looks out at Steve, her feathers ruffled in irritation. “Hey kid, what’s all the fuss?” “I need to see Peggy,” Steve says, trying to push his way into the room. Angie presses the tip of her finger to the center of Steve’s chest, and behind him Bucky growls. “Hold your horses there, kid.” Angie gives Bucky a sharp look, and he falls silent. “What’s all the fuss?” “There’s been another theft, at the library.” Steve tries to look over Angie’s shoulder. “Another book has gone.” He can hear Peggy sigh from beyond the door. “Let them in.” Angie shrugs and steps back. “Your world, boss.” “Peggy,” Steve rushes into the room, finding Peggy seated at her desk, surrounded by stacks of parchment. Bucky follows more slowly, baring his teeth to Angie. “Settle down, sweetheart,” she snipes. “I barely touched him.”
“Agrippa has been taken from the library. That’s the third book in as many weeks,” Steve says in a rush.

“Well,” Peggy drops the quill in the inkwell at her elbow. “It sounds like Mr Wong needs to work on his security.”

Steve shakes his head. “This isn’t some Witch messing around, this is systematic. Someone is stealing Magical books.”

“Oh come on now, Steve,” Peggy sighs. “So the library is missing a few books. That is Mr Wong’s concern, not Shield’s. With the war overseas, the latest attacks, not to mention Hydra and their bloody Accords, our hands are full.”

Steve’s shoulders slump. Hydra. Over the last few years their campaigns for an Age of Reason, of Science rather than Magic, have gained ground. Technological advances like the steam engine and the cinematographs have captured the public’s imagination. Enlightenment, they call it. Wisdom for all, not just for a chosen few who hoard their knowledge jealously.

The worst part is that Steve suspects they have a point. He remembers all too clearly the frustration of all that hidden knowledge, and wanting to learn so desperately.

“I know you’re stretched,” he says quietly. “I could look into it, see if I can find anything—”

“Absolutely not!” Peggy snaps. “Look at what happened the last time.”

Steve swallows, and it tastes bitter. “Peggy, things are different. I have Bucky now.”

“If you think I’m going to let the two of you go running around unsupervised you must be out of your bloody mind!” Peggy rifles through her parchments and extracts a form, taking up her quill and quickly filling it out.

“Peggy…” Steve pleads.

“There.” She pushes the parchment towards him. “You’re on assignment.”

“What?” Steve utters dumbly.

“That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?” Peggy snaps. “To work for Shield? Congratulations. You’ll meet with Agent Romanov at Trafalgar Square an hour before dusk. Please, for once, do as you are told, and let me get on with my work.”

She waves him away, and Steve picks up the form and takes a step back. “Peggy…”

She points her quill at Bucky. “And get a collar for him, for crying out loud.”

“C’mon Steve,” Bucky murmurs, taking him by the arm and pulling him toward the door.

Steve walks around Nelson’s column, pigeons trotting back and forth around him, for what feels like the hundredth time in the last hour. He looks up at where Bucky is napping, curled up between the front paws of one of the four great lion statues.

“She’s not coming,” Bucky mumbles, his eyes still firmly shut.

Steve hisses at him to be quiet, and continues his pacing. The birds scatter as a hawk flies down and lands on one of the lions. It fluffs out its wings and starts to preen.

“You’re wasting your time,” Bucky stretches, reaching up to pat the muzzle of the stone lion.

“Witches,” he mutters, loud enough for Steve to hear.

“The orders were to meet here, and here we stay until we’ve been met,” Steve says flatly.

“Consider yourself met,” an unfamiliar voice whispers in Steve’s ear.

He spins around, his hand raised to form a shield, and comes face to face with Natasha Romanov.

She is dressed in black, blending in with the deep shadows, her long, elegantly curled hair tumbling over her shoulders.

“Miss Romanov?” Steve lowers his hand.

“Rogers,” she replies, and looks up at Bucky sitting between the lions paws. “This one yours?”

“Yes,” Steve nods. “This is Bucky.”

Natasha tips her head to the hawk sitting on the other lion. “That’s Clint. Don’t rely on him for anything.”

“Hey!” the bird chirps and flutters down from his perch. His legs stretch impossibly as he comes
down to land, his clawed feet becoming boots, his outstretched wings transforming into muscular arms. His feathers mould around him into chevron patterned clothing as he changes form. By the time his feet touch the ground he looks like a man, the bow and quiver of arrows on his back the only clue that he was ever anything different.

Bucky’s ears prick forward and Clint points at a finger at him. “Don’t go getting any ideas, kitty cat.”

Natasha snorts, and gestures for Steve to follow. “Your carriage awaits.”

“T’m not getting in a box with a cat!” Clint yelps as Bucky drops down from the lions lap and lands at Steve’s side, silent and predatory.

Natasha murmurs something in a low, guttural tongue, and Clint scratches his short, scruffy blond hair.

“Fine,” he mumbles grudgingly, and follows after her.

The carriage is painted black, and bears no coat of arms. The driver is another familiar, his eyes beetle-black and far too numerous for comfort. Natasha leans out the carriage window and clicks at him, and he shakes the reins, urging the horses into movement.

Bucky hunches up in the far corner, his knees tucked under his chin and his bare feet on the seat. Clint sits opposite him, fiddling nervously with his quiver of arrows.

Steve is the first to break the silence. “What’s the assignment?”

For a long minute Natasha doesn’t answer. Clint taps her on the leg, and makes an odd series of one-handed gestures. Natasha’s mouth twists, half irritated, half amused, and she pushes his hand away.

“We are investigating an abandoned factory in Battersea.” She scowls. “Or at least I was investigating, before Madame Carter had me play nanny.”

Bucky’s ears twist back and he growls softly, his tail thrashing back and forth.

“Yes, fine.” She shakes out her hair. “You’ve heard of the Saboteurs?”

“I have,” Steve nods. “Descraters who have been breaking into abbeys and cathedrals and destroying the altar stones.”

The attacks are infrequent, but devastating. Altars take a long time to craft, and the ones that have stood in the country's great places of power have been there for centuries. So far there have been no clues of who the Saboteurs are, where they are based, and where they will strike next.

“This building is rumoured to be a safehouse,” Natasha gathers up her hair into a neat bun, fastening it in place with a handful of fine silver pins. “We’re checking it out.”

“And if we find the Saboteurs?” Steve asks eagerly.

“You retreat,” Natasha says, a hairpin between her teeth. “The assignment is reconnaissance only. You do not engage.”

Steve opens his mouth to argue, but Natasha stares him down.

“To hell with this, Steve. Let’s go. Let's go home.” Bucky plucks at Steve’s sleeve, his claws punching little holes in Steve’s clothes. “Not that this isn’t all tremendous fun, playing spies with a spider and her harem.”

Steve murmurs at Bucky to be quiet and glances at Natasha’s Witch’s Mark, a red spider on a black background. No doubt the familiar driving the coach is a spider too.

“You got a lot of slaves, miss?” Bucky asks with bared teeth.

“Bucky, that’s enough,” Steve says sharply. They’re on an assignment, the last thing he needs is Bucky kicking off, especially in the presence of a senior Agent. One who could get them thrown out of Shield altogether.


“Fucking Witches,” Bucky snarls. “Birdy here not enough for-”

Steve clamps his hand over Bucky’s mouth. He yowls and bites down on the palm of Steve’s hand, drawing blood. Steve snatches his hand away with a curse, cradling it to his chest.

“Buck?” Steve whispers, horrified.
“Don’t you fucking touch me!” Bucky spits at him, and retreats into the corner of the carriage, as if he could make himself smaller.

Steve pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and dabs at the spots of blood welling up in his hand. “My apologies,” he mutters stiffly. “We’ve not been together long.” “You’ll move on,” Natasha says, giving Bucky a pitying look. “The first ones never last.”

The carriage stops outside a warehouse on the far side of the river. Clint climbs out first. He runs forward, changing shape and soaring into the air, circling high above the building before spiralling down again. “That’s the all clear,” Natasha murmurs as Clint lands on a nearby fencepost and preens his feathers.

She climbs out of the carriage, clicking an order to the driver, who responds with a scratching sound that crawls up Steve’s spine.

He turns to Bucky, and for a moment considers telling him to stay where he is. His hand still aches, though the bleeding has stopped. “I’ll not ask you to come if you don’t want to,” Steve tells him. “How fucking magnanimous,” Bucky growls, wrapping his arms around his drawn up knees. Steve sighs and climbs out of the carriage. “Stay safe,” he murmurs, and pushes the door closed.

“You’re better than this,” Bucky is barely visible in the gloom of the carriage as Steve looks in, just the silver reflection of his eyes. “I won’t be long,” he promises.

Steve follows Natasha over the locked gate and down the path to the main entrance. She taps at the door handle, reciting a spell under her breath. Steve can hear the click of tumblers twisting in the lock mechanism, and the door cracks open.

“You check downstairs,” Natasha murmurs. “I’ll go up.” Steve nods, and she slips through the open door. Steve checks their surroundings and follows suit, pulling the door close behind him, but not letting the lock catch.

It’s dark inside, the weak moonlight that filters through the windows only making the shadows look deeper. The floor is coated in a fine layer of dust, and Steve has to swallow the urge to sneeze. Natasha finds the stairs, and without another word starts climbing up. Steve turns left, and starts to search.

He finds room after room of empty shelves, of storage rooms long abandoned. There is a pungent aroma of damp and decay in the air, of stale air and abandonment.

He thinks of Bucky waiting outside, huddled up in the carriage and looking almost afraid. Steve returns to the main entrance. There is nothing downstairs, no sign of people having been there in years. He looks at the stairs leading up, and wonders what could be taking Natasha so long. He taps his foot, disturbing the layers of dust and staring absently as the soft motes float up, dancing in the shaft of dim light.

She could have gotten into trouble. Been injured or captured by something stronger than she was. She could be lost, or ensnared in some sort of enchantment.

Steve slowly convinces himself that he’s doing the right thing, and creeps silently up the stairs. Upstairs the rooms are filled with cages. There are birdcages, delicate wire mesh domes, their doors hanging open. Wooden crates, bound in cold iron. Earthenware jars line the shelves, jumbled together with copper bottles and jars crusted with brittle wax seals.

There is a humming nearby, a murmur in a guttural tongue. Steve creeps silently forward, listening closely. An incantation, the voice familiar, the words strange.

In the next room, among the empty crates and cages he finds Natasha crouched on the dusty floor, drawing a Magic circle in chalk. Four hairpins mark the compass points of the circle, and in the dull light Steve can see the glowing spells worked into the metal. In the center of the circle is a dusty, battered matchbox. Steve hides himself behind an overturned desk, holding his breath to
keep from making a sound, as Natasha finishes her incantation.
Steve knows that spell, he can taste it is the back of his throat, prickling like a mouthful of thistles.
A binding.
Natasha slides the matchbox open, and a large, metallic blue beetle climbs out. It scuttles in a circle around the pentacle, carefully checking the chalk inscriptions for breaks in the line or mistakes in the spell. When it finds none it returns to the box, clicking its pincers at Natasha expectantly.
She whispers in her strange tongue, the words heavy with power, and brushes the beetle's shell with the tip of her finger. At her touch a blood red spiderweb design forms on the beetle's back. It chitters, and seems to sink down with the weight of the marking.
“You can come out, Rogers,” Natasha looks over her shoulder with a smirk. “I know you're there.”
Steve straightens up, refusing to let himself feel guilty for spying. “What the hell are you doing?”
“My assignment,” Natasha picks up the beetle, settling it in the palm of her hand.
“Our assignment is to check out the building for signs of Saboteurs,” Steve grits his teeth. “If we find any sign we retreat.”
“No, that was your assignment,” Natasha straightens up and scuffs the circle with her boot, destroying it.
“And what was yours?” Steve stalks forward, and Natasha whips around to face him, dropping into a defensive stance.
“Look around you, Steve,” she says slowly. “What do you see?”
He doesn't risk taking his eyes off her. “Cages. Empty cages.”
“Not all of them,” she looks down at her beetle with something like affection. “They forgot about the little ones.”
There is a birdcage, its wire dome crumpled, in the corner of the room, lying on the floor like it had been thrown against the wall. Steve walks slowly over to it, keeping Natasha in his field of vision, and takes a closer look. There are symbols carved into the metal floor of the cage, tiny letters etched onto the bars.
Bindings. Spells for concealment. A lingering trace of Magic, old and powerful and afraid.
“Familiars,” Steve utters softly. “They were hoarding familiars.”
“We didn’t get here in time.” Natasha says bitterly. “They’ve been moved on.”
“There must have been dozens.” Steve shakes his head. “Where were they all from? What were they doing here?”
“It’s getting harder to find familiars. And over the last ten, fifteen years they’ve been disappearing.” Natasha rubs her thumb over her beetle's shell. “At first we thought they were dying. That they were another casualty in the war overseas.”
Steve steps away from the battered cage. “There’s a black market for them?”
Natasha shrugs and picks up her pins one by one. “Could be. Could be solitary practitioners, buying themselves a way into the Craft. Could be a smuggling operation, taking them abroad.”
“You’ve seen this before?” Steve feels a swell of nausea in the back of his throat, the bitter taste of bile. Familiars stacked up in cages, in jars, in bottles.
She straightens up, giving the room a last check. “This is the third storeroom I’ve managed to track down. Never caught them.” She slips the beetle into her pocket. “They were in a damn hurry.”
“And left you a little souvenir,” Steve says bitterly.
“Mad I got to it first?” Natasha tucks her pins into her curled hair. “You looking for a change of pace, Rogers?”
Steve thinks of Bucky waiting in the carriage, and the world seems to tilt on its axis.
Ten years he had been missing, since his last Master died. Ten years to learn to hate Witches. Steve feels ice trickle down his spine. Bucky had turned aggressive in the carriage the moment Battersea had been mentioned. He refused to follow Steve into the warehouse not out of spite, but fear. Something had scared him, scared him enough to turn on his own Master. Steve looks around the room, and wonders which of the crates had been his.
And Steve left him alone out there.
“I have to go,” he stutters to Natasha. He sees her lips move, but doesn’t hear a word she says. He hurries back through the route he came in, dodging around crates and cages and cracked bell jars. He skids to a halt at the top of the stairs before taking the steps two at a time, the last half-dozen in a single leap and stumbling, slamming into a wall. He stumbles over to the front door and shoves it open.

Outside it is still and silent. The carriage is where they left it, the black-eyed driver watching over the nodding horses. Clint is still perched on the gatepost, his head tucked under his wing. Steve leaves the door open and walks quickly down the driveway, too worried to care about stealth. He climbs over the gate and lands in the soft mud at the side of the road. Clint stirs, ruffling his feathers and raising his head, blinking slowly as Steve approaches the carriage and calls out softly.

“Bucky?” Steve whispers through the open window. He can’t make out anything in the darkened interior, and turns to look up and down the deserted street. What if they had been waiting? What if they were still nearby? Would he know if Bucky had been taken?

“Bucky?” he calls again, a little louder, and hears movement in the far corner of the carriage. Bucky’s eyes catch what little light there is and reflect them back. The sight would be unsettling if it wasn’t such a relief.

“What?” he mutters, failing to hide his fear behind churlishness.

Steve wants to reach out to him. Wants to climb into the carriage and wrap Bucky up in his arms, and never let him go. But the last time they had touched was in anger, so he grips the ledge of the open window and sags in relief.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says earnestly. “I shouldn’t have brought you here.” Bucky closes his eyes, and Steve risks opening the door and climbing in. He sits down in his seat and Bucky creeps over to his side, seeking warmth and reassurance. Steve raises his arm hesitantly, and Bucky presses up against him, tucking his head under Steve’s chin as Steve carefully lowers his arm, resting it gingerly across Bucky’s shoulders.

“Were you…?” Steve pauses, uncertain how to continue. The horror of it all twisting in his throat until every breath is painful to draw in. “There were cages…”

“Didn’t know where I was at first. Kept me in a casket. Cold iron. Dark. Couldn’t see,” Bucky mumbles into the collar of Steve’s robe. “Don’t know how I got out. Just that… you called me, and I came.”

Steve cups his hand around the base of Bucky’s skull, fingers moving gently through his hair. “Who did this?” he whispers fiercely. “I’ll find them, I’ll make them pay.” Bucky digs his fingers into Steve’s robe, sharp claws piercing the cloth. “Witches.”

Natasha climbs into the carriage, and Bucky flinches, his claws tearing through Steve’s robe. Steve tightens his hold, and glares at Natasha, daring her to comment.

“I’m sorry,” she gives him a condescending smile. “Are we interrupting?”

Clint, still in hawk form, is nestled in her arms. He nips at her fingers and she strokes his head, smoothing down his ruffled feathers.

“We have to go back to Whitehall,” Steve insists. “Tell Peggy what’s happening.”

Natasha snorts and raps her knuckles on the carriage ceiling. “You think she doesn’t already know?”

The driver taps twice in return and shakes his reins, spurring the horses into movement.

“But this isn’t an opportunistic thief, this is systematic. People, Witches, are hoarding familiars,” Steve thinks of the Book of Shadows in the Abbey, the dwindling rows of names. “We have to—” “Rogers,” Natasha interrupts. “You are going home. I will make my report with Director Carter.” “Yes, but—” “I will include what we found regarding the familiars, and the Director will no doubt question the one I retrieved.” “The familiars are being kidnapped, Agent Romanov,” Steve snaps. “They’re being imprisoned.
“This is important.”
“So are the attacks on the Abbeys,” Natasha counters. “So is Hydra lobbying parliament for restrictions in use of Magic. So is the war.” She sits back, soothing the hawk in her lap. “I understand your concerns, Rogers. I really do. But Shield are aware of it, and are doing everything they can.”

Steve looks down at Bucky, tucked up against him, his face hidden in the torn folds of his robe. “Chelsea,” he says finally. “We live in Chelsea.”

Natasha takes no pleasure in his defeat, and raps on the carriage wall, calling out the new destination to the driver.

Steve looks out the carriage window, at the river running alongside them, and says nothing more than a handful of directions until they pull up outside the house. “Agent Romanov,” he says stiffly, and ushers Bucky out of the carriage. He’s still far too quiet, though he no longer clings to Steve’s side. “Rogers,” she tips her head to him. Clint lets out a friendly little chirp.

“Why a hawk,” Steve asks suddenly, closing the door and watching Bucky walk up to the front door and let himself in. “It’s not exactly in keeping with the rest of your… menagerie.”

Natasha knocks on the carriage wall, and the horses kick up their hooves. “He was the first,” she calls as the carriage pulls away.

Steve waits until they are long gone before he goes inside.

He checks on Bucky, finding him asleep in the armchair in his workroom. Steve adds more wood to the fire and covers him up with a blanket, tucking in the folds of cloth around his shoulders, before going to his room to change out of his shredded robe.

He goes down to the kitchen and clears a space before he sets to work on his shield.

It takes several days, but Steve comes up with a plan.

If Shield is too stretched dealing with political intrigue and missing familiars, then Steve will find the missing books himself. If he can prove himself to Peggy, if he can bring them back, maybe it will sway her into allowing him to take part in missions. Actual missions where he can be of use, not just skulking around in abandoned warehouses.

Steve pushes away the spellbook laid open on his desk and rubs his eyes. He glances at Bucky, leafing through his copy of _The Master Book of Herbalism_ and twirling a pencil around in his fingers.

After what happened in Battersea, Steve is determined to work alone. If asked, he would claim it was because he cannot trust Bucky to go along with him. In truth, he understands now why Bucky bears no love for Witches or the Craft, imprisoned all those years. If Steve were to release him, breaks the bond between them, then Bucky could be captured again. As long as he is with Steve, he is in some way safe. But Steve will not ask Bucky for assistance, or take him on assignment again. He could find another familiar, there are Witches like Romanov and Secretary Pierce with more than one. But the thought sits heavily in him, like a piece of lead in his stomach.

“What’s with the face,” Bucky says suddenly, breaking Steve’s grim train of thought.

“What?” Steve asks dumbly.

“That face,” Bucky points his pencil at Steve. “The one like you got the world on your shoulders.” Steve shakes his head, dismissing the question, and turns the page of his grimoire, running his finger down the lists of spells and invocations.

“You could be an apothecary,” Bucky makes a note in the herbal. “You’re good with plants.” “Thank you, Bucky” Steve mutters absently. “But I already have a profession.”

“There are other professions,” Bucky says, his voice low.

Steve loses his place in the index of spells and returns to the top of the page. “As what? A bookbinder? A gardener?”

“Better than this,” Bucky utters sourly, and Steve is not in the mood to have this argument again. “I am not going to be a librarian, or an agronomist or a… a baker,” Steve says forcefully. “I am a
Witch. I worked hard to become one, I have dedicated my life to it, and I’m damn good at it.” He fights to keep his voice even. “I know you don’t like it, but this isn’t about you or me.”
“Sure it’s not,” Bucky says derisively. “You’ve got nothing to prove.”
“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Steve sits up, giving up on his reading.
“There are people out there dying every day to keep us safe,” Steve slams the book shut. “I will not do any less than them.”
Bucky flinches, and sinks deeper into the chair. Steve sighs and gets up, his chair scraping loudly across the floorboards. He picks up the book and heads for the door, the light is better in the kitchen anyway.
“Fucking Witches,” Bucky growls. “Bunch of fleas fighting over who owns the dog you live on.”
He tears out a page from the book and throws it into the fire. “Bleeding the damn thing dry.”

Bucky wakes up with a start, the book in his lap sliding to the floor with a dull thump.
What woke him?
An ache in his chest, just under his third rib. He rubs at it absently, the ball of his thumb pressing against his bare skin, and yawns until his jaw gives a satisfying crack. He climbs out of his chair, raising his arms over his head and stretching, his tail shivering and quirking at the tip. The pain in his chest worsens, and he flinches, lowering his arms again.
Steve isn’t in the Workroom. The scent of him is faint, lingering, he’s been gone for a few hours at least.
Bucky tucks his thumbs into the waistband of his trousers, and listens to the sounds of the house, his ears pricking forward.
He can hear the cinders in the fireplace settling, the wind blowing down the chimney stirring through the ashes. He can hear the starlings on the roof, their rattling chatter barely audible to human ears. There are mice scratching under the floorboards.
Bucky scratches his hip absently. He should do something about that. Maybe leave a couple in Steve’s bed, or that locked drawer full of pictures that Steve thinks he doesn’t know about.
But no Steve.

Bucky pads downstairs, claws clicking on the tiled floors, and looks in the kitchen. Steve has been baking again, and there is a tray of honey cakes on top of the cast iron stove. Bucky presses his thumb to one of the cakes, sticky and scented with ginger. Cold.
He picks it up and eats it in two bites, licking the traces of syrup from his fingers as he wanders over to the kitchen table. Steve’s books have been left open, stacked in haphazard piles. Bucky pushes them apart, reading through the spells while he considers eating another cake.
Location spells. Spells to find what is lost. Spells to reveal hidden knowledge.
He wanders back to the stove for another cake and then to a chalk circle on the floor, spilling crumbs as he goes. Candles, objects representing the four elements, and the four compass points. In the middle a censer, the contents cooling. A spell had been performed, not too long ago. He bends over the circle and reads the inscriptions, a spell to find something stolen, and in the center of the circle a charred piece of parchment.
Bucky can make out a few words in Latin.
His ribs ache again, and Bucky straightens up, frowning.
The pain isn’t his.
He touches the center of his chest, and takes a moment to feel.
He has no injuries, his body is whole and unharmed. But his heart beats too fast, and there is an ache in his lungs, as if he has been running. His right hand itches, as though he were working a
spell. Bucky frowns. *What the-*

There is a sudden, sharp pain in his gut, and Bucky doubles over, too shocked to even cry out. His mouth opens, but he makes no sound, gasping for breath. The itching in his hand flares up, an intense burst of cold, crackling flame that is gone a second later. Bucky drops to his knees, his sweat-soaked palms skidding on the tiled floor, and screams.

*Steve.*

He can barely stand, the pain in his gut so terrible, like teeth and claws digging into his flesh. Bucky stumbles to the stairs, his eyes stinging with tears, sweat soaking his hair.

Something’s happened to Steve. He’s done something stupid, gone looking for something he should have left well alone. The pain flares up again, this time in his side, and Bucky collapses on the stairs. There is a trickle of flame along the palm of his hand, and he feels his mouth fill with blood.

Steve, what the hell have you done? Where are you?

Bucky swallows, tasting copper and bile, and he bares his teeth. Pain rips through him again, and there is no answering pulse of magic.

Steve is dying.

Bucky can feel him dying.

He yowls, digging his claws into the wooden steps, scoring deep gouges in the varnished wood, and digs deep into the center of himself, finds that shimmering red thread that ties them together, and pulls.

It’s not enough to bring Steve back to him. He’s too weak, the bond between them withered. Bucky focuses on that thread, waits for the sting of teeth again, and sends a line of golden flame after it. He can almost hear the howl of pain, and bares his teeth in a vicious grin.

He scrambles up the stairs on his hands and feet, moving as fast as he can while the pain subsides.

*Where the fuck are you, Steve?*

Steve can’t answer him, he wouldn’t even know how if he could. Bucky never taught him. Bucky shakes his hair out of his eyes and stumbles into Steve’s bedroom. Never taught him defence, never taught him attack. How to move through the shadows, how to call for help.

Steve’s heart kicks erratically in Bucky’s chest.

*I failed him.*

Bucky claps his hand over his mouth to keep from throwing up. Steve never hurt him, never asked anything of him. Never punished him, no matter what he did. Never once acted on the desire he felt for Bucky.

And Bucky had never told him they would have been welcomed.

Bucky shakes his head, his tail thrashing back and forth. He can fix this, he can fix it. He just needs to find Steve, bring him home, keep him safe.

He feels along that red thread between them, but it is too fragile. Bound together in fear and blood, and Bucky had never thought to strengthen it, every act of bitter defiance only making it weaker. He searches the room in a panic. He needs something, something that Steve treasures, something that defines him. Something that can used to track him down.

Bucky searches through Steve’s room, finding nothing of value, nothing of significance. The only things he treasured were his books and his plants, and Bucky destroyed them.

That’s not true, Bucky admits to himself as he searches through the bedside table. *He treasured you.*

His hand closes around a small round box. There is a spell there, old and worn, but still strong. Bucky cracks the metal box open. A compass, inside the lid is an old picture of a fair haired woman with Steve’s bright eyes and defiant tilt to her chin.

Bucky sits down on the edge of the bed, and sags with relief. He can find Steve. He can bring him home.

“Come on,” Bucky hisses, his voice ragged.
The needle wobbles back and forth, and settles. The room shimmers and fades around him, and Bucky follows where the compass leads.

The world shifts back into focus and Bucky finds himself standing in the West India dockyards, where the river Thames loops back on itself. He wrinkles his nose. The Isle of Dogs, it’s known as locally, the river surrounds it on three sides, though it is still landlocked on the north facing side. Strewn with dockyards and warehouses, it's a good place to hide things, stolen goods and secrets. Bucky wonders how many bodies have found their way into the river here.

He follows the compass to one of the newer warehouses. High up in one of the open windows an owl perches, it’s feathers white as snow. It lets out a soft hoot, and there is an answering howl of wolves. Steve’s heart kicks in Bucky’s chest.

It’s been too long since Bucky changed his form. He scolds himself for becoming too soft, too complacent, and bares his teeth in a low growl. His arms twist and shorten, patches of brindled fur sprouting across his skin. His legs draw in, his feet lengthening as he drops onto all fours. His spine snaps into place and he snarls as his nose pulls forward, his skull flattening and stretching like elastic as his muzzle forms. He thrashes his tail and yowls, and up above the owl lets out a screech and flies off into the night.

Bucky prowls forward, his body lithe and strong, and he leaps up the building, digging his claws into the red brick and tearing great gouges in the mortar. He scales the wall, searching for a way in, climbing up and up until he finds a shuttered window. The glass offers no resistance, and he smashes through, landing heavily on the floor in an empty storeroom. His claws click on the wooden floors, and his ears twist back and forth, his whiskers twitching.

Three familiars, bound with iron and silver. Wolves. On the floor above, snarling to each other as they circle their prey.


Up. Up the flight of stairs and along the hallway, past the wooden crates filled with dusty old books and tattered scrolls. Following the scent of blood and fear, and the beating of another heart in his breast.

There is a wooden door, shut and bolted, but it does not stop him. He crouches low, flexing his powerful muscles, and punches through, pinewood splintering and cracking around him as he lands lightly on four paws.

The wolves howl and charge, and Bucky snarls, ducking down low.

The first wolf lunges, and Bucky slashes it across the face, claws raking across its muzzle. The wolf wails and stumbles back. The second wolf barrels into Bucky’s unguarded flank, rolling him onto his back and snapping at his throat. Bucky thrusts up his hind legs, digging into the wolf’s stomach and tearing open its guts. The wolf moans and collapses, its legs kicking weakly as its blood spills across the floor. It sighs, as if in relief, and its body fades from the world of men.

The first wolf takes advantage of Bucky still lying on his back and attacks, biting savagely at his stomach. In the far corner of the room, where the smell of blood is strongest, there is a soft cry of distress.

Steve.

Bucky grabs the wolf’s head with his front paws and bites down on its skull, crushing it in his powerful jaws. The wolf twitches and slumps to the ground, its teeth still snagged in Bucky’s fur. And then it is no more.

Bucky twists around and gets to his feet. Between him and his prize stands the last familiar. He growls, stalking forward, and the wolf refuses to back down. It snarls, threads of saliva dripping from its bloody teeth.

Bucky doesn’t waste any more time, and pounces, digging his teeth into the wolf’s neck and tearing out its throat.
It opens its mouth, as if to whine, and fades from sight.

Bucky turns to the human curled up on the floor.

*Steve.*

He approaches slowly, and Steve lifts his head, his eyes widening in fear. “No,” he whimpers, and raises his right hand. There is the faintest spark at his fingertips, and the spell dies before it can catch and burn.

He’s alive. Wounded, badly wounded, but he’s alive.

Bucky raises up onto his hind legs and wraps his paws around Steve’s shoulders. He cries out in alarm, grabbing handfuls of fur at Bucky’s flanks and trying desperately to push him away. Bucky gently eases him down onto the floor, rubbing his cheek against Steve’s face until he stops struggling.

“Bucky?” he whispers.

Bucky yowls softly and presses his nose to Steve’s throat.

“Bucky,” Steve gasps, his grip on Bucky’s fur loosening. He strokes gently, moving his hands up to cradle Bucky’s muzzle.

Bucky pushes into his touch, tilting his head down until Steve hands reach his ears. He rubs the velvety fur gently, stroking up to the dark brown tufts at the tips, and Bucky purrs.


Bucky closes his eyes as Steve scratches at his fur, and Bucky’s heart skips a beat. Beautiful, he said. There’s blood in his teeth and fire in his blood and Steve called him beautiful.

Bucky sits back on his haunches, pulling out of Steve’s embrace, though it’s the last thing he wants to do. His Master is hurt, and there’s little he can do to help him in this form. He bows his head, letting the change come over him, and wonders if Steve will still think so highly of him when he sees Bucky transform.

His bones pop and crack, and his muscles ache, snapping back into place. Bucky tips his head from side to side, cracking his neck, and feels the last of his fur fade away.

The shadows in the furthest corners of the room he draws around his legs, forming trousers the blue of Steve’s robes, from the dust motes in the air he creates a white shirt.

He kneels down in front of Steve, still curled up on the floor, his robe soaked in his own blood. “Come on, idiot,” Bucky says softly. “Let’s get you home. Try not to throw up on me, alright?”

Steve laughs, then whimpers and presses his hands to his stomach. He curses softly, and Bucky gently wraps both arms around him, pulling him until he’s sat upright.

Steve stares at the room, and the places where the familiars had been.

“You… killed them,” he whispers.

“They were killing you,” Bucky says shortly.

“But they were… they were your own kind.”

Bucky pulls Steve’s arm around his shoulders, and carefully pulls him to his feet. “They were bound in blood and iron,” he says flatly. “I set them free.”

Steve makes a soft, bitten-off sound of pain, leaning into Bucky’s side. “You didn’t have to. Not for me.”

“Hush,” Bucky pushes the palm of his hand to the worst of the wounds, sending threads of gold light across the teeth marks and the tears, knitting them together. “Yes I did. Better for them to die and be free than to live in chains.”

Steve makes no more argument, leaning into Bucky and shivering as his wounds begin to heal. “This will feel… strange,” Bucky warns him. “And I mean it about not being sick all over me.”

Steve huffs. “I’ll try my best.”

Bucky takes a step, and Steve lets out a pained sound as the warehouse fades away, and they are standing in the dockyard. Bucky takes another step, and the Tower of London passes by in a blur. Another step brings them in sight of St Paul’s Cathedral. Another, the Houses of Parliament. The next brings them to the Workroom, and Bucky sits Steve down in his armchair, tucking throw
cushions around him to make him comfortable.
“Shh,” Bucky murmurs, brushing the back of his hand across Steve’s brow. “You did well. Just
close your eyes and rest a moment.”

Bucky fetches supplies, pulling a small table up alongside the armchair and piling it with bandages
and jars of ointment. He lights an oil lamp and puts it on the table with the rest, the soft amber light
burnishing Steve’s hair and skin with gold. He fills a basin with warm water and sets it at Steve’s
feet before rousing him.
“Come on, Stevie,” he murmurs as he cuts away the sash binding Steve’s robe closed. The fabric is
ragged and stiff with dried blood, and beyond repair. Bucky eases the robe off Steve’s shoulders,
coaxing him to sit forward and making soothing noises as he mumbles in pain, stripping the ragged
cloth free.
Underneath Steve is bare chested, and Bucky kneels at his feet and dips a clean cloth into the
water bowl, wringing it out before tending to the wounds.
Steve bears the pain in silence, watching with heavy lidded eyes as Bucky rubs salve into his skin.
“It’s okay,” Steve murmurs, brushing his fingers through Bucky’s hair. “We’re okay.”
Bucky bites his tongue and winds a bandage around Steve’s chest, smoothing the crepe flat as he
works.
“How did you find me?”
Bucky tucks the end of the bandage in place and sits back on his heels. He chews on his lip before
answering.
“I went into your room. I’m sorry.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the compass, holding
it out, balanced on the palm of his hand.
“My compass,” Steve doesn’t reach out to take it, just blinks slowly at him.
“I knew you were hurting,” Bucky’s mouth pulls down at the corners, his ears twisting back. “I had
to find you.”
Steve smiles at him, weary and warm, and reaches out. He doesn’t take the compass, but gently
closes Bucky’s fingers over the tin.
“Keep it,” Steve says. “In case I get lost again.”
Bucky lets out a soft whine and scrambles onto the chair, curling up against Steve, trying to make
himself as small as possible.
Steve lets out a weak huff of amusement and wraps his arms around Bucky, holding him steady.
“You’re too big to sit in my lap,” Steve flinches as Bucky slips arms around his waist. “Big
damned puss-cat.”
“Idiot,” Bucky whispers, and presses his mouth to Steve’s.
The kiss is over before it has even begin, a damp, furtive touch of lips before Bucky rests his head
on Steve’s shoulder, his tail curling around them.
“Don’t ever do that again,” Bucky mutters, sounding small and churlish.
“I won’t,” Steve promises, and strokes his hand down Bucky’s back.

Bucky sighs and huddles up against him, careful of the bandages.
“Your remind me of James,” Steve smiles to himself.
“Old boyfriend?” Bucky’s hands twitch, though he would deny any jealousy, and Steve lets out a
grunt of discomfort.
“No, nothing like that,” Steve huffs. “When I was little, after my Ma died, I met a cat. He used to
curl up on my lap like this.”

Bucky makes a curious sound, and Steve sinks back into the cushions.
“You’d like him, he hated Witches.” Steve’s smile fades. “Then one day he disappeared. I looked
everywhere, put up posters, offered rewards. Never saw him again.”

Bucky remembers.
Remembers the taste of eel pie, the nights spent curled up together for warmth. He remembers the
boy who came to him when he was weak and defenseless, who wanted so desperately to be a
Witch.
He remembers the call, the Witch’s command that he could not fight, and the boy he didn’t want to leave. The boy he was bound to, by blood and oath.
He remembers the summoning circle, and the binding that would not hold him. The cage he was thrown into. A cage he could not escape, not until his bonded called for him.
Steve’s hands fall still, and Bucky can feel his heart quicken.
“James?”
Chapter Summary

Steve takes the grimoire from Bucky’s lap and puts it back on the shelf, careful not to disturb his sleep. Steve watches him sleep for a moment, carefully brushing back a loose strand of hair that has fallen across his face. Bucky snuffles, his ears flickering, and settles again. It is a terrible thing, wanting. And Steve wants so much that he fears his heart might shatter.

Chapter Notes

Thank you as always to Eidheann for beta reading. Beta readers are the unsung heroes of fandom, and it would be a poorer place without them kicking our clumsy words into shape and pointing out where the story goes a wandering. Thank you to Trish and Britt, who are amazing people and every day I am grateful to have them in my life. Special thanks to the amazing Moony for letting me take the idea of Lynx Bucky and run off shrieking with it, and for the stunning artwork.

Want to see the same three pictures of Sebastian Stan’s impossibly pretty face posted over and over? Find me on Tumblr.

Steve looks up the limestone steps to Whitehall and shifts from foot to foot, the hem of his new robe sweeping back and forth over the cobblestones. “Stop fussing,” Bucky mumbles. “We’re not in trouble.”
Steve glances over at Bucky, standing with his back straight and his ears facing forward. Under his heavy wool coat he is dressed in plain black trousers and a crisp white shirt, unbuttoned at the throat to reveal Steve’s mark hanging around his neck. He looks like the kind of familiar that Steve had always wanted. Steve hates it.
He hates the way Bucky stands, shoulders back, hands clasped at the base of his spine. He hates the way Bucky bows his head in the presence of other Witches. Bucky looks up and meets his eye, the corner of his mouth twitching up. “We’re not in trouble, are we?”
Suddenly he looks like Bucky again. His Bucky, and Steve can’t help but smile. “We’re in so much trouble, pal.”
Bucky tilts his head towards the imposing white stones. “Get this over with?”
“Yeah.” Steve nods, taking in a deep breath and squaring his shoulders. “Face the firing squad.”
They walk up the steps side by side, and Bucky lowers his eyes demurely as the security guards approach. Steve gives them his details, and clenches his jaw when their gazes linger on the collar around Bucky’s neck, at the red and silver pendant that rests at the base of his throat.
The guards send them on their way, and they walk through the maze of corridors, finally coming to a halt at Peggy’s door.
Steve stares at the cartwheel emblazoned on the door and chews on the inside of his cheek.
“They’ll kick us out of Shield,” he mutters.
Bucky tuts and pulls at Steve’s sleeve, tugging insistently until Steve turns to face him.
“Good,” he mutters, taking a moment to smooth down the folds of Steve’s robe. “Best off out of all this.”
Steve doesn’t have the heart to argue, and instead waits for Bucky to stop fussing. “How do I look?”
“Damned ugly,” Bucky smiles, flashing a sharp tooth.
Steve huffs, and raises a fist to knock on the door.
They wait in silence, Bucky gently bumping his shoulder into Steve’s, until the door opens and Angie looks out.
“Hey Stevie,” she says brightly, before giving Bucky an approving look. “Well don’t you scrub up nice?”
Bucky opens his mouth and snaps his teeth together in a vicious little click that makes Angie flinch, and Steve has to cough loudly to cover his laugh.
Angie sniffs, unimpressed, and lets them in.
Steve murmurs a thank you, and looks around Peggy’s office, finding her seated at her desk.
Bucky gives Steve a gentle push and he walks forward, pulling out the chair opposite her and sitting down. Bucky stands behind him, one hand in the back of the chair, the tips of his fingers brushing the nape of Steve’s neck.
“Angie, would you fetch us some tea?” Peggy asks.
“Sure thing, boss,” Angie cocks her head towards Bucky. “You gonna give me a hand, kitty-cat?”
“I’m sure you can manage a tea tray,” Bucky says sharply, tightening his grip on Steve’s chair.
Angie looks to Peggy, who gives her the slightest nod.
“Alright, on my lonesome it is then,” Angie grouses, and slips out the door.
Peggy straightens the papers on her desk, and Steve leans back a little, just enough to feel Bucky’s fingers against his skin again.
“Starting with the matter of your running off on half-cocked schemes without authorisation,” Peggy glances at Bucky. “Or securing additional support.”
“He had me,” Bucky mutters, though Peggy chooses to ignore him. Steve doesn’t.
“Shield agents follow strict protocol,” Peggy says firmly. “You do not go taking matters into your own hands. If you cannot follow procedure, you clearly do not belong in our ranks.”
She pulls a parchment from her stack, and Steve recognises his own handwriting on it.
“However,” Peggy voice softens. “Following on from the report of your investigation, we were able to retrieve a number of stolen books, several of which were first editions and of great Magical significance.”
Peggy sits back in her chair and sighs. “Though I cannot endorse your methods, I cannot argue with the results.”
Steve lowers his head. He remembers sitting at the kitchen table, still wrapped in bandages, and writing out the report while Bucky made tea. He remembers Bucky stirring sugar into his cup, the spoon ringing against the ceramic, and saying nothing as Steve carefully omitted any mention of almost dying.
If there was a perfect time to bring it up, and end Steve’s career, it would be now.
“Do either of you have anything further to add?” Peggy asks quietly.
“I do,” Bucky says, and Steve feels his heart miss a beat.
“Go on, Buchanan,” Peggy picks up her quill and dips it in her inkwell, listening patiently.
“One familiar got away,” Bucky says. “A white owl.”
“Did you see any identifiers on this familiar?” the sound of quill on parchment is painfully loud to
Steve’s ears.
“No, M’lady. They were all unmarked. The wolves fur was worn around the ruff, though. Like they wore collars but they’d been removed.”
“Covert,” Peggy muses. “Can you recall anything else?”
Bucky rubs the back of his fingers against the base of Steve’s skull, his touch gentle. “No, M’lady.”

The door bursts open and Angie comes in with a tea tray, setting it down on the desk on top of Peggy’s papers.
They are momentarily distracted with the pouring of tea, and Steve takes advantage, twisting round in his chair to look at his familiar. Bucky winks at him, the briefest flicker of his eyelid, and Steve quickly turns away, rubbing his hand across his face to hide the colour in his cheeks.
Angie hands him a cup of tea and a biscuit, and he mutters in thanks, keeping the tea and offering the biscuit to Bucky.
“Now,” Peggy takes a sip of tea and pushes the cup to one side. “What is to be done with you?”
Steve grips his saucer a little too tightly, and the cup rattles gently.
“You’re smart enough, and you’ve certainly proved yourself capable in a fight,” She gives Bucky an assessing look. “And though I wouldn’t call it ideal, you seem to be getting somewhere with your familiar.”
The cup cracks in Steve’s hands, though it seems to go unnoticed by Peggy or Angie.
“Agent Romanov spoke highly of you in her report,” Peggy pulls another paper from her stack and scans the neat, blocky script.
“She did?” Steve blurts out.
Peggy smiles, in spite of herself. “I’m putting you on active duty. You’ll be hearing from us shortly with your next assignment.” Peggy makes a note in her ledger. “I’d strongly encourage you to spend that time training.”
She doesn’t look up from her work, picking up the top paper from a stack on the far side of the desk and reading through it.
Steve realises that they have been dismissed and gets up, tucking the chair back in place under the desk.
“Thank you, Peggy,” he says quietly.
Peggy dips her quill back into the inkwell. “Don’t let me down, Steve.”

They leave the building, as quickly and quietly as Steve can manage, and the guards don’t trouble them on their way out. Steve leads Bucky east, away from the towering limestone buildings.
He keeps his head down, feeling clumsy and out of place in his robes. Bucky walks by his side, and Steve takes some comfort in that. At least he isn’t walking two paces behind with his head bowed or any other nonsense.
Bucky bumps their shoulders together, and Steve finally looks up. “Hmm?”
“Thought you’d be happy.” Bucky tugs at the sleeve of Steve’s robe. “Thought this was what you wanted.”
Steve looks down at Bucky’s hand on his sleeve, his claws pressed carefully to the cloth to keep from damaging it.
“Is that why you didn’t tell them?” Steve thinks about laying his hand over Bucky’s, about linking their fingers together. “I mean, what really happened.”
“Don’t owe them shit,” Bucky shrugs, and lets go of Steve’s sleeve.
“No? If you don’t care what they think why all the…” Steve waves his hand between them, trying to encapsulate Bucky’s good behaviour and pressed shirt.
Bucky tugs the pendant around his neck thoughtfully. “Keeps them off your back.”
“But it’s not you,” Steve wraps his arms around himself.
“They don’t need to know that.” Bucky makes a disparaging sound, a puff of air through his lips.
“What about you? You weren’t exactly honest back there either. How come you didn’t tell her?”
“Don’t mean that,” Bucky comes to a standstill, scraping his claws along the cobblestones. “I mean James. You didn’t tell her about him.” Bucky looks down at his feet. “Me, I mean.”
Steve bites the inside of his cheek. He’d long since given up on finding James again. And Bucky? He wasn’t James anymore, no more than Steve was that wide-eyed little kid living on Old Pye Street.
“It’s none of her business,” Steve says finally.

“Wait,” Steve slaps Bucky’s hand away from the baking tray. “They need to cool down first.”
Bucky whines, trying to reach over Steve’s shoulder to grab a biscuit as he takes the hot tray over to the kitchen table, and sets it down on a wooden trivet.
Steve flaps his dishcloth, shooing Bucky away and walking back over to the stove. He lifts up the cast iron kettle and fills the waiting teapot with hot water, carefully setting it back on the stove and dropping the dishcloth on the side.

“Ow!” Bucky yelps, and Steve turns to see him tossing a biscuit from hand to hand, trying to cool it down.
There is already a bite missing from it, and Bucky’s mouth hangs open. He sucks in short little gasps of air around a mouthful of steaming gingerbread.
“I burnt my tongue,” Bucky grumbles, and swallows the hot biscuit.
“I told you to wait,” Steve chides gently, pouring the tea and adding sugar to Bucky’s cup.
Bucky’s ears prick forward. “You could kiss it better.”
Steve finds it hard to refuse and Bucky is warm and welcoming, curling up in his arms and tilting his head up for a kiss.
His lips are warm as they part, and his tongue darts into Steve’s mouth, trailing honey and ginger.
Bucky purrs as Steve’s hands drift, down the line of his spine to the base of his tail and the curve of his backside. Sharp teeth scratch at Steve’s tongue, stinging so sweetly as he slips his thumbs under the waistband of Bucky’s trousers and pushes slowly down-

Steve awakes with a start, half-hard under his robe, his skin prickling with sweat, and slowly takes in his surroundings. He’d dozed off while writing the meeting with Peggy in his journal, his face pressed to the pages.
He lets out a soft groan and raises his head, peeling off the parchment stuck to his cheek. He’s no doubt got ink over himself too, and rubs his sleeve across his face in a futile attempt to clean it off.
There is the soft scratch of pencil on paper across the room and Steve looks over to the armchair, where Bucky is sitting, a Magical tome open in his lap that he’s taking notes from.
Steve remembers, with a sudden, guilty lurch, the dream he had woken from. The way Bucky’s mouth had felt against his, warm and sweet. His cock twitches at the memory, and Steve flinches, ashamed and humiliated.
Bucky looks up from his notes and tilts his head to one side, staring at Steve curiously. He squirms under Bucky’s gaze, and desperately hopes that whatever bond ties them together, it’s not the kind that allows Bucky access to his thoughts.

“What’s wrong with your face?” Bucky asks suddenly.
Steve sputters and rubs his sleeve against his sticky cheek. “Nothing. Just dozed off.”
Bucky hums, unconvinced, and closes his book, leaning over to put it back on the shelf. Steve can make out the runes on the spine, and wonders what Bucky is doing to the Elder Futhark.
Bucky stands and stretches, his ears flattening, his tail curling into a query mark. Steve has to close his eyes and turn away from the way his white shirt rides up, exposing the small of his back and the dimples at the base of his spine.
“So I was thinking.” Bucky scratches his hip absently. “Peggy said we’re going on more assignments, yeah?”
Steve covers his eyes with his hand, and mumbles an affirmative.
“You okay, Steve?” Bucky asks, not quite concerned, but getting there.
“Fine,” Steve winces at how abrupt he’s being. “Just waking up.”
“Hmm. Fine,” Bucky waves it off. “So that little… pentagram thing of yours? The discus?”
“My shield,” Steve dares a glance at Bucky from between his splayed fingers. “It’s a shield.”
“It’s not strong enough,” Bucky takes his notes and drops them on the desk. “We need to work on
it.”
Steve pulls the papers closer, skimming through Bucky’s elegant copperplate handwriting,
interspersed with blocky runes.
“You did this?” Steve feels a sting of guilt for sounding so shocked.
“Well, yeah,” Bucky scrapes his feet across the floorboards. “I know you prefer to work in Latin,
but runes are where your strengths lie. They are in your blood.”
Steve remembers. Remembers the sun on his back and dirt under his nails, and Thor cradling a cat
in his arms and talking in his great, booming voice of the river of knowledge in his veins.
“C’mon Steve,” Bucky taps the notes. “What d’you say?”
Steve sits back in his chair and rubs his eyes with his knuckles.
“Yeah,” he says quietly. “Yes. Just give me a minute to get changed?”
Bucky nods and Steve gets up, pushing his chair back and gathering the folds of his robes in front
of him. The worst of his… issues… seem to have abated, but he wouldn’t put it past Bucky to
notice something.
Steve shuffles over to the door and quietly goes to his room.
There is a pitcher of water and a basin on the nightstand, and he strips off the robe and throws it
onto the bed before taking a cloth and dipping it into the water. He wrings it out and wipes himself
down, before scrubbing at the ink stains on his cheek.
He changes his clothes, picking out a clean white shirt and buttoning it up slowly, his fingers
clumsy.
It would be easier to dismiss the dream if he didn’t know the taste of Bucky’s mouth, or the scrape
of his claws.
Bucky had kissed him, soft and fleeting, and had never spoken of it again. And as much as he
wants to, Steve cannot act on his desires. He cannot be that kind of Master.
He rolls up his sleeves, straightens his collar, and resolves to do better.

“Feet further apart,” Bucky kicks Steve’s ankle, making him jump.
“Ouch,” Steve grouses, though it didn’t really hurt. He shuffles his feet further apart.
“Dominant foot forward,” Bucky taps Steve’s foot again, gentler this time.
Steve grumbles, but shifts position, adjusting until he feels comfortable.
Bucky had cleared the room by the time he had come back, pushing the furniture up against the
walls and clearing the desk before setting up a censer and candles on the green leather top.
Steve had scattered rosemary over the burning charcoal in the censer, lit the white candles, and
held as still as possible while Bucky had daubed a star on his forehead in sweet oil.
Every time Steve’s hand unconsciously reaches up to wipe away the smear of oil Bucky slaps it
down.
“Dreadful,” Bucky smiles as Steve shakes out his hands and adjusts his position.
Steve draws the star in the air with his index finger, watching as the cold flame sparks and
crackles. He sketches a circle around it, and the image holds, fizzing and sputtering.
“Good, good,” Bucky murmurs, circling him slowly. “Now the next part.”
Steve blinks, sweat and oil trickling down his forehead, and the image distorts.
“Stop thinking,” Bucky clicks his fingers, the noise sharp and distracting. “Don’t hesitate, you
know what to do.”
Steve’s tongue flicks out, wetting his lower lip, and he sketches in the air around the disc. The
letters tremble, and start to float away.
“Damnit,” Steve hisses, and the image flares out, leaving a faint blue mist that quickly disperses.
He shakes out his hands and clenches his fists, swearing under his breath.
“Shh, settle down,” Bucky brushes a hand across Steve’s shoulders. “You did good.”
“I did terrible,” Steve snaps. He screws his eyes shut and sighs. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to…”
“Nah, it’s fine,” Bucky walks around him, humming to himself as he prods and pokes Steve into position. “We’ll get there.”
“Maybe we should try something else,” Steve lets himself be poked and prodded. “This isn’t working.”
“Oh, do shut up, Steve,” Bucky frowns, and Steve knows he’s being too stiff, too awkward for anything to work.
Bucky claps his hands together, clearing the room of any lingering traces of spellwork.
“Again.”

It is four days before they get an assignment, enough time for Steve to start wondering. He trusts Peggy, he really does. But he also wouldn’t put it past her to say whatever she felt necessary to keep Steve quiet for a few days.
Bucky brings the letter up to his workroom and places it carefully on the desk, his mouth drawn in a tight line, like he wants to throw the letter on the fire and be done with it.
Steve breaks the wax seal and opens the letter, looking over the contents while Bucky hovers over him, silent and reproachful.
“An assignment with agent Romanov,” Steve thumbs the linen paper thoughtfully. “Tonight. Apparently a relic has gone missing and we have…” Steve snorts. “A reputation for recovering lost items.”
“Well, fuck,” Bucky mutters. “Guess she likes you after all.”
There is a bitterness to his tone that surprises Steve. “If you don’t wish to come, you-”
“Oh no, I’m coming,” Bucky folds his arms across his chest and scowls. “Just try and stop me.”
Steve prepares for the assignment, scrubbing his naked body down with rosemary and salt in the privacy of his room before putting on his ritual clothing, light cotton trousers and a white shirt beneath his robe, binding everything in place with the red waistband.
He goes down to the kitchen for inspection, and Bucky tuts over his appearance, straightening out the folds in the robe and smoothing out the creases on his sleeves.
“You’re too damn tall,” Bucky grumbles, reaching up to fix Steve’s collar.
Steve’s breath hitches as Bucky’s ear brushes against his cheek, and he dips his head, breathing in the musky scent of him. Bucky’s ear flickers, and Steve’s hands twitch with the urge to touch Bucky’s brindled hair, to caress his soft ears and tilt his head up for a kiss.
Steve closes his eyes and takes a shallow breath, trying to think of anything but the way Bucky’s claws scrape against his skin.
“There,” Bucky says proudly. “Still damned ugly.”
Steve gives him a weak smile and opens his mouth to say something in retaliation, but Bucky smiles back at him, and he swallows painfully, the words fading away.

Natasha sends a carriage for them, and they wait out on the street for it to arrive.
Bucky paces back and forth, restless and nervous, while Steve watches the street for the unmarked black cab.
“Bucky,” Steve says hesitantly. “You don’t have to come.”
Bucky stops his pacing and gives Steve an unimpressed look.
“I’m serious,” Steve persists. “I know you don’t like Witches.”
“You think I’m gonna let you go off on your own?”
“I won’t be on my own, agent Romanov will be there.”
Bucky hisses, his ears pulling back, his tail twitching under his overcoat.
“Exactly,” he growls. “I’m not letting you out of my sight.”
Steve holds up his hands in deference, and lets Bucky go back to his pacing.
The carriage finally rolls up, and comes to a rattling stop in front of them. The door opens and Clint peers out.
“Hey, fellas,” he calls. “Come on.”
Bucky chews on his lip, but gestures to Steve to go in first, climbing in after and dropping down onto the bench seat beside him. Clint thumps on the ceiling and the carriage starts moving again, lurching over the cobblestones.

“Rogers,” Natasha smirks. “I hear you’re a man who knows how to find things.” Steve nods silently, painfully aware of Bucky at his side, pressed up against him in the confines of the carriage.

“A Magical artifact has gone missing, taken from a private collection,” Natasha hands over a folded parchment. “We’ve been instructed to get it back.” Steve unfolds the paper and studies the image of a golden talisman on it, oval like a stylised eye and decorated with intricate filigree in silver and copper. “The Eye of Agamotto?” he reads out the name and looks up at her. “What does it do?”

Bucky peers at the design, resting his chin on Steve’s shoulder. “It doesn’t matter what it does,” Natasha says sharply. “Our only concern is retrieving it.” “It distorts time,” Bucky interrupts, much to Natasha’s annoyance. “At least it was supposed to. Agamotto overshot the first time he tried to use it, aged a thousand years in a heartbeat.” Bucky suppresses a snigger. “Poor bastard crumbled to dust.”

Steve looks alarmed. “And it wasn’t destroyed?” “Only works in the presence of the Tesseract,” Bucky sits back in his seat. “And that’s kept under guard at the Abbey. All it is now is a very ugly necklace.” Natasha lets out a startled laugh, and quickly composes herself. “Regardless of what it does,” she says stiffly. “We need it back.” “Why?” Bucky retorts. “It’s useless.” Natasha gives Steve a baleful look and he bites his lip. No familiar should speak out against a Witch, let alone one senior to their Master, and by rights Bucky should be disciplined for his behaviour. “Why?” he asks instead.

Bucky makes a show of studying the parchment, but Steve can see him smiling. Natasha huffs and snatches back the paper, folding it up and tucking it into her breast pocket. “Because Secretary Pierce wants it found. The collection belongs to a friend of his, a Witch of high ranking in Shield.” Steve grimaces. Shield stretched to their limits and they’re being sent off in search of missing trinkets.

The carriage halts outside a property in Kensington Gardens, and Clint climbs out, holding the door for Natasha. He gives Bucky a pointed look that gets ignored as Bucky scrambles out of the carriage, leaving Steve to get out himself. Steve doesn’t mind, he’s perfectly capable of getting out of a black cab, and besides, he would feel horribly uncomfortable if Bucky started holding doors open for him.

Steve’s mouth drops open as he stares at the rows of red and white stone houses. If he lived to be a thousand, he would never be able to afford one of these places. He doubted even Peggy could. Bucky touches a finger to his jaw and Steve almost bites through his tongue. “Catching flies there, Stevie,” Bucky murmurs, too low for Natasha to overhear. “It’s just bricks. Just stones. No better than any other bricks and stones.”

Steve nods dumbly, and Bucky gives him a gentle shove before following Natasha and Clint up to the front door.

They are met at the door by a familiar, an owlish looking man with a ruff of greying feathers. “Agent Romanov,” he claps his hands together, ingratiating and deeply unpleasant. “Thank you for coming by on such short notice. Unfortunately my Master is away at the moment, but he has permitted me to show you the gallery.”

“Thank you, Jasper,” Natasha replies. “If you could show us where the item was taken from?” Jasper nods and gestures for them to follow him, and Steve stares up at the high, white-painted ceilings as they walk through the sparsely decorated house.
“Mr Stern’s collection is through here,” Jasper pauses at a door. “I must warn you that the relics within are guarded by Magical wards and protections, and must not be tampered with.”
“Didn’t seem to trouble our thief,” Bucky mutters, and Steve whispers at him to be quiet, fighting the urge to smile. Bucky can see it in his eyes though, and flashes a troublesome grin.
“Thank you, Jasper,” Natasha says, overly loud. “We’ll take it from here.”

The familiar bows his head, and Natasha pushes past him into the room. There are spells for protection crawling over the high ceiling, gathered around the windows and the doorframe. The walls are lined with lanterns lit with cold flame, casting blue-tinged light on the rooms contents. On podiums and displays, artfully arranged, are relics. A piece of stone painted with hieroglyphs depicting a heart being weighed against a feather. A cracked and dusty fragment of parchment with a few symbols drawn in faded ink. Pieces of jewellery, crumbling statues, and every single one of them makes Steve grit his teeth.

Ancient Magic, hoarded and hidden away, locked up in a room. Steve looks over at Bucky, and wonders if he was kept in a room like this, a curiosity for the idle rich.

Bucky senses his distress, and reaches out to brush his fingers across Steve’s sleeve.

“So this was where the missing relic was?” Natasha says, looking at an empty plinth. Bucky lets go of Steve’s sleeve, and the moment between them passes.

“It is,” Jasper remains in the doorway, wringing his hands. “Mr Stern’s prized possession.”

Steve walks over to join Clint and Natasha, Bucky taking his time looking at the other artifacts. There is a fine sprinkling of red dust on the podium, and Clint leans in closer and sniffs.

“What’s this?” he mutters, swiping his finger through the dust. “It smells like ifrit.”

He studies the dust gathered on his finger and lifts it to his mouth, poking out his tongue to taste.

“Wait, stop-”

Steve rushes forward, raising both his hands in alarm, but Bucky is faster, slapping Clint’s hand away from his mouth and cursing loudly.

“What?” Clint whines as Natasha pulls a handkerchief from her robes and grabs him by the wrist, wiping off the residue and holding it up to the light to study. She murmurs a spell, in a language strange and low, and the powder smokes and hisses.

“It seems like an ifrit,” she narrows her eyes, reading the trails of smoke.

“Trust me it isn’t,” Steve can smell the faint trace of sand and spices, all too familiar. A Marid.

Natasha raises her eyebrow. “So you’ve seen this before?”

Steve cocks his head and gives Bucky a rueful look. “You could say that.”

“You care to elaborate?” Natasha asks irritably, folding the handkerchief and slipping it into her robe.

“We came across the same powder a while back,” Steve glances at Bucky, unsure how much he can trust Natasha. Bucky gives the slightest tilt of his head. “It was bait.”

“Bait?” Clint wipes his finger on his shirt. “What d’you mean bait?”

“You follow that trail of breadcrumbs, it’ll lead you to a Marid,” Bucky says quietly. He rubs his marked shoulder absently, and Steve feels a fresh sting of guilt.

“Marid?!” Natasha pales. “You saw a Marid?”

“Yeah, and I don’t plan on seeing it again,” Bucky hisses, his ears pulling back.

Natasha lets it drop for the time being, much to Steve’s relief, and returns to the matter at hand.

“So, it was stolen by a Marid?” she hums thoughtfully. “Well, it would be powerful enough to break through the wards and spells in here.”

“You’d think it would make more of a mess,” Clint scuffs his boot against the parquet floor, leaving marks that make Jasper, lurking in the doorway, whimper loudly. “Water damage, hell, damage. Those guys are big.”

Bucky nods, walking around the very edge of the room, looking for signs of egress. “Like it was never even here…”

Steve’s head snaps up, and he stares at Bucky, his mouth open. “Like it was never even here.”
Bucky grins, sharp and sly. “Fuck me.”

Clint lets out a snort, slapping his hand over his mouth, and Natasha looks briefly scandalised, before quickly pulling herself together.

“Rogers, you need to get your familiar under control.”

Steve ignores her. “The room’s well-guarded.” He spins on his heel, taking in the spells placed in the corners and under the displays. “Hard to steal from.”

“Without making a mess,” Bucky agrees.

“What the hell is going on?” Clint asks, looking confused.

Natasha curses softly. “It’s still here?”

“Buck, you remember that spell? To locate a stolen item?” Steve fumbles in his robes, searching through his pockets, and pulls out a twist of wax paper. He unwraps it to reveal a piece of chalk, soaked in blood.

Bucky growls, his tail flicking back and forth. “Well, at least I’m here for it this time.”

Steve tosses him the chalk. “You remember the spell?”

Bucky catches it and crouches down in front of the plinth, scratching symbols on the polished wooden floor around it.

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“Is this really necessary,” Jasper shrieks, rushing forward. Clint catches his arm and pulls him to the corner of the room. “Step aside, pal. You don’t wanna get caught up in the crossfire.”

“We’ll need to call the corners,” Steve draws a ring of cold flame around the plinth, wide enough to encompass the chalk symbols and ushers Clint into the circle. “Nat you take Fire, Clint you do air.”

Natasha nods, taking up her position in the circle and motioning Clint to take his own place.

Bucky finishes the last symbol and holds the chalk out to Steve, looking at the pink-stained dust on his fingers. “Steve, this is virgin blood,” he says quietly.

“I know.” Steve grabs the chalk and wraps it up again. “It’s effective.”

“Yeah, but it’s y-”

“Into position, Buck,” Steve says quickly, his cheeks burning. “You take Earth, I’ll do Water.”

Bucky nods, but Steve doubts that the conversation is over. He slips the chalk into his trouser pocket and takes his place at the North facing side of the circle. He reaches out his left hand, and Clint looks to Natasha for confirmation before taking Steve’s hand. Clint holds out his other hand to Natasha, and she takes it, reaching out to Bucky, who grimaces, but grabs her hand before reaching out to Steve, completing the circle.

There is a tremor as they call the four corners, and the cold flame rises up around them, buffeted by unseen winds. Steve recites the incantation, the words prickling on his tongue, and Bucky squeezes his fingers.

The chalk marks before them start to tremble, breaking into powder and rising up from the floor, drifting until they are suspended in midair.

The Eye of Agamotto,” Steve tells the cloud, and it drifts upward, like dust motes caught on a breeze.

They hover in midair, pensive, almost thoughtful, then drop in a gentle pink-stained shower over the empty plinth.

“Huh,” Clint lets go of Steve’s hand as the spell disperses. “It didn’t work.”

Natasha drops Bucky’s hand like it burns, but Steve doesn’t let go. Bucky’s palm is warm against his, thrumming with energy, syrupy and golden like the late afternoon sun.

Bucky frowns at the podium as Natasha and Clint leave the circle, his ears flickering back and forth.

Steve lets his fingers slips free, and he feels oddly weightless without Bucky’s grounding presence. “I was so sure,” he murmurs, more to himself than anything.

“No,” Bucky mutters, his mouth flattening. He steps forward, both arms outstretched, and slams his hands onto the plinth.

“Bucky, no!” Steve shouts, reaching out to stop him as Bucky shoves the plinth again.

It rocks back and forth, tottering before finally tipping over. Clint makes an abortive move to
rescue it, but the plinth tips over, shattering into pieces.
“Rogers!” Natasha yells. “Get your familiar under control.”
Bucky lets out a laugh and turns to Steve. “There.”
He points to the shattered marble scattered across the floor, peeking out from the rubble is the Eye
of Agamotto.
Jasper lets out a pained whine, fretting over the state of the floor.
“I’ll be damned,” Clint says, kicking away the pieces of marble around the relic. “It was here all
along.”
Natasha reaches into the rubble, picking up the Eye and brushing off the debris. It is unmarked,
despite the state of the floor around it. She turns to Jasper and holds it out.
“Care to explain?”
Jasper clutches his hands to his chest. “Goodness me. The Eye. You found it.” He squirms under
Natasha’s glare. “Well done you.”
“Jasper,” Natasha says, low and deadly. “What is the meaning of this.”
“It must have been a… a trick,” Jasper answers miserably. “Some sort of prank played by one of
Mr Stern’s associates.” He straightens up, latching onto the reasoning. “And behaviour we will not
tolerate.”
Natasha’s expression sours, and she throws the relic into Jasper’s hands. He fumbles it, nearly
dropping it and clutches it to his chest.

“Nat! Hey, Nat, wait,” Clint scrambles into the carriage after his Mistress.
Steve waits in the doorway, giving them a moment of privacy while Jasper chatters in his ear about
security.
“Jasper,” Bucky rakes the claws of his right foot on the front step irritably. “Do fuck off.”
Jasper lets out a shriek, and Steve has to bite his tongue. “That’s enough now, Buck.”
Bucky’s mouth ticks up. “Should I have said please?”
“Mr Rogers,” Jasper presses his hand to his chest. “You leave me no choice but to file a complaint.
Your familiar is the rudest.”
“I’ll be filing a complaint of my own, Jasper,” Steve snaps. “For time-wasting, and I’m sure our
associates in Cairo would be interested to know that you have a section of the original Book of the
Dead in your possession.” Steve gives him a brittle smile. “I was under the impression that it was
illegal to remove plaster from temple walls. Desecration, is that right Bucky?”
“Yup,” Bucky smirks. “Desecration of a temple is a lifetime imprisonment in the Tower.”
“It’s a replica,” Jasper whimpers.
“I’m sure that Shield investigators are able to tell the difference,” Steve shrugs. “If you insist on
pursuing this course of action.”
Jasper smiles, brittle and sour. “What course of action, sir?”
Steve gives him an innocent look, and Jasper skulks back inside. Bucky gives him a sarcastic little
wave before the door is slammed on them.
“Rum doings, eh?” Bucky murmurs, pointedly leaving another gouge in the doorstep.
“Very rum,” Steve agrees. “What are you thinking?”
“Could be a prank.” Bucky shrugs. “Pretty elaborate one.”
The carriage looks safe enough to approach, and Steve walks down the steps, Bucky at his heels.
“You believe him?” Steve pauses before opening the carriage door. “Jasper, I mean.”
Steve purses his mouth. “So why would he lie?”
“He’s beholden to a Witch,” Bucky bares his teeth at Natasha and Clint. “They’re all liars.”
Steve hushes him, and climbs into the carriage. Natasha raps her knuckles on the roof, and the cab
trundles slowly down the street.
“Steve, stop fussing,” Bucky grumbles, pulling Steve’s hands away from his collar.
“Is it straight?” Steve tries to twist out of Bucky’s grip, but he only holds on tighter. “It doesn’t feel straight.”
“Honestly,” Bucky snorts. “You’d think this was your first festival.”
Steve looks over at the Abbey, the stained glass windows lit up from within. Even the last stragglers who wandered the gardens, taking a moment before the ceremony began, were hurrying inside.
Bucky lets go of Steve’s hands, and reaches up to fix the shirt. The collar is already in place, but he takes a moment to smooth down the white linen covering Steve’s chest.
“There,” Bucky murmurs, brushing a thumb along the line of Steve’s jaw. “Perfect.”
Steve’s breath catches, and for a moment it seems like his lungs have turned to stone.
Bucky tilts his head up, his breath sweetly humid against the hollow of Steve’s throat.
Steve closes his eyes and swallows, and it hurts. It hurts like he has breathed in acrid smoke, burning and bitter. He clenches his fists, fingernails digging into the palms of his hands, leaving jagged little crescents.
He forces his eyes open and looks at Bucky again.
“How do I look?” Steve tries for levity and misses.
“Handsome,” Bucky murmurs, his eyes bright.
Bucky is beautiful in the cold flame that lights the Abbey, Steve thinks. He is beautiful in the early morning light filtering through the kitchen window. In the flickering firelight as he curls up to sleep in Steve’s favourite armchair, a book lying open in his lap.
He is beautiful.
“Bucky…” Steve murmurs, and Bucky tilts his head to one side, his ears facing forward.
Whatever Steve had been about to say is lost as a voice calls out to them across the grounds.
“Steve! Come on, you’re gonna be late.”
Steve blinks, and for a moment feels like he’s been shaken awake from a daydream.
Bucky’s tail twitches irritably. “Birds.”

Sam comes striding across the grass, his familiar Redwing perched on his shoulder. He slaps Steve on the shoulder, and Bucky’s ears drop. He growls, low in his throat, and Sam gives him a quizzical look.
“Still having teething trouble?” he asks Steve with a wide smile. “I hear a spray bottle works with bad-tempered cats.”
Bucky opens his jaws and snaps his teeth in a loud clack, drawing back his lips to expose his sharp teeth and champing. Redwing lets out a piercing shriek and flaps his wings.
“Easy, now,” Sam soothes the birds ruffled feathers. “Ignore the dumb kitty.”
“Come on, Sam. Play nice,” Steve murmurs.
“You’re siding with the fleabag?” Sam looks mock-affected. “After all these years? That’s cold, Steve.”
Steve turns away and rubs a hand over his mouth.
“Come on, Steve. Laugh once in a while,” Sam gives him a gentle push, despite the increasing volume in Bucky’s growling. “You’ll live longer.”
He pulls his hand away sharply when Bucky’s growling gets loud enough to draw attention from other Witches. “Settle down, furball.”
Steve reaches out and strokes the back of his hand along Bucky’s arm, keeping his touch light.
“Sam’s a friend, Buck. Nothing to worry about.”
Bucky’s growl quietens, but doesn’t stop entirely.
“Buck isn’t too fond of Witches,” Steve explains, keeping any hint of judgement out of his voice. “So he’s a little wound up tonight.”
Sam looks over at the Abbey, his expression softening. “Redwing’s last master kept him hooded, leg fastened to a silver chain. I guess that kind of thing leaves an impression.”
Bucky ears swivel back and forth, doubtful and curious in equal measure. “Least we can see our
“chains,” he says finally.
Sam stares at him for a moment, then snorts. “You’re a damned Sphynx.”

They walk into the Abbey just as the ceremony is about to start, and hide in a darkened recess, trying not to draw attention to themselves. Up on the altar, Peggy and Howard lead the proceedings, and the gathered Witches mouth and mutter along to the Rede before the rite begins. Howard’s voice drones on, self-aggrandising and vain, and Steve lets his mind drift, his gaze wandering through the crowds of Witches before them. He wonders who among them hid the Eye of Agamotto. Who left the breadcrumb trail that led to a Marid.

Steve’s thoughts take a darker turn. Who among them kept familiars in cages, and stacked them in abandoned warehouses by the river. Who among them stole those books. Who among them summoned Bucky, all those years ago, and when he could not be bound to them, locked him in a cage that he could barely stand in, even in the form of a cat.

If he ever found them, the Witch who took James-

Bucky jabs an elbow into Steve’s ribs, knocking him out of his malevolent thoughts, and Steve bites down on his yelp of pain, turning to hiss at Bucky…

The hiss becomes a suppressed cough. Bucky has swept his hair off his face and flattened his ears against his scalp. He holds the tip of his tail under his nose, mimicking Howard's mustache, and mouths along to his speech.

“Bucky,” Steve whispers when Howard's voice rises high enough to mask him.
Bucky waggles his eyebrows, and Steve seriously considers biting on the sleeve of his robe to keep from making a sound, giving Sam an apologetic look when he glares at them both.

Bucky lowers the tip of his tail until it covers his mouth, the tip twitching back and forth almost coyly.
Sam glares at them. “You two deserve each other.”

The rite comes to an end and the participants disperse, the members of Shield retreating to the Inner Sanctum. The thick plumes of incense make Steve’s eyes water, and Bucky scrunches up his nose in sympathy.

For all its secrecy and distancing from the wider world of Magic, Steve had yet to see the value of the Inner Sanctum. As far as he could tell, it seemed to mostly entail rubbing shoulders with colleagues and attempting to ingratiate yourself with the senior agents. Steve wanted no part of it, though didn’t begrudge Sam’s slipping off to make new contacts.

Bucky tugs him into a quiet corner, where the clouds of incense seems to be less dense, only to find Scott sitting on one of the pews, feeding grains of sugar to Anthony.

“Hey fellers,” he says with a nervous smile towards Bucky. Anthony waves his antennae.
“Scott,” Steve pats him on the shoulder, careful not to jostle the ant. “How is the spy business?”
“Not all that exciting,” Scott admits. “Very little action, and a lot of writing down boring conversations. Missing jewellery. Did you see what so-and-so was wearing? Did you take my copy of The Seventh Book of Moses? Plus Howard’s kid seems determined to sleep with anything with a pulse.” He rubs his eyes, not noticing the way Bucky’s ears prick up. “How’re you guys?”
“Good,” Steve watches as Bucky carefully extends a claw towards Anthony, letting him explore the sharp tip. “So books have been going missing?”
“Yeah.” Scott lifts one shoulder and lets it drop again. “Fair bit of jewellery too. Nothing major, just stuff that’s been in the family a long time. Probably just petty thieves, thinking they’re grabbing valuable relics and trying to sell them to collectors.”
Steve hums. “I thought with Hydra and the Age of Reason, trade in stolen artefacts was dropping. More interested in the steam train and the zoetrope.”
“That thing with the horse running?” Scott brightens up. “I saw that!”
“The wonders of science,” Steve murmurs. “They say given time, it’ll replace Magic.”
“Good,” Bucky mutters, and Steve gives his shoulder a half-hearted slap. Were it not for the war overseas and the terrorist attacks, he’d be inclined to think the same.
“Yeah, it’s funny.” Scott holds out his paper wrap of sugar to Bucky, who dips a claw into the mound, and offers a few sweet grains to Anthony. “Thefts picking up like that.”
Bucky glances at Steve, his ears swivelling, and Steve nods in understanding.
“So these disappearances,” Steve says lightly. “You think you could let me know if any more crop up? If it won’t get you in trouble, of course.”
Steve pauses, trying to think of an excuse to offer should Scott be reluctant, but he nods, carefully picking Anthony up from Bucky’s claw.
“Sure.”

Natasha gets sent to investigate another damaged altar in the North, and Steve and Bucky find themselves free from assignments for several days.
Bucky seems determined to sleep through their free time, curled up in Steve’s armchair (though in truth, it’s Bucky’s armchair now) with a book in his lap, in the guise of research.
Steve lets him to rest, conducting his investigations into missing books and artifacts accompanied by Bucky’s sleepy purrs.
The peace, for once, is not a fragile one. It grows like a tree, deep roots buried in the earth, its boughs stretched towards the sun.
It’s late in the afternoon when Steve decides to give the shield one more try, taking the grimoire from Bucky’s lap and putting it back on the shelf, careful not to disturb him.
Steve watches him sleep for a moment, carefully brushing back a loose strand of hair that has fallen across his face. Bucky snuffles, his ears flickering, and settles again.
It is a terrible thing, wanting. And Steve wants so much that he fears his heart might shatter.
He straightens up, pushing away the urge to linger, and fetches a bottle of sweet oil from the kitchen.
He daubs his forehead and wrists as Bucky had taught him, leaving the bottle on the desk, and clears a space in the middle of the room.
He breathes in, slow and steady, grounding and centering himself before raising his right hand and sketching a star in the air before him. It crackles and sparks, silver and bright, and he draws a circle around it, cold flame dancing in the wake of his fingertip.
Another circle, a little further out, and the space between them fills with hazy white mist. He fills the space with carefully placed symbols, the writings of Solomon coming easily to him.
The final ring of the shield is where he always fails. The Vegvisir, the compass, a complex symbol embedded within the shield, drawing together all the elements and binding them together in a ring of seventy six distinct runes. He had written out the sequence on parchment countless times under Bucky’s supervision, but every time he had tried to add them to the shield he had gotten confounded. The marks danced around in the air before him, mocking his efforts.
“You’re thinking,” Bucky mumbles from the armchair. “Stop it.”

Steve lets out a quiet huff and flexes his fingers. His hands are trembling, and he clenches and releases them, trying to work out the tension.
Bucky climbs out of the chair and comes to his side, studying the shield with a critical eye.
“I know, it’s dreadful.” Steve sighs. He’d half expected it to have collapsed in on itself by now.
Bucky shakes his head. “No, it looks good.”
Steve lets out a sound of surprise as Bucky reaches out to brush a claw along the outer edge of the shield. It shimmers, the outer circle staining red.
Steve purses his mouth. “So far…”
Bucky lays his right hand at the small of Steve’s back. “Just take it slow. One rune at a time, there’s no rush.”
Bucky’s hand feels hot against the fabric of Steve’s shirt, magic seeping through the thin cotton and spreading across his skin. Despite the heat, Steve shivers.

Whispering the first rune into Steve’s ear spurs him into action, and Steve lifts up his hand, sketching the first rune at the top of the circle. With Bucky at his side, warm and familiar, the letters come easily. Steve sounds each rune as he marks them out, spacing them neatly around the outer edge of the shield. His breaths come slow and even, his heart a steady pulse, until finally the last rune is in place.

Steve hesitates for a moment, his hand still raised, uncertain of how to proceed.

"Is… Is it done?" he asks.

"One last thing," Bucky says, and with the index finger of his left hand traces a five pointed star over Steve’s heart in a line of warm, golden light. He draws a circle around the star and presses the palm of his hand to it, and Steve feels a burst of heat flash through his body.

It doesn’t feel like the cold flame, bright and numbing, or the static charge of raising energy. It feels like late summer sunshine, like honey and ginger and afternoons spent in dappled shade.

On impulse Steve reaches out to touch the shield, his hand splayed out to press against the star. The golden light springs from his fingers and chases the cold flame, spreading out across the shield. The star burns as bright as the sun, burning through the concentric circles and making them shine. The runes glow, shifting and reforming into a new sequence as the golden light spreads out beyond them, gossamer thin threads chasing each other around the outer edge of the shield.

“There,” Bucky says proudly as Steve tilts his hand left and right, watching as the shield moves with him. “Now it’s done.”

The shield moves easily against the palm of his hand, and Bucky chuckles as Steve spins and catches it, his movements easy and gaining confidence.

Steve is suddenly aware of Bucky’s hand over his heart, and it thumps painfully against his ribs.

“Not dreadful?” Steve whispers.

“Perfect,” Bucky’s mouth twitches up, and he leans in a little closer, his hand skimming across Steve’s chest, and moving up to trace the line of his jaw.

Steve swallows, and Bucky traces the working of his throat with a sharp claw. Steve clenches his hand into a fist, a sharp, decisive clasp that crumples the shield up. It is not gone, not entirely, if he wants to call it back, it will come easily.

Steve can’t recall making the decision to wrap his arm around Bucky’s waist, to cup a hand against his hip, but he has, and Bucky makes no effort to push him away, stroking his thumb along Steve’s lower lip.

Steve’s mouth seems to open of its own accord as Bucky tilts his head up and flicks his tongue out, tracing the path his thumb has taken across Steve’s lips. The very tip of his tongue is firm, the flat of it rough as he pushes into Steve’s mouth, making him stutter and gasp.

Bucky withdraws far too quickly, breaking into a delighted smile. “Was that your first-”

“No!” Steve’s voice pitches a little too high, a dull flush spreading from his cheeks to the tips of his ears.

Bucky wraps his hand around the nape of Steve’s neck, keeping him in place. “You been running around on me?”

“No,” Steve says, a little softer. “Never.”

Bucky pulls him close, tilting his head and brushing the tip of nose against Steve’s cheek before fitting their lips together. He licks into Steve’s mouth, slow and careful, his tongue hot and rough-textured.

Steve lets out a startled little moan and wraps his arms around Bucky’s waist, crushing them together and kissing him in return, clumsy and frantic.

Bucky breaks the kiss first, and Steve gasps for breath as Bucky tugs at his shirt, cursing under his breath about Steve’s insistence on wearing so much damn clothing. He draws a claw down the front of Steve’s shirt, and there is a gentle clatter as the pearly buttons hit the floorboards one by one. Steve cannot find it in himself to be angry that Bucky has taken to ruining his clothing along
with everything else he owns, and sighs with relief as Bucky eases the shirt off his shoulders and lets it fall to the floor.

It seems entirely unfair that only one of them is in a state of undress, and Steve takes the hem of Bucky’s shirt and pulls it up, more heedful of its welfare. Bucky lifts his arms up, letting Steve strip it away and toss it to one side before wrapping his arms around Steve’s shoulders and kissing him again.

Where Bucky’s hands are restless, tracing everywhere from the breadth of his shoulders to the slant of his hips, Steve's move slowly, savouring the curve of Bucky's jaw, how easily it fits against his hands, and the lilt of his mouth as he kisses. His hands follow the line of Bucky’s spine, pausing to press his thumbs at the dimples at the base of his tail, and Bucky purrs, a deep rumbling in his chest that Steve can almost taste on his tongue.

He pushes the tips of his fingers under the waistband of Bucky’s trousers, tentative and slow, cupping his hands around the firm swell of his backside.

Bucky hums into Steve’s mouth, a low vibration that thrums through his chest, twisting through his guts and down to his pelvis, making his cock twitch and stiffen. Bucky purrs again, louder, and grinds against Steve’s body in a slow undulation. His cock, hard and hot under his clothing, rubs up against Steve’s hip, lazy and wanton. Steve utters a soft curse and pushes Bucky’s trousers down far enough to expose his cock, stiff and proud and seeping beads of clear fluid. He grips Bucky’s backside a little harder, both hands cupped around each cheek as Bucky rocks against him, smearing silver trails of seminal fluid on his stomach.

Steve turns them around, stumbling across the floorboards as Bucky kicks off the last of his clothing, trailing his trousers across the floor as Steve pushes him up against the desk. It rattles ominously when they collide against it, Steve's papers and quill falling to the floor. The bottle of sweet oil wobbles, but remains standing. Bucky laughs against Steve’s mouth and reaches down between them, working open the fastenings of Steve’s trousers and pushing them down. Steve curses at the feel of Bucky’s hand on his cock, taking him firmly and twisting his wrist. He drops his head onto Bucky’s shoulder, moaning low as his trousers puddle around his feet. He has never felt more exposed, never felt so safe in the arms of another.

Bucky lets go of him and reaches behind him to grab the bottle of oil. “You know what to do?” he asks.

Steve screws his eyes shut, there is room for nothing between them but honesty now. He raises his head and meets Bucky’s eyes, finding no trace of mockery or scorn, only gentle affection.

“I… I have read it. In books,” Steve stutters.

“Oh,” Bucky smiles, his eyes creasing up. “So books are good for something, huh?”

Steve coughs out a laugh, and takes the bottle from Bucky’s hand.

“Take it slow,” Bucky says, reaching up to curl his hands around Steve’s neck. “Use more than you think you need.”

Steve nods, pulling out the stopper. He pours oil onto his hand, coating his fingers, and puts the bottle and stopper on the desk.

Bucky kisses him, a sweet brush of lips and scratch of pointed teeth, and Steve reaches behind him, sliding a slick finger down the cleft of his arse and brushing over his tightly furled hole. He draws his finger back up, pressing lightly against it as he passes, before stroking back down again.

“Not that slow,” Bucky whispers in his ear, and Steve stutters out a laugh.

On his next pass Steve circles the rim, light and teasing, before dipping his finger in, pushing down to the first knuckle. Bucky lets out a startled gasp, his cock twitching where it’s pressed at the crease of Steve’s thigh.

“Is this alright,” Steve asks, hardly daring to move.

“Mmm,” Bucky sighs, his lips brushing Steve’s mouth. “More.”

Steve rests his other hand on Bucky’s hip, holding him steady as presses in a little more and withdraws, angling his wrist and pushing deeper and deeper each time. He navigates by the hitch in Bucky’s breathing, by the flex of his claws, learning what makes him tremble and sigh.
“More,” Bucky gasps, and Steve pulls almost free, hooking the tip of his finger against the loosening ring of muscle and easing in a second. Bucky throws his head back and yowls, his hair clinging to his damp brow, his tail flicking back and forth.

A third finger follows, though Steve could not say if it was moments or hours later. Bucky’s kisses turn sharp, his teeth grazing and sharp, and alternated with swipes of his rough tongue. He whispers Steve’s name between kisses, an entreaty, a command, a desperate plea. More he mouths against Steve’s throat, against the sweat-dampened hair at the nape of his neck, against the lobe of his ear between nips and licks. More.

Steve reaches out to grab the bottle of oil, spilling it onto his fingers. It slips out of his hand and falls to the floor, slowly emptying out onto the floorboards. Steve wraps his slick hand around his neglected cock, pumping his wrist and slicking himself up as Bucky lifts himself onto the desk, twitching his tail to one side and perching on the edge. He spreads his legs, bending his knees and lifting his feet off the floor. The sight of him, spread out and wanting, is almost too much for Steve to behold.

“Come on,” Bucky rasps, holding out his arms and pulling Steve into his arms. Steve presses his face to Bucky’s throat, shaking and overwhelmed, and Bucky reaches down between them, taking Steve’s cock in hand and guiding it into position. Steve curses under his breath, and at Bucky’s entreaty to move pushes forward. He looks down between them, and the tight pressure against the swollen head of his cock seems almost impossible to breach safely. But he feels the moment Bucky opens up to him, the slick movement of skin against skin. Bucky moans, eyes closed in bliss, and wraps his legs around Steve’s waist, locking his ankles at the small of his back. Instinct takes over, and Steve thrusts blindly, saturated with pleasure. Bucky reaches down to the base of Steve’s spine, hands splayed across his fever-hot skin, and coaxes him into a steady rhythm, flexing up to meet every thrust. They trade kisses that miss more often than they reach their target, their mouths bumping against each other’s cheek and chin more often than their lips, breathless and frantic.

Steve buries his face under the line of Bucky’s jaw, kissing and nuzzling his creamy skin as Bucky wraps an arm around Steve’s neck, pulling him closer. The sounds Bucky makes, moans and purrs, spur Steve to sucks a bruise on the pale column of Bucky’s throat, and he yowls, tipping back and sprawling across the desk. Steve is pulled down with him, reaching out to slam his hands against the flat surface. The cherry wood trembles around them, the desk shaking with every punch of Steve’s hips as he takes advantage of the new angle, bracing his hands against the green leather desktop and increasing the pace, fucking into Bucky harder and faster. Bucky’s legs fall open, and he throws back his head and yowls, loud and high, his claws digging into Steve’s shoulder, scoring deeply along his waist. The desk shudders and creaks, tiny, green-leaved shoots sprouting along the decorative edges. They stretch up, growing thicker and longer with every passing second, sending out branches covered in unfurling leaves. Bucky comes first, and the trees burst into flower, tumbling petals down over them. The flowers catch in Bucky’s hair, on his fluttering eyelashes. They cling to Steve’s sweat-dampened skin. Bucky keens softly, a purr rumbling deep in his chest as Steve scrapes his blunt teeth over his throat, as if divining the source of Bucky’s pleasure, and comes with a low cry.

The last few petals rain down as Steve brushes his mouth along Bucky’s collarbone, licking at the traces of salt and musk there. He can feel threads of Magic chasing across his skin, darting and bright as lightning, but with the honeyed sweetness of sunlight. Bucky stretches, his hair fanning out across the desk, and disturbing the scattering of cherry petals. “Ow,” he rumbles as Steve kisses the mark on his throat. “You’re beautiful,” Steve murmurs, and kisses the mark again, more gently this time.
“Yeah? Well you’re…” Bucky frowns. “Bleeding?”
Bucky squirms until Steve takes the hint and shifts down a little, slipping free and rolling onto his side, giving Bucky room to sit up a little. Bucky curses softly, brushing his fingers lightly across Steve’s back.
“Fuck,” Bucky’s eyebrows draw together. “I scratched you up.”
“It’s alright.” Steve smiles, trailing his fingertips along Bucky’s arm. Bucky is warm, and bright with Magic, and naked in his arms, what could possibly concern him? He picks a blossom out of Bucky’s ear, sugary pink against his chestnut hair. “Where did these come from?”
“The trees,” Bucky says like it’s the most obvious answer in the world, and rubs his thumb along the worst cut on Steve’s shoulder. His left shoulder, right where Bucky’s star lies. The last traces of magic prickling across his skin is closing them up, though not fast enough as far as Bucky is concerned.
Steve finally turns his gaze from Bucky, and lets out a soft sound of awe at the trees surrounding them.
“How…”?
“I told you sex Magic was powerful,” Bucky bends down and draws his rough tongue along the cut across the small of Steve’s back, lapping up the trickle of blood.
He twists over and see’s Bucky lapping at his scratches, the skin knitting together under his tongue and healing without even leaving a mark. He sees the trail of semen on Bucky’s stomach too, and gently pushes him onto his back.
“Steve? What are you…”
Bucky lets out a choked sound as Steve swipes his tongue through the mess on Bucky’s stomach, his cock twitching in interest. Steve touches his tongue to the tip of Bucky’s cock for good measure, licking it clean while Bucky curses softly.
Steve grins and wipes the back of his hand across his mouth, and Bucky lets out a sharp growl, rolling him onto his back and nearly pushing him off the desk. Before Steve can ask what he’s playing at Bucky ducks his head down and rasps his tongue across Steve’s chest, swallowing down the taste of himself.
Steve looks up at the canopy of cherry leaves spread over them. “Do you think they’ll transplant?” he wonders aloud. “If I trimmed them off the desk and put them into pots.” He looks down at Bucky draped across his chest, his gaze warm and sleepy. “Do you think they’d grow?”
“I idiot.” Bucky cranes his neck and gives Steve a brief, hard kiss. “Of course they’ll grow.”
Steve folds his arms around Bucky’s waist and pulls him in for another kiss, tongue darting between his teeth.
“Your’re not making it easy,” Bucky sighs into Steve’s mouth, moulding their bodies together. “I’m trying to look after you.”
He rubs his thumb across the gouges in Steve’s shoulder. They are barely bleeding now, and slowly scabbing over.
“Leave them,” Steve murmurs, rubbing his nose against Bucky’s cheek. “I want them.”
“You want scars?” Bucky sits up, shifting until he’s straddling Steve’s hips.
“Yes,” Steve strokes his palms along Bucky’s thighs, and takes quiet joy in how his hands fit against Bucky’s hips like they belong there. “I marked you, made you mine.” He shrugs, as if what he was about to say was nothing. “And you marked me, made me yours.”
Bucky wraps his hands around Steve’s wrists, holding them against him.
“Steve,” he murmurs.
“I am, you know,” Steve whispers. “I am yours.”
Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

Thank you to Eidheann for beta reading, and Trish for all the things that Trish does. Special thanks to the amazing Moony for the stunning artwork, and taking my terrible drawing of Steve’s shield and making it into something amazing.

Want to see the same three pictures of Sebastian Stan's impossibly pretty face posted over and over? Find me on Tumblr.

The ants take some getting used to. The first time they come to Steve, he’s asleep in bed, Bucky sprawled across him like a blanket, albeit one with soft ears that tickle Steve’s nose and far more elbows than you would think plausible. The ants gather on the bedside table, Anthony in their midst, proudly carrying a folded parchment. After a moment spent wondering if it was Bucky up to something again, Steve had carefully plucked the parchment from the mass of ants and unfolded it, revealing a report from Scott about missing relics. Bucky had cracked open one eye, muttered a greeting to Anthony, and went back to sleep. When he had first asked Scott to pass on any news of books and artifacts that had been mislaid or gone missing, he had expected maybe a note every few weeks, or an update at the next solstice celebration. After their first visit the ants returned a week later. By the end of the month they were leaving reports every day. Books, paintings, amulets… all vanishing from private collections. There were no mass thefts, no obvious pattern to it all, but one by one, Magical objects were disappearing. Bucky left parchment and ink on the kitchen table, so that Anthony could write his own messages rather than carry parchments across the city, as well as grains of sugar and biscuit crumbs for him to eat.

Bucky is already up when Steve wakes, the bed cold and far too empty without him. Steve washes and dresses before heading downstairs, finding the day’s report from Scott on the kitchen table, a trail of inky prints leading from the parchment to a depleted trail of biscuit crumbs. Steve smiles to himself, he finds it irrepressibly endearing how Bucky is fond of the ant, and his Master too.
He fills the kettle and puts it on the stove to boil, and reads through the report while he makes tea, adding an extra spoonful of sugar to Bucky’s cup.

He takes the tea out to the garden, pausing to check of the cherry saplings in their pots by the door. They’re growing well, and will soon need moving to a permanent place outside. He finds Bucky sitting in one of the chairs under the cherry tree, soaking up the early spring sun and reading the daily newspapers. He looks up with a smile, tilting his head up for a kiss, and Steve obliges, setting down the cups to press his mouth to Bucky’s waiting lips. Steve runs his fingers through Bucky’s hair, stroking his thumb up softly furred ears, and Bucky purrs, a low rumble that makes Steve’s lips tingle.

“Any news?” Steve asks, taking a seat beside him.

Bucky shakes out his paper and turns the page, creasing and folding until it fits in his lap. “There’s a feller making pictures with lightning,” Bucky says thoughtfully. “Has a little box lined with paper and a way of making cold flame, burns pictures onto the paper in a second.” Bucky snaps his fingers. “Just like that.”

Steve takes a sip of tea. “Is this a Witch?”

Bucky shakes his head. “A scientist. Found a thing that goes flash, and a way of making paper… I don’t know, paint itself?” Bucky shrugs. “I don’t know how to do that.”

Steve hands him his tea, and Bucky accepts it with a happy little purrrp.

“What’s the matter, Buck? You feeling redundant?” he asks playfully.

“Hardly,” Bucky snorts. “Can you imagine it, though? All these things they do with science. You wouldn’t need Magic anymore, you wouldn’t need us.”

“I need you,” Steve says softly.


Steve slumps back in his chair. An end to Magic. The idea doesn’t frighten him as much as it should. A world without bindings, without Shield, without secret societies and knowledge hidden in ancient languages and behind iron clad doors. Without familiars locked up in cages and hidden away.

He should dismiss the idea, point out that the world has worked perfectly well this way, and will continue to do so long after they are gone. But the notion pricks at him like a thorn under his skin.

A world without magic.

He shakes his head, as if he could shake the idea loose. “How would we fight our wars?”

“With pointy sticks and rocks,” Bucky huffs. “One thing you’re good at is fighting.”


“Oh, he’ll be pissed,” Bucky chuckles to himself, and reaches down to pick up a newspaper left under his chair. “Here,” he drops it in Steve’s lap. “They’re debating the Accords in Parliament.”

Steve picks up the paper and scans the article. “You think anything will come of it this time?” He thinks of all the other attempts Hydra have made to force the government to bring Shield under supervision. Every one of them quashed.

“If shit keep disappearing like this, it won’t even matter,” Bucky says dourly. “Witches can’t do much without their trinkets.”

“As long as we have the Tesseract, we have magic,” Steve rolls up the paper and taps Bucky on the thigh with it. “Come on, we’re going out.”

They take their empty cups inside, and Steve fetches Bucky’s woolen coat, shaking it out and holding it up for him to slip his arms into the sleeves.

“So where are we going?” Bucky asks, pulling his hair out from under the collar and adjusting the sleeves.

“Out,” Steve slips on his own overcoat and leads the way to the door.

“Insightful,” Bucky grumbles, but follows after him, slipping his hand into the crook of Steve’s arm as they walk down the street.
Steve’s heart stumbles in his breast, and he could swear that Bucky can feel it, going by the way he smiles to himself and tucks into Steve’s side, warm and familiar.

They walk north towards Westminster, and Bucky’s grip on Steve’s arm tightens as Whitehall appears in the distance. Steve covers Bucky’s hand with his own in silent reassurance, and they walk past the white stone buildings, turning East to Old Pye Street.

Bucky relaxes a little, his ears twitching back and forth as they tread old and familiar grounds. In turn Steve tenses, suddenly aware that they are walking arm in arm like young lovers. But the people passing only nod politely to them, tugging the brim of their caps in greeting.

Bucky digs a claw into Steve’s arm. “Stop thinking,” he murmurs as Steve winces. “These are your people, they’re not going to judge.”

“They’re not?” Steve can’t keep the surprise out of his voice as they stop at Dernier's ale cart. Bucky shrugs. “Well, no. Everyone judges a little bit, but at least they’ll do it quietly.”

Steve huffs and buys them each a cup of milk stout.

“Mr Witch,” Dernier says, handing over a pewter tankards of sweet dark ale. “Monsieur Chat.”

“Merci,” Bucky accepts his cup with a slight bow.

“How is business?” Steve asks lightly.

Dernier gives a shrug and wobbles his hand in the air between them. “And…” Steve runs his finger along the battered rim of his tankard. “Your other business?”

Dernier gives him a worried look. “You here officially, Mr Witch?”

“No,” Steve shakes his head quickly. “Call me an interested party.”

“Huh?” Dernier rubs the back of his hand across his bristly mustache. “You looking to sell?”

Steve glances at Bucky, who raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t interject.

“I might have a few items for sale. Books, parchments, that kind of thing.”

Dernier clicks his tongue. “You retiring?”

Steve shakes his head with a chuckle. “No, nothing like that.”

“A few months ago I would have bitten your hand off, making an offer like that.” Dernier rubs his thumb and forefinger down the ragged edges of his mustache thoughtfully. “Folks have always been interested in that kind of thing, never been too much trouble to pass it along. But now…” He shakes his head. “No buyers out there, and can’t risk keeping hold of stuff for the time it would take to trade it on.”

“No buyers?” Bucky asks, incredulous. “Since when?”

“Science,” Dernier spreads his arms out. “Old books and geegaws are nice enough, but they’re not that great bridge that Brunel designed, or Stephenson’s Rocket, those things are wonders of the age.” He shakes his head apologetically. “Please understand, we respect your skills, and we're grateful for all you do. We just…”

“You’ll never be able to make those spells work yourself, or see them performed,” Bucky finishes for him. “Without Magic it’s just scrawls on some old paper, or an expensive necklace.”

Steve looks down at the dregs of his ale. “But one day you might get to ride on a steam locomotive, or see those suspension bridges for yourself.”

Dernier nods, ducking his head a little guiltily.

Steve finishes the last of his ale and hands back the pewter mug. “Thank you, Jacques.”

Dernier tugs at his flat cap. “You’re one of the good ones, Mr Witch.”

Bucky snorts. “Ain’t he just.”

“So we can rule out the Black Market,” Steve murmurs as they continue along the street. “What does that leave us?”

“I don’t know.” Bucky’s mouth twists thoughtfully. “Rival Witches? Maybe they’re being sent overseas.”

Steve shakes his head. “You were kept in England all that time, weren’t you?”

The memory of the warehouse full of crates and cages comes back to him, and Bucky tightens his hold on Steve’s arm, though Steve could not say which of them he was reassuring. Perhaps both.

“Moved about now and then, but not far. Would’ve felt it if we crossed the sea.”
Steve buys a handful of the last of the winter apples, wrinkled and small but still sweet tasting, and pays for it with silver. “So why do all this? Why take such a risk?”

Bucky shrugs and bites into his apple. “Why does Sitwell have a room full of relics?” he asks, his mouth full.

“Greed,” Steve says absently, polishing his apple on his sleeve before taking a bite. Bucky tosses his apple core to a handful of pigeons, watching as they squabble and peck each other over the scrap of food.

Despite the cold weather, there is a hint of spring in the air, and one of the carts is selling the first bluebells of the season, neatly tied into bunches with ribbon. Steve weighs up the thought of buying a posy for Bucky, and gets startled by a poke in the ribs.

“You buying me flowers, Steve?” Bucky sneaks up behind him and murmurs in his ear.

Steve brushes off the question, but Bucky wraps his arms around Steve’s waist, and Steve curls his hands loosely around Bucky’s wrists.

“Flower are prettier in the ground,” Bucky murmurs, his head on Steve’s shoulder.

“They are,” Steve pats the back of Bucky’s hands. “But someone decided to dig up all my flowers.”


Steve tightens his grip on Bucky’s wrist. All the plants dug up in his garden, and like a fool he’d attributed it to malice.

“I’m an idiot,” Steve sighs, and Bucky laughs, a soft huff of warm breath against Steve’s ear.

“You’ll get no argument there.”

Steve slips out of Bucky’s grip and picks up a terracotta pot of snowdrops, their tender green stems pushing out of a handful of soil. “Would you prefer snowdrops?” he holds the pot up to Bucky.

“We could plant them under the cherry tree.”

“Much better.” Bucky taps a claw against the brick-red pot. “And there should be Marigolds and Nasturtiums in the summer.”

Steve can almost picture it, a riot of red and gold and yellow, and it makes him smile.

“I’ll get out the seed catalogues when we get home,” he says, handing a coin to the flower seller. “Make me a list.”

Bucky tucks the little pot into his coat pocket, and looks across the road where Dugan stands with his pie cart. His ears twitch forward, and he tugs Steve’s sleeve sharply. Steve follows the direction of his gaze and chuckles softly.

“Alright,” he agrees. “Lunch first.”

Bucky lets out a pleased little trill and tightens his hold on Steve’s arm, dragging him across the cobblestones and towards the smell of hot pastry.

Once they get home, Bucky wastes no time sending Steve off in search of plant catalogues while he makes them both tea. Steve comes down to find the back door left wide open and Bucky traipsing around the garden with a notebook and pencil, marking out the areas in the garden that are damp or in deep shade.

Steve takes a seat under the cherry tree and drinks the tea left out for him, listening with half an ear to plans for a vegetable garden and a fish pond.

“No eating the fish,” Steve murmurs as Bucky sits down next to him.

“As if,” Bucky snorts, grabbing one of the catalogues and flicking through the pages.

“Or frogs,” Steve smirks.

Bucky gives him an unimpressed glare. “You’re hilarious.”

Steve lets a sudden, high pitched giggle, and claps his hand over his mouth, taking a moment to compose himself. Bucky watches as Steve straightens his coat, tugging the cuffs into place and clearing his throat a couple of times.

“You pearl,” Bucky rumbles, his voice a low purr, and Steve has to cover his face with his hands and take a few deep breathes until his heart stops stuttering.
Bucky leaves him in peace while he works on his list, even lines of Latin names and quantities in elegant copperplate. Steve glances surreptitiously at his plans, and finds himself imagining the garden Bucky is creating. Honeysuckle by the back door, sending its sweet fragrance wafting into the kitchen. Herbs and flowers and vegetables gathered together in an elegant chaos that would make the authors of his horticultural books weep with rage.

“What is this?” Steve asks curiously, pointing to Bucky’s sketch. “Is this Rosemary?”

“Rosemary and Thyme, keep pests off,” Bucky confirms. “I’d add garlic or onion, but you want the flowers for their smell, right?”

Steve nods, looking at the plan with a new understanding. They are not arranged to please the eye, but to support each other, to ward off insects or provide shade. It is hard not to compare it to the way they live, disordered and unorthodox, and met with disapproval from every quarter. But Steve wouldn’t change it for anything.

Bucky puts down his list and slaps Steve’s knee. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Steve follows him back to the house, and Bucky points to the bare earth at the back wall where Steve’s rose garden had been. There’s still a scant handful of bushes left standing, their thorned stems bare and sorrowful.

“Here,” Bucky sketches rough shapes in the air over the bare soil, and Steve can clearly picture the swathes of flowers, the resinous herbs a dense mat of green all year round.

“Looks good,” Steve nods, giving Bucky a sideways glance. “Shame someone dug up half my roses.”

“Idiot.” Bucky scrunches up a spare scrap of parchment and throws it at Steve’s head. “They were infected. Root rot, would have taken out the rest by summer’s end.”

Steve opens his mouth to argue, then clamps it shut again. The roses Bucky had pulled up had been looking unwell, producing hardly any flowers and small, pale leaves. Steve had put it down to stress.

All this time, he had thought Bucky had been hell-bent on destroying the garden, but in truth he had been saving it.

“We’ll need to dig over the soil first, add some gravel for drainage.” Bucky scratches his cheek thoughtfully. “I know you like the Tea Roses, but I figure we replace the damaged ones with Damask, maybe get some climbers for the wall. Something red.”

Steve’s heart trips and stumbles, beating double-time in his breast. “Damask?”

Bucky nods absently. “Damask are the best roses, they have the sweetest fragrance. You should have a dozen at lea—”

Steve presses his mouth to Bucky’s, cutting off whatever he was going to say. For a moment Bucky freezes, his hands hovering in mid-air as Steve cups the line of his jaw, thumbs brushing along his cheekbones. Bucky comes to his senses, grabbing hold of Steve’s coat and dragging him closer, pulling their bodies flush and licking into Steve’s eager mouth.

Steve sucks on Bucky’s tongue, rough and urgent, pushing his fingers up into Bucky’s hair and curling around his furred ears. He cradles them gently, rubbing his thumb along the base in a way that makes Bucky purr.

Bucky lets out a pleased hum, blinking in surprise when Steve finally withdraws. “What was that for?” he asks, his eyes crinkling with affection.

Steve shakes his head, running the tip of his thumbs up Bucky’s soft ears. “I love you,” he says simply.

Bucky smiles, sudden and warm and bright, it wrinkles up his nose and brings colour to his cheeks, and Steve loves him all the more.

“ Took you long enough,” Bucky murmurs, and Steve has to push him up against the back wall and kiss him again and again, until they are breathless.

Steve drops down onto one knee, the cold slowly seeping through his woolen trousers, and pushes up the hem of Bucky’s shirt to expose his navel. He kisses Bucky’s stomach, pressing his nose to
the soft trail of dark hair that leads down to the waistband of his trousers.

“Please?” Steve hooks his finger in the belt loop, but refrains from pulling them down.

“Steve…” Bucky strokes through Steve’s short blond hair, claws grazing lightly his scalp. “You don’t have to.”

“I want.” Steve swallows and brushes his mouth to the curve of Bucky’s hip.

He should say more, find some reasoning, some explanation for his actions. But it would all be so much noise.

“I want,” he sighs, and it is reason enough for Bucky, who purses his lips and nods, his hands moving down to bracket Steve’s shoulders. His coat brushes against Steve’s arms, enshrouding them.

With unsteady hands Steve tugs Bucky’s trousers down to his hips, just enough to expose him.

Bucky lets out a shuddering breath as Steve cradles his hips and takes in the sight of his cock, already stiff and proud.

He lingers, drinking in every detail. The rosy blush of the crown, the slight curve to the length, tapping against the sparsely furred skin below his navel with every sucked-in breath.

“You… uh…” Bucky swallows audibly. “You need help with that?”

Steve hesitates. Is it too strange, too soon, to admit that the sight of Bucky’s cock, thick and hard and spreading pearly drops of semen on his stomach, is almost overwhelming? That the evidence of Bucky’s passion, of his desire for Steve of all people, makes his heart clatter, makes his mouth water.

In answer Steve leans forward and darts out his tongue, flicking it over the crown, tasting him.

Sweet and salt and musk, Steve draws his tongue across the taut, silken skin again and swallows, and above him there is a gentle thud as Bucky smacks his head against the wall.

Emboldened, Steve wraps his lips around the head and sucks, drawing it into his mouth. Bucky’s hips stutter in Steve’s hands and he curses loudly as Steve tightens his grip and pushes Bucky gently back against the wall. Steve bobs his head, taking in a little more of Bucky’s length each time, saliva dripping from his open mouth and gathering on his chin. He swallows rhythmically, the weight of Bucky’s cock pressing down his tongue, moving faster until it grazes against the back of his throat and he has to pull back sharply and turn his head to cough.

“Easy,” Bucky murmurs, rubbing the nape of Steve’s neck. “You don’t have to do so much.”

Bucky wipes Steve’s chin with a broad swipe of his thumb, and he catches it between his teeth, biting down hard enough to leave a fading mark.

“Oh, you little-” Bucky shoves Steve down onto his back, and slips down the wall after him, his movements lithe and predatory.

Bucky pins Steve to the cold ground, his coat spread over them like a blanket, and kisses him. His mouth feels feverish against the chill air, his hands darting and impatient, slipping under the waistband of Steve’s trousers and wrapping around his aching cock.

Steve swears under his breath, throwing his arms around Bucky’s neck and thrusting up into his grip. He whines when Bucky pulls his hand away, mindful of his sharp claws. Bucky soothes his grumbling with kisses, far too light and teasing to be satisfying.

It takes a minute of work unfastening the buttons on Steve’s trousers, and Bucky pushes them down to his hips and rubs the palm of his hand against Steve’s cock.

“Bucky,” Steve moans, mouthing at his jaw.

Bucky yowls as Steve finds the juncture where his neck meets his shoulder and bites down. He groans, low and rough, and Steve drags his tongue over the marks he’s made.

“You pearl, you sweet pearl,” Bucky rasps, sliding his spit-dampened cock against the crease of Steve’s thigh.

Steve gasps as Bucky ruts up against him, reaching under Bucky’s coat and shoving his hands down the back of his trousers to cup the firm swell of his backside. Bucky shifts in his grip, damp with sweat and spit, and ruts their cocks together. Steve can feel the threads of golden light buzzing through his veins, chasing the sensation of skin against skin as Bucky covers him with feather-light
kisses and panted breaths. They twist on the cold earth, rolling onto their sides, and the ground seems to shiver. Bucky hooks his leg around Steve’s thigh, drawing him closer as they move together, and Steve latches on to the forming bruise at Bucky’s throat. He takes the darkening skin into his mouth, taking as much pleasure in the moans and yowls his kisses can bring as he does in moving with the sinuous glide of Bucky’s body.

Bucky reaches down to grab Steve’s hand, linking their fingers together. The ground beneath them shakes, faint tremors in time with the beating of Steve’s heart. “You feel that?” Bucky whispers, brushing his nose against Steve’s cheek. He nods, too breathless to speak, and Bucky kisses him, a rough slick of tongue against Steve’s teeth.

Steve presses their joined hands to the dirt, and the crackling, golden light flows through him, until he can no longer tell where it ends in him and begins in Bucky. He bows his head, pressing his face to Bucky’s shoulder, the scent of him sharp and musky, and comes over them both, feeling gut-punched with the force of it. Bucky rocks against him a moment longer before he shudders and spills against Steve’s stomach, soaking into his shirt. His claws tear through the thick wool of Steve’s coat, and he curses as the aftershocks make him twitch and gasp.

Steve gasps for breath, overheated and sticky and wearing far too many clothes for such activities. Bucky curls up against him, tucking his warm hands under Steve’s tangled coat and working their way under his ruined shirt to trace along the notches of his spine. The touch is soothing, and Steve yawns, cracking his jaw, fighting the urge to close his eyes. They should get up, Steve thinks to himself. Go inside and get cleaned up, drag the tin bathtub into the kitchen and take the hottest bath they can stand to chase off the chill of the cold earth, and probably burn their ruined clothing. Bucky sniffs and burrows in closer, pressing his face to the hollow of Steve’s throat and breathing in the scent of him.

Steve finds it far more agreeable to stay where he is, combing his fingers through Bucky’s hair and listening to the sounds of the garden around them. Something brushes against his cheek, soft and velvety. Steve twitches, half dozing. “Mpf,” he mutters, his mouth tacky and dry. Did he fall asleep? How long have they been outside for?

The ground under them is warm, unusually so. More than you would expect it to be from just the heat of their bodies. Something else brushes across his nose, light as a butterfly wing, and drifts away, caught on a breeze.

His hands are tangled in Bucky’s hair, and he moves slowly, wary of disturbing him. There are scraps of colour in Bucky’s hair too, caught in his rumpled clothing. Steve reaches up to pluck a slip of something silky clinging to the hint of stubble on his chin. Deep red, almost crimson, he holds it up to the light. A rose petal.

The wind catches it and carries it away, and Steve sits up a little, turning to look at the rose bushes. They are all in full bloom, every single overwintering rose in the garden has exploded into life, sending forth flowers in a riot of colour. Beneath the blooms are deep green leaves. As he stares, open mouthed, a handful of buds crack open, and petals unfurl in rich shades of peach and crimson. “Bucky,” Steve murmurs. “The roses…” “Yes, the roses,” Bucky keeps his eyes tightly shut, still tucked into Steve’s coat, safe from the chill air. Steve can see him smiling, though, the kind of smile that crinkles up the corners of his eyes. “Thank you,” Steve bends down enough to lightly kiss Bucky’s cheek. Bucky purrs loudly. “Still not sorry about the damn books.”
Steve shakes Bucky awake, and he grumbles, his ears flattening against his skull. “No.”
“Buck, you don’t even know what I’m going to say yet,” Steve crouches down beside the bed. He’s fully dressed and has been since sunrise, when the idea came to him, so clear and insistent that he couldn’t return to sleep.
Bucky narrows his eyes, under the covers his tail thrashes in annoyance. “You’re awake and dressed and it’s not even morning. No.”
Steve props his elbow on the edge of the bed and rests his chin on his hand. “First principles.”
“What?”
“First principles, have you never read Marcus Aurelius?” It was one of the few books Bucky hadn’t destroyed. “What is this, fundamentally? What is its nature and substance, its reason for being?”
Bucky sits up and rubs his eyes. “Alright. Go on.”
“Who gains the most from the loss of Magic?” Steve asks. “Who benefits?”
Bucky scratches his ear. “Rival Witches, the fighting in the Middle East?”
“But nothing is being taken overseas,” Steve points out. “Artefacts and familiars are being hidden, altars destroyed. But nothing has been taken out of the country, as far as we know, nor have they been used by rival Witches. Why steal something powerful and not use it?”
Bucky hums in agreement. “Who wants the end of Magic? Hydra?”
“Exactly,” Steve nods, his eyes bright. “Hydra. The champions of scientific reasoning. As long as there is Magic, as long as there is Shield, science is little more than a novelty, an entertainment for the masses.”
“But without Magic…”
“There would be nothing to stop it.”
Bucky gathers up the bedclothes in his hands, his ears pulled back. “Would that be so bad?” he asks quietly.
Steve reaches out and takes Bucky’s hands in his own. “We need magic. We need it to keep us safe, to fight the war overseas.”
“There are other ways to fight,” Bucky mutters.
“But they are not so effective.”
“Then why haven’t you won?” Bucky hisses, pulling his hands out of Steve’s fast enough for his claws to leave long, parallel scratches along his palms. “All these years and you’re still fighting. Over what?”
“Over our safety.”
“If it’s about your safety why are you all over there killing them? They’ve never come here.”
“Because we would never let that happen!” Steve snaps.
Bucky bows his head, and draws in a slow breath through his teeth. “I’m sorry.” Steve murmurs. “I shouldn’t have yelled.”
Bucky shakes his head. “You lost your old man over there, right?”
“It’s still no excuse.”
Bucky reaches out and strokes his thumb along the lines along Steve’s hands.
“Leave them,” Steve says quickly, and Bucky snorts, running his fingers along the scratches until they are gone.
“So, Hydra?” Bucky asks, pushing the argument aside.
Steve frowns, but doesn’t question the change of topic. He takes Bucky's hand and brings it to his mouth, pressing an apologetic kiss to his knuckles.
“We need to see Erskine.”

Bucky is quiet on the walk to the school, but tucks his hand in the crook of Steve’s arm and leans into him, and doesn’t grumble when Steve presses a kiss to the base of his ear. The dark tuft at the tip tickles Steve’s nose as the ear flickers, and he kisses it with equal reverence.
Steve knocks on the door of the school, and waits for Jarvis to answer. He gives them both a world-weary look, but lets them in. Steve makes a little small talk, asking how the students are
faring, and listens to his complaints about the youth of today.
Jarvis directs them to Erskine’s rooms, and returns to his work with the promise of tea shortly.
They find Erskine at his desk, working his way through a stack of reports. He stands and waves
them into the room.
“Come in, yes come in,” he smiles. “Please distract me from my dull and endless labours.”
He looks closely at them, at the way they stand without a hair’s breadth between them, but makes
no comment. Steve has not exactly announced the change in their relationship, but neither has he
denied it.
Erskine points him to a seat opposite him at the desk, and waves away Steve’s apologies for
visiting unannounced. Bucky perches on the arm on the chair, one arm laid across the back and
brushing against Steve’s shoulders.
“How are things in Shield? I hear you’re the man who knows how to find things.”
Steve huffs. “On occasion.”
Jarvis comes bustling into the office with a tea tray, and tsks at Bucky until he slips off the chair
and stands behind it, looking the picture of innocence.
Jarvis doesn’t fall for it, and has Bucky pouring tea while he sets out a plate of spiced biscuits,
fretting over the way they are fanned across the plate.
When he has departed, Erskine steeples his hands and looks expectant. “I gather you did not come
here for idle chatter.”
Steve puts down his cup and clears his throat. “What do you know about Hydra?”
Erskine sits back in his chair and looks at the ceiling. “Campaigners for the Age of Reason,
lobbying for change in Parliament and stricter controls for the use of Magic. They believe that
science is the future.”
Steve nods. “Yes, I’m aware of that. What do you know about them?”
Erskine taps his fingers together. “They seek change. A new world order.”
There is something unsettling in the phrase, something familiar. “They want an end to Magic.”
Erskine pours a second cup of tea, and takes his time adding milk and sugar. He places a few
biscuits on the saucer and passes the cup to Steve, knowing full well that it will be handed on to
Bucky.
“I was… approached. By a colleague, one who has spent many years studying the craft, but has no
familiar of his own.” Erskine pours himself a fresh cup. “There are many who study their whole
lives, who are skilled in Magic, but never find a familiar. You know how the society looks down
on such people.”
Steve nods, his mouth dry. Nothing was ever said out loud, no one would ever be so crass. But it
was always there, the silent judgement, the condescension. The unanimous accord that one without
a familiar wasn’t a true Witch. Steve had spent years searching for a familiar before Bucky came
to him, desperate and frustrated by his inability to do great work without one. It isn’t hard to see
how they could become so disillusioned.
“So they have abandoned Magic?” Steve asks. “Taken science as their new Witchcraft?” Steve
asks.
“So it would seem. I was given the opportunity to join with them.” Erskine shrugs. “I declined.”
“Why?” Bucky asks and shoves a biscuit in his mouth.
“I did not trust their reasoning.” Erskine says honestly. “There is much anger amongst them, and
resentment towards the Magical elite. Some of them, I believe, have familiars. But for whatever
reason, were rejected when they approached Shield.”
“So they’re out for vengeance? To crush Shield for rejecting them?” Steve asks. “And what of
science? Is it real, or is it illusions?”
“Of course it’s real,” Bucky hums, swirling the dregs in his teacup.
“I do not know.” Erskine holds up his hands, as if to shield himself from the questions. “Whether it
is trickery or genuine, certainly what I have seen points to genuine. The world is filled with
wonders we are only just learning to see.”
“We need to find a way in,” Steve furrows his brows. “Would your colleague be willing to speak further? Anonymously, of course.”
Erskine shakes his head. “They are secretive for a reason.”
Steve lets out a hiss of frustration. Erskine pulls open his desk drawer and retrieves a square of black cardstock. He pushes it across the cluttered desk. “I can, however, offer this.”
Steve takes the card and suppresses a shudder. There is no writing on it, only the image of a red skull framed by six serpentine limbs that reminds him of the woodcuts of Baphomet in his old grimoires. A baleful image, filled with dark intent.
“Although you have gained notoriety in some circles for your actions.” Erskine glances at Bucky. “It would still be wise for you to conceal your true identity.”
“Understood.” Steve slips the card into his breast pocket. It feels heavy and dull against him, and he is reminded of gnats and leeches, dun coloured creatures that drain the life of the unsuspecting.
“Thank you. For everything.”
Steve gets up to leave, and Erskine holds his tongue until he’s at the door.
“Stephen,” he calls out. “Do not rush to the command of others.”
Steve pauses, his hand curled around the doorknob. “Sir?”
“I know you only wish to do what is right, but your actions should not be in the hands of others.” Erskine smiles, a bitter little twist of his lips. “You are a good man. And a good man chooses his own path.”

Hydra gather at the dark of the moon, which gives Steve several days to prepare. Erskine’s words stay with him, and he decides against informing Shield of his plans. He’ll submit a report after, and deal with the consequences then. Perhaps it will come to nothing.
He weaves a glamour from some of the rose petals gathered from the garden, dousing them in sweet oil in the light of the waning moon.
Bucky sits cross-legged on the kitchen table, surrounded by lit candles and burning incense. He is dressed in a pair of leather trousers, fastened at the sides by knotted cord. A new collar is around his neck, a plain silver disc hanging at his throat. His hair is tinged with copper, his pointed ears russet-coloured and tuftless. There is a sharpness to his features that Steve finds quietly unsettling, and he finds himself seeking out the familiar amidst the strange. The sly curve of Bucky’s lips, the crinkles around his eyes when he smiles.
Bucky indulges the surreptitious glances even as they argue over his appearance, Bucky rightly pointing out how a familiar would be dressed. Steve can only think on the frost that lines the streets at night, and the heavy silver buckle at the nape of Bucky’s neck, leaving faint marks in his skin.
Steve, in turn is dressed in uncomfortable clothing, purchased for the evening. A wool suit that pinches at his shoulders and tapers at the waist, and a black velvet frock coat that makes him feel ridiculous.
Bucky watches Steve prepare himself, drawing a star upon his brow in rose oil, the perfume dripping down his fingers and soaking into the sleeve of his shirt.
“Dreadful,” Bucky murmurs.
Steve pauses in his application and gives Bucky an annoyed glance. “You do it then.”
Bucky leaps to his feet, lithe and graceful, and steps over the burning candles. He drops down from the table, landing silently, and picks up the bottle of oil.
“You’ve never wrought a glamour before, have you?” Bucky pours oil into his hands, slicking up his fingers.
“No.” Steve shakes his head. “I don’t care for deceit.”
“I can see that,” Bucky huffs, placing himself behind Steve and reaching around to cup his chin in sweet-scented fingers. “Hold still.”
Bucky draws his hands slowly up Steve’s face. The changes are subtle, softening his features and thinning his lips. Bucky smooths his thumbs across Steve’s eyebrows, leaving them almost black, before drawing his fingers through his hair. At his touch Steve’s hair darkens, growing in length until it falls past his eyes in soft waves.
“There,” Bucky says triumphantly. Steve brushes his hair out of his eyes. “Did you have to make it so long?” Bucky swats him on the shoulder. “Stop whining, it’s only one night.” Steve picks up the mirror lying on the table and studies his reflection. It’s a passing strange seeing a stranger’s face looking back at him, strange enough for him to quickly put the mirror down and resolve not to look again until he’s back to his own self. He takes a deep breath. “Are we ready?” “Ready as we’ll ever be.”

They walk a few streets before hailing a cab, and sit silently as the driver takes them south of the river to Battersea. The cab comes to a halt, the driver hushing his horses as they stamp their feet and toss their heads, restless and agitated. Steve climbs down first, and hands over a few extra coins to the driver while Bucky slips down beside him. He waits for the carriage to pull away, the horses straining, before turning to view the estate. The manor house was grand once, but time had not been kind to it. The stone walls crumbling, the grounds poorly maintained. Steve walks up to the entrance, glancing back to check on Bucky at his heel, and knocks on the door. It is answered by a familiar. A large man with a sour expression and the high, pointed ears of a jackal. Bucky growls under his breath, but falls silent when Steve hushes him. Steve takes Erskine’s card out of his breast pocket, and hands it over to the familiar, who gives it the barest glance before shoving it back into Steve’s hands and waving them in. Inside is much the same as outside, a little shabby and past its prime, but it’s the people that make Steve curse under his breath. There are Witches everywhere. Most have no familiars at their side, but there are a handful accompanied by cowed figures with ears and feathers and tails. They have little in the way of clothing, a strip of cloth tied at the waist or draped across their bodies. They all wear collars and chains, bindings and spells crawling across their skins. Steve grabs Bucky by the wrist and pulls him back to the door, but Bucky will have none of it, pushing him into a quiet corner. “Settle down,” Bucky growls, his voice a low rumble. “You’re making a scene.” “Settle down?” Steve rasps. “Do you see this? They’re chained up like… like dogs.” “See it?” Bucky snorts. “I’ve lived it.” A Witch gives them a curious look, his familiar has delicate paws and long whiskers, and is led across the floor by a length of silver chain. Bucky bows his head, giving the appearance of an unruly familiar being admonished by his master. The Witch nods to Steve in support, and continues on his way. “How can you stand it?” he asks in low tone. “Even under the glamour, Steve knows he must look wretched. “Practice,” Bucky says flatly. He reaches out to touch Steve’s arm. “It ain’t right, but there’s nothing can be done about it, not here. So I need you to set aside your righteous indignation and focus.” Steve swallows, shame souring the back of his throat, and nods. “You’re right.” “I’m always right,” Bucky’s mouth quirks up a little. “Now we can get out of here, go home and-” “No,” Steve says quickly. “No. Hydra are up to something, we need to find out what.” Steve takes a minute to compose himself, Bucky’s hand on his sleeve grounding him and drawing the room into focus. “Are they all Witches?” he asks in low tone. Bucky scans the room, watching the people without familiars, the way they stare hungrily after the people dragging their magical creatures around on leads. “Not all. Some have no Magic about them, but they long for it.” Steve nods. He can almost see those who are not adept. There is a dullness about them, a stillness
in the air where they walk.

“If they long for Magic, then why are they at a gathering of scientists?” Steve asks as they start slowly walking around the room.

Bucky shrugs. “Why do humans do anything?”

“Is this yours?” Someone asks loudly, tugging on Bucky’s tail. Bucky’s ears draw back, and he flicks his tail free of their grabbing hand.

“Yes,” Steve moves between Bucky and the man. “And I’d thank you not to touch him.”

“How much?” the man asks bluntly.

Steve glares at the man’s insolence. “Not. For. Sale.”

The man glares at him, but skulks away. Steve hears a soft chuckle and turns to see that the exchange had an audience, a monocled man with a raven perched on his shoulder, bound to his wrist with a heavy iron chain.

“Pay no attention to these parasites,” he says, leaning in close as if they were old friends sharing a joke. “They are an unfortunate necessity, but it’s not fair to encourage them.”

“Indeed,” Steve keeps his answer vague.

Not a trace of Magic in them, and yet they believe that, given a familiar, they can be great and powerful Witches,” the man confides.

“Does he think we spend all these years reading grimoires for fun?” Steve asks.

The man laughs. “Seems a waste of a good familiar, doesn’t it? May as well give them a street cat and send them on their way.”

Steve glances at Bucky, and thinks how finding a street cat didn’t hurt him. The man misconstrues his look and holds his hand out for Steve to shake. “I don’t believe I’ve seen you at our gatherings before. Strucker. Wolfgang Strucker.”

“You haven’t.” Steve takes his hand and shakes it. “Grant. Stephen Grant. I was encouraged by a friend to attend. He said I might find what I need here.”

It’s not a lie, exactly.

“And what is it you are looking for?” Strucker asks, his grip on Steve’s hand tightening.

Steve meets his eye, and picks his words with care. “I have found myself... dissatisfied with Shield’s methods. I appreciate all that they have done for us, but it is run by an unelected council, people with their own agendas. To join Shield is to surrender your free will, your right to choose your own actions.”

“You are looking for change,” Strucker nods, and finally lets go of Steve’s hand. “We all are.”

Strucker turns to face the room. “If you seek change, a new order, then you have found it.”

Steve pulls his lips into a thin line, and hates himself for what he says next. “With them?” He points to the man from before, circling the room and staring at another Witch’s familiar, a female with lidless eyes and delicate scales covering her limbs.

“The compromises we must endure, for the sake of money,” Strucker waves his hand. The chain on his wrists clanks with his movements. “Parasites, they think they can buy their way into the Craft.”

Steve nods, and chooses his words carefully. “No doubt they will make a fuss when it turns out they can’t.”

Strucker shrugs. “Well, by then it will be too late.”

Bucky keeps close to Steve as he follows Strucker through the house, pausing to engage in polite chatter with a few other guests at Strucker’s suggestion. Steve sips at the glass of astringent wine he is given and keeps his comments vague, his tone light, and he listens closely.

The stories he hears are the same. The adepts without a bond bemoan a life devoted to study, ending in the failure to find a familiar. Those without Magic share their anger at the the secrecy of Witches, and the hoarding of their grimoires. They all hunger, be it for knowledge or power or for the things they do not possess.

Steve listens, nodding until his head aches, and when he can’t stand another minute with these people Bucky leads him outside for a breath of fresh air.
Bucky shivers once in the cold and Steve slips off his frock coat and hands it over. “I’m fine,” Bucky grumbles, but takes the coat anyway.

Steve leans against the crumbling wall of the manor house and screws his eyes shut, as Bucky tuts softly and draws a hand across his brow, cool and soothing. “Not one of them mentioned science,” Steve murmurs as Bucky pushes his hair out of his eyes. “Whatever their goal, it has nothing to do with the Age of Reason.”

Bucky looks to either side of them, checking that there are no other partygoers out taking the air. “Well then,” he says with a sly grin. “Let’s find out.”

They creep silently across the ground, shoulders up against the wall, working their way around the building. At every window they reach Steve stops and peers through the leaded glass. Inside the dimly lit rooms people gather in little clusters to gossip and drink sour wine, the few Witches with familiars are the center of their attentions.

The grounds are in a worse state around the back of the house, thickets of the last summers nettles, tall and brittle-stemmed, tug at their clothes. Brambles climb the stone walls, their thorns thick and sharp, and Steve is deeply grateful that Bucky is wearing his coat.

At the very back of the house Steve can make out several voices raised in anger. He holds out his hand, fingers splayed, gesturing for Bucky at his heels to hold still, and listens carefully.

Several men arguing in a private room separate from the gathering. He can just make out a window up ahead, moss and ivy creeping over the frame. One of the leaded panes of glass at the top of the window is smashed, and the sound of their voices filters out into the cold night air.

Steve twitches his fingers, and they move forward together, crouching down as they get closer. “The man has lost his mind,” one of the men bellows. “He’s delusional.” “Come now,” another placates. “Without Alexander we would-” “He wants to raise the Red Skull,” the first man retorts. “Even if such a… such a fairy tale were possible, he would see us all doomed.” “You’re overreacting,” a third voice announces. “If he wants it so badly, let him have it. There are more important matters at hand.”

That seems to quiet them down, and Steve risks raising his head up enough to peer through the glass. His presence is obscured by moss and leaves, but the glass is filthy, and he can barely make out the men within.

The room is lit with smoking lanterns, the guttering flames throwing light onto the spells for subterfuge and secrecy scrawled on the walls, and the men are gathered around a table strewn with parchments. Their leader arranges the parchments by some unseen design, moving around little carved objects into place. “So we all know our places in this endeavour?” the third man asks, looking around the room.

There is a low rumble of agreement, until a man in the furthest corner clears his throat. Steve frowns, leaning forward until his nose is pressed against the glass. The man rises to his feet, and Steve drops down into a crouch below the frame, dragging Bucky down with him. “Stern,” he hisses. “The one who didn’t lose the relic?” Bucky asks softly, straightening up to look through the window. Steve grabs him by the sleeve and pulls him down into the weeds. “Stay down!” Bucky tolerates being manhandled, and leans into Steve’s shoulder as he listens, his head cocked to one side. “My people are in place,” Stern says. “They will await the signal to let your men into the Abbey.” “Good,” says the third man. “I trust I can rely on you all to do your part?” There is a rumble of agreement, and Stern clears his throat again. “If I might put forth a case for delay? There are still some artifacts that I would like to secure before we-” “You have caused enough delay!” snaps the first man. “The Directors are already suspicious!” “And your little trick with the Maenid was a disaster,” another agrees. “Enough,” the third man utters, and the room falls silent. “We have come too far, sacrificed too
much to delay a moment further. I will not see years of effort wasted because one of us has sticky fingers.” There is a shuffle of parchment. “When it is over you will have your pick of trophies. You must wait until then.”

“Carter is a problem,” one of the men complains.
“A problem that is being dealt with,” the third man says grimly. “My people await her in Durham.”

Steve lets out a soft exhale, his shoulders tensing.

Bucky reaches out and grabs him by the collar of his shirt, his claws pricking holes in the silk.

“Don’t be stupid,” he growls.

“You heard them,” Steve whispers harshly. “Peggy—”

“Can take care of herself,” Bucky’s voice is calm, though his ears are pulled back, his teeth are bared. “You go running in there, and what's gonna happen? Hmm?” Bucky tugs gently on Steve’s shirt. “You think they’re gonna still down and listen? Turn over a new leaf?”

“We have to—”

“There’s nothing we can do here,” Bucky’s ears flick forward. “You understand?”

Steve sets his jaw, as if to argue, and finally gives a single, sharp nod. “We gotta tell Peggy.”

“You think she’ll believe us?”

Steve shakes his head, looking troubled. “We have to try.”

“We strike at dawn,” there is a clink of glasses. “By this time tomorrow, my friends, the Tesseract will be ours.”

Bucky grabs Steve by the sleeve as they reach the steps of Whitehall. “Wait!”

“Damnit Bucky,” Steve snaps. “There’s no time!”

He tries to twist free of Bucky’s hold, but he sinks his claws in, deep enough to tear his shirt, but not the skin underneath. He is careful, desperately careful, but his hold is firm. “They won’t know you.”

Steve stares blankly at him, until Bucky touches a strand of his hair.

The disguise.

Steve shakes his head, more annoyed at himself than anything. “Quickly,” he says, relaxing his stance.

Bucky snorts and lets go of Steve’s arm. He passes his hand across Steve’s face, dragging his fingers through Steve’s hair. Steve suppresses a shudder, his skin feels raw and over exposed, and the sensation is deeply unsettling. Bucky pats him on the cheek, and warmth floods through him. “Thank you.” Steve says in a rush, and hurries up the steps to Whitehall.

There is only one guard at the entrance this late at night, and he turns Steve away.

“Come back in the morning,” he crosses his arms and blocks the way in.

“The morning will be too late,” Steve growls. “We need to see Director Carter.”

“What you need is to go home, sir,” the guard squares up to Steve, until they are almost nose to nose.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Bucky sighs.

He reaches past Steve and touches his index finger to the guards lips, his claw pressing against the mans nose. The man stumbles back, his back slamming into the solid oak doors, and he looks down his nose at Bucky’s claw.

“Shh,” Bucky whispers, and the man crumples to the ground.

“What the hell did you do to him?” Steve whips around, checking for any witnesses, but the street is silent and empty.

“He’s fine.” Bucky brushes his hand over the door, listening to the dull clicking of a lock turning, and pushes it open. “Help me move him.”

Steve lifts the guard by his shoulders while Bucky takes his feet, and they carry him inside, shutting the door behind them. The lobby is lit by a handful of lamps along the walls, casting deep shadows in every corner.

“Over here,” Steve whispers, directing them to a darkened alcove. The guard lets out a loud snore
as they lay him down. “How long will it last?”
Bucky shrugs. “Long enough.”
“Bucky,” Steve chides gently, but doesn’t dwell on the sleeping guard, and starts walking down
the hall to Peggy’s office.

Steve hammers again on the ornate wooden door leading to Peggy’s rooms.
“Maybe she went home?” Bucky asks, checking up and down the corridor to see if Steve’s
relentless banging is getting them unwanted attention. One of the doors further down the hall opens
and a senior member of Shield peers out. He takes one look at Steve at Peggy’s door and rolls his
eyes, slamming the door shut.
“Peggy never goes home,” Steve huffs, and raps on the door. “Peggy?”
The door cracks open, a thin sliver of light spilling through in the moment before Angie appears,
blocking their way.
“What the hell, Rogers?” she snaps. “Go home already.”
“I gotta talk to Peggy,” Steve says in a rush, and starts to push open the door.
“Ah-ah-ah.” Angie grabs the door. She’s small and slight, but surprisingly strong, and Steve is
reluctant to shove her out of the way. “She’s busy.”
Steve turns to Bucky, whose expression hardens. “‘Taken care of’, huh?”
“Peggy’s being called away,” Steve says slowly, keeping his gaze fixed on Bucky. “Something
urgent, somewhere far away, that no one else can take care of.”
Angie pales. “How do you—”
“Don’t let her go,” Bucky says softly. “You let her go, she won’t come back.”
Angie glares at him, but something unspoken passes between them, some understanding. In that
moment Steve realises how alike they are, the four of them.
Angie steps back and opens the door wide. “You better have a good explanation for this.”

Peggy is at her desk, packing the last few items into her apothecary case. She tucks an altar cloth
into the lid and closes it, snapping the fastenings shut and letting out a frustrated sigh at Steve’s
appearance.
“This isn’t the time, Steve,” Peggy picks up the coat laid on the back of her chair and drapes it over
her arm. “It will have to wait until Monday.”
“Hydra are Witches,” Steve blurs out.
“I beg your pardon?” Peggy frowns at him, and Steve moves between her and the door, blocking
her exit.
“You have to listen,” he says, not daring to slow down. “Hydra, the Age of Reason, it’s all a cover
for a secret organisation. They are Witches, Peggy. Some of them are members of Shield.”
“Steve,” Peggy looks halfway between angry and concerned. “You cannot go making accusations
about members of Shield!”
“They want the Tesseract,” Steve talks over her, though it pains him to do so. “They’ve been
planning this for months, for years. And at sunrise they will storm the Abbey and take it. They
have members hidden everywhere. The missing books, the relics, the warehouses where familiars
have been secreted away, it’s all Hydra.”
“Oh fo…” Peggy turns away, pinching the bridge of her nose between thumb and forefinger.
“There’s a carriage waiting for me, I don’t have time for this.”
“Durham, right?” Bucky growls. Peggy’s eyes widen. “What was it? The Castle? The Cathedral?”
“The Cathedral,” she says slowly. “The Altar stone has been destroyed.”
“There’s men waiting for you there,” Bucky warns. “They’ve been told to ‘deal with you’. Pretty
sure you know what that means.”
Angie lets out a short trill of alarm and rushes to Peggy’s side. Steve turns away, giving them a
semblance of privacy as Angie wraps her arms around Peggy’s waist.
“I told you it didn’t sound right,” Angie whispers as Peggy embraces her. “I told you.”
Peggy shushes her, murmuring soft words of comfort that Steve doesn’t strain to hear, until Angie
lets her go, but doesn’t move far from her side.
“You have my attention.” Peggy sits down at her desk, her coat in her lap. “Tell me everything.”

Steve sits down opposite her, doing his best to keep calm. There’s no time for this, no time for calm discussions over a cup of tea. Bucky takes his place behind him, a hand resting on the nape of Steve’s neck, grounding him, giving him focus.
“I had begun… private investigations,” Steve begins.

“Why am I not surprised,” Peggy flicks her eyes upwards in exasperation.
Steve gives her a weak smile before continuing. “I was attempting to track down the missing books. My investigations led to a Hydra meeting in Battersea which took place this evening.” Steve leans forward. “There are people with no hint of the Craft there, people who were offered power for their part in this scheme. There are adepts who have not found their own familiars being promised their pick from Hydra’s collection.” Steve grimaces. “As though they were prizes.”

Angie curses softly, and Peggy closes her eyes, drawing in a deep breath. “You said there were members of Shield too,” she asks.
“We witnessed a secret meeting between the ring leaders. Mr. Stern was among them.”
Peggy sits up straight, her expression grim. “That is a very serious accusation, Steve.”
“It’s the truth,” Steve says simply.
“And what proof do you have?” Peggy retorts. “Am I to go before the Council with nothing more than your word?!”
“We don’t have time for this,” Steve loses his patience. “They will be at Westminster Abbey at dawn to steal the Tesseract.”

“The Abbey is protected by spells and wards, created and maintained by Shield,” Peggy says impatiently. “The Tesseract is well-guarded.”
“No it’s not!” Steve snarls. “Don’t you understand? Hydra is Shield. It’s a parasite, a disease that has lain dormant within Shield, waiting for the moment to strike. Those spells won’t protect the Tesseract from Hydra because Hydra put them there!”

Steve moves to stand, but Bucky’s hand brushes his shoulder, his fingers smoothing down his shirt until they rest over his heart.

There is a soft, golden light prickling across the palm of Bucky’s hand. It threads through Steve’s veins, filling them with late summer sunlight and sweet nectar.
“You know me, Peggy,” Steve pleads. “You know me.”
Peggy reaches out her hand blindly and Angie grabs it, hugging it to her chest.
“He ain’t wrong, Boss.” Angie swallows audibly. “You had your doubts about Stern a long time. That scrawny little pigeon of his knew exactly where the Eye was.”

Steve reaches up to cover Bucky’s hand with his own, and feels Magic coursing through him like water. He looks to Peggy and Angie, and can see a faint shimmer in the air between them.

Angie rubs her thumb along the line of Peggy’s jaw, tender and possessive. “What we gonna do, Boss?”
Peggy grits her teeth in grim determination. “We fight.”

“We have to defend the Abbey.” Peggy sweeps her paperwork to one side, clearing a space on the desk.
“The twins are reliable,” Angie suggests.
“They’re too young,” Peggy shakes her head.
“They’re loyal,” Angie purses her lips. “You ain’t got time to be picky on this, Boss. Your best people are already out in the field. T’Challa, Hill, Fury.”
Peggy curses softly and starts searching through her parchments. “I didn’t approve these assignments.” She looks up at Steve, as if only now realising the extent of Hydra’s reach. “We have been sabotaged.”

Steve leans over the desk and pushes through the reports. “You can trust Lang and Wilson. I can vouch for them both.” He hesitates, but trusts his instincts. “And Romanov.”
Peggy gives Steve a shrewd look, but doesn’t doubt his judgement. “Angie, call everyone we can rely on. I’ll tell Howard what’s happening, have him send out word to his people.”

“Stark?” Steve asks.

Peggy shuts him down instantly. “I trust Howard Stark with my life, Steve. And his son.”

Steve nods, chastened. Peggy accepts his unspoken apology and sends Angie on her way.

“Steve,” Peggy picks up her case, her coat forgotten. “I need you down at the Abbey. I’ll be there as soon as I can, I hope with reinforcements.”

Steve and Bucky run through the corridors of Whitehall, while behind them Peggy hammers on every door she passes, calling out to those within.

They clatter down the Whitehall steps and onto the darkened street, the white stone buildings lit amber from the glow of streetlamps. Peggy’s carriage, black and emblazoned with the Shield coat of arms, waits for her arrival.

On the waterfront, Big Ben starts to chime, and incessant pealing calling the Witches of London to arms.

Bucky looks up at the clock tower. “You think they’ll come?” he asks softly.

“London calls to it’s own,” Steve tells him, and starts walking westwards. “Come on.”

Bucky follows him, looking confused. “You’re going the wrong way,” he points south. “The Abbey is that way.”

Steve looks over his shoulder and grins. “Something we need to do first,” he shouts as he breaks into a run. “Come on!”
The Last Witch

Chapter by littleblackfox

Chapter Summary

Bucky winds the final ribbon around Steve’s wrist, twisting spells for deflection and defence into place. “You’ve never once treated me like your servant,” Bucky takes Steve’s hands in his, warm and rough and charged with light. “But I have always been yours.”

Chapter Notes

Cobalt moony:
I had such a great time working on this project with one of the most talented and amazing authors i know, thank you the littleblackfox for bringing us this beautiful story.
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Special thanks to the amazing Moony for the stunning artwork, and for letting me take her original art and weave a ridiculously complicated Historical Magic au around it.

Want to see the same three pictures of Sebastian Stan's impossibly pretty face posted over and over? Find me on Tumblr

There may be some of you compelled to contact me about my formatting. Please don’t. This is how I format, it is my choice, not yours. Don't like it, don't read it. It's that simple.

“Where the bloody hell have you been?!” Peggy yells as Steve hurries up to the Abbey doors, Bucky on his heels.
“You’re not the only one with reinforcements.” Steve turns and gestures to the Abbey grounds. There are men and woman gathering in front of the Abbey, armed with whatever they could find at short notice.
Peggy walks out through the doorway, and stares at the ragged gathering. “They… they are…” “We are,” says Jones proudly, and bows his head. “Pleasure to meet you, M’lady.”
Peggy turns to Steve, looking aghast. “You can’t possibly expect them to fight?” “No offence,” Dugan swings his cricket bat back and forth. “But this is our land as much as yours. And we don’t take kindly to you lot making all the decisions for us.” “Not that we don’t appreciate your efforts,” Dernier adds, tugging on his flat cap. “But from what Monsieur Witch and his cat had to say, we don’t much like the thought of these other folks in
Peggy stares at them. “How?” she asks. “How can you fight Witches?”

Dugan swings his bat again. “A knock to the head usually does the trick.”

There is a murmur of agreement from the crowd, and Steve has to bite hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing.

“You’re Witches, yeah,” Bucky says quietly. “But you’re still human, same as the rest of them.”

Peggy bites her lip, and watches as more people come down from the street and gather on the grass.

“Though I appreciate the sentiment,” she says warily. “There hasn’t been a non-adept set foot in the Abbey in over a hundred years. I understand they want help, I really do.”

“We’re already outnumbered,” Steve argues. “Are you seriously thinking of turning them away?”

“It’s for their own good!” Peggy snaps. “They don’t stand a chance against Witches, they’ll die.”

“They die fighting every day, Peggy,” Steve shouts back. “Across the sea in that… that fucking unwinnable war! Every day you send them across the water, tell them to fight the good fight.”

Steve waves his arm at the assembled men and women. “And among these people are ones who came back, who survived.”

Peggy bows her head, her gaze flicking over the crowd. A handful carry muskets and shotguns, and others are armed with sabers and knives, but most have nothing more than shovels and bats.

“I could move them to the perimeter,” Peggy says finally. “Have them on lookout.”

“Don’t waste them defending the grounds, Peg,” Steve murmurs.

Peggy, screws her eyes shut, warring with her own conscious, and lets out a bone-weary sigh. “I’ll never hear the end of this from Howard.”

“That such a bad thing?” Bucky asks, his upper lip drawn up in a smirk that displays a sharp tooth. “Hmm. There is that,” Peggy agrees, and looks back at the man swinging his cricket bat with obvious enthusiasm. “Mr Dugan, was it?”

Dugan steps forward and tips his bowler hat in greeting. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Follow me.”

Dernier and Jones join Dugan in entering the Abbey, pausing in the main hall to stare up at the stained glass windows lit by candlelight.

“I’ll be damned,” Jones murmurs. “Would you look at those colours.”

Alexander Pierce comes walking down from the altar, his cloak flapping behind him. On his shoulder a snow-white owl familiar is perched, its wide amber eyes fix on Bucky and it ruffles its feathers.

Bucky growls, a low reverberation that feels like claws scraping up Steve’s throat. He moves from Steve’s side, swift and silent, positioning himself at Peggy’s left, blocking the way to the men.

Steve picks up on his actions, and puts himself at Peggy’s right. Bucky’s tail bristles, flicking back and forth in anger.

“Carter!” Pierce shouts. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Secretary Pierce, these people have come to our aid.”

“You would bring dishonour on this sacred place by allowing in commoners?” he spits. “Thieves and vagabonds, no less.”

“Oi!” Dugan bellows, “Who the fuck are you calling common?!”

Bucky growls as Pierce comes closer, his ears drawing back. The sound is unsettling enough to make him stop short and give Bucky a hard stare in turn.

“This is sacred ground, Carter,” Pierce snarls. “Only Witches and adepts are welcome here.”

“Oh please,” Peggy scoffs. “The Prime Minister wouldn’t know a spell if it knocked him on his arse!”

Pierce presses his lips into a thin line, and dismisses them with a snort. “Keep them out of the inner sanctum.” he spits, and storms off towards the altar at the far end.

Peggy rubs her forehead. “Well that could have gone better,” she sighs.
Dugan steps forward and gives her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “There now, M’lady.” She glances at him, and he snatches his hand away. “Please don’t turn me into a toad.” Despite everything, Peggy laughs. “I’ll try to resist.” She gestures for the men to gather around her, and points down the hall. “This is the main area, though there is also the north door left of the altar and access through the cloisters at the right.” “Blocking them up would be the quickest way to fix that,” Dernier tugs on his flat cap. “Leave us the main door to defend. Can we move the pews?” He points to the rows of wooden benches arranged before the altar. “Make a barricade?” Peggy looks pained. “Forefathers forgive me.” “That’s a yes, then!” Dugan props his cricket bat against the door and claps his hands. “Alright lads, two teams. One takes the North door, the other the South. Try not to put a pew through one of these windows, or M’Lady here will hex your balls off!” Steve takes advantage of the commotion and pulls Bucky to one side. “What?” Bucky asks as Steve pushes him into a sheltered corner. Nearby adepts and Witches dodge out of the way of Dugan lifting one of the pews single-handed. “Pierce,” Steve says quietly, checking over his shoulder that no one is listening. “I know you don’t like him, but you can’t act like that every time you see him.” “Are you kidding me?” Bucky bares his teeth. “You wanna talk about this now?” “He’s the Secretary,” Steve says desperately. “That kind of behaviour could get us arrested.” Bucky’s ears draw down, his tail curling around himself. “I don’t know,” he says miserable. “I don’t trust him.” “He’s one of the highest ranking members of Shield,” Steve reminds him. “Peggy trusts him. Howard trusts him.” “Well I don’t.” Bucky hisses. “And neither do you.” Steve hesitates. Since the first time they met, when Pierce offered to trade Bucky for a more docile familiar, Steve has not found it in him to trust Pierce, however much Peggy relies on him. His expression softens as Bucky, still wearing his frock coat, folds his arms across his chest and gives Steve a mutinous glare. Steve reaches up to stroke his tufted ears, brushing his thumb against the soft fur until they straighten up again. “We’ll keep an eye on him, okay?” he says softly. “You’re right, I don’t trust him. I trust you.” Bucky nods, and reaches up to push a claw through a hole in Steve’s shirt. “You need to get ready,” he says, pulling at the silk. “Can’t fight in this get-up.” Steve smiles and takes Bucky’s hand, carefully withdrawing his claw from the shirt. “There’s not much time. Let’s see what we can do.” They find Peggy up at the altar overseeing the defences. The people of Old Pye street are busy building barricades at the doors while Witches work among them, adding defensive spells to their efforts while Dugan and Jones shout orders over the clamour. Peggy sends them to the chapter house, assuring Steve that there is a chest of spare robes and ritual clothing, and he should find something suitable. Steve offers a hurried thanks, which Peggy barely acknowledges as she gets back to work. The chapter house is at the end of a narrow corridor leading away from the main hall. Steve lets out a low sound of awe as they enter the circular room. Stained glass windows surround them on every side, and the elegant curves of the arched ceiling above them are lit by oil lamps suspended overhead. Each windowpane is decorated with the emblem of senior members of Shield, those that have risen through the ranks, and Steve finds himself seeking out the red wheel of Peggy Carter. He finds it low down on one of the near windows, and walks over to take a closer look. “Nice,” Bucky approves, pulling off his velvet coat and tossing it to one side, his bare shoulders bathed in lantern light. There are no chairs or benches in the room, but there is a closet in the hallway. Bucky opens it up, pulling out the contents and discarding the ones that don’t meet his
“Bucky!” Steve complains at the sight of the red and black silks piling at his feet. “Do you have to make such a mess?”

Bucky ignores him until he finds a plain white robe that seems to please him. “Here, put this on.” Bucky throws it at Steve and it falls short, landing on the floor between them. Steve strips off his silk shirt, putting it with Bucky’s coat before slipping on the robe. It fits well enough, though the sleeves are baggy.

Bucky comes over to join him, trailing cloth and blue ribbon and twisted cord, and shakes out a sleeveless outer robe in pale blue. Bucky holds it out for Steve to slip his arms through, and walks around to face him, tugging the cloth at his shoulders into even pleats.

“Arms out,” Bucky orders, pulling a length of red silk from the diminishing bundle in his arms and shifting the remaining cords onto his shoulder.

Steve dutifully holds his arms up, and Bucky winds the red sash around his waist, murmuring under his breath as he does so. Steve can feel the Magic flowing from Bucky’s fingers, weaving into the cloth, spells for protection and strength that soak through the fabric and warm his skin.

“How do you want me to wear this?” Bucky brings down Steve’s right hand and presses it to the sash, holding it in place while he draws the thickest cord from his shoulder and begins to wind it around Steve’s waist.

“Tell me if it’s too tight.”

Steve watches Bucky work, head bowed as he pulls the cord into place. His ears are pricked up and facing forward, focused on his task. Steve feels a sudden rush of sensation filling his chest, a pressure so intense that for a moment he fears he cannot contain it.

“You are far too good for me,” the words spill out of Steve’s mouth unbidden, and he feels colour rising on his cheeks, a mottled pink that spreads down his throat, overly-bright against the blue and white of his clothing.

“You getting maudlin on me, Steve?” Bucky takes Steve’s hand in his and straightens his arm, folding up the flapping sleeve and wrapping one of the blue ribbons around his forearm, weaving spells for endurance and speed as he pulls on the last knot, securing it in place.

“I’m serious,” Steve whispers as Bucky checks the knots. “You’ve stayed by my side through all of this, done things for me that no one could ask—”

“Now you listen here,” Bucky takes Steve’s other arm and tugs the sleeve into place, a little harder than necessary. “You say I’m good to you. You think I don’t see how you are? All that you’ve done for me?” Bucky winds the final ribbon around Steve’s wrist, twisting spells for deflection and defence into place. “You’ve never once treated me like your servant,” Bucky takes Steve’s hands in his, warm and rough and charged with light. “But I have always been yours.”

Steve closes his eyes and presses their foreheads together, and Bucky pushes against him, tilting his head a little and purrs, a low rumble that shivers its way down Steve’s spine.

Bucky kisses his cheek. “I love you too, idiot.”

He picks up the shirt discarded by Steve and slips it on, the red star at his shoulder burning through the sheer silk, and rolls up the sleeves. It’s a little loose on him, so he picks out a white sash from the pile of clothing and wraps it around his waist, knotting it firmly. He looks up at Steve expectantly, his ears pricked up.

They walk back through the corridor to the main hall, and find the last of the barricades being put into place, Dugan standing proudly with his hands on his hips. Peggy is at his side, already sending Witches to work on spells for fortification. She glances over at Steve and gives him a nod of approval.

The hall is slowly filling up with common folk and adepts, working side by side. Steve sees the twins, a young woman whose familiar takes the form of a red mist around her, and her brother with his Frigate bird circling the domed ceiling, laying traps around the door. The common folk working with them fuss over the pair, complaining that the boy is far too pale and his sister too thin, and that they are both in need of a decent meal.

Sam and Scott are up by the altar, working on another line of defence. Pierce watches over them
from the gilded doorway that leads to the inner sanctum, looking at the ants crawling over the altar cloth in disgust.

There is a hammering on the door of the main entrance, and Peggy leaves Dugan to get on with his work and gestures to Steve to join her.

“That must be Howard,” Peggy frowns. “What’s taken him so long?”

Angie pulls the bar across the door and it swings open, allowing entrance to three Witches dressed for battle, their familiars at their sides. None of them are Howard Stark. Steve does not recognise them until their leader pulls off his helmet and shakes out his blond hair.

“Thor!” Steve yells and runs down the hall towards him.

Thor throws his arms out and lets out a joyful roar, pulling Steve into a bone-cracking embrace. Steve lets out a pained grunt, but doesn’t let go until Thor ruffles his hair, pulling back and gripping him by the arms. Bucky watches them fondly, but keeps his distance.

“I didn’t think you’d get here in time,” he says breathlessly.

“Steven.” Thor beams at him. “As if I would not come when a friend calls for aid.” He waves to his companions to come closer. “Come, meet the Warriors Three.”

Thor bows to Peggy as she approaches. “My Lady.”

Peggy gives him an indulgent smile. “Odinson.”

Thor introduces his warriors. Fandral and his familiar, an arctic fox, followed by Volstagg and the boar at his heel, and finally Hogun, a serpent coiled around his waist.

“And my familiar, Lady Sif.” Thor looks at her with pride, and she lowers her head, her delicate cat ears flickering towards Bucky curiously.

“Thank you,” Peggy looks to each of them.

“No thanks needed,” Volstagg, with the flaming hair and beard assures her. “Set us to work, please. Before any of us start getting creative.”

Peggy bites her lip. “This way, if you please. I’m sure Mr Dugan will be delighted to meet you.”

“Oh, that’s gonna be fun,” Bucky mutters as Peggy points out where Dugan is, and sends Volstagg off to meet him.

Thor looks his way and frowns, tilting his head to one side. His expression clears and he smiles, broad and bright.

“James!” he cries.

Before Bucky can react Thor lunges forwards and embraces him, lifting him off his feet. Bucky kicks his heels and yowls, his tail thrashing, and Thor gently sets him down again. Steve watches the exchange with wide eyes.

“You know who he is?” Steve stutters.

Thor gently pats Bucky on the head. He grimaces, his ears flickering, but doesn’t snap or pull away. The tip of his tail crooks slightly as Thor’s touch gentles. “I would know these ears anywhere.”

“Piss off,” Bucky mutters, and Thor laughs.

“And those teeth!”

There is a hammering at the door, and Angie goes over to open it.

“What the hell is all this?” Howard demands, shoving his way in. “Locking me out of my own house?”

There are a handful of Witches with him, who look dubiously at the common folk working throughout the hall.

“Howard,” Peggy snaps. “Leaving everything to the last bloody minute. Where’s Tony?”

“Tony?” Howard throws his hands up in the air. “The boy has lost his mind, turned his back on the Art. Say’s he’s building locomotives now, can you believe it? My only son-”

“He’s not coming? We need him.”

“Need him?” Howard scoffs. “I got some garbled message about stealing the Tesseract, what the hell is going on?”

Peggy looks out the open door at the lightening sky over the city. “We don’t have time for this.”
She turns to the remaining Warriors. “Bar the door, don’t let anyone through.”
They get to work quickly, Fandral slamming the door and pulling the bars across while Hogun
scrawls runes across the wood in spelled chalk.
“Thor, check the North gate, make sure it’s secure.”
Thor slaps his right hand over his heart, and draws Sif to his side. “We will not fail you.”
“Steve,” Peggy turns to him. “I need you up by the altar, make sure no one gets through.”
Steve nods breathlessly, and follows Thor and Sif up the hall. They turn left, rushing down the
corridor that leads to the North gate, and Steve pauses before the altar.
Scott has outdone himself, the stone wall behind the altar covered in a thick mat of ants, their
glossy black bodies moving ceaselessly.
Scott looks proudly at the crawling mass. “Not bad, eh?”
“Certainly puts me off going in there,” Bucky says.
“Really?” Scott asks.
Steve nods and gives him a pat on the shoulder. “Where’s Sam?”
Scott pales and swears softly.
“I’m going to find Sam,” Steve tells him, and gives him a gentle slap on the arm. “You’re doing
fine.”
“I think I’m going to be sick,” Scott whimpers.
It pains Steve to leave Scott in distress, but he swears to come back as soon as he can, pulling
Bucky with him down a narrow hallway to the right of the altar.
The cloisters are a covered walkway with a small square courtyard in the center, portraits hanging
from the walls and statues of celebrated Witches and their familiars tucked into alcoves.
There are a handful of Witches and common folk gathered at the South gate, and Sam is standing
in the middle of the courtyard. Above his head, swooping and shrieking, are birds.
Bucky growls softly, his ears pulling back, and Steve grabs him by the sleeve.
“No,” he says firmly, and Bucky lets out a low whine.
There are hundreds of birds, crows and ravens and pigeons and starlings, all spiralling around Sam,
dipping and soaring in a blur of feathers.
“Sam?” Steve shouts, trying to be heard over the cacophony of their calls. “You okay?”
In the center of the storm is Redwing, looping and spinning and holding the flock in formation.
“I’ve got this,” Sam shouts back, and tips his head back towards the Abbey. “Go.”
Steve turns back the way they came. Another shockwave pulses through the walls around them,
shaking the portraits off the walls. The stones at his feet start to crumble.
The birds scream louder, rising up in a column over Sam’s head, Redwing twisting around it at
impossible speed, holding the center in place.
Steve reaches the hallway, and realises that Bucky isn’t with him.
“Bucky?” he calls out, searching the courtyard.
Steve finds him a little further down the walkway, staring at one of the portraits lying on the
ground. Bucky reaches down and picks up the painting, staring at it with something far too much
like fear.
“Bucky,” Steve reaches for his arm. “Come on, we’ve got to go.”
The portrait in his hands is of Alexander Pierce, commissioned when he first became the Secretary,
back when Steve was just starting his Magical training. Bucky’s hands shake as he grips the frame,
hard enough to make it crack.
“It’s him,” Bucky says quietly, staring at the portrait. “It’s him.”
“That’s Secretary Pierce,” Steve tells him, carefully easing Bucky’s fingers from the splintering
frame.
“He put me in the cage,” Bucky recoils from the picture as though the touch of it burns. “He put us


all in cages.”
Steve lets the picture drop to the crumbling stones at their feet and wraps his hands around
Bucky’s, holding them tightly.
“Bucky,” he says quickly. “Bucky, look at me.”
Bucky’s eyes flicker back and forth, and finally focus on Steve’s. “I ain’t lying, it was him. He
looked different, younger, but it was him.”
It makes a horrible kind of sense. Bucky’s instant mistrust of Pierce, the way he reacted when
Steve was offered a trade.
I should have known, Steve cups Bucky’s face in his hands, brushing his thumbs along the sharp
line of his cheekbones. I should have known.

Peggy is down at the main entrance with every Witch and man that can be spared, fighting to keep
the doors shut. There are deep cracks throughout the ancient wood, daylight spilling through them,
splintering and stretching wider and wider. Thor and Sif press their joined hands to the open
wounds, sealing them shut, but the wood splits open faster than they can heal it.
There is a dull roar from outside, a sound that Steve knows far too well.
“Maenid!” one of the Witches screams. “They have a Maenid!”
“Peggy?” Steve fights through the crowd to her side. “Where’s Pierce?”
Peggy hisses at him in frustration. “The inner sanctum, he’s guarding the Tesseract.”
Steve grabs her by the shoulder and pulls her away from the door.
“Steve, what the hell?” she slaps his hand away. “We don’t have time-”
The door creaks, the bars holding it closed twisting and buckling against the strain.
“He’s Hydra,” Steve shouts. “Pierce is with Hydra.”
The Maenid roars again, punching through the the door. The wood shatters against its fist, and the
Witches scream in alarm, ducking out of the way of reach.
“Pierce is the one who's been taking the familiars,” Steve says quickly. “They are bribes, Peg.
Rewards for the people who bring down Shield.”
Peggy shakes her head. “I’ve known Alexander my whole life.”
“Hundreds of us,” Bucky curls his hand around Steve’s shoulder and looks past Peggy to Angie.
“Hundreds. In bottles and cages and jars.” He tightens his grip on Steve’s shoulder. “In cages so
small we can’t even stand. Hoarded away so he can pick out his favourites.”
Steve brushes his fingers along Bucky’s wrist, offering comfort where he can. “That’s where
Bucky was all that time, those years he was missing.”
Angie’s feathers ruffle furiously. “That bastard.”
“He wanted you,” Peggy looks to Bucky, and her expression hardens. “Couldn’t stand that you
ended up with Steve. Said you were too useful for an apothecary.”
“You have to stop him.” She turns to Angie, never far from her side, and holds out her hand. Angie
smiles, linking their fingers together, and Peggy returns her gaze to Steve. “We’ll hold the door as
long as we can.”
“Sure thing, Boss.” Angie links their fingers together, cold flame threading across her skin.
The door bursts open, knocking Witches and commoners to the ground, and the Maenid bellows,
pushing its way through the debris. Peggy raises her arm, cold flame pouring from her crooked
fingers like a waterfall.
“Come on,” Bucky pulls at Steve’s robe. “She can take care of herself, come on.”
The Maenid lets out a howl as the Witches fight back, and Steve keeps looking over his shoulder as
they race towards the altar, catching glimpses of Peggy and Thor in the fighting. Peggy blasts it
with a bolt of flame and the creature lashes out. Steve opens up his hand, the shield unfurling like a
flower, and spins it towards the demon. The disc slices through its wrist, cutting off its hand. The
Maenid rages, thick, oily-looking blood spilling out in an arc as it whirs around, seeking escape.
Steve calls the shield back to him, crumpling it up in the palm of his hand as Bucky pulls Steve
along with him, keeping him moving forward no matter how badly he wants to turn back.
At the North gate, the tall marble pillars that stretch from floor to vaulted ceiling are shaking apart, pieces of stone tumbling to the ground and shattering. Dugan roars at people to get back, shoving them out of the way while Volstagg weaves chains of runes to hold the roof up, the pillars beyond saving.

Scott is still at the altar, watching the chaos unfold, and comes down to meet Steve.

The pillars fall, breaking into pieces as they tumble down, the shockwave of their landing shattering the stained glass windows overhead.

Scott points to the creature stumbling along the hall, dragging it’s bloody stump behind it. “Is that a-”

“Yes,” Bucky says, brushing past him and going up to the doors to the inner sanctum. “Excuse me, fellas.”

The ants start to move away from the door, gathering around the frame.

“Scott, I need you to hold the door,” Steve says urgently. “Don’t let anyone out.”

“Don’t you mean in?” Scott asks dubiously.

“Out,” Steve repeats, rushing after Bucky as he crack open the door. “Don’t let anything out!”

The inner sanctum is in ruins. The ancient stone walls are crumbling, the stained glass windows high overhead shattered in their lead frames. The candles and lanterns have been overturned, and the only light filters down, stained red and blue by the fractured glass. There are bodies amongst the rubble covered floor, the aftermath of a brief, terrible ambush. Witches, some shifting and groaning while others are still and will never move again.

There is a flash of Magic up ahead, blood red and blinding, and Steve takes a step forward. Bucky reaches for his arm. “Careful,” he hisses.

Steve turns to him, and Bucky looks down pointedly. There are spiders crawling over the cracked and crumbling stones, moving towards the far end of the room where the Tesseract stands on a high altar, its crystalline blue light pulsing in the gloom.

Between them and the Tesseract are the last two Witches standing. Howard Stark, battered and bruised and swaying on his feet, facing Alexander Pierce. Above them Pierce’s owl swoops down after Stark’s familiar, a bright speck of light darting back and forth.

On the ground Natasha is still alive, pinned down by a fallen column and whimpering in pain. Clint is at her side, trying to move the piece of marble crushing her leg while Pierce is distracted.

“You think you can stop us?” Pierce sneers at Howard. “You and your feckless son?”

“You two-faced bastard,” Howard gasps, raising his hand to strike.

Pierce is faster, and knocks him to the ground with a blast of crimson flame.

Steve throws up his arm, splaying out his hand, and the shield unfurls in a crackle of light. He grabs it by the rim and throws it towards Pierce.

The owl shrieks and dives down, knocking the shield off course with a spray of sparks and a rain of snow-white feathers. It drops to Pierce’s feet like a stone, and he kicks it to one side.

Bucky yowls and sends a dart of golden light towards Pierce, it breaks into fine threads, twisting through the air, and Pierce counters with another blast of crimson. The two spells meet, hissing and spitting, and Pierce’s spell punches through Bucky’s. Steve holds out his hand, calling the shield back towards him, and it smashes through the spell, splintering it into fragments, before returning to him.

“Impressive,” Pierce admits, and sends another bolt towards him.

Steve knocks it aside with the shield. The spell briefly ripples over the bands of red and white before dissipating.

Pierce takes a step back, wiping his hand across his mouth and looking at the smear of blood that comes away with distaste.

“I had such high hopes for you, Steven.” he curls up his hands, red light arcing between his fingers.

“Stop!” Steve raises the shield, and Pierce smirks.

“Or what?” he asks. “Are you going to kill me?”
At his feet Howard groans, his familiar crawling across his cheek, clicking and flashing in distress. “You don’t have it in you to kill,” Pierce sounds disappointed. “No, but I do,” Bucky growls, and swipes his claws through the air, sending five slashes of golden fire towards him.

Pierce bats them aside, letting out a low grunt as one strikes him on the shoulder. He snarls, blood staining his even white teeth, and sends a blast in return. Steve throws the shield up as Bucky fires off another spell, dislodging a chunk of loose marble from the domed ceiling and raining debris over Pierce’s head. He staggers, but keeps to his feet, moving closer and closer to the Tesseract, white feathers crunching beneath his boots.

Natasha’s spiders clamber over the crystal, a last line of defence as Pierce inches closer. “We know about the familiars,” Steve shouts across the divide between them, knowing that Natasha and Clint can hear him. “We know it was you. Trophies for your loyal followers, like the stolen books.”

Steve throws the shield again, ricocheting it off the wall to cut across Pierce’s path. It clips him, spinning him around and he lets out a shout of anger, blood spilling over his lips. “You cost me Rumlow,” Pierce spits, and turns his attention to Bucky. “And for that, you’ll pay dearly.”

He throws a jagged bolt of red flame towards Bucky, who hisses in defiance. Steve throws the shield towards him and Bucky catches it, swiping his hand along the rim. Golden threads dance and spark at his touch, and he spins it towards Pierce, slicing through his attack.

Pierce sees Steve open and defenseless, and takes his chance, lunging forward and snatching up one of the stray owl feathers. He whispers a spell over the quill, and throws it towards Steve. The feather darts through the air, its aim straight and true as Pierce pulls the shield out of the air and crumples it to dust.

There is no chance to shout out a warning or pull Steve out of the feather’s path. Bucky reaches out instinctively, crushing the feather in his hand.

Bucky drops to the ground with a scream, curling in on himself, the feather still grasped in his hand. Red flame twists up his arm, the skin blistering and cracking wherever it touches. He cries out again, digging the claws of his other hand into his burning arm, trying to stop the pain from spreading. “Bucky!” Steve drops to his knees, Pierce forgotten as he skims his hands over Bucky’s shoulders, watching in horror as the fire burns up his arm, the air filling with the acrid scent of burning flesh. He pulls the feather out of Bucky’s hand, his fingers darkening at the touch, and throws it aside. Bucky coughs, blood staining his lips, his ears pulling back, and lets out a low moan.

“Bucky,” Steve pulls him into his arms, and Bucky moans, screwing his eyes shut. “What should I do?” Steve asks, curling his arm around Bucky’s shoulders. “Tell me what to do.” He folds himself around Bucky, as if he could protect him, and watches as he shudders and whines. “Please,” Steve whispers, brushing his fingers over the silk of Bucky shirt. “Please.”
Pierce brushes down the front of his robe. “You know what your problem is, Steven?” he asks. Steve doesn’t answer, drawing his fingers along the burning skin of Bucky’s arm and whispering under his breath. He traces runes along the lines of blisters, random scraps of Enochian scripts and hieroglyphs. Snatches of spells and incantations, anything he can think of tumbles from his lips until all he can think of is stars. Five pointed stars drawn on Bucky’s seared flesh over and over. “Sentiment,” Pierce picks his way across the rubble. “You could be a great Witch, one of the greatest.” He glances at Natasha, curled up in Clint’s arms as he tries to heal her broken bones.
“But you insist on attaching yourself to a creature that is,” Pierce pauses, choosing his next word carefully. “Insufficient.”

Natasha spits at him, and curses in her mother language, crystals of ice forming on her lips. Bucky coughs and reaches out for Steve’s hand. “I’m okay,” he wheezes. “Just give me a second.” The owl in the rubble lets out a last, weak sigh, and is gone, and for a moment Steve’s heart forgets how to beat.

He looks down at Bucky in his arms, digging his claws into his burning arm and whining, soft and low. He’ll never stop. As long as he is with Steve, he’ll never stop fighting. And someday, maybe a moment from now, maybe a year, something will happen. They’ll be outnumbered or they won’t be fast enough or their luck will finally run out, and Steve will have to watch as Bucky fades from the world of men.

What was it he had said? That it was better to die free than live as a slave? Steve swipes his hand over his eyes, and reaches down to trace along the red star on Bucky’s shoulder.

“I release you,” he whispers as Pierce walks towards the Tesseract. “I release you from yo—”

“Don’t you fucking dare!” Bucky snarls, clutching at Steve’s hand and dragging it away. His claws punch through Steve’s skin, blood welling up between their joined hands. “I’m not leaving you.”

“You have to,” Steve whispers. “I’ll tell them you died. No one will come after you again.” Tears well in Steve’s eyes, threatening to spill. “You can be free.”

Bucky tightens his grip. “I won’t be anything that you’re not a part of.” Blood trickles down his wrist in thin rivulets. “So don’t even try.”

“You and me,” Bucky rubs his thumb over the punctures in Steve’s hand, leaving five little star-shaped scars. “Always.”

Steve nods as Pierce reaches out for the Tesseract, and room falls to darkness. “Always.”

“Many years ago I was approached by a familiar,” Pierce’s voice rings out in the gloaming. “A foul creature. Weak, useless, but harboured some useful information that I eventually… extracted from it.”

Pierce flicks away the spiders covering the Tesseract, casting weak silvery light across the chamber. “It knew where the Red Skull was, and how to free him from his prison. And I thought to myself that there was a creature worthy of me. That we could do great things together.” He lifts the Tesseract out of its cradle, and examines it closely. “A new world order. Of course, I couldn’t do it alone, I needed a distraction. Something to keep everyone busy.”

“Hydra,” Natasha says bitterly.

“Hydra,” Pierce runs a finger along the Tesseract, and it dims at his touch, a thread of darkness staining the silvery glow. “The sabotages, the theft, the war abroad. All to bring me here, to the appointed place at the appointed time.”

The light within the Tesseract stains red, and something moves within it. “My familiar,” Pierce whispers, almost tenderly. “We will change the world.”

Bucky rolls out of Steve’s lap, tugging him along as he creeps across the floor towards Clint and Natasha. Pierce is distracted, drawing his fingers across the Tesseract and humming softly, a low pitch that makes the crystal in his hand vibrate.

“It was a lie,” Natasha whimpers. “The war... everything…”

Clint shushes her, cracking the last bone into place and chafing his hands across her bruised skin, trying to cover the violet light flowing from his hands.

“We have to stop him,” Steve whispers. “We can’t let him bring back the Red Skull.”

“How?” Clint hisses. “You see all these people. You think they didn’t try?”

Steve looks at the twisted bodies half buried in the rubble. “If he summons the Red Skull, he will be unstoppable.”
Bucky tugs on Steve’s robe and points to the Tesseract, filling the room with an ominous light.
“Out of time, Steve.”
Steve pulls himself up to his feet, and knows what has to be done.
“The Tesseract,” he says softly. “We have to destroy it.”
Natasha sits up sharply. “Are you insane? That’s the source of all Magic! You destroy that and we lose everything.”
“Would it be so bad?” Steve asks distantly. “An end to Magic?”
The light brightens, visceral and twisted, shining down on Pierce. His smiling face looks like a skull.
“We keep them in chains, Nat. We bind them in silver chains and we bleed them dry. And for what?” Steve reaches out for Bucky’s hand, and feels him trace a claw over the stars on his fingers.
“Lies. Lies and greed and power.”
“No.” Natasha shakes her head. “No, I won’t give him up. You can’t make me.”
“I’m not going anywhere,” Clint smiles at her. “You think you can get rid of me?”
Steve looks down at Bucky’s hand in his. “One more time?”

Bucky stands tall beside him, and presses his hand to Steve’s heart. Magic streams out from under his fingers, threading across Steve’s body, growing brighter and brighter, filling the chamber with the light of the sun.
Natasha bows her head, covering her eyes as Clint wraps himself around her.
Steve opens his hand, and the shield flares into life, concentric circles of white and gold and blue. It crackles and flares like a firework, sending out radiant sparks. The star at the center flashes silver chased with gold.
“Now,” Bucky whispers, and Steve throws out his hand, the disc spinning through the air, showering honey-bright drops of light as it ploughs into the Tesseract.
The crystal splinters in a roar of light and sound, and Pierce screams, caught in the blast.
The light dims, and for a moment he still stands, his arm outstretched, jagged splinters of light where his hand had been.
“Oh,” he sighs, and dissipates. A cloud of dust taken apart by an unseen wind.
Sunlight streams down through the broken windows, shining on the living and the dead. A firefly clicks and pulses in careful hands that check over its bright shell.
The doors to the inner sanctum open, ants crawling over the ancient stones, seeking out the ones that need aid. They gather around the fallen, clearing the way for the ones that can be saved.
The hallways are filled with people, carrying the wounded to safety. The ancient stone will not hold out long, they tell each other. In time it will crumble, and something will take its place, something better.
They are not Witches, or common folk, the sigils on their robes mean nothing now.
Out on the grounds the people breathe in the air as though taking their first breaths. They tilt up their heads and feel the sun on their faces, and consider themselves lucky to be alive.
In all the chaos and urgency, in the rush to safety, it is easy to slip away. There are backstreets and alleyways all across London, where two people who know the city can pass unnoticed.
There are clues to their passing, should anyone look for them. A length of blue ribbon, frayed and dusty, caught in the branches of a tree. A white silk shirt clawed at the sleeve. A red sash trailing along the grass. A trail of breadcrumbs leading towards home.
In Chelsea, down by the Great River, is the House of the Last Witch.  
You know which one it is. The one with the roses. The one with the star on the door.  
They say you can see him some nights, when the moon is full, walking through Whitechapel with  
silver coins in his pockets. On his arm is his beloved, skin white as the moon, his hair like autumn  
leaves.  
(They say he walks barefoot, even in winter, and has the ears and tail of a cat.)  
The house of the last Witch looks empty from the outside, though the roses in the garden still  
bloom. They say a brave man who can pluck a red rose will find his heart's desire (it is also said  
that he should be wary, because roses have thorns, and they will scratch those whose hearts are not  
true. Poor Jack looked like he'd been mauled by a tiger.)  

The boy Parker once climbed in through an open window, on a dare by the girl he longed for.  
He said he found the place deserted, though there were two teacups on the kitchen table, the dregs  
still warm. As though the occupants had just stepped out.  
When Parker opened the door to the library, he saw the ocean. He swears on the the graves of his  
mother and father, he saw the sea. And knee deep in the waves there was a man, blond-bearded  
like a pirate. He laughed and flicked water at his beloved on the shore, the Moon to his Sun.  
(But the water in his hands turned to little fishes, that danced and spun, and returned to water when  
they touched the ground.)
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