Shards of Me
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/14073009.

Shards of Me
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Summary

Deleted and extended scenes from Make Me Whole. Life is made of a thousand shattered moments - but when they're pieced back together, what picture will you see? Do they make any cohesive image at all, or will they only reveal the gaping chasms in your heart? What if you lost a vital piece along the way? How can you ever fit this puzzle back together?
Leap of Faith

Chapter Notes

This is a companion piece to my fic Make Me Whole, and I highly recommend reading that one first. For a long time, I've wanted to write a deleted/extended scenes fic, so I leapt at the chance when I realized how much was left unexplored in Make Me Whole. I kept to a pretty limited POV in that fic, primarily telling the story through Steve's eyes, with occasional forays into Sam's perspective. For the sake of suspense and coherence, I decided not to write anything from Winter's perspective. But that left out a whole facet of the story, and I couldn't bear the thought of being the only one to know about it.

So I decided to write a separate fic for all the scenes we didn't get to see in Make Me Whole. Chapters will not necessarily be in chronological order, so I'll make a note of which chapter of Make Me Whole it corresponds to so you can see the context of the scene.

Please feel free to request scenes you would like to see! This fic will include scenes from different perspectives than what's in Make Me Whole, as well as completely new scenes. I already have plenty of material that I want to write, but I also welcome any suggestions you may have.

This chapter takes place during Make Me Whole chapter 1, “The Winter Soldier”.

I've been looking in the mirror for so long
That I've come to believe my soul's on the other side
All the little pieces falling
Shatter
Shards of me
Too sharp to put back together
Too small to matter
But big enough to cut me into so many little pieces

...

But I know the difference
Between myself and my reflection
I just can't help but to wonder:
Which of us do you love?

- “Breathe No More” by Evanescence
The Winter Soldier remembered everything. They didn't think he did. He'd heard them discussing it when they thought he was sedated (eyes closed and breathing steady meant no looking, no questions, no pain). They thought that once they spoke the Words, his memory was shut off, and he would remember nothing of what he'd done when the cold, deadly clarity wore off. That was what they wanted—no thoughts, no memories, no emotion. Just the razor-sharp instincts they'd painstakingly pounded into him.

They were wrong about this. He never told them; he was afraid that if they found out, they would find a way to 'perfect' their technique and he wouldn't remember anything at all. True, he couldn't remember much anyway—everything was foggy and jumbled, and mostly he just remembered pain—but it was all he had.

But he (whoever he was, the one who could actually think and feel) was aware of everything he did as the Winter Soldier. It was like sitting in the backseat of a car—he couldn't steer, but he was aware of everything around him. It was like watching through a peephole into someone else's life. And yet he could feel every impact, smell every drop of blood, hear every scream. They seemed far away, when looking through the Winter Soldier's eyes. But they were there, and they seemed to latch onto him no matter how hard he tried to hide.

While the Winter Soldier tried to kill Captain America, he didn't remember. But after an explosion of pain knocked his senses clear, and everything snapped into sharp, painful reality, he thought it all seemed familiar. Yes, he had fought this man before. This strange man, who was a formidable enemy yet spoke like a friend. What was he doing? Why was he talking, when he should be taking advantage of how the whole world was dipping and swaying, and come finish the Winter Soldier off?

“Please...” Captain America gasped, “c-come with me.... You can...walk away right now.” He bent over, clutching at his bruised throat, but he kept choking out words between wheezing breaths and coughs. “Stop letting them...tell you who you are. Make your own choice! They call you...their Asset...but I know...you're more than that.”

Let them? Let them? Did he have any idea what Hydra was like? You didn't let them do anything. They took whatever they wanted, and there was nothing you could do to stop them.

“What the hell do you think you know about me?” he growled, though it came out slurred. It was hard to keep Captain America in focus.

The man in the silly blue costume straightened to his full, formidable height. “I know that you're a human being!” he cried. His voice was still hoarse, but it was strong again. “And that is not how you treat a human being. It's not even how you treat a dog! You don't have to put up with that. You deserve so much better! And I'll hunt down every last one of the scum who did this to you.”

The Soldier froze, leaning against a stack of crates to keep from falling flat on his face. Why? he wanted to ask. Why are you trying so hard? What do you get out of this? Why would you possibly care about me? Or are you just like them, the ones who smile and then beat me till I bleed?

He felt a little more steady, so he pushed away from the crates. He didn't need any memories to know that this man was different from every other target he'd ever hunted down. Why? What made
him like this? What set him apart from everyone else? He had to know. He took a step closer.

Something crashed to the deck of the helicarrier in a blazing inferno, and his legs were knocked out from under him. Before he knew what was happening, he was tumbling off the edge. He scrambled to grab onto something, but couldn't find anything to stop his fall.

“No!” Captain America screamed, reaching out to grab his hand, but their fingers barely brushed against each other. As he fell, he caught one glimpse of blue eyes filled with terror, grief, guilt....

“Bucky!”

He reached desperately, but it was no use. Their hands were a whole foot apart. Then something in the metal he clung to broke, and he was falling, falling through the cold and the whirling snow, becoming one with the winter. That face grew farther and farther away, the bright sun dimming to a distant star filled with fear and grief and far, far too much guilt.

Then a hand closed over his own, and he was back in reality, and he was no longer falling through the sky, but rising. He looked up in surprise and saw the other man—the one with dark skin, Captain America's soldier—gripping his metal wrist and carrying him back up towards the helicarrier. The engines on his wings whined and strained, not used to lifting this much weight. But even though he let out a cry of pain, the man's grip remained firm.

Why? Why did this man save him? Why did Captain America care so much? Why did he seem...familiar?

The Soldier collapsed onto the deck of the helicarrier, falling to hands and knees. Part of him was screaming to get up, find a weapon, pull out a gun or a knife because they're going to come and kill you come on you have to keep fighting...but he was trembling so hard he didn't think he could stand.

And they didn't come over to keep fighting. They were talking about something. He couldn't focus. That flash of...memory...wouldn't leave him alone. The face he had seen, the man who had been reaching for him, was the same person who had just tried to catch him now. It wasn't just someone who looked similar when put in the same situation. No, the eyes were the same. They had both done this before—he had fallen, and Captain America had been unable to catch him.

And he had shouted a name. Bucky. Who the hell was Bucky? Was that...his name? The Soldier stared at his hands, pressed flat against the deck beneath him. They had known each other. Sometime far back in his jumbled memories, this man had known who he was, and that was why he wanted to catch him now.

But...no. Captain America couldn't see most of his face because of the mask, and he spoke to him like a stranger. A stranger who knew far too much about his life, but still not someone he knew very well. And yet he had looked anguish when the Soldier had fallen. He didn't seem to have recognized the Soldier, yet he still cared that much.

He looked up and saw the two men clasp hands while the wings unfolded again. Captain America looked over at him one last time, his gaze pinning the Soldier in place with the weight of its regret. Then they blasted into the air, and flew towards the nearest helicarrier.

Who was this man? He needed to know. He needed to find out. This man had something the Soldier wanted...no, that he needed. And he wasn't going to let it get away.

Come with me, Captain America had said. I can hide you, somewhere Hydra can never find you. Was that even possible? No...no, of course not. Even entertaining the idea of escaping Hydra's
clutches was laughable. He, of all people, knew better than to even wish a life outside of their control was possible.

But...even if it wasn't...he had to at least try. The thought of trudging back to Hydra when someone had looked at him like that....

Slowly, the Soldier pushed himself to his feet, still trembling slightly. He needed to take this slow. He needed to talk to Captain America again, see if he was really serious. And if he betrayed a hint of dishonesty, the Soldier could always just kill him anyway. But to vet Captain America's offer, he had to be sure no one else was listening. He felt for his earpiece, but it was gone. It must have fallen out at some point during the fight, or maybe when he had fallen over the edge. Next he felt for the hidden microphone, and crushed it under his heel. He pulled off the rest of his communication equipment and dropped it over the side to tumble into the river below. Now no one was listening, and no one could tell him what to do. He felt strangely light, like he could float away at any moment.

But since he couldn't actually float away, he needed to get back to the jet he'd used to get here. Captain America's companion had said they had two more helicarriers to go—and he had seen which one they'd headed to, so he just needed to get to the third one.

The next several minutes were easy. With a plan firmly in mind, it was almost like being the Winter Soldier again. He was following orders, so he could push every ounce of worry and every extraneous thought out of his mind. The only difference was that he was the one giving the orders, and that made him feel warm inside.

He slipped past the guards on deck, and waited for Captain America in the engine room. They had told him that Captain America would probably target the engines, so he stood in front of the control panel and waited for the door at the other end of the catwalk to open.

As predicted, Captain America soon stepped through the door, eyeing the controls he wanted to sabotage. The other man was nowhere in sight. When he saw the Soldier standing in his way, Captain America stopped and let out a sigh. The Soldier wondered what that sigh meant.

"People are gonna die," Captain America said with a tone of resignation. "I can't let that happen."

He also didn't want you to die, the Soldier reminded himself. "I don't care about them," he said roughly. "But if I step aside...can you make sure Hydra never finds me?"

Captain America inched forwards. "You mean...you're going to walk away?"

“They...hurt me,” he said slowly, and suddenly it was hard to breathe. Fists, raised voices, burning pain from his temples all the way down to his toes. They would find him, they would punish him, they would push him down and he would come up gasping but they would push him down again, they would take his mind and his memories and they would throw him down a dark well and he would crash to pieces at the bottom and he would never put himself back together again....

He took a deep breath. “I don't...want to...anymore.”

Captain America looked at him with an odd expression full of...sympathy? Pity? Whatever it was, it made the Soldier uncomfortable, so he looked away.

Was it possible to leave all of that behind, once and for all? Could he really live a life free of the pain, the fear, the shame?

“I tried to, once.” He forced the words out, choking on memories he actually wished they’d taken from him. “After my mission, I just...didn't go back.” After they'd found him that time, they'd made
They had used every last punishment in their extensive repertoire that time, one after another, sometimes letting him catch his breath, letting him think they were finished only to start again, worse than before. The memory of that pain still made him twitch, his nerves jangling. Something inside him reared up in terror at even the thought of crossing them again, and for a moment it was all he could do to keep still.

“This time will be different.” Captain America took a step forward, and the Soldier surged back in alarm, hitting the console behind him. But instead of pressing forward, Captain America stopped and let the Soldier catch his breath.

“This time, I'll be there to protect you, and hide you.” His voice was so...soft. Not in volume, but...texture? Then a lilt of humor mixed with his words, though not in the mocking way he was used to. The softness didn't leave his voice. “Besides, this is Hydra we're talking about. The last place they'll look for one of their own would be at Captain America's side, right?”

He had to admit there was a certain amount of sense to that. “So I'll...stay with you?” The thought was strange, bringing up nothing but a blank white stretch in his mind. He couldn't even imagine what it would be like.

“I think that would be the safest thing to do,” Captain America said, without even having to think about it, as though he took enemy assassins into his care every other week. “At least until you feel ready to strike out on your own. If you disappear for long enough, they'll probably stop looking for you.”

The Soldier hesitated, his resolve teetering on the edge of a knife. He wanted to believe this man. He longed to think that he was sincere, that he meant no harm, that he could actually end the pain. There was no smirk on his face, and his gaze was steady; he looked the very picture of honesty. Either he meant every word he said...or he was the best actor the Soldier had ever seen. But after a moment's reflection, he realized there was no way to know for certain. He would have to make a decision based on faith—faith that this man was trustworthy, or faith in everything Hydra had told him about this cold, cruel world.

Stepping aside was simultaneously the hardest and the easiest decision he had ever made.

The smile that broke across Captain America's face made the Soldier stare. It wasn't like the few smiles he occasionally received. Those were usually triumphant—a hypothesis proven correct—or leering grins that asserted control over him, making him feel like a bug squirming beneath a shoe. No, this smile was...relieved? Happy? He barely even knew what those words meant anymore. Whatever the right word to describe it was, being smiled at like that was like being smacked in the face. Only...instead of pain and fear, this left him feeling...good. He didn't know exactly what this feeling was, but he knew he liked it. He wanted more.

He couldn't keep from tensing a little as Captain America stepped past him to do whatever it was he'd come here to do. But Captain America didn't seem to notice, turning his back and focusing entirely on his task. It only took a minute, but still...didn't he know that the Soldier could easily stab him in the back? The shield strapped there didn't cover everything; with the man's guard down, he could easily hamstring him and carve out his kidney before Captain America could even turn around.

What a reckless, naive man. How had he managed to live this long? He really needed someone to watch his back.

Or maybe...turning his back was deliberate. Maybe he was trying to say something...that he trusted
the Soldier to not stab him in the back. It was still a stupid thing to do, trusting someone that much when he didn't even know him. But somehow, being trusted so much made the Soldier reluctant to break that trust. He had never been trusted before. Hydra didn't trust him; they were always interrogating him, watching him, making sure he'd done what they'd told him. They had a dozen safeguards in place to make sure he had no choice but to obey.

But Captain America just trusted him. He hoped he could earn it.

“Charlie lock,” Captain America said into the device on his wrist. The Soldier tensed—had someone been listening in on their conversation?—but then saw that it was the short-range kind that had to be spoken into directly. Their conversation wouldn't have been loud enough for anyone to hear.

After discussing the plan with whoever was on the other end of the line, Captain America told them to fire in five minutes. Apparently they were trying to get the helicarriers to destroy each other. The Soldier didn't care, but the communication device had reminded him why Hydra had been able to find him last time.

“All right, let's go,” Captain America said to him, starting towards the door. “If that jet on the deck is still intact, we can—“

“Wait,” he said quietly, trying not to flinch when Captain America turned and looked at him. “There's...I have...a...tracking device. In my arm.” He raised his left arm slightly.

He waited for Captain America to get angry, or demand to know why he hadn't said anything sooner, but instead he just nodded. “That's how they found you before, right? Then we'll have to get it out if you're going into hiding. Do you know where it is?"

The Soldier nodded. That was another thing they probably thought they'd erased. They'd taken him out of cryo just to put it in. As soon as they could, they'd said the Words, as if taking every precaution against his memory. He couldn't be sure, because the chair made his brain mushy and disorganized, but he was pretty sure they'd wiped him both before and after the procedure. But the part where the Winter Soldier had sat stock-still and let them place the small chip inside his prosthesis...that was crystal clear.

He pushed on the interlocking metal plates the way the mechanics always did, and a small section slid to the side, opening a hatch that exposed the intricate innards of his arm. Unfortunately, the part he had to open up was on the back part of his upper arm, meaning he had to crane his neck to look at it, and there was no hope of seeing in far enough to find the tracking device.

“Here.” Captain America stepped forward and reached for his arm. The Soldier's knife was out and jabbing toward his face before he even knew what he was doing.

When he did realize, he cursed himself. There goes your only chance, he told himself bitterly.

But Captain America only held up his hands, moving slowly to show they were empty. Of course, they both knew he could cause plenty of harm with his bare hands. “I just want to help,” he said. “I can probably get a better angle on it.”

The Soldier wanted to lower his weapon, but he couldn't. The other man was too close. Far, far too close.

Still moving slowly, Captain America closed one hand around the knife. The Soldier's hand twitched, half of him wanting to stab his attacker in the eye, the other half wanting to jerk his hand away before he got hurt. But Captain America actually pulled the knife closer to himself. “Do this if
it makes you feel better,” he said, leaving the point of the knife mere centimeters from his Adam's apple. “But we've got to get that tracking device, or you won't be going anywhere.”

*I didn't think he could get any stupider,* the Soldier thought numbly, but he nodded once and watched warily as Captain America circled around to his side. Keeping the knife at the ready helped calm the Soldier's nerves somewhat, but his heart still raced as Captain America bent down and peered inside his arm.

“Is it this little green thing?” he asked, and at the Soldier's nod, he reached in.

His left arm couldn't feel anything, but Captain America's deft fingers moved carefully, as if trying not to hurt him. Within moments, the tiny tracking device was in his hand. The Soldier quickly retreated a few steps, shoved his knife back into his belt, and closed the panel in his arm again.

Captain America looked thoughtfully at the little device in his hand. “We should attach this to something in here. Then maybe they'll think you drowned in the rubble.”

“They'll find it.” The Soldier knew only too well how thorough Hydra was. Even if there were only two people loyal to them left, they would comb through every scrap of debris until they found his body. That was how valuable he was to them.

“But hopefully, not for a long time.” Captain America climbed up the side of the central console, using tiny footholds and incredible gymnastic ability, and wedged the tracking device into the smallest crevice he could reach. It would be next to impossible to find, especially if this sank to the bottom of the river.

As if on cue, the entire helicarrier shook with an enormous explosion. Captain America lost his precarious grip, but he landed on his feet on the catwalk below. “We need to get going,” he said, already running for the door. “Come on!”

The Soldier followed. As he ran, he realized that he had completely severed the leash Hydra had used to hold on to him for as long as he could remember (though that wasn't saying much). They couldn't find him, they couldn't hear him, they couldn't tell him what to do.... They couldn't even speak the Words in his ear and turn him into their perfect Asset.

He was their Soldier no more.

~*~*~*~*~*~

*In you do I take refuge;*
*save me from all my pursuers and deliver me,*
*lest like a lion they tear my soul apart,*
* rending it in pieces, with none to deliver.*

- Psalm 7:1-2
Author's Note: This was one of those chapters I had to write while working on the first draft of Make Me Whole. In order to ensure that I was making Winter behave in a way that made sense, even if Steve and Sam don't understand yet, I had to go through the scene from his POV. I wouldn't say this chapter was the only reason I wanted to write Shards of Me, but it was certainly a big incentive. Proof that there's more to this project than just retreading all the same steps we made the first time through. Winter just has such a different perspective on what's happening, because he's overanalyzing everything and doesn't quite trust the others completely yet.

Don't forget to request scenes you'd like to see!

This chapter takes place during Make Me Whole chapter 2, “The First Day of Winter.”

Requested by Qweb, queenbee014, and Lucinda Cottontale from FFNet, a guest on AO3, and my sister Mary (Phew! Lots of you wanted to see this one!)

~*~*~*~*~*~

There's a different sunrise
It's a different world
In a way I feel like
I have just begun

Like I don't remember
Waking up from a dream
All my chains are broken
And it feels so free

...

Once a life imprisoned
I was locked in the past
But your love has given
Given one more chance

- “For the First Time” by The Afters
So he had a name now. Winter. It was interesting—the name was derived from the title Hydra had given him, but somehow it didn't serve as a reminder of where he'd come from. It was a name Steve and Sam had chosen for him. A word that meant *him*, beyond the deadly assassin he had become. *Winter* was something more than the empty shell that was *the Winter Soldier*. He didn't care that Steve and Sam had said it was a girl's name. Ironically, the name *Winter* sounded so warm when they said it.

Names were powerful things. He knew that his name had once been Bucky. That was what Steve had yelled at him in his memory. He didn't know who that Bucky was, or what the circumstances had been that led up to that moment when he fell from a moving train into the snow. Until he knew for sure, he couldn't be Bucky. He couldn't let the others know who he was—who he had once been. He didn't know how they would react, or if they would change their minds and leave him to Hydra's mercy. Everything would change once they knew who he had been, so he needed to find out how first.

That also meant he couldn't call Steve by name. If they had known each other before—and if they were as close as the memory seemed to suggest—then it would be a dead giveaway. Steve didn't seem to have recognized him yet, but he couldn't assist that recognition in any way. Not until he was ready.

At least Sam was safe. Winter had gathered from Steve and Sam's conversation on the way here that they hadn't known each other very long, which meant that Sam probably hadn't known this Bucky person either. Winter really didn't understand Sam. He'd had a whole conversation with Steve about whether they had any siblings and where they were now, yet Sam had fought against Hydra and honestly seemed to trust Steve with his life. He had saved Winter when he fell off the helicarrier, and now he had joined them as they hid from Hydra.

When Sam spoke, Winter couldn't tell if he liked him or not. His voice didn't have the gentle tone that always seemed to enter Steve's voice when he talked to Winter. Sometimes Sam's words were mocking, and sometimes his dark eyes seemed to bore right through Winter's skull till he was sure the man could read his mind. But his smiles were quick and genuine, and there was such a warmth to him.

That warmth was different from Steve's. He'd known nothing but cold for so long that any kind of warmth was surprising to him. But if he'd ever dared to hope that there *was* warmth in this world, he would have expected it to all be like Steve's—steady, gentle compassion that almost seemed tentative at times, hoping he would accept it but willing to keep offering it regardless. Sam's warmth was also steady, but it was like...a fire. It would keep glowing and giving off heat whether anyone was around to feel it or not. Sam didn't stop to hope that Winter would accept what he did. He just did it anyway, and Winter could take it or leave it.

Once, Winter had thought everyone was the same. Then Steve had stepped into his life, and he'd realized people could be different. Now he could see that Sam needed a third category of his own.

What category did Winter belong to?
Winter listened to the rumble of their voices downstairs, occasionally punctuated by a laugh or a stretch of silence. It was so...strange. They weren't demanding answers, or giving him orders (other than Steve telling him to pick a room, which was enough to stump him for a year), or even keeping an eye on him. They just left him to his own devices.

For a long time, Winter simply stood in the upstairs hallway and tried to figure out what his own devices were. Eventually, more because he figured he couldn't just stand there forever than anything else, he walked into each of the bedrooms and took a look around. He ended in the master bedroom, which had a small bathroom attached. There was a patchwork quilt on the bed, filling the room with bright, cheerful colors. The wood of the furniture was dark and shiny, and there was a window with a view of the stream flowing behind the cabin. An overstuffed red recliner sat in the corner, pointed towards the window. A painting hung on the wall opposite the bed, depicting a pure white wolf howling at the moon.

Winter liked it.

Slowly, he went back downstairs, anxiety squirming in his gut. He would have to say something, wouldn't he? What were you supposed to say in a case like this? *I picked one.* No, that sounded dumb. *I want the big one on the end.* That sounded too much like a demand, like he deserved something from them. Maybe he should just point and say, *Can I have that one?* Yes, make it a question. Then they could say no and at least narrow the possibilities. He hoped they wouldn't be too angry...Steve had told him to pick...but maybe that one was off-limits.... Maybe he should just say any of them would be fine....

Steve and Sam were in the kitchen, making food. Sandwiches. The word came to him like a foreign, almost-forgotten language. Hydra had fed him through a tube, always making sure he was strong and nourished, but never wasting his time with the simple pleasure of sinking his teeth into a meal. He'd almost forgotten what the hollow feeling in his stomach meant, and how it could be fixed.

"Winter!" Steve called cheerfully. "Time for supper!"

"Time for supper!"

*He looked up at the third-story window of the apartment building and saw a woman leaning out, her dark hair piled up on her head. ‘Kay, Mom!’ he yelled up at her, and she ducked back inside.*

*He turned to the skinny blond boy sitting next to him on the curb. ‘I gotta go, Steve. Can you get home okay?’*

*One of his suspenders was slipping off his skinny shoulder, and he looked scruffy as though he'd been scuffling in the dirt. He lowered the handkerchief he'd been holding against his bloody lip. Despite the wince of pain it caused, he smiled. ‘I’ll be fine, Buck.’*

The sickly, blood-smereared face melted into Steve's strong, comforting smile as he held out the plate of sandwiches. Their faces looked so different, but the eyes were the same. Winter's heart pounded. What had just happened? Was that another memory? He really wanted to go somewhere quiet so he could figure out what it meant, but right now there were sandwiches staring him in the face.

Slowly, his brain caught up with him. To eat, he would have to take off his mask. And if he did that...they would see who he was. And if that memory was right, Steve had known him since they were *children.* There was no way he wouldn't recognize him now. Winter shook his head, stepping back.

"You can take the mask off now," Steve said. "It's just us. There's no one else around for miles, so
you don't have to worry about someone discovering your identity. You're safe here.”

_You're the one I need to hide my identity from!_ Winter thought desperately. But there was no way to explain that without revealing the very information he was trying to hide, or making them both suspicious about why he was being so secretive.

“At least take it off long enough to eat,” Sam said.

Both of them were staring at him. Watching him. Waiting for him to slip up. They wanted to know who he was. They wouldn't relent until they'd found out every secret he held inside....

_No_, he tried to tell himself, though it did nothing to still his racing heart. _They're not like that. They're just saying that because they can't understand why you don't want to take it off. It's the logical thing to do._

So he took the largest breath he could, and forced himself to say, “I don't...want.... I'm not...ready...to...for you...to see....”

Then Steve took a step towards him and nonono he's going to hurt you and rip off your mask and he'll see you and he'll know you and he'll hate you and he'll leave you and you're nothing you're nobody don't look at me get away get away get away—

By the time he realized what he was doing, Winter was out the door and running as fast as he could to the treeline. He kept running, his heart thudding so hard he was afraid it would burst through his chest, until he could see the road ahead of him. He turned to the right and kept running until he was completely out of breath and had to stop.

Leaning against a tree, he let the knowledge of what he'd just done crash over him. If they weren't suspicious before, they'd definitely be suspicious now, wouldn't they? They'd made a perfectly reasonable suggestion, and he'd freaked out like they'd said that stabbing him with knives would make a good pastime. Worse, he'd run away. _Good riddance_, they'd say. There was no way they'd take him back now, not when he'd thrown their kindness back in their faces like that.

Winter slid to the ground, resting his back against the trunk of the tree. He could hear the stream trickling by in the distance; all he'd have to do would be to follow it back to the cabin. But what could he say? What would they do? They would want an explanation, wouldn't they? He would have to tell them. Show them.

He thought of the memory that had come to him, of sitting on the sidewalk next to a skinny, beat-up kid with Steve's warm blue eyes. How had that pathetic little twerp grown into the tall, strong man he was today? And Bucky...Bucky had been worried about Steve, trying to help him, making sure he was all right. But Steve had just smiled and said, _I'll be fine, Buck._

And there was another name. _Buck_. There was something special about the way Steve said it in his soft, childish voice. There was some meaning in it just for the two of them, something no one else would understand.

What hurt the most was that he didn't understand it either.

Winter watched the treetops swaying in the breeze for a while, then pushed himself to his feet with a curse. He could feel Steve reeling him in like a fish on a hook. Whether he was aware of it or not, he kept dangling enticing bits of who Winter was, and Winter had to bite. He had to keep coming back, because he knew the only person who had even the slightest chance of speaking to him like the memory was Steve Rogers. He had to take that chance.
Maybe I can refuse to eat, he thought glumly, peeking through the trees at the clearing with the cabin. Then I'll sneak out and steal something when they're asleep. That wouldn't keep them from getting suspicious, but he didn't know what else to do.

Steve was sitting on the steps leading up to the porch. After a moment, he got up and went to sit in a rocking chair in one corner of the porch, apparently at his ease. Winter knew better, of course—he was obviously keeping a lookout.

Then his eyes zeroed in on the plate Steve had left behind. There were still two sandwiches left. Winter's stomach made a rather frightening rumble, sending a twang of pain up his nerves. Screw it, he said to himself. Even if they hate you forever, at least you won't die.

He edged around the clearing, inching closer and closer to the plate of sandwiches. Steve was watching him, though he was pretending not to. He rocked slightly in his chair, waiting. When Winter reached the foot of the stairs, he hesitated, glancing down at the plate and wondering if he could grab it and make a break for the trees.

Suddenly Steve broke the silence. “They're for you.”

Winter's attention immediately shifted back to him. What was he saying?

“You don't have to eat them now,” Steve continued. “You can eat later, behind closed doors, if you don't want us to see your face. But you do have to eat.”

Winter blinked, trying to understand. Steve wasn't angry. He wasn't demanding to know the reasons behind Winter's strange behavior. He wasn't even asking him to take off the mask again. He was actually making it easier for Winter, making it seem perfectly normal that he would want to hide before eating a single crumb.

Slowly, he wrapped up the sandwiches in a napkin tucked neatly under the plate, and stuck the sandwiches in his pocket for later. He watched Steve, who merely watched him back with a slight smile. Did he ever stop smiling? Winter couldn't imagine anyone doing so much of it in one day.

Sam walked up to the open front door from inside. Thankfully, Winter could see him coming, so it didn't startle him. “I got the bath ready for you,” Sam said to him. “Thought you might like a good soak instead of just a shower.”

It took a long time for those words to register with any sort of meaning in Winter's mind. Bath. Oh. Right. His handlers had always washed his body when he came out of crysoleep, before forcing him into compliance. Everything was always so muddled when he woke up, so he could only remember brief snatches of degrading exposure and rough, perfunctory motions. Vaguely, he knew what the word bath had meant once...but it was hard to connect that dim recollection to reality.

“You reek, man,” Sam said in the mocking but warm tone Winter realized he would have to get used to. “You need a bath, and don't say no or I'll be offended.”

Steve got up and beckoned to him, so Winter followed them inside. They led him upstairs and into the bedroom he'd chosen (did they know?). The other bathroom only had a shower, but this one attached to the bedroom had a tub, which was now filled with steaming water. Sam pointed out a travel bottle of shampoo and bar of soap in a pointed manner that even Winter understood to mean Use them.

Steve emerged from one of the other bedrooms with a stack of clothes, which he pushed into Winter's arms. “Here, you can change into these. They'll probably be a bit big, but they'll do until we
can get something in your size.”

Winter looked down at the pile of clothes in surprise. It was one thing for Steve to give him the sweatshirt he still wore—after all, that was more for camouflage than anything else. But now he was practically giving Winter the clothes off his back.

“Do you want to keep your old clothes?” Steve asked. “If so, we can wash them. Or do you want to get rid of them?”

There were too many questions, too many decisions. Too many options opening up that he'd never even dreamed of before. How could they expect him to figure out what to say so quickly?

Some of this seemed to show on his face, because Steve said, “Think about it. If you decide you want to throw them out, just drop them outside the door here. Take as long as you need. There's a lock on the bathroom door and this one. Good night!”

Then they left, closing the door behind them. Winter stood there for a long moment, then crossed to the door and turned the lock. It made a satisfying click, and a small amount of tension immediately eased in his shoulders. None of them had any illusions, of course—they knew Steve could break down the door like it was made of toothpicks, lock or no. But it was nice to pretend.

Locking the bathroom door behind him was even better. He was in a small space with four walls and a lock on the door—but he could control that now. This wasn't a prison. This was safety.

After carefully placing the clean clothes on the closed lid of the toilet and putting the somewhat crushed sandwiches on top, he began to take off his clothes. Even this felt strange. Hydra had done everything to him and for him—the only thing he was allowed to do himself was carry out their missions to the letter. Once his clothes lay in a heap on the floor, he looked at his reflection in the mirror over the sink. He was covered in small bruises and lacerations from the fights he'd been in over the last few days. He wondered how long they would take to heal without Hydra's ministrations.

Then he pulled off the mask, the source of so much trouble. He double-checked the lock before setting the mask down on the edge of the sink, and felt the grimy, sweaty residue it had left on his chin. The face in the mirror stared back at him—scruffy, weary, wary. His eyes were dark windows looking in on his hollow soul. No, he could never let Steve see this face. There was no way he would smile like he had in that memory. When he looked at this face, he wouldn't see Buck. He would only see the face of his friend's grave.

He quickly turned to the bathtub instead. First he reached out tentatively with his right hand to test the water. The warmth immediately closed around his hand like a blanket, making the hair on his arm stand on end. Suddenly he realized how cold he was getting, so he slowly stepped into the tub. He lowered himself until he was sitting down, the water rising to his chest. A memory slowly returned to him, a memory of what you were supposed to do in a bathtub. Gripping the sides of the tub to make sure he didn't slip, he slowly leaned back until his head rested on the rim of the tub and the water came up to his chin.

The water encased him in a cocoon of warmth, soothing the tension in his muscles from the last two very long, very eventful days. Slowly, he relaxed every muscle in his body and just lay there, enjoying the water's caress. He could probably fall asleep there if he let himself. He could hear the others moving around, the water running through the pipes to the other bathroom, the occasional snatch of dialogue. (“Hey, Cap, you want your shield in your room?” “Oh, here, I found some towels in the linen closet....”)
Listening to Sam's voice grow indistinct as he moved farther away, Winter remembered why he was in the bathtub in the first place. His movements were clumsy and out of practice, but he did his best to clean himself up. He pretended he was washing away Hydra's taint, that when he stepped out of the bath, he would be a new man.

But when the water grew cold and he finally emerged from the tub, he felt much the same as he always did. He dried himself off with the towel on the back of the door, taking extra care with his metal arm, and turned to the pile of clothes.

It was a simple outfit—loose-fitting black pants with a drawstring, and a plain white t-shirt—but Winter held them for a long time before pulling them on. They were so...soft. Loose. As Steve had warned, they were a little big for him since he was half an inch shorter and not quite so broad in the shoulder. Winter paused with the shirt halfway over his head, breathing in the smell of the cloth. The smell of Steve. It was as familiar as the smell of blood, but so much more pleasant. It was warm, and clean, and...bright. He shook his head at himself and pulled the shirt on the rest of the way. He needed to stop trying to describe things.

Clothed once more, he picked up his mask again. The thought of encasing his mouth in all of that sweat was disgusting, so he carefully washed it in the bathwater and dried it off. He breathed a sigh of relief when it buckled into place once more. As freeing as it had been to take it off for a while, he hadn't been able to banish the thought of Steve pulling the door off its hinges and taking a look at his face while he was vulnerable. But now he had nothing to worry about.

After letting out the bathwater, Winter picked up the sweatshirt, intending to put it back on. But when he picked up the clothes he'd discarded before his bath, he understood what Sam had been talking about. The odor of sour sweat and old blood seemed particularly strong now that he was clean and kept getting whiffs of shampoo every time his hair swung past his face. He hesitated for a moment, looking at the familiar leather and black cloth. Then he quickly opened the bedroom door, dropped the pile outside, and locked himself in again.

The sun had set, and everything was quiet inside. Steve and Sam seemed to have gone to bed. Winter's eyes turned to the sandwiches again. He'd almost forgotten the ache in his stomach in the comfort of the bath. Once again, he locked himself in the bathroom and took off the mask. Then he sat down on the closed toilet seat and peeled away the napkin.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew it wasn't a very good sandwich. Just some ham and cheese and a bit of slightly wilted lettuce between stale pieces of bread slathered with mayonnaise. But as his teeth sank into it and the flavors exploded in his mouth, his breath drew short. This was the best sandwich he'd ever eaten.

~*~*~*~*~*~

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

2 Corinthians 5:17
Hydra's Revenge

Chapter Notes

Having never gone through withdrawal from drugs, I had to stretch my imagination a bit to describe what Winter must be going through. Thankfully, I can fudge a lot because the drugs Hydra gave him are never specified :P Considering how out of it poor Winter is, I think it's a mark of both how strong he is and how terrified he is that he resists the others' help for as long as he does.

This chapter takes place in *Make Me Whole* chapter 3, “Withdraw.”

*Requested by michellejoy on AO3*

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~*~*~*~*~*~

And those voices rip me all apart
I need medicine to quiet and to find it

Welcome to oblivion
Where panic starts to settle in
And I'm afraid of everything
Oh, I lost my head again
Welcome to oblivion
Where my whole life is caving in
And I can't stand who I am
Oh, I think I'm losing it

...

Then I met you...

- “Welcome to Oblivion” by Madina Lake

~*~*~*~*~*~
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When the pain started, Winter realized he should have expected it. Had he forgotten so quickly what it had been like the last time he'd tried to run away? He remembered lying in a ditch, clutching his
stomach and wishing he could die. Wishing Hydra would find him and put him out of his misery. That time, he hadn't reached such a point until he'd been on the run for almost two weeks.

But they had changed the drugs they gave him, after they'd caught him once again. He knew they'd made the withdrawal come faster, so he would be debilitated soon after leaving them. But since leaving Hydra this time, he hadn't stopped to consider when the pain would start. He'd been so focused on trying to figure out his new companions.

He certainly considered the pain now, bending over the toilet and retching, stomach acid burning his throat. How could he have been so stupid? He should have known this wouldn't work. Was this agony really worth leaving his old life behind? If he'd completed his mission, if he'd gone back....

No. They would give him the injection that would prevent his stomach from feeling like it was tearing in half, they would tend his wounds and maintain his arm...but then they would shove him back under the ice. They wouldn't give him any time to think, to be himself.... He was just a knife to be slid back into its sheath.

He wouldn't be Winter. He wouldn't be anything at all.

Knowing that his current situation was preferable despite the pain helped ground him. It didn't matter that the pain remained even after he'd expelled the few contents of his stomach. It was still better than the alternative.

A sudden knock on the door made him jump, then cringe and clutch his aching stomach even harder. “Winter?” Steve's voice called. “Are you all right?”

Winter looked over his shoulder and realized that, in his haste to get to the toilet, he'd left the bathroom door ajar. He quickly pushed himself to his feet and flushed the toilet, hoping Steve wouldn't try to force his way in. As quickly as he could, he washed out his mouth, trying to get rid of the sour taste of bile, and then buckled his mask back on. He let out a shaky breath.

“Winter?” Steve's voice said again. “I just want to help.”

Winter tried to stand up straight, but just ended up crumpling against the door frame. His face in the mirror was deathly pale, and the floor seemed to be swaying underneath his feet. He couldn't ignore the horrible truth: He needed help.

Almost as soon as this logical thought occurred to him, everything else inside of him reared up, screaming out all the reasons he was an idiot for even considering opening that door. Don't let him in, don't let him see how weak you are, he'll take advantage of this, he'll make you promise things and do things and you won't be able to say no or fight back. Won't he laugh at you? Won't he push you down and make you beg for mercy? That's the way the world works. That's what people are like. So don't let him in. Make him fight for every inch. Don't let him think any step of this will be easy. Because you might not be able to resist forever, but every moment you do resist is one more moment you are yourself.

But another voice spoke up as he stood wavering in the bathroom doorway. That's not what Steve is like. Even if the whole world is like that, Steve is different. What has he ever done to make you think he's lying now?

He stepped back into the bedroom, but the first voice screeched, You're such an idiot! Don't you know he's just trying to lull you into a false sense of security? He'll make you think he's going to help you, but as soon as your back is turned, he'll stab it for sure!
No, the other voice said, weaker but still present. *Why would he go to so much trouble just for that? He could force me, but he hasn't. He gave me food, he gave me clothes...he ran away with me. He's trying to help me, and I need help now. I'm about to fall over as it is.* As if to prove his point, he started across the room only to stumble and catch himself on the edge of the bed.

*How is he any different from Hydra?* the first voice said relentlessly. *They smiled at you too. They helped you when you felt like this. They wanted you to be strong and fit. And yet they still hurt you. They still took away everything you thought was important. He'll do the same.*

*I don't think he's like Hydra.* The other voice was tiny now, nearly drowned out in the other voice's screams. But still he lurched toward the door. He could practically feel Steve standing on the other side, waiting for him. *I don't want him to be like Hydra.*

*Yes, but how do you know?*

*I don't*, he thought. Winter turned the key, and at the loud click, he began to tremble harder than ever. *What if I'm wrong?* he thought desperately while the first voice cursed in the back of his head. *What if he pushes me down and makes me beg? What if he drags it out as long as possible before giving me any help? I'm too weak. I won't be able to hold out....*

He scurried back to the bed, bracing himself against the bedpost and waiting for Steve to come charging through the door. But he didn't. Instead, he knocked again and asked softly, “Can I come in?”

His throat closed on the word, but he finally managed to rasp out, “Yes.” Only then did Steve open the door. “You don't look so great,” he said with a worried expression. “Are you okay?”

“Hurts,” he said. The pain was making it hard to think about anything else. “Ate the sandwich...and then it hurt.”

“I hope you weren't allergic to something in it.”

Winter couldn't help glancing up at him. Steve actually sounded...guilty? Was that the emotion he heard? Like he was actually worried it was *his* fault somehow?

“Can I feel your forehead? We need to see if you have a fever.”

Winter jerked back as Steve raised his hand, and shook his head violently. *No no no, don't touch me, don't come anywhere near me....*

And...he didn't. That almost surprised Winter enough to make him forget about the pain. Steve backed off, said, “Okay, wait right here,” and stepped out of the room.

He returned with a long, narrow plastic device that Winter didn't recognize. It didn't *look* like a weapon, but sometimes the most dangerous implements hid in the most innocuous objects. Steve held it out to him, but Winter just stared at it.

“It's a thermometer,” Steve said. “Just stick it under your tongue until it beeps. Then tell me what the number is.”

Winter tentatively accepted the thermometer and watched in surprise as Steve stepped outside the room, closing the door softly behind him. *He's really not going to take advantage of this to see my face,* Winter realized, stunned.
Still, he waited until he was safely behind the locked bathroom door before taking off his mask and slipping the end of the thermometer under his tongue. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he found it strange that a thermometer would look like this, or that it beeped once it was ready, but he didn't know why. There were no memories to provide him with an explanation for why this felt so foreign.

The number on the thermometer was 103. Was that bad? Quickly, he put the mask back on and staggered over to the door again. It was easier to open this time, when all he had to do was shove the thermometer back into Steve's hand. But then he glanced up and saw that Sam had joined them, and was frowning over Steve's shoulder at the thermometer. Winter hastily retreated to the bed.

Steve and Sam glanced at each other, a look full of meaning that Winter couldn't decipher. His breath caught in his throat, and he clutched the bedpost tighter to keep his balance. What did that mean? What were they going to do? When they both stepped through the door, Winter jerked backwards in alarm, but they just stepped aside and left the doorway clear, Steve staying next to the open door and Sam crossing over to the chest of drawers in the corner. Winter had a straight shot for the door if they tried anything. Not that it would do him much good in this state.

"You've got a fever," Sam said. "You should lie down; the best thing to do is get some rest."

Winter could feel the pressure of their gazes even though he didn't raise his eyes from the floor. No one had asked a question, but Winter was pretty sure they were waiting for an explanation. "I...know what this is," he said reluctantly. He didn't want to say anything, but he knew they needed to at least know why he was sick all of a sudden. He doubted they would know what his body needed...and they would probably give up once they realized he wouldn't get any better...but at least they would know. At least then they couldn't blame him for hiding anything from them. "It happened...before. Last time."

"When you ran away?" Steve prompted in a gentle voice.

Winter nodded. "They said...it would be worse next time. That I should know better. That I can't make it without their...m-medicine. That they'd take care of me...." He knew he wasn't doing a very good job of explaining, but it was hard to think straight when the ground kept bobbing up and down like a ship at sea. "They...give me things. To stay sharp. Keep focused. Top of my game. And w- without them...."

Sam swore softly, and Winter flinched. He waited for Sam to start shouting, but instead he just said to Steve, "He's addicted to whatever they gave him. I bet they did that on purpose, so if he ever tried to run away, he'd start going through withdrawal and then he'd want to go back."

Winter knew the look of disgust twisting Sam's face. It was the same expression everyone wore when he was like this. Almost...disappointed that such a valuable and dangerous asset would grovel on the floor, begging for just one shot of a drug only they could give him. Winter didn't want to do this again. He didn't want them to look at him like Hydra always did. He didn't want them to kick him and place their feet on his head, taunting him to get up....

Suddenly the floor was much closer than before, and his knees stung from the impact. He blinked groggily at his left hand, still clenched around the bedpost.

"You really need to get in bed, man," Sam said, starting forward. At first Winter was afraid that Sam was coming for him, but then he just walked around to the other side of the bed and pulled down the covers. "It's going to get worse before it gets better."

Winter looked up at them. They were both watching him with looks of concern. He could see no trace of the disgust he'd seen moments ago. Why were they looking at him like that? If they wanted
him to lie down and stay quietly out of the way, what were they waiting for? Why didn't they just push him down and leave him there? They weren't hauling him up into the bed. They weren't even touching him.

After several sluggish blinks, Winter realized they were waiting for him. It was almost like they knew how uncomfortable he was at being touched, and they didn't want to make him any more uncomfortable than he already was. That was ridiculous...but still they waited.

He couldn't just stay there. He could barely keep his head up. So he heaved himself onto his feet again, clutching the edge of the bed with all his might, and managed to collapse onto the mattress while still keeping both of them in sight. He leaned against the headboard, trying to stay upright, but he could feel himself slipping lower with every second. The battle was almost over, and he was losing.

“We've got something that will help bring your fever down,” Sam said, heading for the door. “I'll go get it.”

Winter's eyes closed of their own accord, but what Steve said next made them snap open again. “I'm sorry, but you really are going to have to take off the mask. We won't be able to help you otherwise.”

*I told you!* the vicious voice in the back of his head hissed, harsh and gleeful. *Sure, he'll help you all right. Just like Hydra always helped you—they just want to help you stay tightly within their grasp. This is all just a plan to see your face. They'll rip away your mask whether you resist or not, and they'll leave you here to die once they find out who you are. Steve just pretends to care. He'll hate you once he knows.*

“No...” Winter said weakly, pressing a hand to his face. His right arm gave out, and he fell flat on his back. “Don't...please don't....”

“It's okay,” Steve said, even though it *wasn't okay, what did he know about okay?* “I'm not going to hurt you. But you need to take this pill for your fever, and if we're going to help you....”

“I think I have a solution,” Sam said, stepping back into the room. He held up a blue bandanna. “You can put this on,” he said to Winter. “That way you can still keep your face covered, but we can help you get a drink of water or something.”

Sam put the bandanna and a bottle of pills on the bedside table, then retreated out the door. Steve backed towards the door as well. “Does that sound all right?” he asked gently.

The room was spinning so much he had a hard time understanding what they were saying, but slowly Winter nodded. As if he could do anything else.

“Just take one of these pills and let us know when you're done,” Steve said. “We'll be right here in the hallway.”

Then they both stepped outside and shut the door, leaving Winter to stare after them in confusion. Even the awful voice in the back of his mind stuttered its way to silence. This didn't make any sense. They had the perfect opportunity, and even the perfect excuse, to take off his mask and discover every last weakness he had. It would give them power over him. Leverage. Why were they letting this chance slip away?

It was probably just the fever, but he began to shake all over as a new thought occurred to him: They didn't *want* to hold power over him. That was the only explanation for all of their actions. They really, honestly, just wanted...to help him.
Slowly, glancing at the door every couple of seconds, Winter pulled off the mask again and swallowed one of the little white pills, washing it down with a tiny sip of water and hoping he wouldn't throw up again. Then he picked up the blue cloth and knotted one end behind his head. The cloth was large enough that it hung down over his nose and mouth, and even covered the front of his neck. He felt exposed behind this cloth, but at the same time...free. It was a bit like taking off his mask behind a locked door. He let out a breath, watching the cloth ripple, but not enough to expose his face. Maybe he could live with this for a while.

All the same, he pulled out the knife he'd slid under the mattress and hid it in a fold of the bedding, within easy reach. That made him breathe a bit easier.

As he leaned back against the soft pillow, it suddenly occurred to him that he would have to tell Steve that he was ready now. Before, even after he'd unlocked the door and Steve could easily have entered, he'd still knocked and waited for Winter to tell him to come in. It would probably be the same this time too. What if Winter just didn't say anything? Would Steve wait there for hours, or would he eventually give up and go away? Or come in, no matter what Winter said? If he kept quiet, would they leave him alone?

But the oddest part of all this was that Winter realized he didn't want to be alone. After so many years where moments of solitude were a rare and treasured experience, he found he wanted Steve in the room. He could feel his coherence and even his consciousness slipping away, and he knew the black void that awaited him was full of terror and agony. He wanted someone strong—stronger than he was, stronger than the pain or the fear—beside him.

He had to take several deep breaths before he could find his voice, but finally he managed to mutter, “Okay.”

For a second, Winter was afraid that Steve hadn't heard, or that he needed to say something else—what did people say in such a situation?—but then the door opened and the others entered, stepping away from the doorway as before.

“You should be feeling better soon,” Steve said. “Try to get some sleep, all right?” Then he turned to Sam. “You go on back to bed; I'll take first watch.”

Wait. He was going to stay here? The whole time? Winter had been expecting him to make sure Winter would stay in bed and take his medicine, but then leave him alone. That was how Hydra had always treated him, after all. Once they were sure he would obey, they would dose him up, tend to his wounds, and then either put him in the cryo chamber or leave him in a cold, dank cell somewhere until they needed him again. Winter wasn't sure he liked the idea of Steve staying there the whole time...but he wasn't sure he disliked it either.

With a yawn and a short wave over his shoulder, Sam turned to go. “Holler if you need anything.”

Then the door closed behind him and they were alone. Winter watched Steve step into the bathroom, wondering what he would do. The water ran in the sink for a moment or two, and then he returned to the bed, folding a wet cloth in half. “I'm going to put this on your forehead, so lie down, okay?”

Winter glanced between Steve and the wet cloth. “Why?” What was this? What was he going to do? Would it hurt?

“It'll cool you down,” Steve said, folding the cloth another time. “Make you a little more comfortable. You can take it off again if you don't like it.”

You would let me? You would care? Slowly, Winter let himself slide the rest of the way down onto
his back. It was something of a relief not to have to hold himself upright anymore. He watched warily as Steve carefully placed the cloth on his forehead, and then went to sit in the chair by the bed. Even though Winter was shivering, the cool weight of the cloth was comforting on his sweaty forehead. Steve was right; it did make him feel better. Was that really his only intention? Did he really just want to make Winter comfortable? He kept waiting for Steve to demand gratitude, or to hurt him...but it never happened. His words and his actions lined up perfectly. He was exactly who he seemed to be.

It was all too much to process. Everything was too strange, too new. The exhaustion dragged his eyelids down and he slipped into that black void. But he was dimly aware of Steve watching over him, and somehow...that made it less terrible.

~~*~*~*~*~*~*~

_For he has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted, and he has not hidden his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to him._

_- Psalm 22:24_
I don't know where I first got this idea, but for a long time I've wondered whether Winter/Bucky ever hallucinates the Words—and if so, whether they would work just as well as someone saying them to him aloud. If you ask me, that's actually one of the most dangerous effects of having the Winter Soldier around. What if he suddenly hallucinates orders to kill you? What if he completely loses control and goes ballistic without being able to stop himself? It's probably a good thing that Winter is so weak when he's in such a vulnerable mental state here at the beginning. And also, as weird as it sounds, I think it's a good thing that the first thing they all had to deal with was Winter's withdrawal. Right away, before they had time to do little more than meet each other, Steve and Sam got a chance to demonstrate what love really is. And Winter is so weak that he has no option but to observe and let them treat him like a human being who has worth.

P.S. The Lord of the Rings quotes in this chapter are my absolute favorites, especially the first one. That scene in The Two Towers never made it into the movie, but it's always stood out to me as one of the most beautiful descriptions of love I've ever read. That's what I see in Steve and Bucky's eyes whenever they're together.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 3, “Withdraw.”

Requested by Night N. Gail on FFNet

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I trust you to heal
I trust you to save
So I'll trust you enough
To get out of the way
To come where I am
To silence my doubt

...

You are strong
In the broken places
I'm carried in your arms
You are strong
In the broken places
There's healing in these scars

- “Broken Places” by Plumb

Winter discovered that it wasn't a black void that he fell into. It wasn't dark, and it certainly wasn't empty or silent. He couldn't tell anymore what was real and what was a dream—and there were moments that he forgot dreams were even a possibility, because how could life contain anything but this twisting miasma of pain?

Hydra had found him again. They punished him relentlessly for daring to even think he could escape. They surrounded him, pushing him down whenever he tried to rise, stabbing him and pounding him and beating him and branding him with hot irons that dug deep into his flesh. He screamed, he pleaded in every language he knew, but nothing would make them stop. He knew this was the end. They wouldn't stop until he was dead...but still he pleaded. Maybe if he pleaded long enough and hard enough, they would believe he was sorry. Maybe they would kill him faster and end this torment.

Sometimes they spoke the Words to him. A thrill of terror rushed through him as he heard Longing...Rusted...Seventeen.... He whirled around, trying to find where the Words were coming from, but he was either surrounded by darkness or tied down with thick chains that he couldn't break no matter how hard he strained against them. Sometimes the Words died out before they reached Freight car, fading into silence and making him freeze in terror, wondering when the next word would come. Other times it would reach the end and he would slip into that cold, sharp clarity, ready to comply to their every whim...but no orders would come. He would sit there, repeating systematically in every language he knew that he was ready to comply, as he had been taught to do. But no one said a word. He was encased in silence until he drifted off to sleep, then woke in torment again.

Somewhere in the midst of all this, Winter realized what their intent was. They would threaten him with the chair (Not that...please, not that.... I'll be good.... I promise I'll be good....), but he never felt the burn of its lightning. They would prep him with the Words, making him think he would be put to work, but then they would leave him wondering. It was all another way to put him at their mercy. They would make him constantly afraid, sure that at any moment they would carry out their threats. But he would never know when.

Then Winter opened his eyes and remembered where he was, remembered why he was Winter, and shivered with relief. His bones ached, his skin burned, his mind whirled because he was sick. No one was torturing him. No one would shove him into the chair or speak the Words to him here.

Suddenly he realized he was extremely thirsty. “Water,” he whispered. He knew they wouldn't give him any, he knew they wouldn't care, but he was so desperate he couldn't keep silent. “Water....”

Steve immediately reached for the glass of water sitting tantalizingly out of reach on the bedside table. Winter stared longingly at it, but when Steve slid his arm under Winter's pillow to help him sit up, Winter suddenly remembered himself. If Steve helped him drink, he might pull the bandanna aside...and then he might see Winter's mouth. And he would recognize him.
Winter grabbed Steve's wrist, pushing it away. “Not you,” he mumbled, looking around wildly until he found Sam in the doorway. “Him,” Winter said, pointing.

Everything was going wrong. They would realize why he didn't want Steve to even see the shape of his chin. They would figure it out, and then....

But nothing happened. Steve just handed the glass to Sam and went back to his chair. And Sam helped him swallow a few mouthfuls of the cool, soothing water, almost as careful as Winter to not push the cloth up too high. Winter settled back onto the pillow, too exhausted to wonder about this much longer.

His mind slid back under the waves of confusion, and his last coherent thought was that Sam's cheek was bruised for some reason.

~*~*~*~*~*~

He lay curled at Pierce's feet, bound hand and foot, a collar around his neck like a dog. A chain stretched from the collar to a ring in the wall, so short that he couldn't even sit up properly. Pierce sat, legs crossed, hands clasped in his lap. He watched the Soldier with a placid smile, watched as the Soldier curled up tighter. Pain ripped through the Soldier's gut, he was shaking all over, and sweat poured from his brow. And he knew it would only get worse.

“What's the matter, Soldier?” Pierce asked in mock surprise. “Did you...want something?”

The Soldier gritted his teeth, hating the smiling man with all his heart. But Pierce was the only one who could make all of this stop. So he squeezed his eyes shut and gasped, “Please....”

“Please what? I can't help you if you don't tell me what you need.” The feigned ignorance in his voice was maddening.

“M-Medicine...please....”

“Oh, you want your medicine, do you? I'm sorry, I had no idea. I thought you'd decided you could manage on your own.”

His blood was roaring through his veins, his head spinning, his forehead resting in a puddle of sweat and tears. “Please...Please....”

Then, the best sound he had ever heard: Pierce snapping his fingers, footsteps approaching. A hand grabbed him by the hair and yanked him upright. A jab of pain in the side of his neck, and almost immediately, blessed relief coursed through his veins. The Soldier collapsed onto the cold concrete, sucking in relieved gulps of air as the pain subsided.

“You see?” Pierce said in a voice so satisfied it was almost a purr. “It's good for you. We have your best interests at heart. Now, don't you have something you'd like to say?”

The Soldier cracked his eyes open and stared up at Pierce, who sat smiling at him, the light glinting off his glasses so he couldn't see the man's eyes. But the smile was steely and cold, as unyielding as the chains holding him in place. So he swallowed and whispered, “Thank you.”

“What was that? I couldn't hear you.”
He raised his voice till it cracked on the words. “Thank you!”

“Good. I'm glad you understand all we've done for you here. You won't be so ungrateful as to leave again, will you?”

The Soldier shook his head so violently his chains jangled. “No, sir. No...please...”

Winter blinked. He was back in the bed again, aware of his real surroundings. The howling wolf stared at him from the opposite wall. Steve sat in his chair as always. Sam was whistling somewhere down the hall.

Then the need woke in him again, an aching void deep inside that he was all too familiar with. It was like an itch too deep to scratch, an ache in his bones that would never abate, a thirst no amount of water could slake. His head pounded and sweat poured from his brow; his teeth chattered and his hands shook as he clawed at the blankets. “Please...” he whispered, blinking sweat out of his eyes.

A white man with blond hair bent over him, speaking softly with a small smile, but he couldn't tell if it was Steve or Pierce. The ache was becoming so desperate that he pleaded anyway. It didn't matter who was there, so long as they could help him.

“Please...” he gasped again. “M-Medicine....”

But instead of taunting him or forcing him to promise that he would never step out of line again, he felt strong arms lifting him up, a warm hand finding his mouth under the cloth, slipping a pill between his lips and then offering the edge of a glass. Cool water slid down his throat rather than the numbing drugs pumping through his veins—barely even taking the edge off the visceral need eating him alive.

But those strong arms laid him gently down, and those warm, steady hands brushed the hair off his forehead and wiped the sweat away with a cool cloth. And the same thing happened every time. He would beg for the drugs to ease the fire in his veins, or water to cool his throat, and wait for the taunting to begin. But in the place of mocking words and rough hands slapping his mouth to keep him quiet or fingers ripping his hair to pull him upright...there were gentle touches and quiet voices. And before they did anything to him, they would always tell him first, or ask him for permission.

“I'm going to sit you up now while Sam changes your sheets, okay? This won't take long.”

“Your neck is really sweaty. Can I wash it for you?”

But the truly amazing thing was that if he said no to the questions they asked...they listened to him. During one of his more lucid moments, right after Sam had given him a drink, Steve stepped into the room carrying a stack of clean clothes. “Your clothes are soaked through with sweat,” he said to Winter. “You'd probably be more comfortable with a clean shirt, at least. Can we help you change?”

Winter shook his head violently. Even the mere thought of them pulling his clothes off, making him utterly vulnerable, made his skin crawl.

And Steve just said, “Okay,” put down the clothes, and left. He didn't argue, didn't push the issue, didn't even express any frustration at Winter refusing to heed his advice. He asked a few more times during Winter's illness—always asking gently, without any indication that he'd asked it before. Each time, Winter shook his head, though it became less emphatic every time. And each time, Steve accepted his decision and didn't force him to do anything he was uncomfortable with.

He tried it out on Sam too. Sam asked him if he wanted the washcloth on his forehead, Winter shook his head, and Sam took the cloth away immediately. (Winter regretted that one, since the cloth was
one of the few reliefs he had in this whirlwind of discomfort.

Over time, Winter began to see a light at the end of the tunnel. The hallucinations grew fewer and farther in between—and he could keep track of what was a dream and what wasn't. He could stay awake for longer periods of time, and one night Sam told him with a grin that his fever was finally gone.

As his health improved and he became more aware of what was going on around him, he realized that Steve was reading a book to him every time it was his turn to sit by the bed. Sometimes as he dozed, Winter's dreams took on a warm, fuzzy glow and he seemed to be tramping through the wild wearing an elven cloak, bearing a terrible burden around his neck. He didn't really know what to make of all this—surely Steve could read silently to himself, right? But he had chosen to read the book aloud. Sometimes Sam brought in a chair and listened, but most of the time it was just him and Steve. Winter didn't mind—he actually liked listening to the steady rise and fall of Steve's voice—but he didn't understand why Steve was doing it.

"Then as he had kept watch Sam had noticed that at times a light seemed to be shining faintly within; but now the light was even clearer and stronger. Frodo's face was peaceful, the marks of fear and care had left it; but it looked old, old and beautiful, as if the chiselling of the shaping years was now revealed in many fine lines that had before been hidden, though the identity of the face was not changed. Not that Sam Gamgee put it that way to himself. He shook his head, as if finding words useless, and murmured: 'I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow. But I love him, whether or no.'"

Winter watched the play of emotions on Steve's face as he read. Somehow, that morphed into the clearest memory he had seen since falling off the helicarrier.

"Rise and shine, Stevie," he whispered, leaning over the man in the bed who was little more than a lump in the blankets.

"I'm already awake, you jerk," groaned the skinny, pale man with Steve's eyes. He peeked out from between several layers of blankets, his eyes bloodshot, his nose red and running. "As if I could sleep with all that racket you're making."

"It's called whistling, Steve," Bucky said, ruffling Steve's hair. "Whistling."

"And what do you have to be so cheerful about?"

He whipped the brand new book out of his pocket. "I got us a new book to read."

Steve squinted at the cover. "What's a hobbit?"

Bucky grinned and cracked the book open. "Only one way to find out."

Winter listened to Steve and wondered if he was thinking of those days too.

"'And we shouldn't be here at all, if we'd known more about it before we started,'" Steve read. "'But I suppose it's often that way. The brave things in the old tales and songs, Mr. Frodo: adventures, as I used to call them. I used to think that they were things the wonderful folk of the stories went out and looked for, because they wanted them, because they were exciting and life was a bit dull, a kind of a sport, as you might say. But that's not the way of it with the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them, usually—their paths were laid that way, as you put it. But I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn't. And if they had, we shouldn't know, because they'd have been forgotten. We hear about those as just"
went on—and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. You know, coming home, and finding things all right, though not quite the same—like old Mr. Bilbo. But those aren’t always the best tales to hear, though they may be the best tales to get landed in! I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?"

~*~*~*~*~*~

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

- Matthew 25:35-36
Surprise! A bonus chapter for Mother's Day! I wanted to write something about one of their mothers, and since Sam is the only one whose mother is still alive, I thought it'd be a great chance to explore his family some more. As usual, we don't get much backstory on Sam in canon, so I took the opportunity to make it up myself. I drew inspiration from Sam's childhood in the comics, but altered it so it would fit the MCU and what I'd already developed in Make Me Whole. So here, enjoy a quiet little chapter about Sam's wonderful mother.

This chapter takes place about two months after Make Me Whole.

_Dedicated to my wonderful mother, who is the best cook in the world and has been my number one cheerleader from the beginning_

~*~*~*~*~*~

You were my mom, you were my dad  
The only thing I ever had was you  
It's true  
And even when the times got hard  
You were there to let us know  
That we'd get through  
You showed me how to be a man  
You taught me how to understand  
The things that people do  

-“Thank You Mom” by Good Charlotte

~*~*~*~*~*~

A single wistful comment Steve made to Bucky one day was what started it. “I always miss her most this time of year.”

Bucky nodded, looking out the window as he sipped his hot chocolate. “The trees were beautiful that year,” he said softly. “I remember...at the graveside. There was this one tree with pale yellow leaves, and when I looked at it against the blue sky...it made me think of her.”

Of course they were aware that Sam was present—it was his kitchen, after all—but at the time neither of them realized that he was listening thoughtfully to every word they said. They also didn't
draw any connection later that day when he invited them to go meet his mother.

Steve had heard a lot about Sam's family, but hadn't had the chance to meet any of them since he and Bucky had moved into Sam's house. Darlene Wilson lived in a small, somewhat dilapidated house in Virginia, sandwiched so closely between the houses on either side that it might as well be a row house.

As soon as Sam opened the squeaking screen door, a tiny woman came bustling to greet them. “Come in, come in! Don't just stand on the mat! But do wipe your feet first. Come on now, don't be strangers!”

Steve automatically held out his hand, but Darlene ignored it and pulled him into a tight, crushing hug. She seemed to make no distinction between the three of them, hugging Steve and Bucky as warmly as her own son and not even commenting on Bucky's metal arm.

Darlene took a step back and looked up at the two of them critically, her hands on her hips. “So you two are the ones who kidnapped my Sammy before he could even say goodbye.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Ma, we've been over this before—Steve didn't even ask me to come along; I invited myself.”

“And we would have been lost without him,” Steve hastened to add. “Really, I don't know what we would've done if he hadn't come along.”

“Yeah,” Bucky chimed in. “I would've hated to be stuck for ten months eating nothing but Steve's cooking.”

Steve punched Bucky in the shoulder while Sam roared with laughter.

When Darlene smiled, Steve noticed the same gap in her front teeth that Sam had. “Sounds like someone could do with some cooking lessons. And you came to the right place! Come on, wash your hands and you can help me peel the potatoes!”

Before they really knew what was going on, Steve was peeling a mountain of potatoes and Bucky chopping up vegetables while Sam and Darlene worked together to whip up some fancy-looking cake with the ease of long familiarity. “I hope we're not putting you out too much, dropping by on such short notice...” Steve said uncertainly. He knew the three of them ate a lot, but judging by all the pots sizzling on the stove and the three large crockpots plugged in on the counter, Darlene was preparing a feast fit for a king.

“You thought all this food was for you, boy?” Darlene laughed, not looking up as she squeezed ribbons of frosting around the edges of her three-layer cake. “Today's the neighborhood Fall Party! Last chance for us all to get together and have a good time before all the kids are in school!”

“Oh, that's right!” Sam slapped the heel of his hand against his forehead. “I completely forgot that was today. Sorry, guys, I didn't want to overwhelm you the first time you met my mom....”

Steve and Bucky barely had time to assure him they didn't mind before there was a knock on the screen door. A middle-aged woman bustled in, asking Darlene if she could borrow some powdered sugar. As soon as she caught sight of Sam, she let out a cry of welcome and demanded to know where he'd been all this time, what he'd been doing, why he hadn't asked her beautiful daughter out on a date yet even though he had her number, and who those handsome gentlemen were, all without taking a moment to draw breath or let him answer any of her inquiries. Then she seemed to remember that she had cookies in the oven, and bustled out without once letting up on her stream of
“Always thought Miz Huffman had an appropriate name,” Sam said mildly, carefully placing a cover over their masterpiece of a cake.

“You watch that mouth of yours if you don't want it washed out, Sammy,” Darlene said sharply, stirring the various pots on the stove. “Charlotte Huffman is a pillar of the church and of this community, and she's had to contend with enough hardship in her life to earn your respect. She's a lonely woman, and the least we can do is listen to her without ridicule.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Sam said meekly.

Soon after Ms. Huffman left, a steady stream of visitors popped in. A teenage boy bounded in, having heard that Sam was back home, and tried to get him to play basketball with him. As soon as Sam promised to shoot some hoops after the meal, a young mother came by, toting her bawling twin babies and asking Darlene's advice about some kind of rash. An old man poked his head in to see if Darlene was making her famous apple pie, a question that was soon drowned out and never answered when several children came clamoring into the kitchen, trying to sample the desserts and gaping up at Steve. He distinctly heard one boy whispering to his little brother, “See? I toldja he knew Captain America!”

The bustle didn't let up the whole time they were in the kitchen. It seemed there was always someone demanding Darlene's attention, either to ask her something or to be scolded by her. Steve was introduced to more people than he could possibly remember the names of, and he had to keep putting down his knife or spoon to shake someone's hand.

He wasn't sure how they got anything accomplished, but in the end they carried out all the dishes and pots and bowls containing Darlene's cooking, and placed them on folding tables already set up along the sidewalk. The street was already filling up with card tables, folding chairs, and families from the surrounding houses. Everyone seemed to know Darlene and Sam, and word seemed to spread fast that they were currently playing host to Captain America and his metal-armed friend.

Once everyone was seated with a plate of food, some of the chaos subsided. Steve sat at a table with Bucky, Sam, Darlene, and the man who had asked about the apple pie, a friendly neighbor named Frank. Apparently, he had once sneaked into one of the shows Steve had performed in before he'd gone to Europe. Steve found that he didn't mind the teasing too much, because Bucky laughed so hard that tears ran down his cheeks when he remembered where Steve had originally gotten his title.

As soon as Sam finished the last bite of his dessert, the boy from earlier rushed up and dragged him off to play with the kids who were already clustered around a hoop in someone's driveway. Somehow or other, Bucky got roped into joining them, but Steve was in the middle of saying something to Frank, and was passed over. Darlene got up to see to the food, and stopped at another table to chat on her way back.

Finding himself alone with Frank, Steve took a moment to survey the scene. There was such a diverse variety of people sitting at these tables—people of every age and color, families, single men and women—but all seemed so relaxed and happy with each other. They could all enjoy this time together before returning to the stress and drudgery of everyday life.

Unexpectedly, as he looked over at Darlene chatting with a group of other middle-aged women including Ms. Huffman, Steve found himself missing his mother more acutely than ever. She would have loved a gathering like this, outside on a cool evening just before fall really settled in. She would have gotten along well with Darlene, he thought. She would have loved Sam.
“I can still remember when Darlene brought her kids to live here,” Frank said, his gaze turned in the same direction. “Her husband not even cold in his grave...three kids and no job to speak of.... I worried about her. 'Specially with that no-good son of hers.” He shook his head sadly.

Steve glanced over at Sam, who hoisted a little boy over his head so he could make a basket. Then Steve remembered Sam telling him about his older brother, who had fallen in with a bad crowd and gotten involved with drugs.

“Darlene don't talk about it much, “ Frank continued, “but I think he blamed the church for what happened to his ol' man. Had to go against everything Reverend Wilson taught.”

Steve turned his attention back to Frank. “What do you mean?” Sam had never mentioned anything like this.

“Ol' Reverend Wilson was a preacher, up in New York someplace,” Frank said. “A good one, from what I hear. Darlene always says Sam takes after him.” He sighed. “Story goes that he stepped in the middle of some gang fight or other—trying to stop 'em shooting each other, right? Well, one of those hooligans didn't like a preacher gettin' in their business, and—“ He mimed firing a pistol.

“I had no idea...” Steve murmured, gazing absently at Sam, who was laughing and high-fiving the children he was playing with. He realized now that in all the stories Sam had told him of his childhood, or all the mentions of the life he had now, Sam never talked about his father. “How old was Sam when it happened?”

“Oh—nine, ten, somethin' like that. His brother was a few years older, just startin' high school, as I recall. Seemed like he was always in trouble one way or another. Don't know how many times I saw the police payin' them a visit. Sometimes Sam would bring his sister round to my place, if Darlene had to go off to the station.” He shook his head, watching Sam as well. “Sometimes I'd look at that boy and wonder how he could still smile so bright with so many clouds in his sky.”

Steve glanced back at Darlene, who was laughing heartily as if she hadn't lost her husband to violent crime and her oldest son to drugs. “I think it's family,” he said softly. “A family that sticks together through the hard times can make it through anything.”

As the sun set and shadows lengthened across the street, some of the families with young children began to make their way back home. As if on cue, people started gathering up the food and collecting paper plates and cups to throw away. Steve got up to help take down the tables and chairs, then glanced around to look for Sam and Bucky.

Sam was surrounded by a crowd of teenage girls, all giggling and trying to get him to play some kind of game with them. Steve smiled to see how popular he was, all smiles and jokes and charm. It took him longer to locate Bucky, but eventually he found him sitting on the front steps of a house across the street with three children who looked Hispanic. One boy sat on either side of him, and a little girl with long black pigtails sat in his lap, playing with his metal hand. As Steve drew closer, he heard them chattering away in rapid Spanish. Bucky responded with an easy fluency, as if Spanish were his first language, and Steve could see the way the children lit up just to be able to talk to someone in their mother tongue.

Gradually, the crowd of neighbors drifted away to their various houses, calling goodbyes to each other and gathering up children and dishes of food as they went. Darlene was the last one to leave, directing Sam, Steve, and Bucky to carry the empty pots and dishes back into her house and start cleaning up. Hardly any of the food she had made was left; it seemed that her cooking was the most popular.
When Darlene grabbed her apron and started towards the pile of dishes, Sam put his hands on her shoulders and turned her towards the living room instead. “Don't worry, Ma, we got this covered. Just sit still for a minute.”

“Well...” she said reluctantly, shooting a glance over her shoulder at Bucky, who was already up to his elbows in soap suds at the sink. “Just don't chip any of my good dishes or I'll have your hide, young man!”

Steve chuckled as she left and nudged Bucky in the side, drying off a serving spoon and handing it to Sam to put away. “How's it feel, being called a young man by someone half your age?”

Bucky flicked water at him in response.

The three of them were well accustomed to working together in the kitchen, and soon everything was sparkling clean and put away. When they ventured into the living room to tell Darlene, they found her slumped in her armchair with her feet propped up, the crossword puzzle in the newspaper about to slip from her fingers. Her breathing was heavy with sleep.

Sam grabbed a blanket and tucked it carefully around her shoulders. He smiled down at her, then placed a tender kiss on her forehead.

They tiptoed out of the room, and when Sam had softly closed the door behind them, Steve said in a low voice. “Well, I guess we'd better get going then; it's pretty late.”

“Nonsense,” Sam said with a careless wave of his hand. “There's beds waiting for us upstairs already; my mom got them ready as soon as I told her we were coming.”

“She didn't have to do that,” Bucky protested, glancing fondly at the closed door to the living room.

“We'd hate to impose like that,” Steve agreed.

Sam smirked. “If she doesn't see you down here for eggs and bacon at eight tomorrow morning, I'll never hear the end of it. So really, you're doing me a favor, see?”

“Well...I would like to thank her in person, I guess,” Steve said. He glanced at Bucky, who nodded.

Half an hour later, Steve was about to drift off to sleep, lying in the room that had probably belonged to Sam and his brother in earlier days. A whisper from the other bed broke the silence. “Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“She reminds me of your mom.”

Steve smiled into the darkness. “Me too.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

He said to her, “Woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

- John 19:26-27
This simple chapter is the confluence of two things: a request that tickled my fancy in exactly the right way, and a desire to actually include an excerpt of White Fang, which I mentioned in Make Me Whole but never actually got to show them reading it. So here, enjoy some pointless fluff! I'm including both Steve's POV and Winter's in this chapter.

This takes place during Make Me Whole chapter 16, “Age of Ultron.”

Requested by NewMoonFlicker on FFNet

Can you feel the void between us?
Nothing there but light, yet it seems like the weight of the world
Keeping us here in the dark

... 

I can sense your apprehension
Fear for naught for I'm here and I'm made of your love
Found in the quick of things

And we can walk the bridge between us...

- “Jealous Gods” by Poets of the Fall

Steve glanced up from the book propped on his knees when the door creaked open. He straightened a little, just enough to see Winter hesitating in the doorway. Wrapped around his shoulders like a cloak was the tasseled brown blanket that usually hung over the back of the largest sofa in the living room.
It had been months since he'd been aware of any danger of relapse, but after a moment Steve sat up fully, grabbing his bookmark. “Distraction?” he asked.

But Winter shook his head, stepping into the room. “Don't get up,” he said, closing the door behind him. “I just...can I just...sit with you for a while?”

Of course.” Steve pulled down the covers on the other side of the bed. Even though he'd slept in a different room when they'd first come to this cabin, Sam had put him in the master bedroom after the battle with Crossbones, so he could make it to the bathroom and the kitchen in fewer steps. He hadn't bothered to change rooms since then, so there was plenty of space for two in his big bed.

As Winter sat down on the other side of the bed and tucked his legs under the covers, Steve propped the extra pillows against the headboard next to him. But instead of leaning back, Winter rested his head against Steve's shoulder. “I don't want to be a bother,” he mumbled. “But when I think about tomorrow night...I can't sleep.”

Steve wrapped his arm around Winter's shoulders and pulled him right up against his side. “You're never a bother to me, Winter.”

He hesitated, imagining what the next night would be like for Winter. The cabin would be empty and silent; he and Sam would be on their way back to the search for Loki's staff. Winter would fix a lonely dinner for one, tidy things up, then lie down in an empty bed in an empty house. There would be no one to talk to, no one he could approach like this for simple companionship. Would he lie awake for hours, staring at the ceiling? Would he get up and try to occupy himself with a book or aimlessly turn on the TV, just to have some sound in the background?

But there was nothing he could say to change that. He couldn't stay, he couldn't bring Winter with him. There was no way to prevent this separation. All he could do was hold him tight for now, and press his cheek against the top of Winter's head so he could breathe in the scent of his hair.

“What're you reading?” Winter murmured.

Steve flattened the book open in his lap. “I loved this book when I was a kid. I made my mom and my best friend read it to me over and over again. Found it in the bookcase here, thought I'd flip through it again.”

Winter pulled Steve's hand from his shoulder and held it in his lap, lacing their fingers together. “Read it to me.”

“Life, as he had known it, not only had had no place in it for much that he now did; but all the currents had gone counter to those to which he now abandoned himself. In short, when all things were considered, he had to achieve an orientation far vaster than the one he had achieved at the time he came voluntarily in from the Wild and accepted Gray Beaver as his lord. At that time he was a mere puppy, soft from the making, without form, ready for the thumb of circumstance to begin its work upon him. But now it was different. The thumb of circumstance had done its work only too well. By it he had been formed and hardened into the Fighting Wolf, fierce and implacable, unloving and unlovable. To accomplish the change was like a reflux of being, and this when the plasticity of youth was no longer his; when the fiber of him had become tough and knotty; when the warp and the woof of him had made of him an adamantine texture, harsh and unyielding; when the face of his spirit had become iron and all his instincts and axioms had crystallized into set rules, cautions, dislikes, and desires.”

The familiar phrases flowed easily from his lips. As a boy, he had read his copy of the book so many times that the front cover fell off completely. And he remembered the last time he'd been really sick.
before the serum, when his high fever had left him unable to do much besides lie in bed and feel miserable. Bucky's voice had led him through a frozen wasteland populated by wolves and sled dogs, the bitter cold a stark contrast to the fire burning beneath his skin.

Was it strange that reading it now brought a warm glow in his chest?

"Like had been replaced by love. And love was the plummet dropped down into the deeps of him where like had never gone. And responsive, out of his deeps had come the new thing—love. That which was given unto him did he return. This was a god indeed, a love-god, a warm and radiant god, in whose light White Fang's nature expanded as a flower expands under the sun."

Steve paused, listening to Winter's deep breathing. He'd already fallen asleep, his fingers slipping from Steve's hand.

Tucking the bookmark between the pages to mark his place, Steve set *White Fang* on the bedside table and switched off the lamp. Gently, he extricated his hand from Winter's loose grip, adjusted the pillows, and shifted Winter's slumped body to lie flat on the bed.

Winter's head turned towards him, but in the darkness, he couldn't tell if Winter had woken up or if he was just shifting in his sleep. Steve whispered, “Shhh...” and sank down onto the pillows next to him. His left arm was pinned under Winter's body from moving him, so he left it there and draped his right arm over him as well, holding the blankets snugly in place.

Winter nudged a little closer, the smooth surface of the mask pressing against his chest. He let out a long, slow sigh as they both slid under the blanketing folds of sleep.

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Winter lay in bed, staring into the empty darkness. He was tired—exhausted, really. As if by some unspoken agreement, they'd all gotten up early this morning to spend as much time together as possible. He ought to get some sleep, he knew. Steve and Sam were leaving early the next morning to catch their flight back to New York, and the last thing he wanted to do was oversleep.

But no matter how still and quiet Winter lay, he couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like tomorrow. It was hard enough to say goodbye the first time, but now he knew exactly how lonely and quiet it would be when the other two left. No one would talk to him, except maybe a text or two that would always leave him wanting more. He would crawl into bed this time tomorrow night, and lie there for hours, just listening to the empty silence. He wouldn't have anything else.

Throwing off the covers, Winter got to his feet and restlessly padded out to the living room. The others had gone to bed a while ago, but at least he didn't have to stare at the ceiling all night.

Halfway across the room, Winter glanced over and saw a strip of light under the door of the master bedroom. Steve was still awake. Or maybe he'd fallen asleep with a light on.

More for comfort than for warmth, Winter grabbed the blanket from the back of the couch and draped it over his shoulders as he walked up to Steve's door. He hesitated for a moment, thinking of all the other times he'd gone in search of Steve when he couldn't sleep. At one point, he'd been afraid that Steve and Sam would be annoyed and impatient to be woken up at all hours. Then there was a time when he felt reluctant to impose on their kindness any more than he absolutely had to. He'd tried to balance not wanting to bother them, and not wanting to let them down by succumbing to his self-
destructive habits.

Now? He just wanted to be close to Steve.

When he knocked softly on the door, it swung open with a squeak. Steve sat propped up in bed, a book resting on his raised knees. He straightened a little when he saw Winter, hands poised to close the book. “Distraction?” he asked calmly.

It seemed Steve was thinking of all those nights his sleep had been interrupted too.

“Don't get up,” Winter said quickly, stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. “I just...can I just...sit with you for a while?”

“Of course.” Steve immediately pulled back the covers on the other side of the bed and fluffed up the pillows.

Winter slid under the covers, draping his blanket over his knees. He'd been expecting to sit on the floor by Steve's bed and watch him sleep, as he'd done many times before. But now that he was right next to Steve, he was more than happy to take advantage of his warm, reassuring presence while he still could. He rested his head wearily against Steve's shoulder. “I don't want to be a bother...but when I think about tomorrow night...I can't sleep.”

It was like Steve could hear his request before he even knew what he wanted himself. Steve wrapped his arm around Winter's shoulders and pulled him close, so their sides were pressed together. “You're never a bother to me, Winter.”

This is all I've ever wanted. Don't leave me. He would never say these words out loud, of course. He knew perfectly well why Steve had to leave, and in the long run he definitely wanted Steve to go fight Hydra. It was selfish to wish that they could just stay here always, that Steve's focus would always be directed primarily at Winter. But he didn't know how to live without Steve. He'd never tried it until now, and he didn't like it.

If only there was a way to keep Steve from leaving after he told him the truth about himself. Since there wasn't, he would just have to treasure memories like this one in the long, empty years ahead of him.

“What're you reading?” he mumbled, more to distract himself from his morose thoughts than anything else.

Steve inched the book a little closer, as if to show him the title. “I loved this book when I was a kid,” he said, smoothing down the page fondly. “I made my mom and my best friend read it to me over and over again. Found it in the bookcase here, thought I'd flip through it again.”

Winter leaned deeper into Steve's side and pulled Steve's free hand into his own. “Read it to me.”

Steve didn't start the book over or bother explaining what was going on. He just picked up where he'd been reading, as if he understood that what Winter really wanted was just to listen to the soothing rise and fall of his voice.

“As the days went by, the evolution of like into love was accelerated. White Fang himself began to grow aware of it, though in his consciousness he knew not what love was. It manifested itself to him as a void in his being—a hungry, aching, yearning void that clamored to be filled. It was a pain and an unrest; and it received easement only by the touch of the new god's presence. At such times love was a joy to him, a wild, keen-thrilling satisfaction. But when away from his god, the pain and the unrest returned; the void in him sprang up and pressed against him with its emptiness, and the
hunger gnawed and gnawed unceasingly."

As he listened and started to piece together what was happening in this story of a vicious wolf tamed by kindness, Winter began to remember it. Bucky had read this story many times, falling in love with the excitement and redemption just as much as Steve had. He pulled Steve's arm tighter around himself, resting his head against Steve's chest where he could feel the vibrations of his voice.

"I've never understood how Beauty Smith could be so cruel," Steve said, frowning up at the ceiling. "How could he treat White Fang like that? Even if he didn't like White Fang, you just can't treat animals like that."

Bucky propped his bare feet up on the bed, handing Steve a clean handkerchief. "It says in the book that he couldn't help it. He wasn't born with a kind nature, and none of his experiences taught him to be kind or intelligent."

Steve shook his head, but he had to cough and blow his nose before he could reply. "He could help it. Other people weren't responsible for the choices he made. He could have taken the horrible situation he was given, and decided to make something better of his life."

Bucky looked at his skinny friend shrewdly. "Sounds like someone I know."

Steve grinned. "I guess if my name was Beauty it'd fit me as well as him."

Bucky swatted at him with the closed book. "Shut up, you're gorgeous."

Winter emerged from the warm blanket of sleep when he felt Steve gently shifting him to the side. He kept his eyes closed, trying not to miss the comfort of Steve's warmth pressed against his side. Steve needed to get a good night's sleep too, not just sit there and act as Winter's pillow for hours on end.

But after Steve pulled the pillow into place and gently laid Winter flat on his back, he didn't pull away and roll over onto his side of the bed. He tucked the blanket snugly around Winter, then settled down with a sigh, draping an arm over Winter.

A portion of the book Steve had been reading returned to him, appearing in his mind even after all these years. He remembered a time when he could almost have recited that chapter from memory.

He was awkward from self-consciousness, but as he drew near, his eyes took on a strange expression. Something, an incommunicable vastness of feeling, rose up into his eyes as a light and shone forth.... What of his joy, the great love in him, ever surging and struggling to express itself, succeeded in finding a new mode of expression. He suddenly thrust his head forward and nudged his way in between the master's arm and body. And here, confined, hidden from view all except his ears, no longer growling, he continued to nudge and snuggle.

Winter rolled onto his side to face Steve, to draw closer to him. He pressed his face into the fabric of Steve's shirt, nestling deeper into the encircling protection of Steve's arms.

It was one thing for Steve to teach him different behavior, or to train him not to react to things the way Hydra had forced him to. But this—this desire to simply be near to him...that was due to something else entirely, wasn't it? Just as he had decided not to run away in the beginning because he knew Steve's offer was his best chance for food and shelter, now he needed Steve for something much more vital. He hadn't even realized how much he needed it until Steve was gone.

He might never say it out loud, but everything within him was pleading, Don't go.... I don't want to be alone.... He pressed his face more and more insistently against Steve's chest. The mask was the
only thing between them, the only thing keeping Winter from his side. Fear had driven a wedge between them, turning even moments of tranquility like this into a torment.

He wanted to take off the mask. Didn't he? He didn't want anything to come between them...but he was still so afraid. Afraid of Steve's reaction, afraid of the consequences, afraid of having to lay aside the identity of Winter that had become such a comfort. Even after all this time—after everything Steve had taught him—he couldn't simply trust him enough to tell the truth. He was still hiding, still running.

He was such a coward. Surely, somewhere deep down inside, Steve despised him.

“Shhh....” Steve's fingers gently combed through his hair, stroking his scalp and the back of his neck, dancing over the fastenings of the mask like it wasn't even there. Instead of recoiling, Steve pulled Winter closer, pressing his lips to Winter's forehead and tucking Winter's head under his chin.

Like a magic spell, sleep descended on him again. It was okay.... It was all okay.... For now, he didn't have to worry about any of that. For now, Steve was here, and he was willing to give him this time. For now, it was enough. He had every chance of gaining the truth on his own terms. Winter knew, even as lightly as he slept, that Steve could easily get the best of him while he lay vulnerable. In this moment, he wasn't even sure that he would resist.

But Steve didn't.

*I'll tell you the truth, Steve. You've earned that. You deserve to know more than I deserve to keep pretending I never knew you. Even when you leave me behind for good, you've earned the right to all my secrets.*

*Just...not yet? Not quite yet.*

*Please don't hate me for lying so I can keep you a little longer.*

~*~*~*~*~*~

*If you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet.*

*Proverbs 3:24*
This was one of those landmark scenes I had to write from Winter's perspective while working on *Make Me Whole*, to figure out what he would do in the scenes from Steve's POV. One thing that surprised me while writing Winter during this part of the story was how easy it is in the end for Winter to trust Steve and Sam. I mean, it takes him a while to get to that point—we've already seen how skittish he is in the beginning, and how nervous he gets if they do much as look in his direction—but after witnessing the love and care they show him while helping him through withdrawal, there's just no way to believe they mean him harm anymore. He still doesn't really understand why they do the things they do, and still finds it incomprehensible that he might be worth this amount of trouble, but he does trust that they mean well and aren't trying to trick him. And even that is a huge step for someone with Winter's background.

This chapter takes place in *Make Me Whole* chapter 4, “Step into the Light.”

*Here I am where no one found the way in*
*Brick and stone, this place in me*
*The cold has taught to close my heart or suffer*
*But lost at home is strange to me*
*And I feel so alone*
*And I need someone*
*Are you out there?*
*If you hear me, listen close*
*I'm sorry*
*I never meant to lock you out*

- “Love Me Now” by Nine Lashes

Winter was more than a little shocked when he realized that he actually trusted Steve and Sam now. The bitter voice in the back of his head told him he was a naive fool for letting down his guard, but he couldn't help it. He believed they honestly wanted to help him. Whether they *could* help him was another matter, but he knew now that they would never try to hurt him.

The voice kept saying they were lulling him into a false sense of security before they attacked when he least expected it, but he didn't believe that anymore. If that was their goal, they wouldn't have to do some of the things they did. All they really needed to do was nurse him back to health and make sure he was well-fed and not dependent on Hydra drugs anymore. Steve didn't have to sit reading to him for hours and hours, just so he wouldn't get bored. Sam didn't have to cook such a delicious
variety of dishes for him. They went so far above and beyond the necessary minimum that Winter couldn't help believing them.

It was...nice...more than nice.... He didn't know the right word, but he liked being able to just relax and let them help him.

So Winter agreed easily when Steve suggested a shower. He was actually looking forward to it a little. He remembered the bath he'd taken his first night here in the cabin, and how warm and comforting the water had been. He could barely remember how it felt to be clean.

The bathroom door locked with a satisfying click, but it was comforting to know that Steve sat just on the other side. He peeled off his sweat-grimed clothes, stepped into the shower, and turned on the water.

FREEZING BURNING PAIN FEAR CAN'T BREATHE CAN'T SEE HANDS REACHING OUT GET AWAY CAN'T FIGHT CAN'T MOVE GETTING DARK PLEASE NO STOP WHY

Look at him, he's falling to pieces.

His memories are returning. We'll need to put him in cryo before this gets any worse.

“No,” he whimpered, “please don't...not again....” Cryo meant cold. It meant powerless. It meant waking to shivering, bone-numbing cold. And then pain, through every nerve in his body, till he wanted to die.

“Winter....” The voice seemed to come from a great distance, garbled and muffled in his ringing ears.

Steve. Somewhere far, far away was a place where he would be safe, if he could just get there...get to Steve....

What's that, Soldier? Hope? The voice came howling to the forefront of his mind, crowding out the memories of an easier time. Do you really think you can escape? All he could see was a livid face hovering before his eyes, mocking him, scorning him, hating him. He couldn't decide if it was Pierce, or Zola, or his own face leering back at him. Haven't I taught you better than that? No matter where you run or how hard you try to hide, you will always come back. You have nowhere else to go.

“I don't want to,” he gasped, but of course the voice didn't listen.

Walls of ice hemmed him in on all sides. He was trapped. No way out. They had him, and they would never let him go. He would never escape....

It was faint and almost impossible to hear past the roar of fury in his ears, but a familiar voice murmured, “Winter...please let me help.”

Winter. Winter. Yes, that was his name. He clung to that name, held on despite the buffeting waves on all sides. Winter was the name Steve had given him. Steve, who he trusted despite himself. Steve, who always seemed to know what to do, who always tried to give him the best care. He was so strong. He could help.

Keep your head down, scum. No one will help you. You're not worth the time. You should be grateful we're letting you live after proving how big of a disappointment you are. Go back to the ice where you belong. Where you won't get in the way.
There was a door in front of him, and he could see the shadows of feet on the other side. Was it his friend, or his enemy? He couldn't remember. It was all getting confused....

No. No, that was Steve. He'd asked if he could help. Winter put a hand on the doorknob, then remembered just in time that he'd taken off his mask. Grabbing the hand towel, pressing it over his face, and unlocking the door were all he could do before his whole body began trembling so hard he could barely stay upright. “Please....”

A wave of cold air washed over his skin as the door opened and Steve stepped in. Well, now he'd done it. Steve could see every inch of him. There was nowhere to hide. He could only crouch at Steve's feet and wait for his hatred, his scorn, his realization that this was far more than he'd bargained for, and he was ready to give up.

Instead, Steve just knelt by his side and breathed, “Oh, Winter....”

Useless worthless failure. Winter, that's right, that's you—the Winter Soldier. Thought you could run away from what you are? Thought you could pretend to be normal? Just look at you—you can't even take a shower on your own. That's not normal. All you're good for is to be thrown back under the ice. That's right—the ice, the cold, remember that? It's what you're made for, so stay there until we have some use for you.

The voice wouldn't leave him alone. It kept overpowering the gentle rub of towels, drying off his wet skin. It was hard to keep track of which voice was real—the one telling him to give up and succumb to the ice, or the one telling him to breathe? So finally, he mumbled, “Where am I?”

“In a cabin in West Virginia.” Steve's calm voice broke through the other voice, warm and immediate and real. “You're here with me and Sam, remember?”

Steve...and Sam...in a cabin...yes, that was right. He was with them...but then it was cold. He buried his face in the towel, pressing the cloth against his eyes till vibrant colors swirled behind his eyelids. “You're not going to put me in the ice again, are you?”

The shock in Steve's voice reassured him almost more than the words. “What? No, of course I'm not.”

Relief washed through him. Of course Steve wouldn't do that to him. Of course. It was unthinkable. He was so different from Hydra....

Hydra. A shudder ran through him as he thought of what they would do if they found him. The pain and the cold would never stop. They would find a way to make him do what they wanted, without ever escaping that agony. “Don't let them do it either. Please?”

The voice in the back of his mind started cackling gleefully, but then Steve silenced it by saying, “Winter, look at me.”

Winter obediently met Steve's gaze, and found he couldn't look away. Steve's eyes, always so soft and kind when they looked at him, now carried an almost painful determination. He wrapped a towel around Winter's shoulders and held it there, the weight of his hands grounding Winter in the present. “I promise you one thing,” he said slowly. “If they want to put you in the ice again, they'll have to kill me first, because I will die before I let them take you.”

The unwavering conviction in his words left Winter breathless. He'd never asked anyone to promise something like this. He'd never thought anyone would. But Steve looked at him—him—and made such a promise willingly, just because he wanted to. And what was more, Winter knew now that
Steve meant every word.

What was he supposed to do with that? How could he even respond? He racked his brains for something to say that didn't just consist of, Oh. Okay.

He thought about what Steve had said. He thought about what would happen if his worst fear came true, and Hydra found him again. He thought about Steve fighting them back, bleeding, dying....

“Don't die.” The words were out of his mouth before he could even think about them.

“What?”

“You said you would die. Well...don't.”

Ugh, where did that come from? 'Don't die.' So stupid.

But Steve just smiled and sat back on his heels. “Yes, sir.”

Winter tried to search back through his memories and figure out what Steve's expression meant. He smiled at him with a bit of sadness, and...fondness? Respect? The words were strange, particularly when directed at him, but they seemed to fit the strange way he was looking at Winter. Like he mattered. Like he was worth something, even shivering naked on a bathroom floor clutching a towel to his face.

“You look cold,” Steve said, as if he didn't realize what a precious gift he'd just given Winter. “Why don't you finish your shower? It'll be nice to be clean and dry again.”

Winter glanced uneasily at the water still spraying out of the shower head. He didn't care how dirty he was, he couldn't go back under that icy waterfall.

“Don't worry,” Steve said, as if he could read Winter's mind. “It's not cold anymore. Here, give me your hand and I'll show you.”

Winter stared at Steve's hand, open and inviting. He trusted Steve. He did. Steve would never hurt him. Steve would never knowingly let something bad happen to him. He would never trick him. He would never lie. Winter knew this now.

So, even though it went against every instinct, Winter reached out and put his hand in Steve's. Slowly and with infinite care, Steve turned Winter's hand palm-up and guided it toward the water.

When his fingers first touched the water, Winter's hand jerked back—less out of fear and more out of surprise when he felt how warm it was—but Steve held his hand in place. Winter was glad he did. He wanted to do this; he just needed Steve's strength to take the first step.

Steve supported his hand as he held it in the stream of water. It really wasn't so bad anymore. Pleasantly warm water pattered against his closed fist, coaxing his fingers to uncurl. As long as Steve was there, he knew he would be safe. As long as Steve told him it was okay, he could brave anything.

Steve let his hand fall away so Winter's hand was alone...and it was okay. The fear didn't smack him in the face again. The cruel voice was silent for once. He was strong enough to do this on his own, but only because Steve had shown him how.

“You see?” Steve said. “You just have to wait for the water to warm up before you get in. Nothing to worry about.”
No...nothing to worry about at all.

“Now, do you want to go ahead and take your shower, or should we turn it off and wait for later?”

Winter took a deep breath, expecting it to catch painfully in his chest at the thought of starting his shower over again. But it didn't. He was fine. Miraculously, he felt completely calm again. “Now is okay.”

“All right.” Steve got to his feet, letting one hand linger for a moment on the towel wrapped around Winter's shoulders before crossing to the door. “Let me know if you need anything else.”

It was only as Steve was leaving that Winter realized what he should say. It was something that had always been forced from him, cruelly demanded of him...but some small part of him remembered what it used to mean. And it was definitely something he wanted to say to Steve after everything he'd done.

“Thank you.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Though I walk in the midst of trouble,  
you preserve my life;  
you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies;  
and your right hand delivers me.

- Psalm 138:7
Chapter Notes

Were any of you curious what Steve had written in the letter to Bucky that he burned up on the anniversary of Bucky's "death"? I was, so I decided to find out. But I couldn't just leave it here on its own, so I went ahead and had Bucky write a reply.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 9, "Echoes of the Past."

The first words that come out
And I can see this song will be about you
I can't believe that I can breathe without you
But all I need to do is carry on
The next line I write down
And there's a tear that falls between the pages
I know that pain's supposed to heal in stages
But it depends which one I'm standing on

I write lines down, then rip them up
Describing love can't be this tough

- "Song on Fire" by Nickelback

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

February 27, 2015

Dear Bucky,

Sometimes I still can't believe you're gone. It feels more like you're just away on a long trip, and I'm waiting for you to come back—like when you went to Wisconsin for training. I have to keep reminding myself that you're not coming back. That you never will come back.

Did you know I'd planned out what I was going to say to you on my deathbed? I started thinking about it after Mom. I realized that if someone as strong as her could be so easily defeated by a disease, I needed to be ready when the time came for me. I didn't get to say goodbye to her in the end, so I knew I'd have to give you a chance to say goodbye to me. I think it would hurt a little less, somehow.

Well, then you signed up for the army, and I realized I might not get my chance for a deathbed speech after all. So I wrote it all down in a letter to send to you when the time came. I took it with me when I went to Europe, because I knew that even though I probably wouldn't die of disease anymore, there were a lot of things that could happen to me.
I don't know what happened to that letter. I kept it, just in case, but I didn't really think about it again. We were together. It felt like we were invincible.

It was only after I lost you that I realized I have no idea how to go on living without you. I never thought I'd have to.

You really need to be here, Buck. I'm such a mess without you. I need you to tell me I'm being an idiot. I need you to make some kind of joke and then convince me I can survive on my own.

...You'd probably say right about now that I'm not alone just because you're not here. And you know what? You're right. I've made two amazing friends, Bucky. I know you'd like them if you ever got to meet them.

Sam is wonderful. He dropped his entire life at a moment's notice just to help me—first to destroy S.H.I.E.L.D., then to come with me on this strange mission even though no one had any idea how long it would take. He always seems to know exactly what kind of support I need most, and he has an inexhaustible supply of generosity and compassion. I think it's impossible to dislike him.

And Winter.... How do I describe Winter? He's more profoundly damaged than anyone else I've ever seen, yet he still manages to hold on to who he is. It's been a long, hard road just to get him to his current semi-functional state, but he's never given up. He fights back so hard against everything that's been done to him, and he's made it so far. It's breathtaking to watch the little glimmers of potential I saw in the beginning unfold into the person he's starting to become.

This is going to sound weird, but...sometimes he reminds me of you. The way he moves sometimes, a word he'll use.... Don't worry, no one could ever replace you, but...well, I'm not sure I believe in ghosts, but sometimes I think he's channeling yours.

Sorry, Bucky, I'm trying to stay positive, but sometimes it just gets really hard without you. I wish I could say these things and know you were listening. I wish you could've been here all along.

You were the best friend I ever had, Bucky. Thank you for the time we shared...and I'm sorry that I can't seem to let you go.

Love,

Steve

February 27, 2016

Dear Steve,

Sometimes I still can't believe we're together again. It amazes me every time I think about how you found me. Even before you had any idea who I was, before you had any reason to hope I'd ever be anything but Hydra's tool, you wanted me. You saw something in me that even I didn't know was there. I was trying to kill you, and you risked your life to save me.

Do you know how amazing you are?
I keep thinking back to a year ago, before you knew who I was. The things you said about me that day have stuck with me ever since. Now that I can remember everything clearly, I find it hard to believe that you'd ever think so highly of me. If you weren't the worst liar I've ever seen, I might think you were pulling my leg.

I've also thought a lot over the past year about what you said about me dying. That it was your fault. That you were the one who killed me. It doesn't matter that I'm not actually dead—even if I had died, it was never your fault. Falling from the train wasn't your fault. Losing my arm wasn't your fault. Hydra wasn't your fault. Not even close.

Stop carrying the burden of everything that's ever happened to me. Even if you did share some small fraction of the responsibility for recruiting me back in the war, I think you've more than made up for it by now.

Actually, I think I should be the one apologizing—not for what Hydra did through me, but for what I did to you even after I remembered who I was. I could have told you a million times before I did. I could have said I remembered you, even though I didn't know many details. I was scared, so I kept quiet till the lie grew so big I didn't know how to tell the truth anymore. But because I didn't tell you, I let you continue to grieve. Even when I saw how much it hurt you to think that I was dead, I still didn't say anything.

Steve, I'm sorry. I left you alone for so long, even when I was right there. I'm so sorry.

I know I don't deserve your forgiveness. I don't deserve anything from you, but you've already given me everything. Last year, you said you'd killed me, but that couldn't be further from the truth. You're the reason I'm alive. So for however long we have, I don't ever want to be parted from you again.

I'm with you, pal. No matter what.

Love,

Bucky

~*~*~*~*~*~

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete.

- 2 John 12
Ugh, this is such a difficult part of the story to come back to T_T I took special care while writing this part of Make Me Whole to also write these scenes from Winter's POV, because I needed to make sure Winter was acting believably and realistically, and I needed to know his thoughts and reasonings before I could write his words and actions, let alone Steve's reactions to them. My understanding of exactly why Winter started cutting shifted and matured over time, so the first draft of this chapter was actually quite different (in terms of Winter's thoughts, at least). In a way, it was actually kind of the opposite—originally, I had Winter start cutting because he was feeling too much. It was only after working through his whole journey that I realized how much more likely it would be that he would start because he wasn't feeling enough.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 5, “Lines of Red.”

\[ \text{I can't feel my senses} \\
\text{I just feel the cold} \\
\text{All colors seem to fade away} \\
\text{I can't reach my soul} \\
\text{I would stop running} \\
\text{If I knew there was a chance} \]

... \[\text{You say that I am frozen} \\
\text{But what can I do?} \]

- “Frozen” by Within Temptation

Once he got his strength back and wasn't confined to bed anymore, Winter spent most of his time trying to understand his life with Steve and Sam. Everything was new and strange, but he appreciated their attempts to acclimate him to this new lifestyle. It was so peculiar—their days consisted of little beyond cooking, cleaning, and enjoying nature or a book. There were no sudden missions, no intensive training, no regimented torture. Not that he really expected there to be any of those things, but he didn't know what to expect.
He discovered that he wanted to please them—partially because it seemed like a way to repay everything they did for him, but also...he liked it when they smiled at him. So when they taught him how to make his bed, or wash the dishes, or do his laundry, he worked hard to do it properly. He craved their smiles, their praises, their looks of approval.

But these tasks they set him weren't particularly hard. He soon mastered the art of washing plates without chipping them, and making sure not to put too much fabric softener in the washing machine. But once they settled into a daily routine, Steve and Sam didn't compliment him so much anymore. Doing his job well wasn't a cause for praise, it was an expectation.

He felt terrible even admitting it to himself, but he was almost...disappointed. Was this normal life? Was this the alternative to the pain and fear of life with Hydra? When he'd taken up Steve's offer to run away, he'd liked the way freedom sounded. But now, the gap left behind when the torture and murder of his previous life were taken away just left him feeling empty. His instincts and reactions to the world as he knew it now felt senseless, without a place in this odd new life.

Winter watched the others, smiling their way through interminable days spent doing the strange things that normal people apparently did. At first, these activities held Winter's attention, because they were so different from anything he could remember doing. But as he grew accustomed to this life, he started paying more attention to Steve and Sam.

He often felt like he was watching them through the scope of a rifle, reading their lips but not fully grasping the meaning behind what they were saying. Their conversations were so easy, the words falling from their mouths as smoothly as rain falling from the sky. Sam would say something that didn't make sense, Steve would laugh in response, and Winter would sit there wondering why. He watched the way they looked at each other, as if even their eyes could speak words. Then they would look at him, and their smiles would become fixed. The words spilling from their eyes smacked into the invisible wall that hemmed Winter into his world of solitude.

It seemed he would always be alone.

Somehow...he'd thought it would be different, once he got away from his masters and fought through the torment of withdrawal. He had to keep reminding himself that this was better than his old life with Hydra. It was better, wasn't it? Instead of hurting him and forcing him to do what they wanted, these men asked and explained. They waited for him to decide what he wanted to do.

What a horrible person he was. He wasn't even content to get more than he deserved. The empty ache inside him yawned wider and wider with every passing day.

The first break in this fog of numbness resulted from a simple accident. Though no one could see his face because of the mask, Winter still shaved every so often, when the itchy stubble started to annoy him. He was seventy years out of practice, since Hydra had always seen to his hygiene themselves, but his hands were slowly remembering what to do.

After his shower one morning, Winter was mechanically going through the motions of shaving when a tiny slice of pain broke through the haze of his thoughts. He froze, staring at his mostly-shaved face in the mirror, and watched a thin red line appear on his right cheek. Blood oozed out of the narrow wound, collecting in a small bead at the lower end of the cut.


Suddenly, the whole world crashed into sharp, immediate focus. He drew in a breath of the warm, steamy air and straightened up. The fog in his mind blew away at once, and the void was filled. For the first time in what felt like an eternity, he felt present in his own body. He felt real. Every
sensation connected to that small cut tethered him to the world around him.

Winter slowly let out his breath as he finally lowered his eyes from the drop of blood congealing on his cheek. The razor he held in his hand was broken, he realized. One of the little blades hung loose in one corner, creating a dangerous spike of bent metal. He set it down on one side of the sink, where it would be out of the way, then carefully dabbed at the cut with a square of toilet paper. Once he was sure the cut had stopped bleeding and wouldn't make a mess on the inside of his mask, he slowly continued getting dressed and prepared for the day.

The cut on his cheek continued to sting a little throughout the morning, but Winter didn't mind. Everything seemed fresh and new. It was like he'd been sleepwalking all this time, and only now had he woken up.

As he helped clean up the kitchen after breakfast, Steve smiled at him. “You seem more cheerful this morning,” he said.

Winter looked at him in surprise. “Do I?”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed from the other side, dumping a stack of plates into the sink. “More pep in your step.”

Winter wasn't sure what that meant, but his heart lifted. Maybe things were finally starting to look up. But by the afternoon, Winter felt the familiar pit open up in his stomach again. With every minute, he seemed to soar farther and farther away from the others. Once again, they were talking, but it was like listening to the static between stations on the radio. They were going through the motions of their daily life, and his movements felt as sluggish as if they were all underwater.

Where did the sharpness of reality go? Why did he feel like he was wandering through a dream again?

Winter found himself standing in his bathroom, with no memory of stepping inside and locking the door behind him. Slowly, he pulled off his mask and looked at his reflection in the mirror over the sink. He stared and stared, but the longer he looked, the less familiar it seemed. Did that face really belong to him?

Someone in a dream lifted his right hand to brush fingers across his nose, his mouth, his chin. He watched from miles away as a finger ran along the cut on his cheek, which was already beginning to fade. Such a cut wouldn't endanger anyone, but it was even less dangerous for that man in the mirror. His body was enhanced to heal even faster than normal. It was the perfect receptacle for all the abuses Hydra had poured into it, because it would leave no marks. It could be beaten, burned, bruised—but it would never be broken.

So what are you waiting for? said a voice in the back of his head.

Winter picked up the broken razor from where it lay on the side of the sink. With his metal hand, he tugged the broken blade free.

He looked at his hands with a distant sort of curiosity. He was used to other people touching his body and molding it to their own purposes. When they hurt him, he could only guess at how and when the pain would come. He had no control over it. What would it feel like to know exactly when it would hurt? To be able to decide for himself what would be done to him?

He sliced the blade across the soft skin of his right wrist. The cut was quick and shallow, so there wasn't much blood, but the effect was instantaneous: Everything locked into sharp, immediate focus,
grounding him once again in reality. He knew the man in the mirror again. Every throb of his heart reminded him that he was there, that this was something more than a hazy dream.

Winter stared at his blood as it trickled from the wound and began to clot. It was strange. Pain, the thing he'd tried to run from all his life and failed, was now his only hope. But in a way, it made sense. He knew pain. He understood it intimately. It was like an old friend. No...it was him. His identity was made of pain.

So as the days passed, Winter fell into a private routine of his own, a counterpoint to the daily life he shared with the others. Every time he started to feel like he was fading back into that hazy unreality, he would cut his arm again. He soon threw the razor out, realizing it was much easier to use his knives. His metal hand wasn't quite as good as the right in fine motor skills, but it was very accustomed to the leather-wrapped handles of his knives.

The frustrating thing was that the little, shallow cuts he made at first soon stopped working. He would nick his skin, but even when it drew blood, it didn't feel real. He had to cut deeper, wider, shocking his senses to life with the bite of the knife. Sometimes the cuts wouldn't stop bleeding. Sometimes he'd have to wait a long time before the blood congealed, and sometimes they reopened when something rubbed against his arm. But he didn't care; more pain just meant staving off something worse.

Everything was going fine until the others found out. He hadn't paraded what he was doing, but hadn't exactly hidden it either; it was just something private. They didn't need to know about it because he could deal with it himself. And he was really starting to enjoy this newfound ability to even have privacy.

Winter could tell something was wrong as soon as he joined them at the table that day. Steve and Sam kept glancing at each other as they ate, and there was no casual conversation. Winter was glad for an excuse to leave the stifling atmosphere, so he started gathering up the plates as soon as Steve put his fork down.

But Steve said, “Wait. There's something we need to talk about.”

He shared another grave look with Sam, and Winter's heart thudded into his throat. Talk? What did they need to talk about? What if they...had they found out who he was? Were they going to send him away?

Okay, you're all better now, nice knowing you....

Have you been cutting yourself?”

Shock, relief, and fear hit him in such quick succession that he staggered back until he could feel the edge of the sink behind him. They knew. He clutched his arm, watching their expressions, and he realized...they knew, and they didn't like it. They wore the same looks of concern and careful gentleness they had when trying to get him to eat, or calm down, or when they'd asked him to take his mask off.

“We just want to help,” Steve said. “Won't you talk to us? Help us understand.”

Understand? What could they possibly hope to understand? Steve Rogers—the perfect man, perfect soldier, perfect friend. And Sam, so loyal and friendly and happy. What did either of them know about someone like him? They were nothing like him. They were so accepting of him that he'd almost started to think he was normal, but now they reminded him that he was nothing but a freak.

“If we know what makes you feel like you need to do this,” Sam said, “maybe we can help you stop.”
Stop? Didn't they realize that he needed this? Didn't they know how unbearable it was to feel cut off from his own body, to wonder if he was even real at all? If they made him stop...there would be no point. No point in continuing this empty existence. There was no reason to keep going if he couldn't really live.

Was that what they wanted? To take away everything he relied on to get by, until he couldn't stand this life he'd fought so hard to keep? They sat there watching him, waiting for him to respond, the weight of their judgment pressing in on him from all sides.

They wanted him to give in. They wanted him to comply with their wishes. They wanted to keep him alive, but keep him trapped in an existence as cold and senseless as cryosleep. But he didn't want to, so he left.

It was only after Winter had closed the front door behind himself, breathing heavily as though he'd run instead of walked, that he realized what he'd done. He had said no. They'd told him what to do, but he'd refused to follow their orders. And they weren't just asking him if he preferred the door open or shut anymore. This was something important to all of them...and he had said no.

He felt...powerful. It was a new sensation for him. Winter stepped up to the railing of the porch, staring unseeing at the colorful trees all around. The chilly breeze brushed the hair off his forehead, calming his breathing and clearing his head. He half-expected the others to come out after him, but thankfully they left him alone.

They were trying to help him. Now that he gave himself a moment to think about it, he realized it was true. He knew that Steve and Sam genuinely wanted to help him; they wouldn't demand something like this purely out of spite. They just didn't need to cut themselves to get through the day, so they didn't understand why he did. And because they didn't understand why he was doing it, they thought he should stop.

Well, that was just too bad for them. He wasn't going to stop. He couldn't.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Winter's life had become a waking nightmare. Steve and Sam were always watching him, judging him. They knew what he was doing, no matter how hard he tried to hide. He was laid bare before their scrutiny, and even behind closed doors, they knew what he was doing. There was nowhere to hide.

Steve had told him it was wrong to cut himself. He'd explained why, so at least Winter knew why he looked at him with such crippling disappointment now. Winter would step into the room, and Steve would immediately look at his arms with this awful pinched look of worry and pity and something else he couldn't identify. But of course he was going to be disappointed when he had such high standards but still expected Winter to meet them!

Well, he wasn't perfect. He wasn't like them. He didn't know why they couldn't seem to comprehend this, but every day he fell short hurt worse than the day before.

The voice was back again—the voice in the back of his head that had fallen silent once he'd begun to trust the others. Now it came whispering back into his mind, reminding him (just in case he ever forgot) that he was worthless, that Steve was disappointed in him, that there was no way out of this
Winter was glad when Sam taught him how to take care of his cuts. After that, he could sneak supplies from the first aid kit in the kitchen and shut himself up in his room where no one could look at him. No one would judge him except for the voice in his head, and he could easily shut that up. He also discovered that the mechanical motions of cleaning the cuts and wrapping a bandage around them helped the voice stay quiet longer. It was soothing. Calming. Sometimes when his healing cuts would itch like crazy, he would sit next to his window and just stroke the raised ridges of flesh till the itching died down. He savored the hypnotic lack of thought as much as the sensory stimulation.

He kept justifying his actions to himself, and reminding himself of all the reasons the knife was necessary. So why did he feel so guilty all the time?

Maybe it was because of the others. They could always seem to tell when he was sporting a new cut on his arm, no matter how hard he tried to hide it under his sleeve, or how hard he resisted scratching the itchy, constricting bandages. And as long as they knew, they would judge him. They would be disappointed, and that would make him feel guilty even if he wasn't doing anything wrong.

So he did everything he could to hide. He let the cuts on his arm heal and instead started an even row of cuts down the insides of his thighs. The only problem was that if they rubbed against anything, they itched worse than his arm. Sometimes he couldn't help scratching until he felt warm blood trickling down his leg.

The cold weather outside seemed to mirror the atmosphere inside the house. It was like wherever Winter went, the weather associated with his name followed. Dreary days filled with rain and biting winds settled over the cabin, and no matter how many fires Steve tended in the fireplace, it did nothing to banish the chill between them. The void between Winter and the others seemed to suck up all the warmth those two exuded.

Or maybe Winter was the void, the black hole that pulled every good thing inside until it imploded.

One morning, when Winter ventured downstairs to pour himself some cereal, he found Steve and Sam standing at the large front window, which glowed brilliantly in the morning sun.

“Look, Winter!” Steve cried, turning with a grin. “It snowed last night!”

Winter approached the kitchen window and saw that he was right. A liberal dusting of white coated every bush and tree branch, the ice crystals sparkling in the bright sunlight. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, so it would probably start melting soon, but for now, everything was still and frozen.

“So what? Winter!” Sam cried, already pulling on his coat and hat. “Let's go make a snowman before it melts!”

Steve eagerly followed suit, but Winter stayed where he was. The thought of leaving the warm kitchen to go tromping through the wet snow wasn't particularly appealing, and he didn't understand where the others' energy and enthusiasm was coming from.

“Aren't you coming too?” Steve asked, pausing in the doorway while Sam charged outside.

Winter hesitated, absorbing the hopeful smile on Steve's face and Sam's waving arms as he beckoned them outside. But then a frigid breeze from outside came curling around his ankles like the air from a
refrigerator...or a cryo chamber. When they opened it to put him inside, he could always feel the air wafting up from it, like the cold breath of a monster on the back of his neck.

He shook his head. “I don't like snow.”

“Oh.” Steve looked disappointed—again—but he hitched his encouraging smile back into place. “Come on out if you change your mind, okay?”

“Okay,” Winter said, knowing he wouldn't. He would much rather make a cup of coffee the way Sam had shown him, and spend the morning trying not to think about cold metal walls closing around him so quickly he barely had time to wonder if he'd ever see the light of day again.

After Steve went outside, Winter went about his usual morning routine. After he'd dressed and finished his breakfast, he went to the front window to see what the others were up to. Most of the snow in the front yard had been scraped together to build an enormous, if slightly lopsided, snowman. Now they were throwing handfuls of snow at each other, trying to hit each other in the face, as far as Winter could tell. They were laughing, their cheeks red from the cold, their breath puffing out in short, happy bursts like steam from a teapot.

Winter stood on the other side of the glass, as different from them as if they were a separate species. He couldn't even imagine himself joining them. No, it was better for him to stay inside, where he couldn't spoil their fun.

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Look to the right and see:
there is none who takes notice of me;
no refuge remains to me;
no one cares for my soul.

- Psalm 142:4
Alternate Reveals

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure how long *Shards of Me* is going to be, or how long I'll be able to keep this up, but for now I'm going to have every tenth chapter diverge a little from the usual format of song lyrics–chapter–Bible verse. Of course none of *Shards of Me* is strictly necessary to read, since it's all basically bonus content, but these tenth chapters will be especially optional. I'll try to make it clear what each is about, so you can decide if you want to read it or not.

As a bit of explanation, while posting *Make Me Whole* on FFNet, I made a contest of sorts where people could give their ideas about how the reveal would happen, before I'd actually posted the canon version of the scene. The reward for those who participated is that I would take their ideas and write them out as different versions of the reveal. I'd like to thank everyone who participated, both for showing how excited you were to find out how it would really happen, and for giving me such great inspiration to work with! I only hope you like what I did with your requests :)

My favorite thing about working with all of these ideas was that I was able to use some of the discarded ideas I'd come up with when writing on the final version of the reveal scene. There were some really good sequences I was sorry I wasn't able to work into the final version, so it was great to be able to revisit them here. Also, a couple of these reveals happen right after the Crossbones battle, which would change the whole course of the Age of Ultron events. Happy as I am with the final version of *Make Me Whole*, it's fun to consider how things would have changed if Winter took the mask off earlier. But I'll let someone else write that AU :)

_for SunnySides_

When Steve hung up his towel and opened the door to the bathroom, he caught the strains of his least favorite song in the world coming from the living room.

"*From Hoboken to Spokane! The Star-Spangled Man with a Plaaaaaan....*"

Steve groaned. It would take him *hours* to get that song out of his head now. He crossed his bedroom and opened the door to the main living area, steeling himself for Sam's laughter and teasing.

But the only person sitting on the couch in front of the TV was Winter. As Steve strode into the room, he saw that Winter was watching some kind of documentary about World War II. No, wait. It was a documentary about *him*.

"*Following the success of the Captain America Show, bond sales increased by—*"

"What's this?" Steve asked with a chuckle, plopping down onto the couch next to Winter. "It took you ten months before you decided to research me?"
“It was on TV,” Winter said quietly, hugging a pillow to his chest and lowering the volume so they could talk easily, but still hear the narrator. “Looked interesting.”

“I tried watching one of these a couple years ago,” Steve said, watching a slow succession of photos of himself and the Howling Commandos. “But they kept getting the details wrong, so I turned it off.”

They watched in silence for a few minutes. Steve stared at the old black-and-white photos, some of them severely faded by age, and tried to reconcile them with his memories of lively, active men. Though he tried not to, his eyes immediately scanned each new picture for Bucky, latching on to the face he hadn't seen in so long.

“What do they get wrong?” Winter asked quietly.

Steve glanced over at him, but Winter didn't look away from the TV. With a sigh, Steve nodded at the grainy footage they were showing of him and the Commandos escorting a group of German prisoners. “Like this one. They make it sound like the only reason the Howling Commandos followed me in the beginning was because Colonel Philips ordered them to. Actually, I barely had to ask them to fight.” He smiled fondly. “If I hadn't asked them to join me, they probably would’ve knocked me down flat on their way to destroy Hydra themselves.”

“Sergeant Barnes was more than just our sniper,” said an old man in the documentary. It took Steve a moment to recognize Gabe Jones; he looked so different after almost seventy years. “He was kind of like a second-in-command, you know? He knew Cap so well, he could predict what he'd want us to do even when Cap wasn't around.”

Steve’s heart ached, to hear one dead friend talking about another dead friend. “They also get Bucky wrong,” he added. “They talk about his skills and training, or what he did on the battlefield. They'll mention that we were friends growing up, and what he did on the battlefield. They'll mention that we were friends growing up, and they'll talk about his death...but nobody mentions that he was really good at dancing. They don’t say that he’d complain about the taste of coffee unless there was so much sugar in it you could feel it crunching between your teeth. And no one talks about how picky he was about shining his shoes, making sure everything was neat and shipshape, even when there was no one to impress. I guess nobody cares about those things....”

“They get you wrong too.”

Roused from his brooding thoughts, Steve looked over at Winter in surprise. “Oh?”

“They don't say you snore,” Winter said, a fond smile in his voice.

“I don't snore!” Steve protested, crossing his arms.

“Then what else do you call it? Breathing loudly?” Winter snorted, still watching the documentary.

“Hmm.” Steve couldn't suppress a small grin. “Okay, what else did they get wrong? As long as you're ruining my image, you might as well dish it all out at once.”

“They never say what a snarky little punk you are.”

The smile slipped off Steve's face, his eyebrows raising in surprise. “What?”

Winter wasn't looking at the TV anymore, but staring down at his hands twisting in his lap. His hair hung over his face, offering only fleeting glimpses of his expression. “They don't tell anyone that you used to wear newspapers in your shoes. They don't talk about how Miss Sarah taught you to knit, or how you used to make blankets out of old sweaters you'd unravel. Nobody talks about the time you almost died of hypothermia because you went for a walk without telling anyone while you were sick,
and then passed out in an alleyway....”

His heart was pounding. “How...?”

Winter shook his head, sniffing, and brushed a hand across his eyes. “Hydra tried so hard to erase everything,” he said, reaching behind his head to the mask’s fastenings. “But how could they hope to get rid of so much? Even when I forgot myself...there's no way I could forget you forever.”

The mask fell free and hit the floor. For the first time, his face was fully exposed to the air. A face from a time gone by. A dream, a memory brought to life.

Tears blurred Steve's vision, but he quickly blinked them away. He didn't want to tear his eyes away from this impossibility. “Bucky?”

He flinched, still not looking up. His jaw clenched and unclenched several times, his hands curled into shaking fists on his knees. “I'm...I'm not Bucky anymore,” he said tightly. “I'm not...that man in the pictures.”

They both glanced at the TV. The documentary had moved on to talk about Schmidt and Zola, but Steve knew what he meant. He put a hand on his friend's shoulder, prompting him to look up at last. Steve smiled sadly. “I'm not the man in the pictures anymore either.”

“I'm sorry,” he said, his eyes brimming with tears as he met Steve's gaze. “I'm sorry I'm not him. You deserve Bucky.... I-I'm sorry....”

Steve pulled him into a tight hug. Part of him was still frozen in shock, unable to believe this wasn't a dream. He didn't understand how this could be true, and there were so many questions that still needed answers. But there was one thing he knew for certain, and right now it was all he needed to know.

“You're right,” he said, choking past the sobs in his throat. “I do deserve Bucky. So thank you...thank you, Bucky. I deserve you. Thank you....”

Bucky could only let out a gasping breath and cling to Steve with all his strength.

~*~*~*~*~*~

for Godd3ss

Winter followed Natasha to the front door, leaving Sam to watch over Steve until he fell asleep. Though he knew Natasha was supposed to be their friend, he couldn't help watching her suspiciously. After all, the last time someone besides the three of them had stepped through that door, he'd tried to kill them all.

He could still see Steve gasping for breath on the couch. He could still hear Sam's screams punctuated by Crossbones’ laughter. He would never let anything like that happen again.

He'd been watching Natasha closely the entire time she was there, and even though she seemed perfectly at her ease, he could tell that she was monitoring his every movement too, and she was
carrying at least three weapons that he could see. From what Steve and Sam had told him, Natasha had been there when they'd first fought him, so it was understandable that she would be wary around him. He wondered if he'd injured her.

When they reached the front door, Winter held it open for her and followed her out onto the steps. As soon as the door closed behind them, she turned to face him and asked in Russian, “Why haven't you shown him your face yet?”

Winter started, staring at her. She stepped down onto the ground, giving him the advantage of extra height, and held her hands open at her sides. Winter knew she did it in an attempt to make him feel less threatened, and he was a little irritated at how well it worked. It was the sort of thing Steve and Sam had done in the beginning, before he fully trusted them.

“What?” he growled, also in Russian. If either of the others happened to hear any of this conversation, he didn't want them to understand a single word.

“Steve told me you've never taken off that mask,” she said, nodding towards the window to Steve's room. “Why not?”

“What difference does it make to you?” Winter demanded, his hand sliding down to the pocket where he'd kept one of his knives ever since Crossbones' attack.

Natasha glanced at his hand, but he didn't move it from his weapon. “He's my friend too, you know,” she said, returning her attention to his face. “I need to make sure he doesn't get hurt.”

“Then you can rest easy,” Winter said shortly. “I have no intention of hurting him.”

“You do if you're not planning on taking off that mask anytime soon.”

Winter glared at her suspiciously, trying to figure out her motive for saying these things, but he couldn't see anything past the expression of friendly concern on her face. He wasn't sure if that meant she was good at hiding, or if there was nothing to hide in the first place.

When he didn't say anything, Natasha continued. “It makes you look like you don't trust him. You know him; he's so patient he'll wait forever and won't push you if he thinks you're not ready. But every day you keep hiding is like a slap in his face, after everything he's done for you.”

A leaden weight sank into his stomach. Winter knew that she was right. Steve had done so much for him—showed him the path out of darkness and then guided him every step of the way. He had given Winter so many reasons to trust him, without asking for anything in return. But Winter couldn't even trust him with the truth about himself.

Natasha cocked her head to one side, watching him shrewdly. “What are you so afraid of?”

Winter met her eyes, which seemed able to look right through him and into his soul. They were the eyes of a kindred spirit—someone who had seen as much of the dark underside of human nature as he had, but had also been pulled upwards to find the light again. Someone had seen her, not as she was, but as she could be, and had decided to help her see it too.

Maybe it was that recognition of someone who had an inkling of what his life had been. Maybe it was the desperate desire to explain himself, when he couldn't breathe a word of this to Steve or Sam. In any case, he found himself blurring out, “He'll hate me. If I show him. Once he sees...he'll hate me. And I...can't.”

His throat closed over any remaining words he could say. Even just imagining that inevitable
reaction was too overwhelming. Part of him was appalled at how vulnerable he'd just made himself, but the rest of him just hoped Natasha might have an answer for him.

She gave him a little smile, almost as if to say, *Come on, you know better than that.* Shaking her head, she glanced again at the window to Steve's room. “ *Steve doesn't hate. That sounds impossible, I know, but it's true. He doesn't even hate his enemies, so what makes you think he would hate you?***

The gentle stress she placed on the word *you* put him in such a different category from Steve's enemies that his heart ached, but he was already shaking his head. “ *That will change...once he knows. Everything will be different. He'll realize that I'm...not who he thinks I am....***”

“ *Look,*” Natasha said. “ *I don't know what you're hiding, but I can guarantee that Steve won't hate you. Sure, maybe he'll be angry. Maybe things will change between you. But isn't it better to know that however he feels about you, he feels that way about you? About who you really are?***”

Winter thought of all the times Steve had turned to him and smiled. The time he'd said, *You're a good friend.* Or when he'd told him, *I'm proud of you.* Every gesture of friendship and respect had been directed at Winter...but what if he said that to *Bucky?* To the person he was now, whoever that was?

But on the other hand, what if all he got was rejection? What if Steve saw his face, and wanted nothing to do with him anymore? Well...at least he would know, right? He wouldn't have to wonder anymore.

Winter became aware that Natasha was slowly stepping back, raising a hand in farewell. “ *I'm heading out now,*” she said, switching back to English. “ *Good luck...Winter.*”

Winter watched her until she turned onto the road and disappeared from sight around the next bend. Then he slowly went back inside, his mind spinning with what he'd just decided to do.

The TV was turned on—the weather, it looked like. Sam sprawled across one of the couches in the living room, his leg propped up and the TV remote dangling from one hand as he snored quietly. Winter gently pulled the remote from his hand, switched off the TV, and draped a blanket over his friend's sleeping form. Then he stepped into Steve's room and quietly closed the door behind him.

Steve was fast asleep, positioned carefully between pillows and blankets so as not to disturb his many bandages. At least some of the bruising on his face and knuckles was starting to fade. Winter pulled the chair up to Steve's bedside again and sat down, looking at his tranquil face.

How on earth was he supposed to break the news to Steve? How did anyone make that kind of unbelievable revelation? Well, in one way it was extremely easy. Winter unfastened his mask and pulled it off, setting it down on the bedside table.

A shiver passed through him as he sat there, face exposed. Sam could come in and see him at any moment. Steve could open his eyes and see the truth in a second. Still, Winter knew that some form of explanation would need to follow the initial surprise.

“ *Steve,*” he murmured, but his soft voice didn't cause the slightest stir from the bed. “ *See...the truth is...I'm actually Bucky.*”

It was easier to say these things when Steve was asleep, he realized. He kept talking in a voice barely louder than a whisper, repeating himself over and over, trying to figure out the best way to say it when Steve finally awoke.

“ *I'm Bucky. It's been me this whole time. I'm sorry I lied to you. I'm sorry I was so afraid when I should have just trusted you. Believe me, I wasn't trying to hurt you. I...I know I did, though. I'm so*
sorry. You can hate me if you like. No...I guess you won't hate me. But I'll understand if you're angry. Or if you yell at me. Or if you don't want to talk to me ever again...."

He didn't know how long he kept talking, but his voice was hoarse and the light was fading outside by the time he wearily laid his head on the pillow next to Steve. He still hadn't figured out exactly what he would say. Maybe there was no perfect way to tell him that Bucky was still alive.

“I'm not dead,” he whispered into Steve's ear. “I'm right here with you....”

~*~

“I'm not dead.... I'm right here with you....”

The dream of Bucky faded and Steve woke, feeling rested and refreshed despite the dull ache from all of his healing wounds. Early morning sunlight shone on the end of his bed, warming his legs. He caught a bright sparkle at the edge of his vision, and glanced over to find Winter's metal arm stretched across the blankets next to him. With a smile, Steve turned his head farther and saw Winter sitting next to the bed, leaning forward and sleeping soundly with his head on Steve's pillow.

Then he registered what he was seeing, and the smile slid off his face. Winter wasn't wearing his mask. Steve looked past him, to the bedside table, and saw it sitting there amid rolls of bandages and glasses of water.

He looked back at Winter's face, and was sure he was hallucinating. Or still dreaming. Because that face belonged to Bucky.

The longer he lay there, the more lucid he felt, and the more convinced he was that this was real. This was actually happening. And once the surprise began to ebb away, and he found that all he could do was just stare at that familiar face resting on his pillow. There were so many times he'd seen Bucky sleep, from sleepovers when they were kids to weary nights in the war.

It was the same face, the same curve of the chin, the same shape of the nose, the same dark eyelashes brushing like feathers against his skin....

Bucky.

~*~*~*~*~*~

for Unajet

It was the second evening after the battle with Crossbones before Steve was able to clamber out of bed on his own. Winter had carried him into the master bedroom after the battle, since it was a more convenient place to recuperate. Steve had to take it slow, pausing often to catch his breath and wait for the pain to subside a little, but now that the breathing tube was gone, he thought he could risk the trek to the kitchen.
Leaning against the wall for support with his good arm and placing his feet carefully, Steve made his way into the main living area. Most of the lights were out except the ones in the kitchen, where Sam sat at the counter, holding the walking stick Winter had fashioned for him. “Shouldn't you be lying down?” he said when he looked up and saw Steve wincing his way across the floor.

“Could say the same of you,” Steve gasped, gripping the edge of the counter and stopping to catch his breath.

“Yeah, we make a pretty sorry pair,” Sam said with a grimace. “It's good to walk around a bit, but don't overdo it, okay? If you collapse another lung and I have to poke you with a tube again, I won't be gentle this time....”

Steve started to laugh, but stopped quickly when his chest blazed with pain. After squeezing his eyes shut for a few moments and waiting for the agony to subside a little, Steve focused on the countertop he leaned against. For the first time, he realized Winter's bandanna lay there, folded neatly in a triangle. At first he didn't recognize the black object lying on top of the blue cloth, but then he realized the curves and contours were designed to fit around a nose, a chin, cheekbones....

“Sam!” he gasped, pointing a trembling finger at it.

Sam looked up and nodded. “Yep.”

“Did...Did you see...?” Steve gestured towards his own face.

Sam shook his head, continuing in a quiet voice. “He suggested hot chocolate out on the deck.” He nodded towards the doorway leading out to the covered porch where the dining table was. None of the lights were on out there, and the trees blotted out what little light remained in the dusky sky out the windows.

“Yes...” Steve said, trying to find a Winter-shaped shadow in darkness of the porch. “He poked his head into the room a few minutes ago and asked me if I wanted hot chocolate. I told him I'd come out to get it myself....”

“They were already there by the time I got out here,” Sam said, poking a finger at the mask as if to make sure it was real. “And I saw three mugs on the table in there. Seems like a sign that he's ready for us to see him...don't you think?”

Steve dragged his eyes away from the mask and up to Sam. The slow grin and the mounting excitement in Sam's eyes echoed the giddy somersaults Steve's heart was performing, rattling around his ribcage as if trying to reopen the wound in his chest.

This was it. After all this time, the day had finally come.

“Come on.” Steve offered his arm to help Sam get back on his feet again, and together they hobbled the few paces over to the doorway. The only source of illumination in the room was the band of light stretching across the floor from the kitchen, and even that was blocked by Steve and Sam's shadows as they stumbled over to the table.

For a minute or so, Steve was occupied by helping Sam pull out a chair and carefully lower himself into it, taking his weight off his injured leg. Then Steve, clinging to the back of the chair and breathing hard, glanced around to locate Winter. He stood just on the edge of the strip of light, his back to the room as he gazed out across the valley and the star-studded sky. Even though Winter's head was turned just enough that Steve could make out the shape of his chin, it was dark enough that he couldn't make out any distinct features.
Three mugs sat on the table; judging from the smell, they were filled with hot chocolate. Wordlessly, Steve picked one up and took a step towards Winter, holding it out to him. After a moment's hesitation, the man in the darkness turned slightly. His right hand entered the beam of light to grasp the mug, then pulled it into the darkness. Steve saw the barest silhouette of the mug being raised to his lips in the darkness, with no mask or even a bandanna to get in the way.

Steve turned back to the table and pulled out a chair next to Sam, turning it so he could face Winter too. He took one of the mugs and sank heavily into the chair, waiting. This was Winter's moment.

For a couple minutes, there was no sound except the three of them quietly sipping at their chocolate. Then, finally, Winter set down his mug on the windowsill and began to speak.

“I remembered,” Winter said quietly, as if wary of shattering the tranquil night air. “When we were fighting Crossbones...and he was...laughing, while he was hurting you two.... The last few pieces fell into place in my memory.”

A pensive silence fell, as Steve wondered what Crossbones' sadistic cruelty would have jogged loose in Winter's memory. Hesitantly, he asked, “Can you...tell us what you remembered?”

Another long minute of silence passed, and Steve was sure Winter wasn't going to answer. But then he suddenly began to speak, more clearly than ever before. “It was during the war when the Russian soldiers found me. I was alone...I'd been wounded.” His metal arm glinted in the light from the kitchen. “Lying in that snow...I kind of wished I was dead. I couldn't move...so I waited for death, but it never came. Instead, the soldiers did.

“They took me to their base and traded me off to Hydra. I...I'm not real sure about the order things happened. I think they installed the arm first. Then...beatings. Isolation. Sleep deprivation. They'd take away my water, then turn on a tap outside my cell and wouldn't give me a drink until I'd say 'Hail Hydra.'”

He paused, and even in the darkness Steve thought he could see Winter shudder. “Then came the Chair. At first...it was only little bits that started to disappear. Those were the worst...because I knew that those memories were gone.” His voice shivered with the pain that reverberated through the long years since then. “I couldn't remember my mom's face. I forgot what grass smells like. I...I tried to hold on to the most important things...faces, names...love....” His voice choked off, then whispered harshly, “Until one day, I couldn't remember anything but Hydra.”

Every word weighed down Steve's heart more and more. He couldn't even imagine what that would be like. He couldn't fathom the amount of strength Winter had possessed to break free of all of that. “Oh, Winter...” he whispered, setting his mug down on the table. He didn't think he could stomach any more right now. “I'm so sorry you had to go through that....”

When Winter replied, his voice was surprisingly calm. “In a strange way, I'm not. If I had the chance to relive it...go through the events that led me to getting injured...then I would do them all again. Even knowing what they'd do to me after.”

“Why?” Sam asked.

“That's what Crossbones helped me remember. The reason I lost my arm...it was because I had just saved my best friend from getting killed. If that's the price I had to pay to save him...I'd pay it again.”

Somehow, Steve had never imagined that Winter might have had a best friend before all of this happened to him. This revelation opened up far too many new questions and emotions he wasn't prepared to deal with. “But...if he was there, why didn't he help you?” Steve demanded. “Why did
he let Hydra capture you?” Some best friend.

“He thought I was dead.” Winter let out a bitter chuckle. “I thought I was dead. But he did try to save me.” He paused, then deliberately took two steps to the side so he was standing directly in the beam of light, though his back was still turned as if he found the barely-visible view out the window fascinating. He reached up and tucked his hair behind his ears—an innocuous gesture, one that would mean nothing for most people. But Steve knew Winter was deliberately leaving his face exposed.

“Actually,” Winter said slowly, “he finally did.”

Sam cocked his head to one side curiously. “What do you mean?”

Winter chuckled. “My friend was always too stubborn for his own good. But for me, that turned out to be a good thing. Always trying to do what was right, even if it got him into fights. Never backing down, even when that might have been the smarter thing to do. And of course, I had to follow that little punk into every fight that I could, to try and keep him safe. I lost my way a few times, but he kept leading me on, all the way here from Brooklyn.”

Steve drew in his breath at that word, staring with ever widening eyes at...Winter? No...it couldn't be....

“I'm sorry it's been so difficult the past few months,” he continued with his back turned, oblivious to the others' reactions. “I...I guess I always thought that if you never saw my face, I'd be nothing more than a 'project' that might fail, not a real person. I thought I was sparing you the guilt of knowing what really happened to me that day. But now...I realize I was just embarrassed to let my best friend see the monster I'd been turned into.”

With that, Winter turned his head to finally face Steve and Sam. The lights from the kitchen fell over him, illuminating Winter's features perfectly, with nothing hidden. It was a face they knew well from what he'd let them see over the past several months, yet it was a face Steve hadn't seen for seventy years.

Bucky's face.

Steve pushed himself to his feet, almost forgetting about the wounds all over his body that were still healing. “Bucky,” he gasped through the pain, while Sam looked between them with his mouth hanging open in shock.

Staggering towards his friend, Steve almost expected Bucky to disappear into motes of light, like an apparition conjured by his deepest wishes. But when he reached out, his hand found Bucky’s shoulder, warm and solid. “Bucky?”

Bucky smiled sadly, a smile he knew so well. “Stevie.”

He fell into Bucky's embrace, gripping him as firmly as he could in his condition. Bucky's arms were strong and gentle around him. It was so strange—the same embrace Winter always gave him, but now he realized it also felt like the embrace Bucky used to give him, back when Steve had been half his size. Maybe that was why Winter's arms around him had always felt so right.

“It wasn't your fault,” Bucky murmured in his ear. “There was nothing you could've done...and you've saved me now. That's all I care about.”

A harsh, painful sob ripped out of his chest. “Bucky....”
Bucky rested his forehead on Steve's shoulder. "And I meant what I said. I'd do it all again in a heartbeat."

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for Mary

Steve lay on his back, staring up into the darkness. He wasn't sure why he couldn't fall asleep—he'd had a full, yet relaxing day, and anticipated a good birthday the next day. They were planning on going to see fireworks in the evening, and Sam was going to fix all of his favorite foods. There were no immediate threats to anyone he loved. He was able to relax in this peaceful cabin with his two best friends in the world.

So why did he feel so...lonely?

He felt ungrateful, as if he were saying that Sam and Winter's company meant nothing. It wasn't that he didn't appreciate everything they'd done for him, but...something was still missing. He wasn't sure what.

No. That wasn't true. He knew exactly what was missing, he just hated to think about it. There was a Bucky-shaped hole that no number of new friends could really fill, no matter how wonderful they were. On days like this, he felt Bucky's absence more than ever.

Was it selfish to feel that way?

He didn't hear the door open, but he felt the whisper of air moving as someone crept silently in. By the time he rolled onto his side to look at the door, it was closed again and a familiar silhouette crouched by his bed. It was dark enough that he couldn't make out any distinct features, but what little light filtered through his curtains gleamed slightly on a metal arm.

"Hey, Winter," he murmured, glad for this distraction from his thoughts. "Can I help?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you," Winter said, shuffling closer to the bed on his knees. He was only a couple feet away now. "I just...couldn't sleep, so I thought maybe I'd watch you sleep instead...." He cut himself off with a snort. "Okay, that sounded creepier out loud than it did in my head."

Steve chuckled, pulling his hand out from under the covers and reaching for his friend. "I don't mind. You might be creepy on the outside, but on the inside you're just a big...softie...."

His voice died away. He'd been reaching out to place a comforting hand on Winter's head, but it was so dark that he couldn't really see what he was doing. Instead of the smooth skin of Winter's forehead, or the soft brush of his hair, Steve's fingers met the rough, scratchy stubble of an unshaven cheek.

He froze, drawing in a shocked breath. He could feel Winter stiffen, and even thought he could see a glint of light on his eyes, thrown wide open with shock.

"Winter!" he gasped, pulling his hand away and pushing himself up onto one elbow.
“You're...You're not wearing...”

“I...forgot.” He sounded as shocked as Steve.

For a moment, they simply sat there, not sure what to do with this unprecedented situation. Finally, Steve found his voice. “Don't...Don't worry. It's so dark in here, I can't see anything. So...you're still safe.”

Winter got to his feet—slowly, not as though he were nervous or panicking.

“Go ahead,” Steve said, looking up at what was barely a silhouette in the darkness. “You can get your mask if you want, but...come back and sit with me for a while, okay?” He patted the mattress next to him. “As long as we're both awake, we might as well spend the time together, right?”

The patch of darker shadow that was Winter moved towards the door, but then he stopped. After a brief hesitation, Winter turned, walked around the other side of the bed, and sat down on the edge. He paused again, let out a breath that sounded loud in the silence, and slid under the covers.

After a minute or so of shifting around into a comfortable position, squashing pillows behind their backs as they leaned against the headboard and settling the blankets over their laps, silence fell on them again. Then Winter ducked under Steve's left arm and scooted up against his side.

“Sure you're okay with this?” Steve asked softly.

“I don't know,” Winter said, his voice low and shaky. “But I...I wonder if maybe it's time. And....” He took Steve's right hand and guided it to his cheek. “I like this.”

Once again, Steve felt the rough stubble beneath his fingers, the warm skin so different from the cold, hard mask. Slowly, giving Winter plenty of time to pull back if he wasn't comfortable with it, Steve stroked his fingers up and down Winter's cheek. His thumb brushed against the corner of Winter's mouth, then down to the chin. It was a cleft chin, he realized. He'd never even thought about what Winter's chin must look like.

Winter let out a soft sound that Steve could feel rumbling in his throat, his weight settling more heavily against Steve's side. Judging from the way the muscles were bunching up under Steve's fingers, he was smiling.

They stayed that way for several long minutes—Steve gently rubbing his fingers across Winter's face, Winter obviously loving every minute of it. After a while, though, he put a hand over Steve's to hold it in place, then turned his head just enough to press a clumsy kiss to Steve's palm.

“They said my mask was for protection,” he whispered. Steve realized that the reason his voice sounded so loud all of a sudden was that he was used to it being muffled behind the mask. “But you know...it didn't stop them from hitting me.”

With a sick jolt in his stomach, Steve imagined a faceless Hydra thug slapping and punching the cheek Steve had just been caressing.

“So when you told me to take it off...back at the beginning...I thought you were trying to hurt me.”

He let out a puff of breath, pressing Steve's hand harder against his cheek. “I'm sorry.... I've known for a long time that you wouldn't, but I was still too afraid to take the mask off.”

“It's okay,” Steve assured him. “You can move at whatever pace you're comfortable with.”

“I think it took a mistake like this to prove to myself that I'm ready,” Winter said thoughtfully. “I've
never forgot about the mask before. Even when I was completely out of it, I'd still remember to cover my face. But tonight, I took it off to wash my face, and I just...didn't put it back on.”

Steve nudged the side of his head against Winter's. “I'm glad.”

They sat in silence for a long time, Steve's left arm around Winter's shoulders, his right hand fiddling with Winter's metal fingers on top of the covers. The silence was thoughtful, peaceful, comforting. Sometimes Steve would forget what a monumental decision Winter had just made, one that would affect the rest of his life. But then Winter would shift and Steve would realize that there was no hard mask pressing against his shoulder, just the warmth of his face.

Gradually, Steve became aware that he could make out the details of the furniture in the room. He could see the lumps in the covers hiding their feet. He could read the title of the book on his bedside table. The first glow of morning light shone behind the closed curtains.

“Getting lighter,” he commented.

“Yeah....”

There’s still time,” Steve said quietly. “You can go put on the mask if you want. If you're not ready. I promise I won't look.”

Winter hesitated for a long time. But finally, he sighed and said, “No. It's time. I know we can't stay like this forever, and I'd rather get it over with now. I don't want this hanging over me anymore.”

“Is there anything I should know, before...?” He had wondered several times before if Winter hid his face because it was scarred and disfigured from his years under Hydra. But he hadn't felt any scars earlier....

“Just...that I'm grateful,” Winter said. “No matter what...thank you. For this night...for everything. I know sometimes...it doesn't seem like I really appreciate everything you've done for me...but I do. I always will.”

“Oh, Winter....” He took Winter's right hand in his and squeezed it gently. “I'm so proud of you. You've come so far in such a short time.”

Winter squeezed Steve's hand in response. “Only because you helped me.”

“And that's been my privilege. I'm honored to be your friend.” And to be trusted with something so important to you.

Winter let out a long, slow breath, as if in preparation for diving into a deep pool. “If you'll still let me be your friend...then the honor's all mine.”

Steve opened his mouth to ask what he meant, but then Winter pulled back and turned his head to face Steve.

If Steve hadn't been holding onto Winter's hand the whole time, he might have thought this was some kind of trick. But the hand in his was the same, and Steve's side was still warm from their bodies pressing against each other. But his face....

“Bucky?”

There could be no mistaking it. There was enough light in the room now that Steve could see every feature of his face. The face of his dead friend. Winter's brow, furrowed with anxiety above eyes
swimming with worry, faded into Bucky's jawline clenched in nervous tension.

They had been the same face all this time, and Steve had never once guessed at the truth.

He became aware of Winter's hand in his grip. It was warm, slightly sweaty, and he could feel the pulse in his wrist. This was real. Not a ghost, not a dream, not his imagination running away with him.

Slowly, he brought his free hand up to Bucky's face. Trembling fingers brushed against his cheek, warm and rough with stubble. Real. Alive.

This was the face Winter had been afraid to show him. The one a mere accident had convinced him to finally reveal. The truth that had been hanging over his head all this time, a secret he was afraid would threaten their friendship.

Steve pressed his palm to Bucky's cheek. It had been seventy years since he'd touched that face, but now it was hard to believe that he hadn't been able to figure it out even without being able to see it. He brushed his thumb along the cheekbone, his hands remembering the contours they used to know so well.

Bucky's eyes, which remained fixed on Steve's face, slowly filled with tears. He leaned into Steve's hand, like a cat nuzzling for a scratch between the ears. Closing his eyes, his pulled his right hand free and pressed it against the back of Steve's hand, holding it in place.

A choked laugh followed the tears running over Steve's fingers. “Guess I got my answer.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

for NewMoonFlicker—and kind of for me too :)

Steve watched Winter's restless pacing across the living room for a moment or two before he lowered himself to one of the couches. Maybe that would calm him down, to see that Steve was completely at his ease. “What's this all about, Winter?” he asked gently.

Winter turned abruptly when he reached the fireplace, took two steps back in Steve's direction, then stopped and rubbed his right hand against his leg, as if the palm were sweaty. “Sorry, I.... How much time has passed? I-I want to do this before Sam gets back.”

Steve wondered what was so private about whatever Winter wanted to say, but he checked the clock on the wall anyway. “It's only been five minutes. Sam will probably be gone a couple hours, don't worry. You don't have to rush.”

Winter nodded, took a breath as if to say something, but then their eyes met and he turned on his heel to resume his nervous pacing.

“Winter,” Steve said gently, reaching out and grabbing his wrist as he passed Steve's couch. “Here, why don't you sit down? Just take it easy.”

Winter perched on the edge of the cushion next to Steve, fiddling nervously with the fingers of his
metal hand. “Sorry,” he mumbled again. “I...I thought I was ready, but...I guess not.”

“We don't have to do this now.” Steve put a comforting hand on his right shoulder. “Do you want to wait for another time?”

Winter shook his head sharply. “I never will be ready,” he said in a strained voice. “And I can't...I can't stand it any longer. I...I have to do it now.”

“Oh, okay,” he said softly, watching Winter's agitation with concern. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

Winter pressed his shaking right hand to his forehead. “Don't say that when you don't know....”

Steve slid his hand along Winter's back, scooting closer so he could wrap his arm around Winter's shoulders. “You're my friend, Winter. Do you really think anything could take that away?”

Winter peeked at him through his fingers and unruly strands of his hair. Their eyes met, Winter's shining wetly. “I've been holding something back,” he whispered thickly, looking away again and squeezing his eyes shut. “A secret.... And once I tell you...once you know...you won't look at me the same again. Everything will change, and...and we'll never be able to go back to the way it was. But...I can't keep this from you anymore.... I should never have kept it from you, I should have told you in the beginning, but I was so scared....”

Steve smoothed the hair back from Winter's face, tucking it behind his ear. With a fond smile, he said, “It's not a secret that you love me. I already know that.”

Winter shook his head and let out a breath somewhere between a laugh and an exasperated huff. "No, that's not what I...." He stopped short, then glanced over at Steve out of the corner of his eye. "You...You do?"

"Of course I do," Steve said with a chuckle. "It's kind of obvious. And you know that I love you too, right? You know that you're my best friend.”

Winter's eyes were riveted on his. “I....” His throat convulsed, as if he were struggling to swallow. Slowly, he nodded—not agreeing that he'd known this all along, but accepting that it was true nevertheless. That was good enough for Steve.

“Now,” he said, clasping Winter's right hand in his, “I don't know what it is that's bothering you, so I guess I don't know exactly how I'll react when you tell me. But one thing I do know: Nothing you say or do will change how I love you. Nothing could take that away. Can you trust me enough to believe that?”

Winter's eyes were the grey-blue of the sky glimpsed between stormclouds. They made Steve think of rain even more as they filled with tears. Winter swiftly looked down, and he didn't say anything, but he squeezed Steve's hand tightly and nodded.

Winter was silent for a long minute, but Steve waited without any further coaxing. He didn't mind waiting until Winter found the right words. As he sat there, gently stroking Winter's knuckles with his thumb, Steve forced himself not to try to predict whatever this earth-shattering revelation was going to be. Winter would tell him as soon as he was ready.

“I'm trapped,” Winter finally said, his voice breaking. He pulled his right hand from Steve's grip to swipe it across his eyes. “I...I keep trying to move forward. But every...everywhere I turn...I find that Hydra still has its grip on me.” His fingers trailed over the surface of the mask, as if searching for the features it hid.
Winter's tear-filled eyes rose to find Steve's again, lit with a desperate yearning. "With this...I can't be anything but...but the Winter Soldier. I...I don't want to...but every time I try to free myself...." He shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. "It never works. I couldn't free myself from Hydra in the first place. I couldn't escape my addictions on my own. I couldn't...I couldn't find my way out of...." His voice trailed away, but his metal hand clutching at his scarred forearm said it all.

Steve brushed his fingers across the scars with hesitant fingers, not sure how best to help him. Winter snagged his thumb with one of his metal fingers, sniffed slightly, and looked up at him with weary eyes. "You were always the one who saved me," he said wistfully. "Every time, I discovered that if I could just get to you...you would take care of everything."

Steve shook his head. "You did most of the work yourself, Winter. I was just there to catch you when you stumbled."

Winter grasped Steve's hand in both of his and looked earnestly up into his face. "Then I need you to catch me now," he said. "I need you to...to take off my mask."

Steve's heart pounded. "What? Me? Are you sure?" He forced himself to take a deep breath and slow down. Grasping Winter's shoulder, he looked carefully into Winter's pleading eyes. "I'll do whatever you need me to. I just... Other people forced you into this mask. Are you sure it wouldn't be better if you took it off yourself? When you're ready?"

But Winter was already shaking his head. "I want you to do it. After everything you've done for me...you're the only one I'd ever want to do it." He hung his head. "I'm sorry, I know it's selfish to ask this of you, but...please. Please save me one more time."

Steve realized he was holding his breath. As he slowly let it out, he felt the burden of this responsibility settle on his shoulders. The amount of trust and respect Winter was showing him by willingly giving him this power over the one thing he'd held private all this time.... Steve felt both humbled and honored to be given this task.

He had killed more Hydra agents than he could count. He'd stopped dozens of their operations, and done his best to destroy the organization for good. He'd fought and helped kill Crossbones and his men. He'd spent the better part of a year turning the Winter Soldier's life around, cutting him loose from Hydra's clinging tentacles.

Now, in one simple action, he would eradicate the last parasite still plaguing this man, and finally let him live.

Slowly, gently, he brushed the hair out of Winter's face again. As he did, he realized Winter was shaking, trembling all over. Steve tried to think of the right thing he could say to encourage him—to remind him that everything would be so much better when this was over, even if it was new and unfamiliar.

"Winter...no matter what, I promise that I will still l—"

"Don't." Winter's hand shot up to cover Steve's mouth, stopping him mid-sentence. He took a deep breath, then let his hand drop back into his lap. "Please don't...say anything yet. But...But if you could...just...once you see my face, if you...just tell me...if-if you think you could still...love me...maybe...one day...." His voice died down into a whisper and faded away as he stared fixedly at Steve's right knee.

"Okay." Steve privately resolved to reassure Winter the minute the mask came off. He wouldn't leave his friend in suspense any longer than he had to; he already knew the answer he would give.
Slowly, carefully, he raised his hands to unfasten the mask.

~*~

“Okay.”

Steve didn't break eye contact as he leaned in, gently threading his fingers through Winter's hair to find the clasp of the mask. His eyes were always so intense, so honest and determined that Winter thought they could pierce through steel. But at the same time, they were filled with the warmth that had drawn Winter out of his shell in the first place. It was like he looked at Winter with every expectation of liking what he saw.

Winter closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to watch that warm optimism turn hard and cold.

“Shhhh...” Steve soothed, leaning in as if to peer over Winter's shoulder to look at what he was doing. Winter suspected the real reason was to wrap his arms around Winter and help him stop shaking. Winter didn't return the embrace, but he was grateful all the same.

Steve's fingers fumbled at the fastenings of Winter's mask for what felt like an eternity. When the pressure against Winter's face lessened and he felt the familiar sensation of the mask pulling away, his heart made a sickening somersault into his stomach.

This was it. The end. The beginning.

Steve pulled back, and even though Winter's eyes were still closed, he knew exactly when Steve saw his uncovered face. A gasp. A clattering sound as the mask fell to the floor.

“Bucky?”

Winter cringed, ducking his head and hunching his shoulders. He couldn't identify the emotion in Steve's whisper. Outrage? Disgust? Dismay? How had he ever thought this would be a good idea?

“Bucky...is...is this really happening...? Is it...really you?”

Winter nodded tightly, bracing for a blow. Angry words. Silence. Whatever punishment Steve deemed appropriate for how terribly he'd hurt him. He wouldn't defend himself, but he couldn't help tensing up in anticipation of the pain. His heart already ached so much.

“Bucky...” Steve whispered again, placing his hand under Winter's chin and tilting his head back, exposing his face again.

The fresh air was cool against his cheeks. A lump was forming in his throat. He remembered what he had asked Steve a few minutes ago. He'd lost his head and actually asked Steve if he could love him after knowing the truth. Why had he done that? He wouldn't be able to handle it, no matter what Steve said.

“Bucky,” Steve repeated, cupping Winter's face in his hands.

A shiver passed through Winter's body, but this one wasn't a shudder of fear. Those hands, warm against his cheeks, were the hands that had saved him over and over again. They had knocked him free of Hydra's control. They had taken care of him through all of his wounds and illnesses. They
had always been as gentle as they were strong, as steady as they were compassionate. They had freed him from the prison of lies the mask had built around him, and now they were the first hands to touch his face since he had left Hydra.

Steve's thumbs brushed across Winter's closed eyelids, gently coaxing them open. Only when he blinked away a film of tears did he realize that he was crying. He looked into Steve's eyes and saw that they were shining with tears as well, shimmering and sparkling like a summer sun on the waves of the sea.

It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. And he knew, as soon as he saw it, what Steve's answer would be.

Steve leaned forward, resting their foreheads against each other. “Buck...I love you.”

Bucky raised shaking hands to place them gently on Steve's tear-streaked cheeks.

“I love you so much.”
Dying to Live

Chapter Notes

Obviously, this part of the story was vital for me to write from Winter's POV. His actions and choices don't always make sense from an outsider's perspective, but once you know what's going on in his head, everything falls into place. At least, that's what I'm hoping. We know, having seen this part from Steve's POV, that Winter is completely misreading the situation, but I hope that it makes sense why this misunderstanding happened. Winter has been taught to be suspicious and jump to the worst conclusions about everyone, and coupled with his depression and this dangerous addiction he hasn't even realized he can fight yet...it's no wonder he ends up here. But hopefully you can console yourselves by remembering how it all turns out in the end.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 6, “On the Edge of a Knife.”

Am I better off dead, is it all in my head?
There’s a snake in my mind, spitting venom and lies
It runs through my veins, paralyzed by the pain
I’m at the end of my rope, as it’s placed around my throat

...

I’ve been screaming but no words come out
You can’t hear me, it’s just silence now
Trapped in a nightmare with my eyes sewn shut
Is this what I’ve become?

- “Pull the Plug” by I Prevail

~*~*~*~*~*~

“I just need to sleep,” Winter said, weary from the panic attack and onslaught of memories he wished he didn't possess.

Neither of the others protested as he made his way upstairs. They were probably relieved to see him go, so they wouldn't have to constantly worry about him and he wouldn't spoil their day any more than he already had. It had been a long time since he'd had such a violent panic attack that they'd had to physically restrain him and carry him somewhere.
Winter could finally relax once he locked his bedroom door behind himself. Now no one could look at him and he wouldn't throw a taint on everything he touched. He didn't know what Steve and Sam had to be so happy about, but they could go ahead and be happy now. He wouldn't drag them down anymore.

He tried to sleep. He really did. But after slipping under the snug, warm covers and shifting around to find a comfortable position, he just ended up staring at the ceiling. The voice in the back of his mind never went away anymore. It was always there, whispering hateful truths in his ear. When something distracted him, he could drown it out and turn his attention elsewhere. But at times like these, when all was still and the only sounds were the occasional rumble of voices from downstairs, there was nothing he could do to silence that voice.

_They're probably talking about you_, it whispered now. _Wondering what they're going to do with you, their burden. Why does he have to ruin everything, they'll say. Why can't he just be grateful. Why does he make everything so hard. Look at what we gave up to come away with him. Look at all the time and expense we're pouring into him. Is he really worth any of that?_

Winter rolled over and stuffed the pillow around his head, blotting out all sound. But that didn't stop the voice from being right.

_They wish you weren't here_, the voice continued relentlessly. _They regret ever taking you in, especially because they're too good to go back on their promise. They wish they had an excuse to send you away, because you're such a bother. They wish you would leave. They hate you; they're just too nice to let it show._

With a groan, Winter flung the pillow away and rolled out of bed. He began to pace, thunking his metal fist against the side of his head whenever the voice started up again.

“You're wrong,” he muttered, as if speaking the words aloud would make them true. “They're not like that.... They want to help me....”

_But they can't, can they?_ the voice said with a snicker. _You are so far beyond their help. They have no idea what to do, do they? Nothing can pull you out of this mire. You might as well give up...worthless, pathetic, weak...._

Winter whirled around, grabbed his largest knife from the top of the dresser, and sliced at his wrist to get the voice to shut up. It subsided with the echo of a mocking laugh, leaving him with nothing but the sharp, stinging pain in his arm.

Breathing raggedly, he grabbed a cloth that had already seen too many bloodstains, wiped off the blade, and pressed the cloth to his cut. The throbbing pain kept the voice at bay...for now.

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By the time Winter ventured downstairs again, his stomach was rumbling and darkness had fallen outside. He stepped into a fog of wonderful smells as soon as he entered the kitchen, and saw that the others were nearly finished setting the table with the fruits of their labor. Steve smiled when he saw him, and cheerfully told him to grab a plate.

The others' cheerful expressions and happy conversation filled with laughter, and the warm, cozy living room festooned with blinking lights...it was all so incongruous to the way Winter felt. Didn't
the others remember what had happened mere hours ago? Shouldn't they be gravely trying to figure out how best to break the news to him that he would have to go? Instead, it was like they were pretending nothing had happened. Like they thought he would forget if they just smiled enough.

Then, when Winter thought he could finally escape to the familiar ground of washing dishes, Steve dragged him and Sam over to the tree inexplicably set up by the fireplace. He had been wondering what its purpose was, trying to line it up with the few vague memories of Christmas he had, and it seemed he was finally going to get an answer.

Packages had steadily been accumulating under the boughs of the tree, wrapped in colorful, glistening paper and tied with bows of red and green. Steve started handing these out to the others. Sam ripped the paper off one of his, revealing two jars—one of peanut butter, one of marshmallow fluff. Sam crowed with delight and held them aloft like twin trophies. “Fluffernutter time!”

“You made such a big deal about it, I had to get you some,” Steve laughed. Then he turned to Winter. “Go on, open yours!”

Bemused, Winter ripped the paper off the lumpy parcel in his lap, waiting for them to scold him for ripping such pretty paper. But they didn't seem to mind. He vaguely remembered tearing wrapping paper apart excitedly, unable to wait to see what his present was. He had been much smaller then. Much happier about everything.

Inside the package was just a pair of gloves, knitted with a snowflake pattern. Nothing to get excited about. But that wasn't the end of it. Steve kept handing out presents, most of which turned out to be useless but nice things like candy. Winter wasn't sure what the point of all this was, nor why the others looked so happy about what was inside the brightly colored wrapping paper.

Finally, Steve reached for what seemed to be the last present, a small red box that he placed in Winter's hand with a satisfied smile. Winter dubiously untied the green bow around it, and pulled off the lid. Inside the box was a ring of keys.

“They're the keys to the motorcycle,” Steve said as Winter picked them up. “It's yours now! You can ride it wherever you want. And...maybe...when you're ready to leave...it can take you where you need to go.”

Winter looked up. Steve was beaming, obviously pleased with himself. Sam was smiling too. Suddenly everything fell into place—why they were so happy, why Steve was ignoring everything that had gone wrong. He was trying, in his own subtle way that would ease his conscience, to get Winter to leave. He was excited at that prospect, because then he wouldn't have to waste his time on such a hopeless case. And he seemed to think that Winter should be grateful that they were throwing him to the wolves.

Anger boiled inside him as he looked at Steve's smiling face. He got to his feet, threw the keys on the floor, and stalked upstairs to his room.

By the time he reached the top of the stairs and stepped through the door to his darkened bedroom, his anger was already ebbing away. In its place, an awful emptiness opened in the pit of his stomach. Steve didn't want him anymore. He was tired of him. He was doing it nicely—not killing Winter or putting him in cryosleep—but Steve was abandoning him nevertheless, because he had no need for all this wasted time on a soldier who at best could only cause him grief.

Don't tell me you're surprised, the voice in the back of his head spoke up. You should have known this would happen eventually. What, did you actually think they'd want you to stick around forever? You're no use to them. Everything you do only makes it harder for them, so why wouldn't they want
to see you gone?

So...he would have to leave. Venture out on his own. And what then?

_They'll find you_, the voice supplied helpfully. _They may not realize you're still alive at first, but anyone high up enough to know who you are will stop at nothing to get you back once they find out._ Without Steve...you'll never be safe again, will you? You'll always be looking over your shoulder, until finally you can't run anymore. Then they'll get you. They'll put you in the chair again. Make you forget all of this. Then they'll get you. And the next time you wake up, Steve won't even be alive anymore. No one will come to save you, not after Steve failed. But that's okay. Steve doesn't care about you now anyw—

Before he even realized what he was doing, the knife bit into his flesh, cutting easily through the barely-healed wound he had made earlier that day. The voice shut up, as it always did, but the hollow, empty feeling clung to him like a leech and settled in the bottom of his stomach. He sank onto the closed toilet seat, staring at his blood leaking around the knife blade, too exhausted to even think anymore.

He didn't know how much time passed before he realized Steve was standing in the doorway. Watching him, always watching. Why did he care, if he was pushing Winter to just leave anyway?

“Can I help you with that?” Steve asked quietly.

Winter nodded—refusal would have taken energy he just didn't have—and Steve began the familiar routine of tending to Winter's cuts. Winter let him work, neither speaking nor making any movement to help or hinder him. He just stared dully at a droplet of blood trembling at the very tip of his knife.

“I really wish you would stop doing this,” Steve said suddenly.


“How can you say that?” Steve asked, sounding hurt. “Of course it matters.”

What a hypocrite. He thought so highly of himself, so sure that he was in the right. Steve didn't even stop to consider what Winter wanted; he had been struggling against Winter's desires this whole time. He was always telling Winter what to do, explaining why _his_ ideas made more sense, and never gave Winter another option.

“People...want things from me,” Winter spat, idly wondering if Steve would hear the accusation in his voice. “And they take them. Even if they ask, it's not like I can say no. They'll just take it anyway.”

Steve recoiled as if Winter had punched him in the face. “Is that really what you think of us? Of _me_?”

Winter shrugged, tugging his arm out of Steve's clutching grasp. He could act affronted as much as he wanted; Winter knew he was in the right. “Then what would you do if I said I wanted to leave tonight?”
He waited for Steve to plead with him not to go, or lay out all the perfectly logical reasons why he wasn't ready to strike out on his own. Winter would throw it all right back in Steve's face and point out every last contradiction. Then Steve wouldn't be able to pretend they were friends any longer. The truth would be out in the open, and Steve could show his true colors. Now that all those high and mighty words were proven false, it would become obvious that he was no different than—

“Well...I would pack up as many supplies as you could carry on the motorcycle,” Steve said, “and send you on your way. And then I would go after the rest of the Hydra agents who are still out there, and put them all behind bars before they can find you. But...I'll miss you, Winter.”

“Miss me?” Winter echoed numbly, looking up at Steve's sad little smile. This reply wasn't anything like he'd expected, nothing he'd even imagined in the realm of possibility. Wasn't Steve supposed to be glad that he was leaving? Didn't he resent Winter's very presence? Wouldn't life be so much easier for him when he didn't have to take care of a brainwashed amnesiac who had nothing to offer in return?

But here he was, eyes soft and worn, looking at Winter as though his heart would break. “Of course I'll miss you.”

Of course? What about any of this was of course? Had Winter been wrong about him all along? Was it possible...that he had misunderstood the signs? Maybe Steve hadn't been trying to get rid of him after all. Maybe...all this time...maybe he'd been wrong about everything.

“So...I won't stop you if that's really what you want,” Steve continued, grasping the knife Winter still held as if he didn't even feel its sharp edge. “But...please don't go?”

Steve had no reason to ask this if he genuinely wanted him gone, right? He wouldn't risk Winter taking him at his word, if his true purpose was to get rid of Winter for good. Maybe...there was still a chance.

“Okay,” Winter breathed.

“Okay.” Steve slowly tugged on the knife, and Winter let go so he wouldn't get cut. Setting the knife aside, Steve got to his feet and put the unused bandages back in the cabinet over the sink. “Try to get some sleep. It's been a long day.”

Sleep sounded very appealing all of a sudden, and Winter wondered if he might actually be able to manage it this time. After Steve left, he sat for a moment more, then got up to follow Steve's advice.

When he reached for the door to his room to close it, he hesitated. Steve was slowly making his way back downstairs, where he would no doubt talk to Sam about what had just happened. What would they say about him?

He hesitated, but finally morbid curiosity won out. Soundlessly, Winter crept down the first few steps, where he could hear the voices in the kitchen without being seen.

“And what about you?” Sam was asking. “How are you holding up?”

“I'm tired,” Steve said, and all of a sudden...was he crying? Winter had never thought to hear those gasping, sniffling sounds coming from Steve, of all people. He always seemed so...put together. So strong that nothing could touch him. Yet as he tried to speak, sobs shook his voice as if he had just lost a battle he'd been fighting a long time.

“I can't take this anymore,” he sobbed, every word turning Winter's insides to ice. “I've been trying so hard...but nothing I d-do...ever helps. It's...just getting worse, and ev...everything I say just p-
pushes him farther away! I can't do it, Sam, I j-just can't do it anymore. It hurts too much...."

“So...what?” Sam asked quietly. “You're giving up on him?”

Winter waited breathlessly for Steve's reply, his heart thrumming with horror. But the seconds stretched out, and Steve didn't answer. He didn't answer. The only sounds were his defeated sobs.

His training and long years of habit were the only things that kept Winter quiet as he turned and went back upstairs to his room. Pain was there to greet him, the only thing that could coexist with the emptiness. A scream pressed against the inside of his throat as he dazedly walked back into the bathroom. Steve had stood there just minutes ago and pretended that he cared. That he'd stay. “He said he'd miss me,” Winter said aloud, trying to make sense of what he'd just heard. “He just said he wouldn't rest until I was safe, but then he....”

I told you so, the voice in the back of his head viciously taunted. I warned you not to trust him, and see? I was right. It's too hard for him to keep taking care of you, so he's just dumping you now. Forget all those pretty words. He never really meant any of them.

“He was supposed to be different,” Winter said shakily, and only when he heard his own voice did he realize tears were rolling down his face, pouring over the mask and trickling under the edge to wet his cheeks. “Why isn't he different?”

Oh, he can pretend with the best of them, but he's no different from everyone else who's abandoned you. He's a liar. He doesn't love you, Soldier. And you actually wanted him to love you, didn't you? How could anyone love such a worthless piece of trash? Didn't Hydra cure you of that foolish desire? You knew better, but you let your guard down. You've gotten soft. You're so stupid for thinking he would care for you, even for a moment.

“Shut up,” Winter sobbed, pounding his metal fist against the fresh bandage around his wrist. But even that sharp burst of pain couldn't blot out the relentless voice.

Oh, boo hoo. Don't tell me you're surprised at this? Surprised that no one will ever want you? Why should they? You're the Asset, Soldier, but you're no asset to anyone like this. Let me tell you like it is. They don't need you, they don't want you, because you're worthless!

“No,” Winter gasped, clawing at the bandage, which had become saturated with blood. His whole arm was throbbing now, bruises already beginning to form under his harsh metal fingers, but the voice was only growing louder than ever.

It's hopeless! The voice screeched, so loud that it drowned everything else out and made it impossible to think. You might as well just give up—give up, like your precious Steve. Just do it. There's nothing here for you anymore. No missions to return to, no future to build, no past to reclaim. Nothing left for you to do but listen to me and comply.

The knife was slicing down his arm almost before he realized he had picked it up. Blood gushed out of the deep cut he'd carved all the way down his arm, spilling over the floor. Staining it, tainting it like he tainted the very air he gasped out of his lungs. The voice was still there, howling with laughter that made his ears ring. Or maybe that was the blood loss.

His knees hit the floor, squelching into the growing puddle of his blood. His racing heart pumped his life out on the floor. Pointless. Useless. No end was more fitting for the broken tool he was. This was the only way it could end. He should have realized that long ago.

So why did it hurt so much?
Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach,
especially to my neighbors,
and an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.
I have been forgotten like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.
For I hear the whispering of many—
terror on every side!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.

- Psalm 31:11-13
The Scars That Linger

Chapter Notes

This wasn't intentional, but I realized I've been alternating between the part of the story where Winter is cutting himself, and chapters with lighter subject material. Even though I didn't plan it that way, I think that works pretty well. There's not quite the same tension about Winter's situation as there was in Make Me Whole, because you already know how it's going to end up. So hopefully you don't mind if I keep making these meandering rabbit trails to lighten the mood a little bit :P

This chapter is something that wasn't originally going to be much of a big deal, but I ended up having more to say about it than I'd originally intended. Basically, what sparked the idea for this chapter was wanting to talk about how Bucky's primary Love Language is touch. (If you haven't heard of the 5 Love Languages, I'd recommend a quick google—it's great material for characterization!) Especially after all the torture and physical trauma he's been through, affectionate touch is vitally important to Bucky, and Steve is the perfect person to give him that.

This chapter takes place (mostly) a few days after Make Me Whole.

‘Cause this is not about what you’ve done
   But what’s been done for you
This is not about where you’ve been
   But where your brokenness brings you to

...  

You are more than the choices that you’ve made
You are more than the sum of your past mistakes
You are more than the problems you create
   You’ve been remade

- “You Are More” by Tenth Avenue North

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It was something they started to do while Winter was trying to stop cutting himself. Though his body's ability to heal itself was enhanced, the long cut down his entire forearm took a long time to heal. Even after the stitches had come out and the skin was completely closed over, leaving nothing
but a red line that stood out starkly against his pale skin, it still bothered him. Sometimes, the healing skin would itch so ferociously he thought he’d go crazy. And of course, it didn't help at all that he kept on adding more cuts that would itch once they started to heal too.

He was caught in a never-ending loop of torment. When he cut himself, he was damaging his body. But then when it started to heal, often the only way to get rid of the itching was to inflict more pain. If he cut the wound open again, it would ache instead of itch. Which was better?

Resisting the urge to scratch his arm was almost as hard as resisting the urge to cut it. His metal fingertips had no nails, of course, and while they were good at grasping things, they didn't really have enough of an edge to be much use in getting rid of an itch. So he rubbed his arm instead, but that wasn't very effective. He grabbed the seam of his sleeve and tried to use that to scratch his arm. He scraped his forearm across the edge of the door, the headboard, the chest of drawers, anything that might alleviate this maddening discomfort.

When he started gnawing on his own arm like a wild animal trying to escape a trap, he knew he couldn't keep quiet about it any longer. He went in search of Steve, trying not to listen to the voice in the back of his head telling him he was like a dog whining at his master's feet.

Steve's eyebrows pinched together with concern when Winter haltingly tried to explain what the problem was. “I'm...hurting myself...but I don't want to...but...but it just _itches_ so much....” Finally, he gave up on using words and pulled up his sleeve.

Steve's fingers ghosted over Winter's forearm, not quite touching the raw, red skin where he'd been desperately scratching. Bruises, where his metal fingers had pressed too hard, showed up starkly against the healing cuts, some of which were barely scabbed over. The only way his arm could look worse would be if he were actually bleeding.

“I'm sorry, Winter, I didn't think.... Of course it would itch while it's healing....” Steve got up and headed for the stairs, beckoning to Winter. “Come on, let's try putting some lotion on it and see if that helps.”

Winter followed Steve upstairs and into the bathroom that he and Sam shared. Steve pulled a bottle of lotion out from under the sink. “This has aloe in it,” he said, handing it to Winter. “That'll probably help you feel better.”

Winter hesitated, looking down at the bottle in his hand. He knew that Steve was waiting for him to put it on, or take it away to try it out. But now that Steve was here...Winter didn't want him to leave. He was afraid that if he so much as touched his arm, even just to put on lotion, the temptation would be too great.... But he also didn't want to bother Steve, who was already going so far out of his way to help.... But hadn't he told Winter to ask him if he needed something? He'd just helped Winter by suggesting the lotion, but....

“Um...could you....” He held the bottle out to Steve. “I mean...would you mind...if...if you....”

Steve glanced down at the bottle, back up at him, and he seemed to understand what Winter was asking for. “Oh, of course! I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking—of course it would make a mess on your metal hand....”

Winter wasn't sure if Steve had made up that reason, or if he really thought that was why Winter was asking, but he was grateful either way. Steve squirted some of the lotion into his hand, turned Winter's arm over, and gently began rubbing the lotion over his itchy, irritated skin.

The coolness of the lotion and the gentle touch of Steve's hands immediately soothed the terrible
itching. Winter watched Steve's hands, focusing on each sensation and letting the jumble of his thoughts fade away. Steve held Winter's wrist in one hand, keeping his arm in place while he used the other hand to rub the lotion into the skin. His fingers were gentle as they slid across the ridges Winter had carved into his arm, smoothing down the dry skin and rubbing gently over the veins.

The way Steve touched him was always fascinating. The bulk of his memories involved rough and painful touches. People would push and prod him, molding him to fit their needs, punishing him gleefully when he didn't measure up. And when he touched his own body...well, sometimes it was still rough and painful. But even when he was trying to be gentle or soothing to himself, it never felt like it did when Steve touched him.

Steve's touch was more than just gentle and soothing. It was almost like...when he reached out and touched Winter, he was saying something too, without any words. Winter wished he understood what it was. He wished he knew how to ask Steve about it.

Steve ran his hand down the length of Winter's arm one last time and said, “Well? How does it feel now?”

“It feels good,” he replied softly. “It feels really good.”

From then on, Winter brought the bottle of lotion to Steve whenever his arm started itching again. Sometimes he did it even when he felt like cutting himself, because as long as Steve's hands were gently rubbing lotion into his skin, it was easy to ignore the voice in the back of his head. The cuts steadily began to heal. The bruises faded. The dry, irritated skin smoothed out, and even the scars seemed to grow fainter with every passing day.

Even after he'd set aside the knife for the last time, and all the cuts on his arm had fully healed and stopped itching, he kept on bringing the bottle of lotion to Steve every now and then. It was so soothing to sit there quietly for a few minutes and let Steve gently rub his arm. Steve didn't seem to mind giving him this treatment, so Winter kept asking. If there had been a hint of impatience or exasperation in Steve's response, Winter would have stopped requesting it immediately. But the most he ever got was a knowing smile, as if Steve knew he didn't really need the lotion anymore, but was willing to play along.

Slowly, Winter began to figure out what it was that made Steve's touch different. When Steve touched him, it was like he was saying, *I want to take care of you. You're important to me. I'm touching you because I want to be near you.*

Was that...love?

It was such a foreign concept to Winter that he hardly even dared to wonder at first. The thought that someone—let alone someone as wise and discerning as Steve—would ever love *him* was laughable. Ludicrous. Inconceivable.

And yet...true.

He wasn't completely sure until he heard it from Steve's own mouth, but it was a slow-dawning realization that had begun the first time Steve had asked him to leave Hydra. From the first time Steve had touched him, when he'd helped him through withdrawal, every moment of contact had been another word in this never-ending message of love.

Most remarkable of all was that Steve didn't stop, even after Winter took the mask off and let him know that he'd actually been Bucky all along. Even after discovering that Bucky had been lying to him for months, Steve still treated him the same as ever—if not growing even more tender and caring...
than before.

The best-case scenario he'd been imagining was that Steve would let him stay, but would pull back at first to reevaluate their relationship. Bucky didn't expect to treat him like he used to, nor like he'd treated Winter. He told himself it would be all right, as long as he had a chance to regain Steve's trust and affection over time. Even if it took his whole life, he would do his best.

Instead, Steve kept reaching out to him. He never stopped telling Bucky, with his words and his actions, that he saw him in the same light as ever. And if Bucky was ever tempted to think he was just putting on a show, pretending for the sake of their old friendship or because he thought it was the right thing to do...all it took was a simple touch to convince Bucky that this was genuine.

In the days after Bucky took off his mask, they all had to get used to the differences that resulted from that revelation. For the most part, they did the same things as always, but there was a different quality to every moment now. Bucky didn't have to hide anything. Steve would often pause in the middle of what they were doing and grin at him, as if he'd suddenly remembered that he was really Bucky.

After lunch one afternoon, Steve and Bucky lingered at the table after Sam had got up to answer a phone call. They sat in companionable silence for several minutes, gazing out the windows of the closed-in porch at the valley below. Bucky reached to scratch a slight itch on his right arm, then suddenly realized how long it had been since they'd taken the time to put lotion on. Not since Steve had left to go hunt down Ultron.

Abruptly, Bucky got to his feet. Steve looked up in surprise and started to rise as well, but Bucky pushed down deliberately on his shoulder to keep him in his seat. Steve looked confused, but obeyed Bucky's silent order and stayed put while Bucky left the room. When he stepped into the bathroom to rummage under the sink, he heard Sam pacing around his bedroom next door, talking on his phone.

“No, Ma, I'm fine—would you listen...Ma....”

Bucky smirked as he grabbed his bottle of lotion and returned to the porch. Sounded like Sam would be a while.

Steve looked up with an odd expression when Bucky set the bottle of lotion down on the table in front of him. The corner of Steve's mouth twitched into what wasn't quite a smile, but all he said was, “Sit down.”

Bucky pulled out his chair and turned it so he could easily lay his right arm on the dining table. Just like always, Steve squirted some of the lotion into his hand and then slowly, steadily started to rub it into Bucky's forearm. Bucky relaxed into the soothing, repetitive motions of Steve's hands, suspending all thought while he focused on the feel of fingers sliding gently across his skin. He'd missed this.

As he often did, Steve kept on rubbing Bucky's arm even after there was no trace of lotion left. Back and forth, gently pressing against the muscles and tendons, almost like a massage. Then his fingers ran down the line tracing Bucky's vein from elbow to wrist, and his hand faltered. Steve froze, one hand holding Bucky's wrist in place, the other resting on the long scar, his head bent at such an angle that Bucky couldn't see his expression.

A drop of moisture touched Bucky's arm. Then another, and another. Slowly, Steve rested his forehead against Bucky's arm, his shoulders shaking as he drew a shuddering breath.

“Steve?”
Steve made a sound that might have been Bucky's name, or maybe it was just a wordless sob. He gripped Bucky's arm so tightly that he could feel his blood pulsing through his veins. "You...could have died," Steve finally said, his voice little more than a squeak. "You almost did...and I...I would have...." His shoulders heaved for breath. "I...I al-almost...lost you again...without even knowing it!"

Bucky looked at the hand clutching his wrist, and realized Steve was feeling for his pulse. His suicide attempt had been so long ago, and it had been a long time since Bucky had come to grips with what he'd done. He'd had almost ten months to get used to the idea that Winter and Bucky were the same person, but Steve had only found out a few days ago. The realization must be hitting him in waves, as he remembered that all the things Winter had done and struggled through were really Bucky's struggles all along.

With a sigh, Bucky rested his metal hand on Steve's back. "I never really apologized for that, did I?" He rubbed Steve's back in little circles, hoping to give back some tiny measure of the comfort Steve had given him. "Steve...I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for making you worry for so long...for not listening to you.... You gave me every reason to trust you, but I only believed the worst about you. I'm sorry for believing all the lies in my head instead of you." He closed his eyes, remembering the darkness of that time. "I'm so sorry for trying to end the life you gave everything to win back."

Steve shook his head, his hair tickling against Bucky's forearm. "You were...depressed," he sniffled. "Desperate...didn't know what to—" His voice broke.

Bucky ran metal fingers through Steve's hair. "Those were my reasons," he said softly. "But not excuses. It took me way too long to realize that every time I cut myself, I also hurt you. Steve...I'm so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

"'Course I do." Steve let go of Bucky's arm at last, only to pull Bucky into a tight embrace. They didn't say anything as they held each other, but they didn't need to. Bucky hoped that Steve could feel the same care and concern that he'd always felt when Steve touched him. He hoped that the warmth of his embrace reassured him, as words couldn't, that he was here now. No matter what had happened—or almost happened—in the past, they had each other right now. And their future stretched out in front of them, full of possibility, a future he knew they would spend together.

Steve finally sniffled himself to calmness, resting the side of his head against Bucky's. He gave a great sniff, then let the breath out in a long sigh. "Buck," he murmured, almost as if to remind himself of who he was holding onto.

"Stevie," he responded, as always. He'd given Steve that nickname when they were kids, because Steve had insisted on shortening his name even further than it already was. Even though their nicknames had started as a joke, there was something special about them. No one else used them. Bucky relished every time he could call his friend Stevie now that there was nothing left to hide.

"Sorry for falling to pieces," Steve mumbled, straightening up and scrubbing a hand over his face.

“Welllll...” Bucky said, dragging out the word with mock reluctance as he handed Steve a napkin to dry his tears. “It's a bit of a stretch, but I guess I can forgive you for being human.”

Steve let out a wet snort into the napkin as he mopped up the remains of his tears. He kicked at Bucky under the table, which only made Bucky grin.

When Steve had finally composed himself, he looked up with a little smile, as if to reassure Bucky that all was well. But his red-rimmed eyes were soon drawn back to Bucky's right arm, which still lay on the table. He reached out a hand toward it, but came to a stop before his fingers could brush
against his scarred skin. Steve sighed. “I just wish...it hadn't left such a permanent mark. Now, every
time you look at your arm....”

Bucky pressed the hand down on top of the long scar running down his whole arm. “It was wrong
for me to cut myself,” he said, slowly and deliberately. “I know that now, and I wish...I wish a lot of
things could have been different. But because they weren't...well, I'm glad I'll have these scars
forever.”

He smiled at the look of surprise and concern on Steve's face. “When you look at them, you're
probably remembering all the blood and pain, aren't you? The thing is...that's not what I see.” He
looked down at his scarred wrist, covered by Steve's warm hand. “I see the way you saved me.
When I look at my scars, I don't remember the pain. I just remember that you were there, showing
me a better way. So I hope these scars never fade, because I don't ever want to forget that.”

Steve gazed at him, lips slightly parted, his eyes filling with tears again. But the corners of his mouth
slowly lifted, and he let out a soft chuckle as he lowered his gaze to Bucky's arm. “You're making
me cry again, you jerk.”

He kissed the scar on Bucky's arm.

~*~*~*~*~*~

You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

- Psalm 16:11
Waking from a Nightmare

Chapter Notes

I hope reading this part of the story from Winter's perspective isn't just an excuse to wallow in angst. Hopefully, a lot of questions you might have wondered when seeing this portion of the story through Steve's eyes will be answered, now that we can see exactly what Winter was thinking all this time. It's not that Winter is just stubborn and defiantly insists on hurting himself despite everything the others are doing to help him. It's such an arduous process for him to even see that there is a way out of his darkness. But he's getting there. Slowly, painfully...but we all know he makes it in the end.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 7, “Cross the Distance.”

How am I supposed to break this spell you got me under?
I'm so addicted to the pain
Got your poison running through my veins
The way you pull me in
The way you chew me up
The way you spit me out
I keep coming back
I can't get enough
I can't go without you

- “Break the Spell” by Daughtry

Winter opened his eyes, and blinked in confusion. How was he still alive? He hadn't expected to wake up again, yet here he was, lying in his familiar bed as though all that agony had just been a nightmare.

When he shifted, the pain shooting up his right arm made it quite obvious it had not been a nightmare. “Wha...?” He looked down at himself and saw that his arm was bandaged and lay on top of the blankets, and someone had changed his clothes to soft pajamas. That meant they had probably seen the cuts on his legs....

Then he realized Steve was there, sitting at his bedside looking as weary as if he'd sat there all night. “Hey,” he said with a wan smile. “How are you feeling? Sorry, we had to change your clothes. There was blood everywhere....”

Winter didn't know how he felt about this. Guilt stabbed at him from the hurt expression on Steve's face, but he was also still so angry with him. More than anything else, however, he was confused.
Didn't Steve say that he was giving up? Hadn't he decided it was too hard to keep taking care of Winter? Hadn't he betrayed every promise he'd made?

Yet here he sat, taking care of Winter with the same dedication and concern he'd always shown.

Suddenly, Winter became aware of a terrible thirst, like those awful days when his whole body begged for Hydra's drugs. “Thirsty,” he gasped. He glanced around, his eyes locking on a glass of water sitting on the bedside table.

“I'm sure you are,” Steve said gently. “Sam wanted to give you an IV saline solution, but...well, that's not really feasible right now.” He picked up the familiar blue bandanna and tied it in a loop so Winter could easily pull it over his head one-handed. “So you've got to drink lots of fluids and get your strength back up. You should probably stay in bed for a couple days at least, to be on the safe side. So I'm afraid it's back to this again.”

He pointed out the glass of water on the bedside table. “There's water there, and something for pain if you need it. I'll get you something to eat.”

It was strangely soothing to slip back into these old, familiar roles. He wasn't struggling to read Steve's motives. He knew that Steve would never hurt him physically, so he could just focus on letting Steve guide him through recovery. He didn't have to think very far into the future, just focus on eating the soup Steve fed him without letting his face be seen.

“I'm...I'm really sorry about...yesterday,” Steve said after Winter had finished his soup. “I wanted so much for everyone to be happy that...I didn't realize how much you were hurting.”

Winter was torn. He couldn't forget the way Steve had said he was giving up, but...he must still care, right? He had saved Winter's life when it would have been far simpler to just let him die. He was still going above and beyond what was necessary, sitting and waiting for Winter to wake up....

“Why are you still here?” he blurted out, before he could think better of it.

Steve's face fell, and he felt worse than ever. “Do you want me to leave?”

Winter quickly shook his head. “But why don't you?”

“You're my friend.” His hand closed over Winter's and squeezed gently, encasing it in warmth. “So as long as you need me...as long as you want me...I'm not going anywhere.”

Winter looked down at his hand, trapped in Steve's warm, strong grip. He ought to hate the way Steve clutched at him—claiming him as his own, controlling him, holding him in place—but he didn't. The odd thing was...he liked it. Steve's fingers curled around his, his palm pressed against Winter's knuckles, his thumb rested on the back of Winter's hand.... He felt safe. Like someone pushing him flat against the ground in order to shield him with their own body.

When Steve pulled his hand away, Winter suppressed a disappointed sigh. He wanted Steve to maintain that soothing contact.

“Was it because of me?”

It took Winter a moment to realize what Steve meant, but then he realized that Steve's eyes were fixed on his bandaged arm.

He needed to know. He had to find out if everything Steve said was a lie, or if he was the one who'd been mistaken all along. “You were lying,” he said, watching for Steve's reaction.
At first, the only emotion on his face was confusion. “When? What do you mean?”

“You acted so happy, like everything was fine,” Winter said bitterly, the anger simmering just beneath the surface again. “But everything’s not fine. Nothing’s fine.” He took a deep breath and pushed the anger back down, focusing on Steve’s expression instead. “And then I realized...you gave me your motorcycle...so you were happy because you wanted me to leave.”

The confusion on Steve’s face gave way to a sickening realization, even horror. “Oh, Winter...that wasn't what I meant at all....” He swallowed hard, rubbing his hands over his face and trailing his fingers through his hair. “This is so messed up....”

Steve stared blankly out the window, as if hoping the snowy mountains in the distance would give him advice on what to say. “It was Christmas,” he said weakly. “For as long as I can remember, Christmas has always been...almost magical. I look forward to it all year. When I was a kid, even when we didn't have much, my mother would always try to make it special.” His face softened, till Winter could almost see in him the skinny boy who appeared in his memories. “My best friend, he’d...he’d always come over to play, so even when I was sick...it was still special. Even in the war, we always managed to celebrate Christmas, even with Nazis breathing down our necks. We’d sit around the fire, passing drinks around and telling stories....”

He sighed, and turned back to Winter. “Ever since I woke up in the twenty-first century, it just hasn't been the same. I wanted to have that again. I wanted you to have that.”

Winter watched Steve's face, hunting desperately for any sign of duplicity, any slight indication that he was anything other than the concerned friend he said he was. Then he gave Steve one final test, a final chance to show his true colors. “Tell me the truth. Do you want me to leave?”

Steve met his gaze without a trace of hesitation. “No. Do you want to leave?”

Winter thought about that a moment, but in the end it wasn't hard to decide. If Steve wasn't tired of him...if he didn't want him to leave even after all of this... then Winter never wanted to leave. He shook his head, letting his hair fall in front of his eyes as he looked down at his bandaged arm again.

A comfortable silence fell between them—more comfortable than it had been in a long time. Winter felt as though he could finally let out a breath he'd been holding for too long, or that he was finally able to stretch out a tense muscle and relax. He almost expected Steve to pick up a book and start reading to him like he used to, or maybe tell more stories of past Christmases, but instead Steve said, “I want to help you, but I guess I don't know how. What do you need, Winter? What would make it easier?”

Winter blinked, utterly dumbfounded. No one had ever asked him something like that before. No one in Hydra had cared, and up till now Steve and Sam had both seemed to have a better idea than Winter about what he needed. But now Steve admitted that there was something he wasn't sure about, something he needed help with. He wasn't perfect. He was just a man, doing the best he could.

Somehow, taking him off that pedestal made Winter admire him even more.

Oh, right. Steve was still waiting for an answer. What did he need? What could Steve do to pull him out of this awful place he found himself in? He had no doubt that Steve could help, but.... “I don’t know,” he finally said.

“Well...if you do think of something,” Steve said, “you'll tell me, won't you? Anything at all.”
“Yeah.” He had been drowning, and the current was still dragging him down, but now the shoreline was in sight.

While Winter had been stuck in bed, and the others ministered to his needs like they had before, it had almost begun to feel like things were back to normal—or whatever unsettling form of normalcy there had been before his life spiraled out of control. While he was too weak and pathetic to even get out of bed, it was obvious that Steve and Sam were helping him, and he could just listen to them and let them make all the decisions. He could follow their orders, and they wouldn't be disappointed.

The voice in the back of his head had also fallen silent for the first time in a long while. He could think again, without constantly trying to drown out imagined taunts and threats. He could pay attention to the book Steve started reading him—a book about a man who was stranded on Mars and struggled to survive all alone.

But as soon as he'd recovered enough to move about the house again, he began to hear the whispers again. That voice was like a sinister shadow always lurking just out of sight. He could push it away while the others were talking to him or while he was occupied with something else, but every time he relaxed and turned his back, there it was, waiting to ambush him.

As much as he could, Winter tried to stay near the others. He could ignore the voice better when one of them was talking, or when he was trying to understand what they were doing and why. But it was...awkward. Every time Steve looked at him, his insides shriveled up at the thought of that horrible misunderstanding that had caused Steve so much worry. Winter couldn't join in their conversations, couldn't laugh easily like Sam. He didn't understand the unspoken camaraderie that passed between those two with every word, every glance. He was something different, a foreigner intruding on their friendship.

So he got by the only way he knew how. While they were waiting for the huge cut down his arm to heal, he knew better than to put any more cuts there. Sam liked to check on its progress at least once a day, so anything Winter did would be immediately obvious. The only way to silence the voice now was to keep slicing at his legs. Once he tried his chest, but as he lifted the knife, the voice started shrieking, Plunge it right into your blackened heart! That's it, just end it all right now! He was too scared to try that again. Too scared that he would listen to himself.

He’d hoped that things would be different, after going so far and being pulled back from the brink. After talking with Steve and making sure they both understood what was going on, shouldn't things have been better? Easier?

But, if anything, just surviving at all had become harder than ever. Now he fully realized what the others had been trying to tell him all along. If he continued like this for much longer, he would die. But...he had no other options. There was nothing he could do but keep digging his own grave.

After Sam took the stitches out of his arm, Winter expected everything to revert to the way it had been before he'd almost died. Now that the danger was past and they had fulfilled their responsibility of making sure he'd healed properly, they would leave him to his own devices, wouldn't they? They would let him struggle through this waking nightmare alone, because there was nothing more they could do.
So when Sam pointed out one day that he had an infected cut on his arm, and gave him an ice pack and a look of concern, Winter accepted his help but didn't expect anything more. He had done all he could. Winter just wished they wouldn't always look so sad about something that would never change.

Winter was about to turn away and slink back to his room, but Sam said quietly, “Can you tell me what makes you want to go for the knife? Maybe next time you feel like that, we can do something different so it won't be so hard.”

Winter was taken aback—as much by Sam's offer to change what he did as by the question itself. But how was he supposed to explain anything to Sam? How could someone like Sam understand about the voice, or that horrible blank emptiness he felt inside that could only be filled with pain? How could he describe this suffocating pressure that made him feel like he was being frozen all over again?

“I don't know,” he mumbled, defeated.

“Well, what about this time?” Sam persisted. “What did you feel like right before?”

For the first time, Winter really examined what happened before he cut himself. He normally thought of it as just the voice in the back of his head nagging at him till he made it shut up. But what if there was something that triggered the voice in the first place? What if there was some way to keep it from speaking up at all?

Hope swelled in his chest, nearly choking him. *It won't do any good,* the voice was quick to whisper in his ear. *There's nothing you or anyone else can do to stop me. That's because what I tell you is the truth.*

But the voice was still quiet enough that Winter could push it away and focus instead on remembering what had happened right before he'd cut his arm. “I was...in my room,” he said slowly. ‘You were out running. Cap went to get groceries.” He remembered the feeling that had settled over him as he stood in the silent house, that feeling like he was the only living person in the whole world.

It wasn't a comforting thought when his only companion was his own sick brain.

“I was just looking out my window at the mountains,” he continued, “when I thought about the last time I saw mountains. On a...mission....”

*Find the target, squeeze the trigger, splash of blood on the snow. Footstep from behind crunching in the ice, whirl around, drop gun, grab knife, through the chest, blood everywhere—hands, face, snow, death—*

Winter heard a crack and looked down. The ice pack was crushed in his metal fist, leaking all over his arm and dripping onto the floor. He hastily dropped it in the sink and drew a deep breath, banishing those memories to the back of his mind again.

“Next time you feel like that, could you come tell me?” Sam said, and Winter gratefully turned his attention back to the conversation. “Maybe a distraction would help, something to keep you busy. We could go running or something. How does that sound?”

*He's just saying that because he doesn't realize how many times a day you'll have to go to him for help,* the voice in the back of his head muttered bitterly, as if it could tell that it was losing the battle.

If he could go to Sam, maybe he could resist what the voice told him. Maybe, once he started to do something else, he could forget for a short time. He doubted it would work as well as the knife, but it
was worth a try, at least.

“Just...don't tell Cap?” He didn't think he could stand it if Steve knew just how often he would need this kind of distraction. His opinion of Winter would sink even lower, and he would look at him with that horribly sad, disappointed look....

No. It was better that only Sam knew.

He glanced up at Sam, who was watching him thoughtfully. What was he thinking? Did he know why Winter had asked? But without giving any indication, Sam said, “All right. If that's what you want...then I promise.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

 Attend to my cry,  
for I am brought very low!  
Deliver me from my persecutors,  
for they are too strong for me!  
Bring me out of prison,  
that I may give thanks to your name!  
The righteous will surround me,  
for you will deal bountifully with me.  

- Psalm 142:5-7
I've long been wanting to explore why Sam chose to join Steve and Winter, and why Natasha didn't. This proved much more difficult than I'd been anticipating—for different reasons for each of the characters. I've actually never written Natasha's POV before, and I don't really feel comfortable in her head. I just feel like there's too many unanswered questions about her past to really understand her reasons for what she does (not to mention the OOC fiasco that is AoU, but that's another subject...). Hopefully some of those questions will be answered in future movies, but for now I hope I did an okay job with what we do know. As for Sam, I feel very comfortable in his head...but his reasons for helping Steve are actually so simple and unremarkable (to him) that it's kind of hard to write about them from his POV. For him, it's basically, “Well, of course I'm helping him. He needs the help, and I can give it. No biggie.” Yeah, no biggie, Sam—you just put your entire life on hold for a guy you just met, without even needing to be asked. I love you, Sam T_T

Also, just in case anybody forgot or missed the memo the first time, I want to remind everyone that in this AU, Natasha and the Winter Soldier don't know each other from before. Since we've gotten no confirmation or details of their history in the MCU at the time I'm writing this, it's much simpler to just cut any of that out rather than me trying to guess how they might possibly reveal it in the MCU later.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 2, “The First Day of Winter.”

Do you ever think about running away
’Cause I was thinking about leaving today
We'll follow forever where our hearts wanna go
Maybe we'll end up somewhere that nobody knows our names
Then things might change for the good

I wanna be somewhere so far away
To lie under the night at the end of another good day
I can't tell you how long we'll be gone
But as long as we're together then forever is never too long

- “Runaway” by 3 Doors Down

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requested by MichaelaRL on FFNet
Natasha fed more quarters into the ancient library printer and glanced around as the next batch of papers churned out slowly. Color printing was more expensive and time-consuming, but she was proud of her work. She wanted Steve to be able to glean as much information from this report as possible. There were enough unpredictable elements in the path he'd chosen; the least she could do was get rid of a few question marks.

The library wasn't very busy this time of day, but Natasha kept her eyes roving over its few patrons. She wasn't worried—if any Hydra thugs were still alive and hadn't been taken into custody, they would be licking their wounds for a while before they dared to lift their heads again. By that time, she planned to be as far away from the ruins of S.H.I.E.L.D. as Steve would.

This wasn't her whole list of safe houses, of course. Just the ones that would require the least amount of looking over one's shoulder. She didn't mind doing that; it came second-nature to her by now. But Steve could use the extra sense of security. As could his traveling companion, no doubt.

The printer ground to a halt, spitting out the last page. Natasha shuffled through her papers at the table next to the printer, ordering them from nearest to farthest. She tried to imagine Steve and the Winter Soldier hanging out in one of the cabins on her list, like two average guys on a camping trip. She wasn't sure whether to laugh or fear for Steve's safety. Ultimately, she was just glad she wasn't being asked to join Steve's attempt to help the man who'd now tried to kill her twice—and nearly succeeded.

Gathering up the papers into a folder, Natasha made her way out of the library and across the street to a little park, where trees and flowers carved out a small sanctuary amid the tall buildings and bustling streets. A few couples strolled along the path, and an old man sat on a bench feeding the pigeons. Oh, wait, that was Steve.

Mentally snickering at her own joke, Natasha walked over to Steve (who wasn't actually feeding pigeons). Her eyes swept across the paths and trees around them to make sure no one was close enough to eavesdrop. When Steve saw her approaching, he got to his feet. Natasha motioned with a tilt of her head towards the path, and they began to walk side-by-side at a leisurely pace.

“You know,” she commented, “you didn't actually have to tell the press you were going on vacation.” If it had been her, she would have sent a few carefully-written tweets or something instead of drawing attention to it like he had—but then, Steve didn't use Twitter or Facebook, so the old-fashioned way would have to work.

“I didn't want them harassing me every time I set foot outside,” Steve said, acting as though it wasn't obvious his real reason for going into hiding was to make sure the Winter Soldier didn't get caught. Well, it wouldn't hurt to play along.

“If you think that's going to keep them from hounding you,” Natasha said with a smirk, “you're more naive than I thought. So it's a good thing you picked me as your travel guide.” She handed over the folder she'd spent all morning putting together.

She watched Steve thumb through the folder. It was amazing how he could be so easy to read, yet so hard to understand. She knew, on an intellectual level, that he was doing this because he felt responsible for what Hydra had done to the Winter Soldier. He'd explained that he simply wanted to
give the Soldier a second chance. She got that much; it was a lot like what Clint had done for her.

But she liked to think she had given Clint some encouragement on that front. They'd had several conversations before he'd made the decision to go against his orders and spare her life. She'd given him solid proof that she was ready and willing to go straight. But what about the Winter Soldier? She supposed neither she nor Sam would ever know exactly what he and Steve might have talked about before the third helicarrier exploded. Maybe he had given Steve a solid reason to believe there was still a chance for him.

But Steve had made up his mind to save the Winter Soldier before they'd even spoken one word to each other. He didn't wait to make sure that he would succeed, or that the Soldier would respond well. He'd just decided he was going to help this man, whether he wanted or deserved it...or not.

She wondered if the Winter Soldier knew how lucky he was.

“I'm noticing a theme,” Steve said, raising an eyebrow at the papers in his hands. “What is this, Romanoff's Rustic Roadtrip?”

With a laugh, Natasha said, “All of these are a fair distance from civilization, and the nearest towns are pretty small, so you should get your privacy. I gave you some options in case you blow your cover.” Which you will, if you call that a disguise, she added silently, eyeing his ball cap and sunglasses, which did precious little to actually hide his identity.

Steve gave her a long, thoughtful look. It still caught her by surprise sometimes, how unaffectedly noble he often looked. Steve was terrible at acting a part, so it was obvious that every selfless thought carried across his face was genuine. She knew for a fact that nothing he did or said was intended to manipulate or trick her into helping him. When he'd asked her for advice on where he could lie low for a while, she had done so willingly. And if he asked her to join him on this foolhardy quest, she doubted she would refuse. The thought terrified her. She wouldn't even accept a mission like that from Fury, not with so little assurance that anything good would come of it, or that she wouldn't end up dead at the end of it. What had Steve done to her, these past few days?

“Thank you,” Steve said, slowing to a complete stop and turning to face her. “I really appreciate this.”

But no, of course he wasn't asking her for help. He was a great leader, but he liked it best when the people who followed him were volunteers. It made sense—that way he'd know they were truly invested in the job. And especially after his trust in S.H.I.E.L.D. had been so shaken, there probably weren't too many people he'd trust to accompany him on such an important mission.

She met his gaze—not judgmental, not demanding or even asking anything of her, just waiting to see what she would do—and almost said it. If you need help, I'll go with you. Even though he terrifies me. Even though I can't see in him what you seem to. Even though, every time I think about what was done to him, I can only remember all the things I've tried so hard to forget.

No. The Winter Soldier needed someone else. Someone much braver, and much less selfish. He'd be able to tell instantly that she doubted and feared him, and that wouldn't help him heal at all. Even though he probably didn't know the half of what he was getting himself into, Steve was much better suited to the task.

“Just be careful, Steve,” she said, pulling him into a hug and kissing him on the cheek. She knew she wouldn't be seeing him for a long time. “I don't want to come out of hiding just to go to your funeral.”
“I'm just going on vacation,” Steve said, studiously looking at the papers he was putting back into the folder.

Natasha rolled her eyes and turned away. “You're still a terrible liar.”

Once she was out of earshot, she pulled out her phone and tapped the most recent contact she'd added. It rang only once before the call connected. “Confirmed,” she said briskly. “He's going alone, not asking for help.”

“Roger that. Looks like we're going with Plan B.”

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“Okay, he's leaving on his motorcycle,” Natasha said, peering through her binoculars. “But he left all his stuff in the car, so he's probably picking up the Soldier and bringing him back here.”

“Guess I might as well wait over there, then,” Sam said, unbuckling his seatbelt. He was relieved; he felt too much like a stalker, just sitting here and spying on Steve from a distance. At least they weren't in a white van.

Once he'd gotten out of the car and retrieved his duffel bag and Falcon wings, he turned to Natasha. “Thanks for everything.” He knew she was antsy to make herself scarce, but she'd hung back specifically to help him meet up with Steve and the Winter Soldier.

Natasha started to shrug, but then seemed to think better of it and waved her hand instead. “No skin off my back. You're the one who's actually tagging along with them.” She opened her mouth, as if to say something more, then closed it again.

He waited for a moment, but she didn't continue, so he slung his duffel bag over his shoulder. “Make sure you change those bandages regularly,” he said, nodding at her left shoulder. “Stitches come out in ten days.”

“Yes, Dr. Wilson,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes. “Believe it or not, this isn't my first rodeo.”

“All right, all right,” Sam chuckled. He pulled her into a one-armed hug, careful of her wounded shoulder. “I know you won't go to a doctor, so just take care of yourself, okay?”

“I will.” Natasha looked up at him somewhat wistfully as they broke apart. “And you take care of Steve. He doesn't realize how much he needs it yet.”

“Will do.” He gave her a final nod, and started across the street to the deserted parking lot where a single car waited. “Guess I'll see you when I see you.”

Natasha called after him, “If you need anything...call me. Anything at all. I might be kind of far away, but I'll come as quick as I can. You have my number.”

Sam paused, looking back at her. He realized this was probably a rare offer, coming from her. She'd outed herself in a big way when they took down S.H.I.E.L.D., making her own dirty secrets as public as Hydra's. She was the sort of person who could make herself completely untraceable, and he couldn't really blame her for doing so. But she was keeping this channel of communication open, just in case they needed help with a man who'd tried to kill her twice. If that wasn't selflessness, he didn't
know what was.

He nodded slowly. “Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. And I'll make sure Steve knows too.”

Natasha smiled—a genuine smile he realized he'd rarely seen from her—and raised a hand in farewell before getting back into her car.

As Sam walked over to the car Steve had left in the empty parking lot, his thoughts turned back to the task ahead of him. Though there was nothing simple about what Steve was trying to do, the decision to help him had been the easiest one Sam had ever made. It had quickly become obvious that he wasn't going to ask for help—probably from some misguided notion about this being his fault, so he had to solve it all on his own.

Idiot. Well, if he wasn't going to ask for help, Sam would take that decision away from him and just help him anyway.

When he reached the car, Sam looked around and realized he probably needed to hide. If they saw him standing there as they drove up, the Winter Soldier might think it was a setup and the whole thing would fall to pieces before it began. No, he needed to be within earshot when they first saw him, so they could ease any concerns that might arise. So he settled down onto one knee in the shadow of one of the rear wheels, listening for the sounds of an approaching motorcycle. He'd probably be able to hear it before he saw it.

So there he was, crouching in the shadow of an SUV parked in the empty parking lot of a deserted strip mall, hiding from a friend he'd made a couple days ago, preparing to drop off the face of the earth to help an assassin who'd trashed his car and almost killed him the day before.

Though Sam didn't doubt or regret his choice for a second, he had to admit he was a little surprised at himself. True, he'd admired Captain America since he was a boy, and it hadn't taken long at all before he'd realized this was a leader he would gladly follow to death and beyond. But if Steve was only a good leader, he wouldn't be doing this. He'd followed other good leaders before—leaders whose orders he would loyally carry out.

But Steve hadn't ordered him to follow him this time. He hadn't suggested it or even told Sam what he was doing. Before, when Sam had offered his help in taking down the helicarriers, Steve hadn't asked for his help, but he had openly discussed what he was trying to do, and had been too aware of how Sam could help to put up much resistance to him joining the team. This time, Steve hadn't breathed a word about his plans, even when Sam had gently prodded him about it. It was obvious that Steve didn't want to ask anyone to join him, yet here Sam was, going out of his way to join him.

That wasn't following a leader. That was helping a brother.

Sam watched a puffy cloud drifting across the cheerful blue sky. He could only remember one person who had become so important to him so fast. It had only taken sitting next to each other on a plane, early on in their training. When he'd stepped on the plane, it had just been 'the guy sitting next to me.' By the time they'd landed, it was 'my best friend, Riley'.

Sam hadn't thought he still had it in him to care so much. He'd thought that part of his heart had shriveled up and died...but here he was. Ready to do anything for Steve Rogers—not just because he was Captain America, not just because he believed in what Steve was doing.

The rumble of a motorcycle grew louder, and Sam carefully positioned himself so he couldn't be seen from the road. He wasn't going to let Steve refuse his help, because they were brothers now. And Sam had a long history of helping his brothers, even when they didn't ask for it.
A friend loves at all times,
and a brother is born for adversity.

- Proverbs 17:17
Here we go. The light at the end of the tunnel. This chapter is a perfect example of why I wanted so strongly to do this fic. I mean, we get a great story in Make Me Whole, and this scene is complete and encouraging when it's just from Steve's POV. But there's a whole dimension that you haven't seen yet, because you don't know what Winter's experience is. As I'm sure you can imagine, this part of the story was particularly important for me to write while writing Make Me Whole, because this epiphany shapes the course of Winter's life. I'm so happy to get to share it at last.

This chapter takes place during Make Me Whole chapter 7, “Cross the Distance.”

I was safe  
I was empty  
Wide awake  
But I was still dreaming  
The sound of a closing door  
Footsteps to something more

...  

Hearts are burning  
Eyes are open  
Still I'm certain  
That now's the moment  
To change direction  
Break the mold and  
Just start running  
Don't know where we're going

- “The Other Road” by David Hodges

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To Winter's extreme relief, Sam's plan to distract him from cutting worked. When he found his fingers itching for a knife, he would go find Sam and just say, “I need to run.” Without making any comment or betraying any sign of reluctance, Sam would drop whatever he was doing immediately,
and they would set out together. Winter focused on the trail in front of him, and ran away from the voice and all the worries that followed it.

Unfortunately, Winter couldn’t run away from his problems forever. After distracting himself, he could go for a while without thinking about reaching for a knife, but eventually that urge would always rear its ugly head again. Sometimes he thought resisting the voice in the back of his head only made it stronger and louder the next time it spoke. It was like Hydra—defiance only made them more determined to break you.

And Sam couldn’t be there all the time. Often Winter would lie awake in the middle of the night, haunted by the endless torments of his own thoughts and memories. In those moments, he hated himself, but what else could he do? He couldn’t just go running in the middle of the night, nor did he want to wake Sam up, so the only choice was to cut himself again. Even during the day, sometimes he would go to find Sam to ask for help, but Sam would be busy, or Steve would be there. In despair, Winter would have to help himself.

He was finding his way to a new, precarious equilibrium. His only fear was that it would prove unsustainable.

One early morning, as Sam and Winter were about to head out the front door for yet another run, Steve came into the kitchen and glanced over at them. He didn’t say a word, but sometimes Winter wondered if he had figured out why they went running so often. Maybe he already knew, and his opinion of Winter had already fallen so far that—

“Hey,” Sam suddenly muttered, breaking into his thoughts. “You mind if I ask him to join us? He just...looks really left out, you know?”

Winter looked up in surprise, glancing between Sam and Steve, who stood filling up the coffee pot with water from the sink. Steve...left out? He had never stopped to consider that Steve might wish to be included in what they were doing. He had been too worried about what Steve would think of him if he knew how badly off Winter was.

Sam, misreading his expression, quickly added, “I won’t tell him why we’re doing this unless you want me to. But I think he’d enjoy it.”

Winter looked again at Steve's slumped shoulders, his slow movements, the furtive glances he kept shooting their way. He just looked...miserable.

Winter glanced back at Sam and nodded.

The way Steve's face brightened when Sam invited him made it clearer than ever that Sam was right. Winter met his eyes briefly, almost afraid that he would figure out the real reason behind this excursion. But Steve just gave Winter a smile that warmed him from head to toe.

As soon as they stepped outside into the brisk morning air and started to run along the side of the winding mountain road, Winter felt all the tension inside him relax, as it always did. The chaos in his mind stilled, and the world opened up before him. He settled into the others' rhythm, running on Steve's left side.

This was what he'd been missing—the feeling that he belonged, that they were all running down the same path together, and if he stumbled there was a man on either side who could pick him up again.

Winter glanced sidelong at the others—Sam, puffing and panting as he struggled to maintain this pace, and Steve, eyes bright and head tilted back to take in the view as they ran. Maybe this was
what life was like. They were all running down the same path, but some found the going easier than
others. That didn't mean anything was wrong with them—Sam was a strong man; he just didn't have
the enhanced muscles that Steve and Winter did. Some people, like Steve, would look at their
surroundings and say what a beautiful day it was. People like Winter might just say it was cold and
the sun was too bright. But, despite all their differences, at least for a short time they could run side-
by-side. For this one, fragile moment, he wasn't alone.

It was especially comforting to have Steve there, he realized. He'd enjoyed running with Sam, but
there had always been a sense that something was wrong or missing, like a discordant note in a
familiar tune. With Steve running at his side, matching him stride for stride, he knew that everything
would be all right. The world was as it should be.

When he looked over at Steve again, he saw Steve glance over to Sam, then back to him with a
devious little grin. And in that moment, something magical happened. The invisible thread that so
often seemed to connect Steve and Sam, so that they seemed able to understand each other without
speaking, speared right through Winter. He knew what Steve was about to do. How did he know
that?

But there was no time to figure it out. A moment after Steve looked at him, he took off running as
fast as he could—just as Winter had known he would. He put on a burst of speed in the same
moment, vaguely aware of Sam calling from behind, “Aw, c'mon, no fair!”

Winter pushed himself as hard as he could, but he could never pull ahead of Steve. They were
perfectly matched. Equals. Running like this, pushing themselves to their limits but neither leading
the way nor falling behind.... For the first time, Winter felt like his eyes were open. He could see it all
so clearly now. He was the same as the man he looked up to so much. They were no different.
Just...human.

Bucky sat down on the curb next to the skinny blond boy who was glumly watching several boys
playing baseball in the street. He couldn't join them, of course. He never could join them. Even if the
other boys had let such a scrawny, unpopular boy into their game, he would have been out of breath
in five seconds. Then he would probably have to go to the hospital again and his mother would scold
him for scaring her half to death.

Steve heaved a deep sigh—as deep as he could manage, anyway. “I wish I could run.” He gazed at
the running and laughing boys as if they were a different species.

Bucky looked at his wistful expression for a moment, then nodded to himself, his mind made up. He
got to his feet, then crouched in front of Steve, facing away from him. He grabbed Steve's stick-thin
arms, pulled them around his neck, and in one fluid motion he stood up, pulling Steve to his feet as
well.

“Bucky?” he stammered in confusion.

Bucky grabbed Steve's legs behind the knees and effortlessly hoisted him up so he rested against
Bucky's back. He barely weighed anything at all. With a whoop, Bucky set off running down the
street, Steve clutching frantically to his neck so he wouldn't fall off.

At first, Steve clung to Bucky for dear life, but as Bucky kept running, leaning over far enough that
Steve wouldn't fall even if he lost his grip, Steve finally began to relax. Slowly, he let go with one
arm, then the other. He held them out to either side like an airplanes' wings, savoring the wind
blasting in their faces as Bucky ran. He ran faster and faster, ignoring the aching in his legs and the
burning in his lungs, cherishing the sound of Steve laughing with pure joy.
He felt the same ache in his legs now, the same burn in his chest, the same exhilaration thrumming all through him. But somehow, this was even better than what he’d felt in his memory, because he knew that Steve felt it too.

Just as he was starting to wonder how long he could keep up this pace, Steve turned aside into a little picnic area with tables and benches. He slowed down, then fell to the ground, panting. Winter dropped to his knees next to Steve, unable to stay on his feet any longer, then imitated him and fell onto his back on the frost-crusted ground.

Winter looked over at Steve, who looked back. His weary, sweat-drenched face split into a wide grin, though they were both too out of breath to say anything.

Then something happened to Winter's face. He could feel the muscles in his cheeks stretching, pushing against the stiff material of his mask like he’d never felt before. His mouth widened, bunching his cheeks up in a way that seemed...familiar.

Oh. He was smiling.

His surprise wiped the smile off his face, but it returned after a moment, stretching his face even more than before. He tried to memorize the way it felt, so he could recreate it later in the mirror and see what it looked like. The euphoria settled down with his racing heart, easing into such a strong sense of serenity that he didn't want to move.

The void inside him—that black, empty space in the pit of his stomach that sometimes made him wonder if he was even alive—was usually something he either ignored or tried to fill with his own blood. But now...now...it was brimming with warmth and light. Overflowing, spilling over with...what was it? What was this amazing feeling, like he would burst into a supernova and banish every shadow in the universe?

Winter was a little disappointed when Steve finally sat up. He thought he could have stayed there, lying at Steve's side, forever—no matter how cold the ground was. Steve clambered to his feet and held out a hand to Winter. Winter stared at it for a moment, then realized he wanted to help Winter get to his feet. Even though he could have gotten up on his own, he let Steve take his hand and pull him upright.

His hand was so warm. So strong. He didn't want to let go, but eventually he had to. Steve would look at him strangely if he didn't.

Steve was still smiling, but Winter's face had returned to normal. “I think we'll walk back, what do you say?” Steve chuckled.

Winter nodded, and they began the long walk home. Winter's heartbeat had slowed back down to a normal pace, but his spirits were soaring. He couldn't remember ever feeling so...happy. Joyful. Content. Those words had never seemed to apply to him before. The happiness he'd sometimes identified in those childhood memories had never felt this immediate and real. They had always belonged to Bucky, not to Winter.

But this feeling was just for him. He was alive, he was here, he was Winter, and...he was glad. Now he thought he understood why Steve smiled so much. He would too, if he had known something like this existed. That it could be his.

Suddenly, Steve threw an arm around Winter's shoulders and pulled him close as they walked. Winter started at first, but once he got used to it, he rather liked the feel of Steve's arm around him. Winter's right side pressed against Steve, comfortably warm in the chilly breeze. They walked in
silence, but the air was full of unuttered words, flowing between them on the invisible thread connecting them. Steve's protective arm around him seemed to say some of them, as did the way their footsteps matched each other. Winter listened.

After they had been walking for a while, a car appeared around the next bend, driving towards them. Winter easily recognized it as the one the others used to drive into town. Steve let his arm drop as Sam pulled up beside them and rolled down the window.

“You know, I oughta just let you guys walk the whole way after leaving me behind like that.”

Winter was thinking about how much he liked Steve's arm around him when he found himself blurting out, “It's not our fault you're a slowpoke.”

He snapped his mouth shut when the others stared at him. Where had that come from?

Steve let out a surprised chuckle, and soon both he and Sam were laughing loudly. Winter watched them, not sure what to think. He'd seen and heard them laughing enough times by now to figure out that they weren't mocking anyone when they did it. They almost seemed to just laugh for the sake of laughing, or to express their pleasure in something. Winter remembered the way it had felt as a child, to feel Steve laughing for joy, the vibrations of his laughter thrumming through him from behind. Now, he had elicited that reaction again.

Eventually, the laughter died down and Sam said, “Come on, let's go home. It's getting cold.”

Winter climbed into the back of the car and settled in for the ride back to the cabin. Home, Sam had called it. Was that what home meant? A place of warmth and safety, where no danger could touch them. A place where he could figure out who he was, and how he fit into the rest of the world. How he fit into their world.

Returning to Hydra had never felt like going home. Going back to them was always an act of despair and desperation, because there was nowhere else for him to go. But listening to Steve and Sam's cheerful conversation as they drove back to the cabin, and stepping inside to be greeted with a bowl of pancake batter just waiting to be cooked.... Even if he had another choice, he thought he would want to return here.

“Ah-ah-ah!” Sam said, waggling his finger when Steve started to sit down at the table. “Neither of you gets anything to eat if you're just going to stink up the whole room! Go on!” he added, pushing them both lightly in the direction of the stairs. “Into the shower!”

“Yes, Mom,” Steve said with a roll of his eyes, but he was grinning, so Winter decided it must be another joke.

Winter followed Steve upstairs and listened to him whistling cheerfully as he stepped into his room. Winter opened the door to his own room and paused just inside, looking around. It was strange, how everything looked the same as he'd left it this morning, when he had finally been able to put the knife down long enough to go looking for Sam. Maybe it was just the golden sunlight streaming through the windows, but...everything felt different in an intangible yet beautiful way.

He looked at the knife he'd hastily discarded on top of his dresser, which now lay in a thick band of sunlight. The sharp edge glittered in the sunlight—enticing, so beautiful it was hard to believe how dangerous it was. He reached out, running one metal finger along its razor-sharp edge....

Abruptly, he yanked open the top drawer of the dresser, where he kept all his knives, and gathered them all into his arms. Last he grabbed the one sitting on top—his favorite one, the one that sat in the
palm of his hand like he was born to use it. Then he took them all next door, into Steve's room.

Steve turned around and stopped whistling when he saw what Winter was carrying. Before he could think better of it, before he could stop himself, Winter dumped all of his knives on top of the brightly colored quilt on Steve's bed. He eyed them all again, reluctant to give them up. With a knife in his hand, he felt safe. In control. Able to hold his own. But even so, he knew now that there was something better than clinging so tightly to his own safety. Maybe right now what he really needed was to take a risk.

“I might want to use these later,” he said, lifting his eyes to meet Steve's. “Don't let me.”

He turned on his heel and marched out before he could second-guess himself or regret his decision. He was risking everything...but he had the world to gain.

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Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain gladness and joy,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

- Isaiah 35:10
I was hesitant at first to put these two scenes together in the same chapter. Even though, chronologically speaking, one happens shortly after the other, there was actually almost a year in between the writing of each scene, so they feel very separate in my mind. But the more I considered both of these scenes, the more I realized they belong together. This is a very important point in the story for Winter. It's the first time he really takes it upon himself to contribute, to really give back, to this friendship that's been growing stronger and stronger. This is the point at which he stops simply accepting the others' friendship, and starts figuring out how to return it. So it seemed fitting that this would be the chapter with the moment featured in the cover art.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 9, “Echoes of the Past.”

All I want is freedom
A world with no more night
And you, always beside me
To hold me and to hide me

Say you want me with you here, beside you
Anywhere you go, let me go too

Love me, that's all I ask of you

- “All I Ask of You” from Phantom of the Opera

~*~*~*~*~*~

requested by Oceanera12 on FFNet
Winter was minding his own business in the laundry room one day when Sam stepped into the room and asked without preamble, “How much do you know about Bucky Barnes?”

Winter froze, his arms full of damp clothing, as his heart slammed up into his throat. Sam knew. Or at least he guessed. It was all over now. They knew he'd been lying to them. They would be angry. They would throw him out. He would be alone forever. He would have to leave the safety and stability of this new life, and he would never see Steve or Sam again. They wouldn't want to see him again.

Why did he have to be Bucky? Why couldn't he have been someone, anyone else? If not for this connection to Steve, he could show them his face instead of having to watch his step to make sure he didn't slip up. They would have no expectations, no preconceptions of what he should be. They would accept him the way he was. He could just be Winter. He could just be nobody.

But then he realized what Sam was saying. “He was Steve's best friend. They fought together in World War II, but he died in '45.”

Winter watched Sam carefully, but he couldn't detect a single shred of irony or accusation. Nothing to suggest he knew who Winter was and was trying to trick him into admitting it. He wasn't putting two and two together, explaining how he'd figured the truth out. He was simply telling Winter who Bucky was, assuming that Winter had no idea.

Winter forced himself to take a breath. He was still safe. They hadn't figured it out. They didn't know that he could remember falling from the train, nor that one of the first memories he'd recovered had been his old name.

He hung onto every word Sam said as he described how Bucky had died, and what it meant for Steve. Had he really been so important to him? What was it about Bucky that Steve had valued so much that he still found the loss so painful? Winter didn't fool himself into thinking he could be anything like that again...but he still wanted to know what he used to be.

“Anyway, just give him some space tomorrow,” Sam concluded. “But don’t let him be alone for too long either, okay? We'll be there for him when he needs us.”

Winter nodded, since that seemed to be the expected response. But even after Sam left, Winter still stood with his arms full of wet clothes, his mind whirling and his stomach churning.

All the rest of that day and the next, Winter watched Steve carefully. He didn't know what he'd expected, but Steve surprised him by how calm he was. He was quieter than usual, hardly saying a word all day, and he stared thoughtfully into space for long periods of time. There were no profusions of emotion, just a quiet, subdued weight dragging his shoulders down and deepening the lines in his forehead.

What was he thinking about? What was he remembering that made him so withdrawn?

For most of the day, Winter followed Sam's lead and stayed out of Steve's way. But in the middle of the afternoon, he glanced out the window and saw Steve sitting on the wooden bench on the deck out back. He wasn't wearing a coat or gloves, but he was just sitting there, barely moving. If not for the intermittent puffs of his breath clouding the air, he could almost be an ice statue.
Winter hesitated for a minute or two, but then he bundled up in coat, hat, gloves, and scarf. He grabbed a warm blanket they kept draped over the back of the couch and ventured outside at last. Steve didn't seem to notice him until he threw the blanket around Steve's shoulders. Even then, he briefly glanced up but returned to staring into space immediately, his fingers curling around the edges of the blanket and pulling it closed around him.

Winter sat down on the other end of the bench, watching his breath mist in front of him. He felt like he ought to say something—but what? He didn't know what you were supposed to say when someone was grieving you, but you were sitting right next to him. What could he possibly say that wouldn't give everything away in an instant?

Eventually, he gave up on trying to figure it out and decided to satisfy his curiosity instead. “What was Bucky like?”

At first, it didn't seem like Steve would reply. But then he drew a deep breath, looked over at Winter and smiled a tiny, weak imitation of a smile. “He was a jerk.”

Winter blinked in surprise, but Steve just gazed at nothing, the smile still playing about his mouth. “He would come up with all these hare-brained ideas and then drag me along with him—and I was usually the one who got in trouble, because I couldn't run as fast and they'd catch me. And then he'd pretend he had no idea what I was talking about when I complained to him later.”

His smile widened reminiscently. “Bucky was...strong and handsome. Kind. Polite to his elders. Always ready to laugh. He was everyone's favorite. All the girls wanted to dance with him, all the boys wanted him on their team to play ball.”

Slowly, his smile slipped away into a wistful look. “He joined the army,” he continued softly. “Not because he loved violence or wanted glory or thought it would be exciting. He just wanted to protect people. And then...did you know that Hydra captured him too?”

Winter shook his head, his heart thudding violently in his chest. This was where it had all started. Hydra had wrapped their cruel tentacles around him even back then, before he'd forgotten who he was. They had started to change him even then. \textit{That's how I survived falling from that train}, Winter realized. \textit{They were already trying to start the Winter Soldier Program. So when I fell from the train, they went looking for me, because they knew that I would survive...and that Steve would think I was dead.}

“Yeah,” Steve said, staring into the middle distance again. “They tortured him. Experimented on him. I don't even \textit{know} what all they did to him; he'd never say. It would have been perfectly understandable if he'd gone back home after that, but...he wanted to stay and help me. He wanted to fight back. And he never let his fear get in the way of trying to stop them for good.”

Winter turned to look at Steve, whose face was pinched in an expression he couldn't decipher. “He never had to follow me. He never had to be my friend. But...”

Steve didn't say anything more, just sat there with jaw set as though clenching his teeth against physical pain. An instinct rose up in Winter's heart that he hadn't realized was there, a desire to \textit{do} something that would stop the pain. But he didn't know what to do, didn't remember how Bucky used to help. That was who Steve needed right now, and Winter hated that he couldn't be him.

Because he couldn't think of anything else to do, he reached out and put a hand on Steve's shoulder like he'd seen Sam do earlier. It probably wasn't that comforting; he was probably supposed to squeeze Steve's shoulder or rub his hand back and forth or something, but no one had taught him how to comfort someone. He was usually the one seeking comfort.
To his surprise, Steve's whole face crumpled as soon as Winter touched his shoulder. With a sound somewhere between a gasp and a cry, he covered his face with both hands. His sobs were quiet, choked sounds with no voice, like he was trying to stifle them even though there was no use pretending anymore. His shoulders shook with every shuddering gasp, and tears leaked through his fingers.

Winter had been on the other side so many times over the last few months. What would Steve do if their positions were reversed? Well, he would probably say something soothing and encouraging, for one thing. But Winter had no idea what to say.

There was nothing to say in the face of such pain, no mere words that could heal this hurt. Even if he took off his mask and showed Steve he had nothing to grieve anymore...it would still hurt, wouldn't it? Even if Bucky Barnes was technically still alive, he was nothing like the glowing descriptions Steve had just spoken. Bucky was as good as dead, and letting Steve know that would just be cruel.

Winter did the only thing he could think of: He slid down the bench and moved his hand to the other shoulder, holding Steve in an awkward half-hug. Steve turned to him immediately, leaning into the embrace even though it meant bending awkwardly because Winter hadn't scooted far enough to make it comfortable. Steve grabbed Winter's metal arm desperately, like that was the only thing he could hold to keep from falling.

“It's...It's my fault!” Steve gasped, muffling his words in Winter's coat. “I...I k-killed...my best friend....”

“Don't,” Winter whispered, his words catching in his throat. “Don't....”

Because he remembered that train. The images came swiftly when he thought of them, no longer jumbled and confused with memories of leering faces and unnameable tools of torment. He remembered fighting next to Steve. He remembered a hole being blasted in the side of the train. He remembered grabbing the shield, standing over Steve to protect him...and then flying backwards through the hole. Steve desperately trying to reach him. A piece of metal snapping off in his hands, sending him hurtling down into the valley. Steve almost falling off too as he screamed for Bucky. Terror. Cold. Pain.

Because he was shaking so hard with his own sobs, Steve didn't seem to notice the shudder that ran through Winter's body as he shoved the memories away again. The important thing was that it was not Steve's fault. There was nothing more he could have done, no miscalculations or maneuvers he should have prevented. It wasn't a mistake, it was an accident.

But how could he reassure Steve of that? He couldn't exactly tell him that he remembered it. He couldn't even pretend that Sam had told him about it, because Sam hadn't even been born yet. Winter was so pathetic. He wanted to help Steve, but there was absolutely no way.

After long minutes of holding Steve and wracking his brains to think of some way he could actually help, Steve finally began to calm down. He shifted to a more comfortable position, resting his head on Winter's shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said in a shaky voice, sniffling. “I know...I know it happened a long time ago, but...for me, it really hasn't been that long, you know? He...d-died...so soon before I went under the ice. And...it's only been two years since I woke up again. I still haven't gotten used to.... I mean, I still start to say something to him sometimes...and then I r-remember....”

When Steve's voice broke again, Winter stroked his hand down Steve's back a little, trying to imitate the soothing motions Steve was so good at.

“Yeah,” Winter murmured, heart aching. “After everything you’ve told me about him...I think I miss him too.”

Steve let out a long, quavering sigh. “I don't think I'll ever stop missing him,” he said, “but I'm so glad I have you, Winter. You're a good friend.”

What?

Winter blinked quickly several times. After all the wonderful things Steve had said about Bucky, how could he look at this paltry substitute and call him a good friend? He hadn't done anything. He hadn't said anything encouraging. He didn't even remember what Bucky would have done.

But Steve didn't seem to mind. He sniffled, pulled away from Winter, and dried his eyes on a corner of the blanket. And when he looked up at Winter again, he smiled—a real smile this time, warm despite the pain rimming his eyes. “Let's go back inside. It's getting cold out here.”

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Winter couldn't stop staring at Steve out of the corner of his eye. On a normal day, the other men in this cabin were hard enough to comprehend. But...he just didn't know how to process what had happened yesterday.

Strange enough to see Steve so quiet and forlorn, lost in memories of Bucky and the day he'd lost his best friend. Stranger still, to know that he was the one who had fallen from the train that day, and if Steve only knew what lay behind the mask, everything would be different. But the most mind-boggling thing about yesterday was that when Winter had fumbled his way through trying to be comforting, Steve had thanked him. And then he'd said, You're a good friend.

A friend. A friend? Him? The Winter Soldier? The one who'd tried to kill him? The one who'd brought him so much grief and stress, and who had taken so long even to accept his good intentions? And Steve called him a good friend, too.

What did it mean? Winter eyed Steve, watching his smile brighten slightly the next day as they left the old ghost of Bucky behind. He wasn't exactly normal yet, but at least he wasn't staring off into space like he had no idea where he was. Some of the sadness had lifted.

As ever, Winter spent most of his time quietly observing the others go about their daily pursuits. He listened to them talking and teasing each other. He watched the way they smiled at each other, the way Sam nudged Steve in the ribs, and Steve rolled his eyes. That was what friends were like...wasn't it? He knew Steve and Sam were very good friends; he'd seen how they relied on each other and enjoyed each other's company.

But...he wasn't like that...was he? They cared about him, of course—it was impossible to deny that, after everything that had happened. But he was...different, wasn't he? He'd always placed himself in a different category from them. He relied on them, but he was just...someone they took care of.

Right?

I'm so glad I have you, Winter. You're a good friend.
Obviously, Steve wasn't lying. Steve didn't lie, but even if he did...no one could doubt the earnest look in his eyes when he'd pulled back and looked at Winter after saying that. He'd really meant what he'd said.

But what did he mean?

When Winter stepped into the downstairs bathroom to put his mask back on after lunch that day, he decided he couldn't stand it any longer. If he couldn't figure it out on his own, he'd just have to ask them...as loaded of a question as it was. Steve had called him a friend, so he needed to know what expectations were placed on him. Maybe for Steve and Sam, such things came naturally and they could just accept friendship with open arms...but nothing like this came easily to Winter. He'd been mistaken before about so many things. He didn't want to get this wrong too.

As he emerged from the bathroom, Winter's eye fell on the large dictionary sitting on the bookshelf in the living room. He glanced over briefly at the others, but they were busily clearing off the table and putting the food away; they didn't so much as glance up at him. So he crossed the room and quietly opened the dictionary.

**Friend. n. 1. a person attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard.**

Winter stood staring at the first definition listed in that entry, his breath catching in his throat. Then, turning the pages slowly with trembling fingers, he flipped back towards the beginning of the book.

**Affection. n. 1. fond attachment, devotion, or love.**

He didn't know what he'd expected to find in these entries. Something about someone who's useful to you or someone you can laugh with or even someone you can trust to not stab you in the back. But now he saw how shallow his understanding had been—like he thought he knew what the ocean was like after stepping into a bathtub.

Winter peeked over his shoulder at Steve and Sam working in the kitchen, then gazed back down at the definition on the page. Such a short description, but each word was packed full of such deep meaning. Did Steve honestly think of him this way?

**Attachment. I'll miss you, Winter. Please don't go?**

**Devotion. As long as you need me...as long as you want me...I'm not going anywhere.**

**Love. I'm so glad I have you, Winter.**

Slowly, Winter closed the dictionary again and replaced it on the shelf. So. Steve called him a friend. He felt that much affection for Winter—and it went beyond mere words, he knew. Steve had proven, over and over again, that his friendship meant more than just emotions or brief words on a page. He was there for Winter, no matter what it was Winter needed.

Which meant that, if Winter was Steve's friend in turn, he needed to be there for Steve too. Winter turned back to watch the others again. They were laughing about something; he hadn't heard the joke, but Steve's head tipped back in the hearty laugh that Winter loved to see most. Yesterday, it had seemed like Steve would never laugh again.

**Yesterday.... I'm so glad I have you, Winter. You're a good friend.**

He hadn't done much—just sat there and listened to Steve talk about the way things used to be. He'd held Steve when he cried, even though Steve hadn't asked for it. He hadn't let Steve sit there all alone, wallowing in misery.
So...together with what Steve had said...he was already acting as Steve's friend. A good friend, Steve claimed. That was it. And evidently, that was enough.

Steve, still chuckling, turned away to put clean silverware in the drawer. He paused momentarily when he glanced at Winter standing in the living room, and his smile softened slightly before he returned his attention to the silverware drawer.

Something twisted in Winter's chest—not exactly pain, not exactly pleasure—and sent waves of warmth through his body from head to toe. I want to be your friend. I want to be the best friend I possibly can. Even though I know that won't be enough. You deserve so much more than I could ever give you...but please, whatever this is, take it all.

Winter crossed the room till he faced Steve, the ache only intensifying as he drew closer. He waited until Steve turned to face him, then said softly, “I want to hug you.”

Steve's eyebrows rose a little in surprise, but he didn't hesitate to raise his arms slightly.

That was all the encouragement Winter needed to close the space between them and hold Steve close. “Because we're friends...right?”

Steve rested his chin on Winter's shoulder. “Of course we are.”

Suddenly Winter felt warmth behind him; not one to be left out, Sam leaned against him to join the embrace. His arms wrapped around both of them, and even though Winter couldn't see him, he could hear the smile in Sam's voice. “Best friends.”

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We love because he first loved us.

- 1 John 4:19
Starting Over

Chapter Notes

I think it's hard for someone who hasn't struggled with an addiction to understand just how hard it is to give it up. Even once you realize it's a problem, and even when you're trying so hard to quit, it's almost impossible to stop. In fact, I would go so far as to say it is impossible with no outside help. This part of Winter's journey is so important because he's finally realizing that he can ask for help, and that the others are only too happy to give it to him. I mean...just think about that for a second. The Winter Soldier, asking for help, asking for something that's good for him—and receiving a treasure trove of help, affection, and encouragement.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 8, “Turning a New Leaf.”

I said it before and always mean it
I promise this time will be the last
’Cause just when I thought that I’ve come so far from who I used to be
There’s no escaping from my past

Can you save me?
Can you save me from myself?
’Cause I’ve lost it all again
And I think maybe
You’re the one who can pull me out
Of the holes I always dig

- “Can You Save Me?” by Hoobastank

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Not for a single moment did Winter regret his decision to try to stop cutting himself. He could see now what Steve and Sam had been trying to show him all along, that there were better ways to get by. Pain was all he'd known for so long...but he wanted to believe they were right, that it was possible to live without pain.

But it was one thing to decide to stop, and another to actually stop. He was full of good intentions for the first day, his soul singing with newfound freedom. He stayed with the others as much as possible, wondering if they knew how happy he was. If only he knew the right things to say to tell them how comforting it was that they were there, that they hadn't left him even after all this time.

With such gratitude and contentment swelling his heart, Winter didn't even think about the knives he'd given Steve that day. He felt as free as when he'd run away from Hydra in the first place. But
when the day was done and they all retired to their rooms, Winter came under attack.

*Stupid,* that dreaded voice in the back of his head said as soon as he lay down. *How dare you feel happy? How dare you be content? You don't deserve any scrap of happiness, you murderer. Peace? What about the children you burned alive? Comfort? What about the men you've tortured till they screamed? Joy? What about the women you've strangled right in front of their families?*

He could hear them screaming, pleading, crying.... He rolled over and hid his face in the pillows, but he could still see their dripping blood, their wide, sightless eyes....

Winter threw the covers off and got out of bed, knowing he wouldn't be getting any sleep like this. He paced back and forth, the floorboards cold against his bare feet, but it wasn't enough to distract the voice.

*You're a monster. A demon. You ought to suffer like them. Bleed like them. Scream in terror and beg for mercy until you die like them. No one wants you. No one needs you. You bring nothing but trouble and pain to everyone around you.*

From what seemed like a great distance, another voice whispered, *Steve. Steve wants you. Sam wants you.*

But the first voice was so much stronger. It howled with rage and triumph, *But they're not here now, are they? They only put up with you because they don't know what you've done. They don't know what a filthy piece of trash you really are.*

*Yes, they do,* the other voice said, so weakly and faintly that Winter hardly even noticed it. *They researched the Winter Soldier. They know what you've done, and they still want to help you.*

*But they can't help you!* the first voice was quick to point out. *They're asleep, and how thrilled do you think they would be if you woke them up just to deal with this?*

“Shut up,” Winter groaned, resting his forehead on the ice-cold glass of the window. But there was no moon, so he couldn't see anything. There was nothing to distract him from the turmoil in his own mind.

*I think you know what to do if you really want to shut me up.*

*Steve has all of my knives,* Winter thought desperately, *so even if I wanted to—*

*Surely not all the knives.* The voice became sly and smug, and Winter realized in that instant exactly what the voice was getting at. His eyes turned unwillingly towards his boots sitting in the corner. He always kept a small blade in a hidden pocket on the side of his right boot, just in case. It was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand—easily hidden, easily retrieved. He had completely forgotten about it in yesterday's purge, because he used it so rarely.

He didn't want to use it—he *didn't*—but he found himself crossing the room, stooping down, and pulling out the sharp little blade. It sat easily in his metal hand, sharp and thirsty for blood.

*Put it down,* the small, weak voice said. *Put it down, and go straight to Steve. Go now, before it's too late.*

Winter tried to listen, but the other voice was too loud. *It's already too late. There's nothing you can do—nothing he can do—nothing anyone can do to help you now. There's only one way to get rid of me, and you know it. The only way is to fail. You think he likes you? Well, watch me prove him wrong! Disappoint him, and see what he thinks of you after that. He tried so hard, but you're just too*
pathetic to change. You're trapped, and there's no way out. Besides...you deserve this.

Even as the knife bit into the flesh of his wrist, Winter wanted to throw it away. The voices fell silent, and he was left alone with nothing but the knowledge that he had failed.

Winter didn't sleep at all that night. After bandaging his wrist and putting the knife away again, he sat in stunned silence for hours. The voice left him alone, but he could torment himself just as easily without it.

One day. That was all it took for his resolve to shatter into a thousand pieces. How could he face the others now? After everything they'd done for him, this was like a slap in the face. They'd think he didn't care. That he wasn't grateful. That he'd learned nothing in all this time. This would be the final proof that they should give up on him.

At 5:00, Winter got up from his uncomfortable seat on the floor and crept downstairs. Steve and Sam were still asleep, so Winter quietly made himself breakfast and left his dishes in the sink so they wouldn't worry about him. Then he hid in his room again and listened to the sounds of the others beginning to stir.

As the minutes dragged on into hours, Winter began to realize he would have to face them at some point. He couldn't hide forever; they would begin to worry or suspect something was wrong before too long anyway. It was best to get it over with now, rather than waiting in suspense indefinitely and wondering what kind of punishment they would give him.

He waited until he heard Sam get into the shower. He needed to tell them, but he'd rather not face both of their disapproving expressions at once. With leaden feet, he descended the stairs and eventually found Steve in the laundry room.

“Hey, what's up?”

Steve sounded so unbearably cheerful. Winter stood in the doorway, trying to steel himself to crush that cheerfulness. He had to look away. He couldn't watch Steve's expression fall.

Just say it, he tried telling himself. Get it over with. The longer you wait, the harder it's going to be. He took a breath...but he just couldn't do it. He couldn't say it.

I cut myself again. That was all he needed to say. I'm sorry, I cut myself again. I know you tried really hard to get me to stop, but it's no use. This is the way I am, and I'm never going to change. Thanks for trying, but you can give up now. You can't fix me. I'm too broken. It's pointless to try anymore.

The words caught in his throat, and he couldn't spit them out. He didn't want to hear Steve say, You're right.

The minutes ticked by, and still he said nothing. Steve stopped folding the clothes and just stood there. He shifted his weight slightly, but he didn't seem impatient. He didn't even sigh.

He was too good. Too patient, too kind. Not too good to be true...but too good for Winter. He deserved better than anything Winter could give him.
Unable to get the words out, Winter finally just dropped his knife on top of Steve's pile of clothes, then pulled up his sleeve to show where he had cut. Steve grew completely still, and Winter stared at his shoes. He hoped Steve would get angry. He hoped he would shout. He knew Steve wouldn't, but he almost wished Steve would hit him, just this once. That would be preferable to quiet disappointment.

But after a few moments of silence, all Steve said was, “I guess I need to find a better hiding place, huh?”

Winter glanced up a little in surprise, just enough to take in Steve's stance. He was just as relaxed as before—not tense, not angry. He shifted his weight again, edging slightly closer. When he spoke, his voice was gentle and encouraging as ever.

“I'm sorry, Winter,” he said. “This must be very discouraging for you. But don't be too hard on yourself. This is just the first day. All we have to do is start over again.”

Winter blinked, taken completely by surprise. He had moved right past the disappointment that still choked Winter, and was looking ahead to the next step. Like...somehow it was okay that he had failed. He couldn't seem to catch his breath, so his voice came out choked. “Then...you're not...upset?”

Steve stepped forward, right into Winter's personal space, but the movement wasn't angry or threatening. He raised his arms, then pulled Winter close. It took Winter a moment to understand what Steve was doing, and by then he was ensnared in Steve's embrace. He stiffened, heart pounding, as Steve trapped him, but his touch was gentle, his warmth soothing.

“I'm sad that you're hurting,” Steve said, his voice vibrating through Winter's chest, “but I'm not angry.”

The hope exploding in Winter's chest was too painful to bear. He tried to push it down before it could be crushed. “Disappointed?” he asked, his voice coming out in a breathless rasp.

Steve pulled him tighter, one hand splayed across his back and one curled around his side—holding him in place, holding him together just when Winter was about to fall apart. “Never.”

His breath was warm against Winter's ear. He was so close, Winter ought to feel terrified, but instead he found himself relaxing. He settled into the warmth and safety of Steve's embrace, where he knew nothing could ever harm him.

“This isn't a failure,” Steve said, the hand on his back slowly starting to rub back and forth. “It's just a step back. It's a chance to try again, to learn from our mistakes and move on.”

Winter could hardly believe his ears. He hadn't failed? It wasn't completely hopeless? Steve wasn't going to give up? They could just...start over?

“And Winter,” Steve continued, “this still means you went a whole day without cutting yourself. I'm so proud of you.”

Proud. Proud? There was a caress in his voice, a gentle note of esteem that told Winter he really meant it. Tears sprang to Winter's eyes as he let his head rest on Steve's shoulder. No one had ever said something like that to him. Not that he could remember, anyway. Usually, if he did something well, people would congratulate themselves for possessing such a useful tool. There was no need to praise him.

But if Steve, of all people, was proud of him...maybe Winter didn't realize what was really going on.
Maybe this was a battle that anyone would find hard. Maybe the demons he faced were so strong that resisting them at all was a victory in itself. Maybe this wasn’t a fight he could win or lose all at once, but a slow war of attrition that he had to fight every day.

“There’s no shame in needing help.” Steve stroked his head in a soothing rhythm, trailing his fingertips through Winter’s hair. “Every time we stumble or fall is just an opportunity for our friends to pick us up again. And every time we get back on our feet, we’re a little stronger because of them. All you have to do is try. That’s all anyone can ask for.”

He was fighting a war, but he had allies. He had to remember that. One man might be able to fight a battle on his own, but no one could fight a war alone. Hesitantly, Winter raised his arms and grabbed the back of Steve’s shirt, squeezing the fabric tightly. “Please...help me.”

“I will. I promise.”

And Steve Rogers never broke his promises.

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Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

- Matthew 11:28-30
Why do I always find Sam so difficult to write? He's such a simple and straightforward character, yet I find myself stumped twice as much as I do when I write complicated, contradictory Winter/Bucky. This time, what was really remarkable to me was how devoid of angst and drama Sam's head usually is. I mean, yes, he's known tragedy and loss aplenty, and he has a lot to process in the aftermath of *Make Me Whole*...but that aftermath doesn't really take the typical route you might expect. At least, not the typical angsty route most writers seem to want to dwell on to the exclusion of other natural human responses XD Anyway, I hope with this chapter I'm able to make it clear how strong their friendship is—and exactly why this three-way friendship works so well.

This chapter takes place in *Make Me Whole* chapter 18, “Winter's End” (and after).

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**Do you remember when we learned how to fly?**

*We'd play make-believe; we were young and had time on our side*

*You're stuck on the ground*

*Got lost, can't be found*

*Just remember that you're still alive*

*I'll carry you home*

*No, you're not alone*

*Keep marching on*

*This is worth fighting for*

*You know we've all got battle scars*

*—“Battle Scars” by Paradise Fears*

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requested by CapGirlCanuck on AO3

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Sam pulled into the driveway of the cabin and switched off the car, pleased with his little shopping trip. He couldn't wait to see Steve's face when he saw the sky lit up with his name. The perfect gift for someone born on a national holiday, if he did say so himself.
Grinning to himself, Sam hopped out of the car and gathered up the shopping bags filled with the ingredients he'd need to make Steve's birthday feast. Fresh apples for the apple cake he'd requested. A new bag of flour for the same purpose. A case of beer, even though Sam would be the only one getting tipsy in this house. Canned peaches, because Steve was weird and preferred them to fresh ones. Maybe that had something to do with growing up in the Great Depression?

Somehow, he managed to grab all of the bags at once. He rustled loudly as he tried to turn the handle on the front door with one finger, hoping that maybe the others would see or hear him and come help him out. He could just hear his mother chiding him for ignoring the sensible option of taking two trips. Finally, he admitted defeat, set down a couple bags, and pushed the door open.

Grabbing all the bags again, Sam staggered inside. As he maneuvered around to nudge the door closed with his hip, he spotted Steve and Winter sitting on the couch that faced in the opposite direction. “Hey,” he called to them. “Do either of the supersoldiers wanna...oh.” His voice died away as he realized both Steve and Winter were hastily wiping their eyes and sniffling as they got to their feet. Hopefully he hadn't just interrupted their heart-to-heart at the most crucial moment.

Winter turned to face Sam. He wasn't wearing his mask.

All of the shopping bags cascaded to the floor. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he numbly hoped the eggs hadn't cracked. He needed them for the cake.

“Winter?” Sam croaked, his throat as scratchy as sandpaper.

And then he smiled. He smiled, and it wasn't just the corners of his eyes crinkling together. Sam could see his whole face bunching up in a huge grin, a mouth he'd never seen before lifting up in a lopsided, slightly embarrassed smile.

“My name is Bucky.”


Steve nodded, beaming as he put an arm around his friend. “It's him,” he said shakily. “It's my Bucky.” Then his expression crumbled and he pressed his face against Bucky's shoulder, stifling a sob.

Bucky pulled Steve in close with his metal arm. “Don't wear it out,” he said softly. The smile he gave Steve was warm and gentle, a smile filled with a century's worth of affection. More had changed in this man than simply taking off his mask and stating his true name. He was subtly but undeniably different from the man Sam had seen this morning.

After a minute of just gaping at the two of them like an idiot, Sam finally recovered enough to step over the fallen groceries and approach Bucky. “Then...welcome back, I guess?” He let out a stunned chuckle, holding out a hand. “I don't know, what do you say when something like this happens?”

Instead of shaking Sam's hand, Bucky held up a fist. “You say, 'Hey, man, what's up?'”

Sam grinned and knocked his fist against Bucky's. This would certainly take some getting used to...but he liked it already.
A pounding headache greeted Sam when he woke. He groaned, running a fuzzy tongue around the inside of his mouth. A hangover.... Why? He didn't usually drink that much....

A vague memory of standing on the coffee table and singing “The Star-Spangled Man with a Plan” at the top of his lungs returned to him, and he groaned again. Steve and Winter would never let him live that one down....

No. Steve and Bucky.

Sam stared up at the ceiling for several minutes, letting his brain sluggishly wake up and run through everything that had happened the day before. Winter had taken off his mask, revealing that he'd been Bucky Barnes all along. The whole rest of the day had turned into a huge celebration, not only of Steve's birthday, but also of his reunion with his old friend. They’d taken a picnic with them when they went to see the firework show, and then when they'd gotten back to the cabin they’d broken out the booze. Of course, since neither Steve or Bucky could get drunk anymore, that had meant Sam was the only one intoxicated. He had a feeling one or both of them had carried him to his room and tucked him in. He would normally be embarrassed by that, but right now his head hurt too much.

Sam slid his gaze over to his bedside table, trying to move his head as little as possible so as not to exacerbate the pulsing pain in his temples. A tall glass of water and a bottle of pain pills sat waiting for him, and he silently thanked whichever of the others had been so thoughtful.

Once he'd levered himself up to a sitting position and swallowed a few pills with the entire glass of water, Sam sat back and waited for the pounding in his head to subside. He smiled faintly as he remembered some of the toasts they'd made that had led to him getting plastered. To Cap! To Bucky! To friends reunited! He also thought he remembered making a toast to facial hair after he and Bucky had teased Steve about not being able to grow a beard.

Oh, it was going to be fun facing them this morning. He just hoped neither of them had filmed blackmail material on their phones.

Finally, the throbbing in his head grew faint enough that he thought he could hazard getting out of bed. Moving slowly and carefully, Sam got to his feet and closed his eyes against the pain. Gingerly, he made his way first to the bathroom and then out to the kitchen. Food didn't sound like a good idea yet, but he thought he could probably handle a bit of coffee. Maybe some toast, eventually.

Sam passed by the open door to Bucky's room on his way out to the main living area. He saw it out of the corner of his eye, then stopped and turned to look more closely. A fond burst of affection broke through the lingering discomfort of his hangover, and he smiled despite himself.

Steve and Bucky lay crowded in the narrow space of Bucky's twin bed, turned towards each other and both fast asleep. One of Steve's arms draped protectively over Bucky, who was curled against Steve's chest, his right hand clutching a fistful of Steve's shirt. They nestled together with the comfort and familiarity of those who had found respite in this way many times before. It had taken many months for Winter to really be comfortable around them, but no time at all for Bucky to resume his place at Steve's side.

With a fond smirk, Sam softly closed the door and left them to their slumber.

Gradually, as he moved out to the kitchen and got the coffee started, Sam began to feel more like himself. After taking his time drinking a whole cup of coffee, he started gathering up the remains of the festivities from the day before. While gingerly bending down to collect empty beer bottles from the living room, he noticed an odd shape poking out from under the coffee table.
Sam's head protested as he leaned down farther to retrieve the black object, but he was curious enough to ignore the pain. Once he'd straightened up again, he finally realized what it was. Winter's mask, discarded the day before. He could tell which curves were supposed to fit around his nose and cheeks, closing tightly around his face like a muzzle on an unruly dog.

Funny. Sam could easily remember that day, when they'd just begun their time in the first cabin, and he and Steve had suggested that Winter take off his mask around them. It had taken many long months, but he'd finally reached that point. At last Sam understood why he'd been so reticent until now; Bucky had explained to both of them how nervous he'd been to reveal who he was before he'd known if they would accept him or not. Sam wondered how much might have turned out differently if Bucky had just told them who he was from the beginning.

Sam suddenly realized with a start that Bucky was standing on the other side of the coffee table. “Don't do that, man!” he gasped, pressing a hand against his pounding heart. Sometimes he had to consciously remind himself that Bucky was the same man he'd come to know over the past several months, but then there were times Bucky would make it clear that Winter still lived inside him. Such as when he moved around as quiet as a mouse. He'd never admit it, but he probably just did it to mess with Sam.

Bucky smirked at him, confirming Sam's silent grumbling. Then he cocked his head to one side, eyes drawn to the mask. “What've you got there?”

“Oh, right.” Sam raised the mask in his hand, turning it towards Bucky so he could see it. “You want this anymore?”

Bucky reached out a hand and took the mask, looking down at it with an odd mix of emotions. It fascinated Sam how easy it was to read his expression, now that he could see all of it. Bucky's brow was furrowed with uncertainty, his nose was crinkled slightly in disgust, and his mouth twisted halfway between a frown and a rueful smile.

His metal fingers closed around the mask that had held Winter back for so long, crushing it into dozens of small, black slivers that pattered down onto the carpet. Bucky opened his hand again, brushing off the last bits of dust and the strap that had held the mask shut. He drew a deep breath and looked up at Sam again, his face smoothing into a peaceful, triumphant smile.

Sam pointed at the shattered remains of the mask at their feet. “I ain't cleaning that up, you know.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

“Look, Sam! Isn't she beautiful?”

Sam reminded himself that beauty was in the eye of the beholder. All he could see in the little square of paper Riley had shoved in front of his eyes was a whitish blob against the dark, grainy background. If he squinted, he could almost believe that blob was a head, and the squiggly bits to one side were legs. Or maybe arms?

The truck hit another rut, jostling something into place in Sam's head. He looked up at Riley with a sharp frown. “Wait...'she'? So no Sammy Junior after all, huh?”

“Nonsense,” Riley said, elbowing him and taking the ultrasound picture back. “We're naming her Samantha.” He kissed the picture, then tucked it back into his pocket next to the photo of Rachel he
always kept there. Then he winked at Sam. “And you know this means you have to name your first kid after me.”

Sam grinned. “Yeah, find me a girlfriend first.”

Riley turned to look out the window at the drab, dusty hills passing by. “Sam...take care of them for me.”

“What?” Sam watched the bit of Riley's face he could see. The air between them had suddenly shifted, like loose pebbles beneath his feet, and Sam felt like he needed to grab hold of something before it all crumbled to dust.

Riley turned back to him, tears shimmering in his eyes. “I can't take care of my girls like this, Sam,” he rasped. He coughed weakly, and blood dribbled down his chin.

Sam's eyes widened as he noticed the bullet holes in Riley's chest, the blood steadily soaking through his shirt. With a gasp, Sam reached out to put a hand over the wounds, to try to stop the bleeding, but Riley fell away from him. Suddenly they were no longer in the truck, but on a dusty hillside as the sun sank under the horizon. Riley's broken body crashed to the ground in front of him.

Sam bent over Riley, but before he could tend to his wounds, Riley's bloody hand closed around a fistful of Sam's shirt, pulling him in close. “S-Sorry...” he mumbled around the blood trailing from the corner of his mouth. “M sorry...brother...”

“No....” He couldn't say anything else. He couldn't do anything. He never could. He knew exactly what would happen next, because it always happened like this. Knowing he had seen this before, a thousand times in a thousand variations, was no comfort. It hurt the same every time.

“Sorry...for not...saying...goodbye....”

Riley's head rolled back, his eyes staring blankly at the darkening sky. His fingers loosened, and his hand fell from gripping the front of Sam's shirt. It fell...down...down....

A blinding flash dazzled Sam's eyes, quickly followed by a deafening crack, as of thunder. It was even louder than the wind howling in Sam's ears. He flew swiftly through clouds of smoke and dust, his lungs full of the scent of gunpowder and lightning. But the man flying by his side suddenly faltered, his wings fluttering erratically.

“Sam!” Riley screamed as he plummeted towards the ground.

“No!” Sam pushed his Falcon wings as far as they would go, dipping into a reckless dive. But he was too far away.

“Sam....”

Riley was falling...falling...falling. And Sam could do nothing....

“Sam....”

He opened his eyes and found himself lying spread-eagled on his bed, breathing hard and drenched in sweat. He flinched when a roll of thunder grumbled past, but the room was already full of a warm, orange glow from the lamp on his bedside table, so the next flash of lightning was easy to ignore.

Sam blinked and focused on Bucky, standing a step back from the bed with a corner of the sheet in his hand, as though he'd just pulled it down. Bucky looked back at him with a little smile of
understanding, and dropped the edge of the sheet at the foot of the bed. “Hey.”

“Hey.” Sam whispered in reply. Sitting up, he ran trembling hands over his face. They came away damp with sweat and possibly a few tears. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, willing the crazy beat of his heart to subside—a tall order when the storm still raged outside and he kept watching Riley fall to his death every time he closed his eyes.

Still...this wasn't as bad as some nights. At least he hadn't woken up screaming again.

“Come on,” Bucky said softly, backing up towards the door and beckoning with a tilt of his head.

With nothing better to do, and no desire to keep lying in bed, Sam clambered to his feet and followed Bucky out to the living room. To his surprise, the room wasn't dark and empty as he would have expected at this time of night. Several lamps had been turned on, providing a circle of warm light around the couches in the center of the room. Two steaming mugs sat ready on the coffee table, as if they'd just been placed there. And playing softly in the background, just loud enough to be heard above the patter of rain on the roof, was some kind of jazz music Sam didn't recognize.

He glanced at Bucky, who simply led the way to one of the couches in front of the coffee table and sat down. Sam wordlessly joined him, accepting the mug of tea Bucky offered him. It took him a moment, but gradually he realized that Bucky had chosen the couch that was directly facing the large fireplace. Of course, he could still see the flashes of lightning out of the corners of his eyes, but this was the one position where he wasn't directly facing a window.

For several minutes, they just sat there quietly, listening to the soft music and sipping their warm drinks. Sam thought back to all the times Bucky had come to wake him up at night, back when they'd called him Winter. He'd tried his best to come up with ways to keep Winter talking, focused on anything but his temptation to hurt himself, even if that meant Sam just ended up rambling most of the time. It hadn't been much, but he hoped it had helped make those long nights a little bit shorter.

Then there had been that time a few months ago, when Sam had woken up screaming and both of the others had stayed up to keep him company. They'd spent most of that night talking as well, keeping the conversation light and happy, till Sam had actually been able to laugh again. For all the talking he'd done that night, he hadn't found the words to thank them for sitting up with him and reminding him that he wasn't alone.

Now...neither of them spoke. But it wasn't an awkward or tense silence. Nothing needed to be said. No explanations were necessary. For now, it was enough just to know that Bucky was there if Sam needed him.

Cupping his hands around the warmth of his mug, Sam leaned over and rested his head on Bucky's shoulder. His closed his eyes to soothing, empty darkness and murmured, “Thanks, brother.”

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For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother.

- Philemon 7
I think I've probably alluded to this part of the story before, specifically what Winter does at night during this time. But I didn't go into it in detail from Steve and Sam's POV, primarily because the interesting stuff is what's going on in Winter's head. There aren't really any earth-shattering moments of crisis in this chapter—but the small, daily victories are just as important as the huge battles.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 8, “Turning a New Leaf.”

Every day I try to run, but in vain
Anytime I stop, it all starts again
In the shadows I cast
Silhouettes of the past
Every day, I lie and say that I'm cured
Even though I know they're just empty words
If there's nowhere to turn
Am I destined to burn?

Who is my salvation when no one's aware I'm at war?

- “Afraid of the Dark” by Beyond the Black

Winter was at war.

In some ways, it seemed harder to stop cutting himself once he'd actually decided to try to stop. The harder he resisted the urge to find a knife or something sharp, the louder the voice in the back of his head seemed to scream. He waited as long as he could stand, but no matter how good his intentions were, the hateful words crowding his brain would make it so hard to remember why he kept fighting. He had to make it stop, so he would succumb to his enemy's attacks and find his blood circling the drain again.

Still, he was better off than he used to be. Winter clung to that brittle thread of hope with everything he had. Even though the vindictive voice in the back of his head hardly ever left him alone, now he had another voice to listen to. This second voice almost sounded like Steve gently interjecting and quietly refuting what the first voice said, when he himself couldn't resist what he heard.

Go to Steve, it would patiently say when he picked up a knife. Ask Sam for help. Put down the knife. Remember how good it felt to just go running with them? Don't you want that again?
And the more he listened to that voice, the louder it grew. That didn't mean the first voice gave up, of course. If anything, it only grew louder and more insistent, mocking the other voice and mimicking it in an attempt to make its words sound foolish. But the second voice would just ignore this and continue speaking the truth.

Weak, failure, worthless, useless, helpless, meaningless....

Stop what you're doing right now. Go find Steve, go find Sam. You need help.

That's right, go running to him with your tail between your legs. Grovel before him like the dog you are. You're such a pathetic nuisance. He must be so tired of you by now.

Remember what Steve said. He's proud of you.

Right. Proud of what? You have absolutely nothing to be proud of, murderer. If he's proud of you, that's just further proof that he's stupid.

Steve promised he would help you. He wanted you to tell him if there was anything he could do. Even if you don't believe him, you have nothing to lose by going to him. Just give it a try. See who's right.

That decided it. Winter got up and went in search of the others, hoping he would run into one before the howling, shrieking voice convinced him to turn back. Thankfully, he soon found Steve reading in his favorite chair in the living room. Still, he couldn't quite relax, not with that voice telling him what a bother he was and how annoyed Steve would be if he interrupted him now.

When was the last time Steve was angry with you? the other voice gently asked, a soft whisper undercutting the harsh shrieks of the other voice.

Never. Steve was never angry. Frustrated, sometimes. Occasionally stern or disappointed, but never angry. Not at him. As he crept closer to Steve, who hadn't looked up from his book yet, he felt a great rush of...affection. He thought that was the right word for it. He kept giving Winter so much, and there was nothing he could give in return. He could only ask for more.

Steve finally looked up after Winter had been standing there for almost a full minute. Winter didn't mean to sneak around; it had just become second nature to him. Steve saw him and immediately smiled, something that never failed to amaze Winter. Why would anyone be happy to see him?

That's right. Don't you see? He's lying to you. He's tricking you! Don't listen to a word—

“I need a distraction,” Winter blurted desperately.

Steve immediately put his book aside and stood up. Sure enough, there was no anger in his expression, not even a hint of irritation or impatience. “You want to go running?”

A sudden thought occurred to him, running on the tail end of the things Steve gave him without expecting anything in return. A few weeks ago, he had offered Winter his motorcycle, hoping it would help, and Winter had thrown it back in his face. Did the offer still stand? Did he dare...?

He made himself say it before he could think about it too much. “Actually...I was...wondering if...if we could...ride the motorcycle.”

Any fear he might have had about this was instantly swept away. Steve's face brightened into an almost painful expression of hope. “You...want to?”
Winter nodded as the voice in the back of his head faded into insignificance.

Steve grinned as though there had never been any misunderstanding or pain, as though it was Christmas again, but they understood each other perfectly this time. “Then let's go!”

Winter trailed after Steve as they pulled on their coats and headed outside. As he climbed onto the motorcycle behind Steve, Winter remembered that first day, when he'd met Steve at the gas station and run away with him. It was the same motorcycle, the same man in front of him, the same person behind the mask...but so much was different now. They knew so much more about each other, and Winter wasn't afraid anymore.

It was only after the engine started up and they wound their way up the drive to the main road that Winter realized his arms were around Steve's waist. Strange...he didn't know why he'd done it. It wasn't like he couldn't stay on otherwise. His body had moved before his mind could catch up. Almost as though...he'd done this before, many times....

“C'mon, Stevie!” he yelled, braking his bicycle by scraping the sole of his shoe along the road. He came to a skidding stop next to the skinny boy who was toiling up the hill with far too many books in his arms. To Bucky, the hill was nothing—he would hardly even lose his breath if he ran all the way to the library at the top. But Steve was taking it slow, breathing carefully so he wouldn't start coughing again. Bucky could tell just by looking at him that he was already exhausted, and he was only a block away from home.

"Mother doesn't want me on a bicycle," Steve said uncertainly, brushing a sweaty lock of hair out of his face. "She says it's too dangerous."

"Nonsense! You can sit on the handlebars and I'll do the driving!"

After only a little more coaxing, Steve placed his books in the basket and perched on the handlebars, leaning back and gripping Bucky's wrists for support. Bucky started pedaling forward, using one hand to steer and wrapping the other around Steve's waist. "Don't worry, I gotcha. I won't let you fall."

The wind whipped Winter's hair around his face and made his eyes sting, so he focused on the broad back in front of him. It was so comfortable here, to lean into the turns and feel the man in front of him match every movement. Even though they were both bundled up in coats against the winter wind, he could feel Steve's warmth seeping into him. He leaned forward, resting his cheek against Steve's back, and felt all tension seep away. For a short time, he could almost believe he was that man he kept seeing in his memories.

"Okay, pull the— No, that's the brakes! You're making an awful lot of noise on purpose, aren't you?"

"Now why would I do that?" Steve gave him a cheeky grin.

Bucky rolled his eyes. "I bet that's the only thing you do know how to do on this thing.

"Nice to know you're still an oversensitive jerk."

Winter wanted to be that man. Before, that had seemed completely impossible. He was so different from the man who had been Steve's best friend that it had seemed pointless to even wish. Most of the clearest memories that returned to him were from their childhood, where both of them were so
different that it was easy to believe they had nothing to do with anything happening now. But this
memory showed Steve as he was now, and that made Winter wish he could be like the man sitting
behind him, wearing an army uniform and a fond smile.

He wanted that easy, effortless camaraderie. He wanted Steve to stop worrying about him and just be
glad he was there. He wanted to finally get to a place where that was possible.

Gradually, Winter realized the roar of the engine and the howling of the wind had gone quiet. He
opened his eyes and saw that they had stopped. They were back home, and he was just sitting here
with his arms around Steve's waist. He hastily let go, jumping off and turning to see Steve's reaction.

But Steve acted as though nothing was out of the ordinary. He just casually climbed off the
motorcycle and said, “I liked that. We should do it again sometime.”

He was still thinking of Steve's warmth blocking the cold wind. The words spilled out of his mouth
before he even knew what he was saying. “I...I liked it too.”

The most dangerous time for Winter was always the middle of the night. In the light of day, it wasn't
too hard to keep himself occupied and hang around the others. But as soon as all the lights went out,
he was left to deal with the voices on his own.

Some nights he was so exhausted that he would fall asleep almost immediately, and manage to get
through the night without a single nightmare. But those were the rare exceptions. Most nights, he
would stare up at the dark ceiling and try not to listen to what was happening in his head. Or he
would jerk awake from some horribly vivid dream, and he would be unable to think of anything but
all the horrible things he'd experienced.

And he couldn't just ask Steve or Sam to distract him in the middle of the night, could he? Maybe
they wouldn't be angry like the voice in the back of his head always told him...but they shouldn't
have to put up with him in the middle of the night. They already did so much for him; they shouldn't
have to disturb their rest just to reassure him the monsters under the bed were all in his head because
he was crazy.

The gentle voice, the one that sounded like Steve, kept urging him to wake up the others anyway,
that it would be better than having to tell them in the morning that he'd cut himself again. He tried
several times, but he never managed to muster up the courage to knock on their doors. He would
stand outside one closed door or another, silently wishing they would somehow realize he was there
and come talk to him. They never did, of course, and eventually Winter would wander back to his
own room.

One night, while standing uncertainly outside Sam's room, Steve's door suddenly opened, but Winter
panicked and hid in the shadows. Steve stumbled into the bathroom, completely oblivious to Winter's
presence.

Winter hesitated, then crept into Steve's room. He wasn't sure why he did it—what, was he going to
ambush Steve here and keep him awake to deal with Winter's problems, rather than go back to sleep
like he wanted to?

But as long as you're in here... the voice said slyly.
It was stupid—the whole reason he was in here in the first place was that he was trying not to do what the voice was telling him. But....

*But if you're not going to bother Steve, what are you going to do? You know you only have two options: Run to Papa like a sniveling child afraid of the dark, or....*

Steve always picked the most obvious hiding places. Winter half-heartedly slid his hand under the mattress and, sure enough—there was one of his knives. He looked at it, his heart sinking. It was going to be one of those nights.

He tiptoed back out of the room, but stopped before stepping through his own door. He waited until Steve emerged from the bathroom and wandered back to his room, yawning widely. Winter waited, half hoping Steve would see him, half hoping he was well hidden in the shadows. He didn't want Steve to know what he had done—what he was about to do—but he also wanted Steve to stop him.

But Steve was yawning, his eyes squeezed shut, as he passed by Winter's position. The door closed softly behind him, and Winter was alone again.

*You know you're not. Knock on the door—now, before he falls asleep.*

But he just couldn't do it. He was too much of a coward. He didn't deserve their help. The only thing he deserved was to slink back to his room and cut himself back to square one where he belonged.

Tears mixed with the blood dripping into the sink.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Perhaps he should have given the others more credit. They weren't stupid; they could recognize a pattern when they saw one. The third time Steve poked his head through the open door of Winter's room to say good morning and ended up having to change Winter's bandages, he took Winter's hand in his and caught his eye.

"You know you can come to me for help anytime, right? Any time."

Startled, the only thing Winter could do was look down at their hands. He really shouldn't be surprised, should he? These days, he usually only cut himself at night, when the long hours of darkness and solitude became too much to bear. It made sense that Steve would realize this was happening.

"It doesn't matter what I'm doing," Steve continued. "I promise I don't mind."

"Are...Are you sure about that?" Winter mumbled, still not daring to raise his eyes. "Really, really sure?"

Steve clasped his other hand around Winter's too, encasing it in warmth and gentle pressure. "One hundred percent. If I'm sleeping, you can wake me up. If I'm in the shower, come in and talk to me. If I'm in the middle of something, go ahead and interrupt me. You come first."

The voices in his head were mercifully quiet, but he couldn't easily forget the doubt and confusion they had sown. Some of this seemed to show on his face as he looked up, trying to gauge Steve's expression.
A sad, half-hearted smile crossed Steve's face. “Don't you believe me?”

Winter took a deep breath. “I want to.”

“Then just try me,” he said gently. “I'll prove it to you.”

The first few nights after that, Winter still couldn't dredge up the courage to test Steve's promise. Then, out of nowhere, one evening Sam clapped a hand on his shoulder as he was heading towards the stairs and said, “Hey, if you need anything tonight, you'll come and wake me up, right?”

“Oh....” Winter's foot missed the first step and fell to the floor with a loud clunk. Had Steve talked to Sam about their conversation? Or had Sam simply noticed the trend and figured out what it meant on his own?

But Sam was still waiting for a reply. “O-Okay....”

“Cool.” He patted Winter's shoulder again and stepped past him to ascend the stairs himself. Winter watched him go, marveling at how he and Steve had told him the same thing, but in completely different ways. Steve was full of sadness and concern, till Winter almost felt like he would be helping Steve more than himself if he followed his advice. Sam, on the other hand, spoke like there was nothing out of the ordinary happening. Like it was the most natural thing in the world for Winter to wake them up in the middle of the night.

He really needed both of them, didn't he?

Somehow, that night it was easier to go to Sam than to Steve. That was how it had always been—he always felt better with Steve in the end, but Sam made it so much easier to begin. He took everything in stride. And, well...if Sam got angry or annoyed, Winter thought it would be easier to bear. There was just too much history with Steve, even if he didn't know and Winter couldn't remember it all.

The door opened at his touch; Sam hadn't even closed it all the way. How could he sleep like that? Didn't he feel too unprotected to relax at all?

That's right, the voice in the back of his head said, continuing the tirade that had sent Winter here in the first place. You're so vulnerable that nothing can protect you. Nothing, you hear me? Nothing!

Sam was sprawled all over the bed, lying slightly crooked with one foot dangling over the edge. Desperate to shut up the voice, Winter reached out and gently nudged Sam's shoulder. He quickly took a step back, just in case.

With an enormous snort, Sam jerked upright. His hand immediately flew to the gun lying on his bedside table, but he didn't pick it up as he grunted, “Wha— Who?” He shook his head slightly. “Winter, 'zat you?”

“Sorry,” Winter said, backing towards the door. Why did he ever think this was a good idea? “Sorry.”

“No, no, wait, come back!” Sam flicked on the lamp on his bedside table, groaned in the sudden glare of light, and rubbed his eyes. “It's fine, Winter, it's— Really. What do you need?”

Winter stopped with his back to the open doorway. “Distraction,” he whispered.

Sam stood up, stretching and yawning widely. “C'mon, let's go downstairs and I'll make us something to drink. You ever tried putting a candy cane in your hot chocolate?”
And just like that, Winter was able to get through the night as easily as the day. As soon as one of the others woke up, he felt his fear and shame melt away. Even just slipping into their rooms and listening to their soft, steady breathing helped him calm down. It was enough just to know they were near, and they would help no matter what time of day it was.

Sam was easier to talk to. Winter never intended to have much of a conversation, but Sam would start talking about something, ask a question, and after a few minutes Winter would realize he was doing all the talking. He often got the sense that, even if he was just explaining how his metal arm worked and whether he could feel anything with it, Sam could glean from it more information than Winter ever intended to share. But no matter what went on behind those sharp eyes and warm smile, he never treated Winter any differently.

Steve, on the other hand.... Winter decided that what he had to offer could be called 'companionship.' They usually didn't do much talking when Winter woke him up in the middle of the night. Sometimes they would bundle up and go for a walk in the moonlight to a hillside where they could look at the stars. Sometimes Steve would start a fire in the fireplace and they would just sit there, mesmerized by the flames. Sometimes Winter wouldn't even wake Steve up at all, but would sit there watching him sleep.

Strangely enough, a night with Steve helped just as much as one with Sam. Steve never asked for an explanation, never pressured Winter to say anything. It was enough just to be together in that moment, to forget everything that led them both here. It was when he felt the most desperate that he went for Steve. When the scornful voice wouldn't stop attacking him, and he couldn't even find the willpower to fight back when everything it said sounded true, he fled to Steve's side. Maybe it was because Steve always seemed so inexplicably happy to be around him. At least for a little while, he could feel like he was worth something.

One night, he sat on the floor by Steve's bed watching the steady rise and fall of the blankets and letting the sound of deep breathing soothe his aching head like the pounding of the surf. He rested his head against the edge of the mattress, gazing up at the bit of Steve's face poking out of the blankets. He was lying on his side, facing Winter, but curled up almost into a ball.

Winter wasn't sure if it was imagination or memory, but he thought he'd watched Steve sleep many times before—and not just in this cabin. The way his whole face smoothed out in the peace of slumber...the way he curled up under the covers, trying to keep warm...it was all so familiar.

"Please," he gasped, scrunching up his whole face and gripping his hair with both hands. "Please, God, I'll do anything.... Just let him pull through this. Let him live."

A cold, trembling hand tugged at one of his. "Not dead yet, Buck," he said hoarsely.

Bucky pressed the hand against his cheek and opened his eyes. Steve looked so frail and gaunt, his eyes enormous in a face that was normally skinny but now looked positively skeletal. His skin was grey except for an unhealthy spot of color on his sharp cheekbones. He could hardly even keep a mouthful of water down—could hardly draw breath without coughing—and yet he was smiling. How could he find such strength, when Bucky was falling to pieces?

"It's gonna be okay," Steve said.

Bucky choked on the laugh bubbling up in his throat, turning it into a sob. That's what he was supposed to say!

"Bucky, when I—" Steve was interrupted with a violent coughing fit that shook his entire body. Bucky helped him sit up, rubbing his back and letting him cling as tightly to Bucky's hand as he
needed. For a moment, he was afraid those words would be the last thing he ever heard from Steve, but finally the coughing subsided.

Bucky carefully settled him back on his pillow as he drew in a shaky breath, eyes shut and face streaming with sweat. Instead of falling silent and drifting off to sleep as Bucky expected him to do, Steve opened his eyes again after a few moments. They seemed such a vivid blue against the pallor of his skin, like the fire of his soul was burning brighter than ever now that its vessel was weakening.

“When I die,” he began, his voice hoarse but determined.

“Don't talk like that!” Bucky said through clenched teeth as more tears spilled down his face. “I can't...I can't lose you.”

“You won't,” Steve said with a thin ghost of his usual smile. “Even when I die...I'll still be with you. Right...here....” He poked Bucky's chest with one finger.

Ripples of warmth seemed to spread across Bucky's chest from the spot Steve had touched. He wasn't sure if he was laughing or crying as he brushed Steve's hair off his forehead and planted a sloppy kiss there. “You get so cheesy when you have a fever.”

Bucky watched Steve's eyes slowly close in sleep. His fingers curled around Bucky's, clinging with the weak but trusting tenacity of a child.

Winter reached out, brushing weak fingers against the knuckles he could see gripping the edge of the blanket. He was the child now, the one who needed someone to stand vigil over him throughout the night. Steve's fingers shifted, hooking around Winter's index finger and holding it in place. And slowly, his eyes opened.

“Mmph. Winn'er?”

“Go back to sleep,” Winter said, gently pulling away. He hadn't meant to wake Steve up. “I just want to sit here for a while...if that's okay.”

“'Kay.” For a moment, Winter thought he was just replying, but then Steve raised his head a little and said, only slightly more coherently, “You 'kay?”

“Yeah,” Winter said, though he hadn't been sure until that moment. “I'm just...thinking.”

Steve shifted to a more comfortable position. “Don' think too hard.”

Winter expected Steve to quickly fall asleep again, but instead Steve's hand emerged from the mass of blankets and settled against the side of Winter's face. Winter started in surprise, but didn't shy away as Steve's fingers combed through his hair. His fingernails gently scraped against Winter's scalp, and his thumb brushed against the vein in his temple. The exact spot where they used to clamp a piece of metal that would send tooth-jarring, bone-numbing, nerve-blasting pain through every inch of his body.

The movement was soothing, almost hypnotic. Steve could easily lull him off to sleep like this. It occurred to him that Steve was petting him like a dog—that he had come to Steve like a dog whining for its master's attention.

Hydra had treated him like a dog. A dog they'd beaten and chained up and muzzled and trained to be a vicious attacker. The voice in the back of his head called him a dog, and now he realized it had a point. But maybe it wasn't so bad to be a dog, if someone treated him like Steve did.
Slowly, Steve's breathing evened out and his fingers fell still as he slipped back into slumber. Winter closed his eyes and held still so he could enjoy the warm pressure of a hand against the side of his face.

Even in his sleep, Steve stood vigil.

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Weeping may tarry for the night,  
but joy comes with the morning.  

- Psalm 30:5
Chapter Notes

Author's Note: You can blame this chapter entirely on NewMoonFlicker. And she knows it! XD As a reminder, every tenth chapter in this fic is a little different from the norm—a break from the usual layout, and even more of an “optional” read than usual. This time, it's just a small step above pure crack. It's silly, it's a little pointless, and you won't miss anything by skipping it, so please feel free to do so for any reason.

In case you couldn't guess from the title, this chapter revolves around nudity and the awkwardness that I'm sure you can imagine resulting from it. I hope I don't need to assure you that nothing sexual happens in this chapter, but there are jokes and embarrassment aplenty, and I understand if you find that distasteful. I personally find this scenario hilarious, so my only hope is that if you do choose to read, you'll find my faltering attempts at intentional humor funny too.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 11, “Hail Hydra.”

Steve sat cross-legged on his bed, idly sketching a picture of Winter feeding birds from his hand. Sam had shown them how the day before, sitting perfectly still with birdseed cupped in his hands. Steve hadn't had much luck himself—he'd been too busy watching the others, mesmerized by their smiles and the tiny finches that dared come close. Winter could hold his left hand as still as a statue and the curious birds would land on him, seemingly with no idea that it connected to a living, breathing person. And the look in Winter's eyes as he watched the tiny, delicate creatures dancing all over his palm....

Thinking about Winter drew Steve's attention to the closed bathroom door. Due to the small size of the cabin and its one shower, the three of them had to take turns using it. This was rarely an issue; none of them took very long. Today, it was Steve's turn to go last, so he was working on his sketch while waiting for Winter to emerge.

He glanced at the clock. He hadn't paid attention to the time Winter had gone in, but it had been quite a while since he had even heard the water running. It didn't usually take Winter that long to finish, even with his long hair and the mask.

Concern trickled down Steve's spine, but he tried to brush it off and focus on the meticulous details of the tree branches in the background of his drawing. He was overreacting. Winter could take as long as he wanted; there was no rush. But...the last time Winter had disappeared into the bathroom for long periods of time, he had....

Fear slowly closed its fingers around Steve's heart. He could all too easily envision blood dripping from Winter's forearm. He shook his head to dislodge that mental picture, instead reminding himself
of the night Winter had handed over his last knife and said, *I don't need it anymore.* The look of hope in his eyes as he realized he could expect something other than pain....

The hollow, dead expression on his face every time he'd turned to the knife instead of his friends....

Steve dropped his sketchpad and pencil on the bedspread and got to his feet, marching with determination up to the closed bathroom door. He knocked on the door before he could think better of it. “Winter? Are you okay?”

There was a pause while Steve tilted his head towards the door, listening carefully. “Hmmm?” Winter finally said. His voice was vague and almost dreamy, as if his mind were a thousand miles away.

“Winter, can I ask you something?” Steve licked his lips. Was there any way to ask this question that wouldn't sound condescending or accusatory? “Please, just be honest with me. Are you.... Sorry, I-I'm probably just being paranoid, but....” He took a deep breath and asked, as gently as he could, “Are you cutting again?”

Another long pause. “No?”

That didn't sound very convincing. Steve's heart sank to the pit of his stomach, but he squared his shoulders and put a hand on the doorknob. “Is it all right if I come in?”

“Okay,” Winter said in the same dreamy, distant voice, “but I'm not—“

Steve pushed the door open and took a step into the bathroom. Winter sat cross-legged in the middle of the bathroom floor, his hair neatly combed and his mask covering his face. But instead of desperately slicing his right arm open, he was simply sitting there—without a stitch of clothing on.

“Winter!” Steve yelped, hastily leaping back out of the bathroom and turning away. “Wh-Why aren't you wearing anything?”

Winter's voice still sounded a little dreamy. “I don't like clothes when they're touching me.”


“Mmm...yes,” Winter said calmly. “Sometimes...different things...it's just too much, so.... In the other cabin, I'd draw a bath and lie in the water for a while...so nothing would touch me. But here...there's no tub, so I'm just...sitting here for a while.” As he spoke, his voice became a little stronger, like he was waking up. “You're intruding on my private time, you know.”

“Okay, sorry, I'm leaving!” Steve yelled, slamming the door shut harder than he'd intended. His cheeks blazed with warmth when he realized Sam was howling with laughter from the kitchen below.

“Why are you being so weird?” Winter called through the closed door. “Usually *I* am the weird one.”

Steve leaned his back against the wall next to the door and slumped down to the floor, groaning into his hands, “It's the fondue thing all over again....”

Down in the kitchen, Sam was flat on the floor, laughing so hard he sounded like he was crying.

Steve took a steadying breath, staring at the opposite wall, and said as calmly as he could, “See...when you're around other people, you need to wear clothes.”

“I'm in the bathroom,” Winter said, sounding confused. “Bathrooms are for private things, right?”
“But you said it was okay for me to come in!” Steve protested, aware that his voice was rising again but unable to stop it. “It's not okay if you're not wearing anything!”

“Why? You've seen me without clothes before.”

Steve's mind flitted to the first time Winter had taken a shower, and had ended up crouching naked on the floor in the throes of an overpowering panic attack. “Yes, but...but it's not...appropriate!”

Steve protested, the heat spreading across his face and down his neck as he tried not to bring up his crystal-clear memories. “It's one thing if...if it's an emergency and I'm helping you or something, but usually...if someone's going to see you, you should at least...cover up enough to be decent.”

“How much is decent?”

He'd walked right into that one. Steve turned his eyes upward and mouthed to the heavens, *What did I do to deserve this?*

Taking a deep breath, Steve said in as level of a voice as he could manage, “Pants. Have at least pants on when giving the all-clear, and you will always be decent.”

“But you told me I was *free* to wear whatever I wanted. Why can't I wear nothing?”

It took all of Steve's willpower not to bang his head against the wall. He did *not* want to talk about this. “Because you need to wear *something* if people are going to see you. Do it for their sake, if not for your own.”

After a few minutes, the bathroom door finally opened. Steve glanced carefully to the floor at Winter's bare feet, and only when he saw the leg of Winter's plaid pajama pants did he dare to look up at him. Winter stood looking down at him with a curious furrow in his brow. His mask covered his face as always, but nothing covered his bare chest. Steve felt his cheeks growing hot again as he hastily averted his eyes and got to his feet again.

He could feel Winter's confused stare. “Why's your face doing that?”

Steve was sure he could have cooked a whole stack of pancakes on his face.

Sam peered around the curve of the staircase, his cheek resting on the banister as he smiled impishly. “Because he's *embarrassed,*” he called in a sing-song voice.

Steve deflated. He was really in for it now—of anyone, Sam would *never* let him live this one down or let him off easy.

“Embarrassed?” Winter echoed. “Why would *you* be embarrassed if *I* was the one who was naked?”

Steve took a deep breath and ran his hands down his face, not for the first time cursing the deepening heat in his ears and neck. “Look...it just...took me by surprise, all right? Because...Because that's not something...not something I was expecting....” He looked at Sam pleadingly as he floundered about for some way to explain the dilemma.

“Right,” Sam chimed in, climbing the stairs the rest of the way. He was still grinning. “You know, when you're living with other people, you can't just do what you'd do if you were by yourself. You gotta follow some common courtesy rules. And one of those rules is to wear clothes around other people 99% of the time.”

Steve relaxed slightly. It looked like Sam was going to back him up.
Winter cocked his head to one side. “What's the 1%?”

Steve tensed, glaring at Sam, who only grinned innocently. “When you have a willing partner.”

Nope. Sam was definitely not going to back him up.

“And that's my cue—I'm getting a shower!” Steve all but shrieked, darting into the bathroom and slamming the door behind him, narrowly dodging Sam's renewed laughter. Immediately turning the water to full blast helped drown out hearing where the conversation went from there.

A long, cold shower helped Steve calm down and finally banish the blush from his cheeks. He took his time, not looking forward to leaving the bathroom and having to look the others in the eye again.

But finally, he couldn't put it off any longer. He cracked the door open, peered around the corner, and only when he saw the coast was clear did he tiptoe out. He heard Sam and Winter talking in the kitchen below. To his dismay, when he focused on what they were saying, he realized Sam was explaining to Winter how to tell if someone was 'checking him out.'

Steve grimaced, but he there wasn't much he could do to salvage the situation. He'd already blown it; best to just get the jokes and embarrassment aside sooner than later. With a sigh and a shake of his head, he started down the stairs with all the reluctance of a man heading to his own execution.

Sam cracked an evil grin as soon as Steve reached the last step and turned towards the kitchen area. Winter sat at the table, one knee pulled up comfortably against his bare chest. Still no shirt.

“Any chance we can call a truce?” Steve asked as he descended the last few steps.

Sam let one hand fall on his heart and let out a single, hearty laugh. “Nope.”

Steve groaned.

Winter looked over at Steve, his expression unreadable. “Why didn't you just explain that you didn't want to talk about sex?”

Steve could feel his face turn brick red in the space of a second. Sam's teasing he could take, but Winter's genuine bluntness was, again, unexpected and left him tripping over his words. “Why did you need an explanation at all?”

Winter's eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Are you trying to tell me you're—“

“No.”

Sam grinned and clapped a hand on Winter's metal shoulder. “C'mon, Cap, just admit that you find this guy irresistible.”

Steve shot Sam a look of pure I will get you for that, one Sam didn't take seriously in the slightest. It was official. There was nowhere to go but deeper into the hole that was this entire conversation.

“Okay then. See that door?” Steve pointed to the front door. “Here's me walking through it.”

“You sure you want to go on a walk now?” Sam's chuckling was as maddening as Winter's quizzical eyes.

“Oh, I'm sure.”

“See, Winter? Just like I told you. Classy avoidance, like this, is a sure sign of—“
Steve slammed the door particularly loudly behind him. “I hate you both!”

Sam’s laughter rang in his ears long after he was out of earshot.
Winning the War

Chapter Notes

When I first started writing about the voice in the back of Winter's head, I just meant it in the usual sense of that phrase—a way to describe the way we talk to ourselves. It wasn't until later that I realized I had literally created a demon. Perhaps Winter's experience is a little more visceral and even allegorical than other people who struggle with similar addictions and emotional problems, but I've always characterized Winter/Bucky as someone who thinks in terms of metaphor. I couldn't explain to you exactly why, but that's always the way I've seen him. So to me, it just makes sense that he would think of his struggle as a war with a literal demon. But if you can accept that Winter has a demon living in his head, the good news is that he also has an angel :)

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 8, “Turning a New Leaf.”

I'm standing on the front lines
I'm fighting for my soul
I've walked a self-destructive, lonely road
I read the warning signs, but
I was too blind to see
I had to feel the pain till I believed

I have a purpose

...

I'm calling out your name
I'm locked in my own prison
Tell me help is on the way

- “War over Me” by Papa Roach

~*~*~*~*~*~

“At last we've found you,” the man said—though he wasn't a man at all, but a hideous beast with slimy tentacles erupting from its sleeves and a forked tongue flicking between its grinning teeth. It towered over Winter, wreathed in shadows that blotted out all light. Yet still, he could see the hunger in the monster's eyes.
“You thought you could hide, didn't you?” the monster snickered as Winter backed slowly away. “Thought we couldn't find you if you pretended to be normal? Well, let me tell you a little secret, Soldier. You'll never be normal again. You'll never be anything but a monster.”

Winter's back collided with a solid brick wall. “You're wrong,” he protested weakly, trembling as the hideous beast towered over him. “I...I'm not like you....”

The monster burst into peals of unrestrained laughter. “Like you?” Its eyes glowed red with merciless flames. “I am you!”

Winter stared up in horror, and saw that it was true. That hideous face with the forked tongue and the glowing eyes was his.

“Go on,” the monster purred, “take off the mask. Why don't you see for yourself what's behind it?”

“You don't have to listen to him,” said a steady, calm voice somewhere off to the right. Winter glanced over and saw Steve standing there. He was wearing his Captain America uniform and holding the shield loosely by his side.

“Just try and stop me, pathetic weakling.” The monster stepped forward, reaching out with many tentacles that wrapped around Winter's neck and pinned his arms to his sides. He couldn't protest, couldn't struggle. He could only let the monster have its way with him.

When Winter tried to turn his face towards Steve again, the monster wrenched his head back to face it. “You think he can protect you?” the monster sneered. “You think he can save you? He doesn't even know you. Try taking off the mask, and see how much he cares when he knows you've been lying to him!”

“No!” Winter gasped as the tentacles wrapped around his mask and ripped it away. But then he caught a glimpse of his face in a mirror he hadn't noticed before, over the monster's shoulder. The mask was still in place.

Cackling gleefully, the monster kept tearing off the mask, but each time there was another one underneath. He couldn't escape the mask. He couldn't be anything other than the murderer he was trained to be.

He was on his knees now, fingers scrabbling at the mask. But his fingers were slick and kept slipping over its smooth surface. Was it because they were covered with blood? Or had they turned into writhing black tentacles like the monster's?

“I'm so disappointed in you,” the monster said scornfully, towering over him. “You can't even do something this simple? Get over yourself! Do you really think I'm going to waste any more time on such a lazy worm?”

Winter realized the monster's voice had changed, and slowly looked up. He didn't want to confirm the fears gripping his heart, but he had to know. As he looked up, the monster pulled on the face that looked like Winter's. It was a mask, sliding off to reveal the true face beneath it. Steve's face.

“You're not getting better,” Steve growled, his forked tongue tasting the air. “You'll never get any better!” The tentacles that took the place of his arms lashed across Winter's face.

“I-I'm sorry,” Winter stammered, too stunned to even try to shield himself. “I'm trying....”

“Oh, you're 'trying,' are you? Do you really think that's enough?” Steve yelled, hitting him across the back this time. “Do you expect me to do all the work?”
Cowering under Steve's blows, Winter feebly protested, “But...you said...all I had t-to do...was try.
You...You said...it was all...anyone could ask for....”

“You greedy little leech,” Steve spat. His tentacles curled around Winter's chin, forcing it up to face
him. “You really thought I would give you whatever you wanted, and I'd never ask for anything in
return? The only reason I don't ask for anything is that you have nothing to give. You are nothing.”

Steve shoved Winter away...and he fell out of bed. He lay panting on the floor for a few moments as
he slowly realized it had all been a dream. Then he scrambled to his feet and rushed into the
bathroom, where he ripped off his mask as fast as he could. His face stared back at him in the mirror,
white as a sheet, free of the mask.

A few dry heaves over the sink later, Winter realized he was crying. The foul things Steve had said
in his dream kept echoing in his head. You'll never be anything but a monster. You'll never get any
better. You are nothing. I'm so disappointed in you. So...now he knew whose voice he'd been
listening to all this time.

The voice laughed at him, haunting his waking brain as easily as when he'd been asleep. Always so
surprised when people treat you as you deserve, it sneered. You know that deep down, this is what
Steve really thinks of you. He knows you're a hopeless case; he's just pretending so he can ease his
conscience.

“No,” Winter gasped, hiccuping past a sob as he bent over the sink. “He's not giving up on me....”

Just face it already. There's nothing to give up on. You're too broken. There's nothing left to save
anyway.

Winter fell to his knees, still clutching the edge of the sink. Every word hurt like a stab to the chest.
“Please stop,” he sobbed. “Please....”

Stop? the voice said with a superior chuckle. Why don't you go ahead and stop me?

Unwillingly, Winter's eyes shifted over to the knife sitting on the toilet tank. He'd left it there after
wiping the blood off it last time. He hadn't dared to touch it again....

Don't do it, the quiet, gentle voice said. You need to get help. You don't have to do this alone.

But he didn't want to wake up Sam—he didn't feel like talking, whether about the nightmare or
anything else. And...he couldn't stand the thought of rousing Steve, not when he'd seen those blue
eyes turn red with hatred. Not when he'd felt slimy tentacles around his neck.

You know that wasn't real, the gentle voice said. There's no reason to believe he would do anything
other than what he's always done.

And what's that? the voice of the monster sneered. Sit around and hope you'll get better? He can't
help you. Accept the inevitable. There's nothing he or anyone else can do, so you might as well....

Winter grabbed the knife, interrupting the monster mid-speech. He sat back on his heels, transferring
the knife to his left hand and eyeing the gleaming edge of the blade. Peace and quiet were only a few
inches away....

Are you sure you want to do that? the quiet voice gently pressed.

He hesitated, the blade quivering over his scarred, mutilated arm. No...No, he really didn't want to do
this again. It had been almost two weeks since he'd cut himself last. Slowly but surely, his arm was
healing. He was changing for the better. Did he really want to take a step backwards now?

There's nowhere else to go! the monster howled in his mind. You have no other choice. You've never had a choice. Your only recourse is to dig yourself deeper into the mud, you pathetic little worm.

As his tears fell shimmering on the knife and then dripped down onto his arm, he suddenly remembered a voice saying, You don't have to listen to him. Where had he heard that before? Had he just imagined it?

“I...don't have to listen to you?” he echoed hesitantly. Then he straightened up a little and said more firmly, “I don't have to listen to you.”

Do you really think that's enough to get rid of me? the monster demanded. You know there's only one way to make me shut up....

Winter's hand tightened around the knife, and he pointed it in front of him rather than at his arm. “I...don't want to do that....”

It doesn't matter what you want. You've said so yourself. There is no other way for you to escape. Go crying to the others as many times as you like, but you know you'll never get rid of me.

Winter shuddered, but the gentle voice was quick to speak up. Don't believe him. Everything he's ever told you is a lie. Listen to those who will build you up, not tear you down.

Sure, the monster said scornfully, stick your head in the sand and ignore me if you want. But that won't stop what I say from being true. You can't reject the truth just because you don't like it.

“I...don't know what's true anymore,” Winter said in a tiny, quavering voice. “So I guess what it comes down to...is who I trust to tell me the truth. And you....” He took a deep breath, and when he closed his eyes, he thought he could see the ugly monster leering down at him. “You have never done anything to help me. You make everything worse. But Steve...he always helps me.” He could see Steve too, standing over the monster's shoulder and smiling encouragingly at him. “I think...he actually cares about me. You don't care about me. You don't think I'm worth anything. Why would I trust someone if they don't think I even matter at all?”

He drew himself up, and looked the monster in the face without flinching. “But I...I do matter. I matter to him.”

The monster's face, which was an ugly mockery of Steve's to begin with, twisted into a grotesque expression of pure rage. A stream of curses and profane insults spewed out of the monster's mouth, hitting his mind like physical blows.

But then there was a shield in front of him. Steve stood before him, arms spread wide to either side like he could easily endure every awful thing the monster could think up. Winter looked over Steve's shoulder, and saw that the monster...well, it was still enormous, and the most hideous thing he'd ever seen. But he realized now that it was also desperate. Not the powerful tyrant he'd always thought it was. There was fear behind the hatred in its eyes.

“I don't want you,” Winter told the monster with quiet conviction. “And I don't need you. Go away.”

Everything fell silent.

Slowly, Winter opened his eyes and stared blankly at the opposite wall. Just like that, the voice was gone, like he'd found the right switch to flip in his mind. Had it really been that easy all this time?
Steve's gentle voice spoke in his mind one last time, filling his mind with things he remembered the real Steve saying to him over the months he’d known him. *You're my friend. You come first. You deserve so much better. I will die before I let them take you. Winter...I'm so proud of you.*

Then that voice also faded away, and Winter's mind was completely silent for the first time in a long, long while. He was still crying, but something else was happening to him too. It took him a moment to realize what was going on, but then he understood: He was smiling again.

Winter pushed himself off the floor and leaned over the sink to look at his reflection. Tears still streaked down his face, and his chin was quivering, but that wasn't what made him look so different. All the lines stress had etched into his face were smoothed out, and the tired bags under his eyes weren't so prominent somehow. His mouth had scrunched his cheeks up into a slightly lopsided grin that fit so well with the bursting, swelling feeling in his chest—like a balloon trying to float away.

The cage was open. The fog had lifted. He had climbed over the prison wall, and he was never, *ever* going back.

Wiping his eyes on his sleeve, he contemplated the knife he still held in one hand. He was no longer plagued by the insidious whispers that kept telling him to use it. The sharp edge had lost its perilously beautiful gleam, and now it was just a knife. Not the heady temptation he'd been trying to resist for so long.

But that didn't mean he needed to keep temptation around. He didn't know if the voice would return, and if it did, it would probably mean another desperate struggle for survival. Oddly enough, the prospect didn't frighten him. He had bested his own demons, and he could do it again. Or rather...he had someone who could protect him, no matter what that monster threw at him.

His smile, which had begun fading away, broadened again as he remembered Steve standing in front of him, shielding him from all the pain and accusation. It didn't matter that all of that had happened in his head. It was as real as the air he breathed.

But even if victory was assured, there was no sense in giving the enemy a weapon. He should give the knife back to Steve now, while his will was strong, and it would be that much easier to fight next time. Ironic that a weapon made it harder to win a battle.

Winter took a few minutes to compose himself, then washed his face and put the mask back on. Then he tiptoed over to Steve's room, eased the door open, and slipped soundlessly inside. Steve's deep breathing immediately calmed Winter's heart, which was still pounding giddily in the wake of his victory. He crept up to the side of Steve's bed and reached out, intending to leave the knife on the bedside table.

“Winter!”

He nearly leapt out of his skin, and was on the verge of beating a hasty retreat when he realized Steve was still asleep. In the dim moonlight filtering through a gap in the curtains, Winter could see that Steve's eyes were closed. His arms were stretched over his head in a position that looked rather uncomfortable, which might have explained the pained expression that scrunched up his sleeping face.

Steve shifted restlessly, his head tossing from side to side. He mumbled something incoherent, but Winter managed to decipher the last few words: “Please stop.... Please....”

Winter stared, transfixed. Normally, Steve's sleep was quiet and untroubled; Winter had never heard him talking in his sleep, not any of the times he'd come in to wake Steve up or watch his slumber.
Somehow, it had never occurred to him that Steve could have nightmares too. What did someone with a clean conscience and no addictions dream about?

“Winter....” Steve said, panting with effort as if he were struggling against some invisible restraint. His fists opened and closed helplessly. It was strange, how the Steve in Winter's mind had been so calm and capable, yet the real Steve was struggling with demons of his own. “No...don't touch him....”

Winter could hardly breathe. Steve was dreaming about him being hurt. As if on some level he knew that Winter was under attack. And even in his sleep, Steve was fighting for him.

Steve fell still and silent, and at first Winter thought the nightmare had passed. But then his eyes slid open, and latched onto Winter with a sharp intake of breath.

Before Winter could do more than register that Steve was awake, Steve flung his arm up and knocked Winter's arm to one side. His foot lashed out from under the covers and kicked Winter to the floor. As Steve rolled on top of him, pinning him down, Winter's body reacted before his mind could catch up. Decades of training took over, till he didn't see Steve anymore, only an enemy.

With a few deft movements, he managed to flip his attacker over, so now Winter was on top, holding him down with a metal arm to the neck. The enemy jabbed his thumb roughly into the pressure point on Winter's forearm, forcing him to drop his knife with a grunt of pain. But he wasted no time in pulling his hand free and using it to punch the other man as hard as he could.

In the split second as the attacker pulled his fist back to strike again, Winter realized what was happening. This was Steve. He was fighting Steve, and Steve was fighting back.

He must not have fastened the mask properly, because as soon as Steve's fist collided with it, it clattered onto the floor. Winter whirled off of Steve and scurried into the farthest corner of the room, shielding his exposed face with both arms. His heart pounded, his stomach a roiling tempest of horror, guilt, and dread.

“Oh no—I'm sorry! Don't worry, I didn't see....”

His dream had come true. Steve had attacked him. He'd taken off the mask. If Winter turned around, he would see the tentacles oozing out of Steve's sleeves, the forked tongue flicking between lips curled up in a cruel grin....

Something nudged up against the side of his leg. The mask. “Sorry,” Steve said, closer this time. Terrifyingly close. “I didn't see anything, I swear.”

Those tentacles would reach under his chin and force his head up, and Steve would see him and judge him and there was no way to escape....

He was dimly aware that Sam was in the doorway, saying something and then leaving again, but he couldn't hear over the roaring tempest in his ears. All of his confidence and joy was snuffed out in the gale of terror howling through him.

“I'm so sorry, Winter.... I was dreaming, and I was just...so startled to see you, I didn't stop to think....”

No...No. It didn't add up. Steve wouldn't be apologizing if this had been his plan all along. He wouldn't have given the mask back if he was eager to see Winter's face. And he wouldn't keep reassuring Winter if he was a cruel monster.
Winter cautiously peeked over his shoulder at Steve, who stood over by the window. He leaned against the frame, his head bowed and his shoulders slumped. What was this experience like for him? Had he reacted to a perceived attack the same way Winter had? If he hadn't meant to hurt Winter or take his mask off...what was he thinking now?

No...don't touch him....

What if Steve wanted to protect him like the man in his mind had, but instead he had actually hurt him?

Winter picked the mask off the floor where Steve had left it, and put it back on. As he double-checked the buckles to make sure it wouldn't fall off again, an insane urge came over him to just leave the mask off this time. The lingering terror of his dream where he hadn't been able to get rid of the mask was almost enough to convince him. Would it really be so bad for Steve to see his face now?

...Yes. It would make everything so much worse if Steve knew that his old friend had so many problems. He would become convinced that somehow this was all Steve's fault. He would take all the blame, and he would feel even worse than he already did....

Much better to leave things as they were. Standing up and letting out a shuddering breath, Winter reached over to the floor lamp he crouched next to, and switched it on. Steve turned around, looking as apologetic and dejected from the front as he had from behind.

Winter spotted his knife on the floor between them, glittering in the muted light of the lamp. Looking at it reminded him of the reason he'd come here in the first place, and an echo of the unshakable joy he'd felt sang in his chest. Slowly, he crossed to it and picked it up, turning it over in his hands. He wished he knew how to tell Steve what had happened. How could he explain that he'd been living with nightmares in his head ever since he'd left Hydra?

Though that reminded him.... “You were talking in your sleep,” he said, looking up at last. “You...said my name.”

A trace of horror crossed Steve's face before he rubbed it away with both hands and sat down heavily on the bed. “I dreamed that Hydra found you again,” he said in a small voice. “They were...hurting you. Torturing you. I wanted to stop them, but...I realized that I was small and weak again. The way I was before the serum. I couldn't fight them, I couldn't protect you.... There was nothing I could do but watch.” He laughed bitterly. “It's like a metaphor for my waking life.”

Winter stared at him. That was his nightmare? He was practically saying his worst fear was that he couldn't be the Steve in Winter's dream.

How come Steve was always so amazing?

“You never hurt me,” Winter blurted, the words tumbling out before he could order them into some kind of sense.

Steve looked up with a confused frown. “What? I just punched you in the face!”

Winter wished he had a way with words like the others did, so Steve would instantly understand him and feel reassured. Instead, Winter had to muddle through as best he could. “Everything you've ever done was to help me. From the beginning, you did everything you could to make life better for me.” He thought of the monster wearing Steve's face, insulting him and trying to make him believe a lie. “You've had plenty of chances to be cruel, but...you make me feel safe. Even when I didn't—
couldn't—understand or accept that's what you were trying to do.”

Winter's heart ached as he thought of all the times he had believed the worst of Steve. “You could have abandoned me anytime. Maybe you should have.” All those times he hadn't believed what Steve told him, the times he'd tried to find his own way out when the answer was right in front of him. “But you didn't. You're still here. You're still trying to help. Even if sometimes it seems hopeless.”

“Haven't been a whole lot of help lately,” Steve said quietly. Winter frowned. He'd been trying so hard, but he still couldn't seem to express what he was trying to say. Why couldn't he get Steve to understand what he'd done? Frustrated, Winter took a step forward and pressed the handle of his knife into Steve's hand. “I came to give this back. I don't need it anymore.”

He hadn't realized what an immense relief it would be to finally hand the knife over. Steve could protect him much better than he could protect himself, and the monster was that much farther away from him. It might hurt him again, but it would never dig its claws into his heart the way it once had.

An awkward silence stretched out between them. He'd expected Steve to say something, but he just sat there with a strange expression on his face. After a long pause, Winter turned to leave. He wasn't sure how Steve had taken anything he'd said, but he'd tried his best. And as Steve himself had said, that was all anyone could ask of him.

When he reached for the doorknob, he hesitated, remembering the profuse apologies Steve had made after hitting him. He remembered the awful, dejected tone in his voice when he'd said, Haven't been much help lately.

“You couldn't have prevented it,” Winter said quietly, looking at the vivid scars lining his arm. “But you stopped it. Thank you.”

“Wait!” Steve suddenly cried as Winter opened the door. “Don't just walk away from me after saying something like that!”

Winter turned back, anxiety clutching at his throat. What had he said wrong? Had his attempt to thank Steve backfired so horribly that he'd offended him instead? Oh no. There were tears shimmering in Steve's eyes. Winter scrambled to think of how to apologize when he wasn't sure what he'd done wrong.

But then Steve smiled and raised his arms slightly. “Come here and give me a hug.”

Winter was so relieved Steve wasn't angry that he immediately approached, but when he stood right in front of Steve he realized he wasn't sure what to do. Steve had hugged him before, but he hadn't exactly paid attention to how it was done. And the days when such things came naturally were long gone. Hesitantly, he raised his arms and tried to pull Steve close. “Like this?”

Steve's arms wrapped around him, warm and much more comfortable than Winter's awkward grip. “Close enough,” he said.

Long minutes passed as Winter stood in the safe circle of Steve's arms. He lost track of time, but he didn't want to leave, and Steve didn't pull back either. Occasionally he would rub his hand up and down Winter's back, but otherwise he just stood there without any indication that he was growing impatient.

Steve's arms fit him so well it was like they were made for nothing other than holding him.
After several minutes, Winter asked hesitantly, “How long do we keep doing this?”

“As long as you need,” Steve said, rubbing his thumb back and forth across Winter's right shoulder.

“How long is that?”

Steve laughed slightly, a deep chuckle Winter could feel through his chest. “I guess that's up to you.”

Winter thought about that for a minute. “How will I know?”

“Well...I guess when you get tired of this.”

He rested his head on Steve's shoulder, leaning into his warm embrace and turning his head so he could feel Steve's steady pulse against his forehead. “Uh-oh,” he whispered.

“What's wrong?”

“We're going to be here all night.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

...for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was in a besieged city. I had said in my alarm, “I am cut off from your sight.” But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy when I cried to you for help.

- Psalm 31:21-22
Unfortunately, the inspiration for this chapter comes from my own personal experience in the last couple months. I had back surgery when I was a teenager, so I've had to deal with lots of pain and discomfort in the years since—more from what the rest of my body has done to compensate, rather than a direct result of the surgery itself. For the most part, I've just kind of dealt with it as best as I can on my own, doing exercises and occasionally bribing someone to give me a massage or attempting to give one to myself. But then in the past couple months (as of the time I'm writing this), I've been dealing with near-constant headaches and stiff necks, and begun seeing a chiropractor to hopefully get this sorted out. I find that up to a certain point, I can kind of distract myself from the pain and just kind of get used to it, but there's a threshold beyond which I simply can't function anymore, and that's when I go looking for help.

Anyway, a while back I read a massage therapist's take on the kind of things Bucky might have to deal with because of his metal arm. Now, he has enhanced strength and healing abilities, so his side effects probably wouldn't be as extreme as a normal person getting a hunk of steel grafted to their shoulder...but I don't think he'd be able to walk away without any discomfort whatsoever. So I thought I'd explore what it would be like for Winter/Bucky to be experiencing this when Steve and Sam actually have the chance to help him with it. Especially since I've already established that Steve is good at giving massages. I would pay good money to get a Steve Rogers neck massage right about now....

This chapter takes place in *Make Me Whole* chapter 8, “Turning a New Leaf,” and after the end.

**And when I'm open wide**
**With nothing left to cling to**
**Only you are there to lead me on**
’Cause honestly, I'm not that strong

... 

I'm not all right
I'm broken inside
Broken inside
And all I go through leads me to you
I'm not all right
That's why I need you

- “I'm Not All Right” by Sanctus Real

Steve was setting the table for breakfast one morning when he looked up to find Winter standing silently at the edge of the kitchen area. That wasn't a strange occurrence, but what was strange was the look of pleading in Winter's eyes. He stood stiffly, with his shoulders slightly hunched, his hands balled into fists. His disheveled hair and the haggard bags under his eyes suggested it hadn't been an easy night.

Slowly, Steve set down his handful of silverware. “Winter? What's wrong?”

There was something different about Winter's expression this morning, something other than the usual shamed confession that he'd been unable to resist cutting himself again. Sam looked over his shoulder at them and immediately moved the skillet he'd been melting butter in, turning off the stove.

Winter's eyes darted between their concerned expressions, but he barely moved his head at all. “Please,” he gasped, in sudden bursts as if holding his breath between each word. “It...hurts. Hurts...really bad....”

“Where's the pain?” Sam asked in a businesslike way, stepping closer. “Describe what it feels like. What hurts the most?”

“Ev...Everything....” Winter started to turn his head to look at Sam, but stopped himself with a wince. “Everything hurts...but...but especially...my back...neck...shoulders....”

“Like a sore muscle?” Steve asked. “Did you sleep funny or something?”

“Didn't sleep...” Winter mumbled, squeezing his eyes shut. “It's...because of my arm,” he said, wiggling the fingers of his left hand slightly, but not raising his arm at all. “Too heavy...pulls on everything.... So sometimes, it...gets like this....”

Steve wondered how long this pain had been building up. Had Winter been dealing with increasingly tight, strained muscles all this time, and been too afraid to ask for some kind of relief? Or worse, did he think relief was impossible, or that they wouldn't care if he told them about it?

Winter kept his eyes closed, as if that were the easier alternative to fixing his gaze on the floor. “I...I know you don't have the drugs or the...the things they'd use...to fix it...but...please....” When he opened his eyes again, they were glistening with tears. “Please...do s-something....”

“Here, I'll get you a heat pack for starters,” Sam said, heading back into the kitchen. “You tried taking something for the pain yet?”

“Didn't help,” Winter muttered.
“Here.” Steve pulled over a chair for him—a regular chair that sat in the corner, not one of the barstools at the kitchen table. He had Winter sit in it the wrong way, so he could lean forward against the back of the chair. “Can I try rubbing your back for a bit and see if that helps?”

“Okay,” Winter whispered, gingerly resting his forehead against the back of the chair.

“I'm just going to rub up and down your back for now,” Steve said. “If it starts to hurt too much, just tell me and I'll stop, okay?”

“Okay....”

Steve rubbed his hands up and down the long muscles of Winter's back, moving in smooth, gentle motions. As he worked, Sam brought over a couple heat packs, settling them carefully over Winter's shoulders and neck. Then Sam sat down on the floor in front of Winter, took hold of his right arm, and set about inspecting his cuts.

Winter didn't say anything, just sat there and let them do what they wanted with him, like he was a life-size doll or something. Steve tried not to wonder what it had been like when Hydra had dealt with this problem their prized 'Asset' experienced.

Slowly, Steve worked his way up Winter's back to his shoulders, taking off the heat packs as they cooled. He could easily feel how tight Winter's shoulders were through his loose pajama shirt, so he spent a long time working on them. Winter grunted a few times when Steve found a particularly tender spot, but he didn't ask Steve to stop.

It had been Steve's mother who had taught him how to give a shoulder massage. Growing up, he hadn't been able to do it very long or very hard, but his mother had always seemed to like it when he gave her one after a double shift at the hospital. Later on, he'd taught Bucky how to do it, and they would practice on each other. And as soon as the Howling Commandos had discovered that he was good at backrubs, he'd found himself giving them more than ever.

After the serum, Steve had always felt that if he wasn't extra careful, he would accidentally punch his thumb right through someone's ribcage when he gave massages, but he discovered that he didn't have to worry about holding back this time. Winter's bones and muscles were as strong as his, so he was actually able to use his full strength for once.

“What are you doing?” Winter suddenly asked.

Steve was confused for a moment, but then he realized Winter was peering through the slats in the back of the chair. Sam had finished with Winter's arm, and now sat with Winter's bare feet in his lap. “Giving you a foot rub,” he said.

“But it's my back that hurts, not my feet.”

“It's like my mom always says,” Sam said, busily rubbing Winter's heel. “If your back hurts, pamper your feet.”

A sudden image of Winter reading a magazine while Sam painted his toenails pink popped into Steve's mind, and he had to hold his breath to keep from snorting with laughter.

Once he finally thought he could speak without bursting into giggles, Steve said, “What about your neck? Can I do that next?”

He was a little nervous about how Winter would react to someone touching his neck from behind, but Winter just hesitated, then quietly agreed. And as Steve began to gently massage the tight
muscles in his neck, he could feel the tension seeping out of him. Winter practically melted into the chair, his fingers curled around the slats and his forehead resting against the back.

Steve kept rubbing—back, shoulders, neck, back and forth, in little circles—keeping a steady rhythm. He lost track of time, focusing only on the motions of his hands. He forgot that they'd been about to sit down for breakfast, or that he'd been hungry. All that mattered right now was what little he could do to ease Winter's pain.

At one point, Sam leaned to the side and mouthed up at Steve, Asleep.

Steve smiled. And Winter got some much-needed rest while his friends soothed his pain away.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Bucky lay face-down on his bed, so comfortable he was halfway asleep. No thoughts crossed his mind; he just focused on the sensation of Steve's hands rubbing up and down his bare back. He paid attention to every detail, registering the pressure, the friction, the warmth.

After that first massage, Steve had suggested they do it on a regular basis, so the pain would never get that bad again. Winter had been skeptical at first, reluctant to demand so much for himself, but Steve had insisted. Often, he didn't even wait for Winter to ask, but would just come up behind him and start rubbing his shoulders.

And...it just felt so good. How could he refuse?

Bucky finally thought he could believe it when Steve said he enjoyed giving these massages. If nothing else, Steve liked helping the people he loved. He liked being useful. Bucky was growing used to the satisfied look in Steve's eyes when Bucky told him how much better he felt after one of their sessions.

And Bucky had noticed a dramatic difference after they'd been doing this regularly. He'd forgotten what it was like to not be in constant pain. To wake up in the morning without having to wait for a pounding headache to subside. To turn his head without that catch in his neck. To lift his arms without a twinge between his shoulder blades.

Every area of his life had been like that since Steve invaded and made his presence known. Hydra's claws had been embedded in him for so long that pain had seemed an ordinary, expected part of life. Then Steve had come along and reminded him that he could trust people, ask for help, change the way he thought of himself. When he'd been empty, he'd tried to fill that void with pain...until Steve filled him to the brim with love.

Steve's fingers followed their familiar paths up and down his back, pressing and molding him—not like Hydra had, shoving him forcefully into a mold that had broken him. With every gentle press of his fingers, Steve was gently coaxing him back into the form of the man he'd once been. His natural shape.

Then Steve's fingers trailed lightly down the side of his ribcage, and a sudden giggle burst from Bucky's lips.

He craned his neck around to look up at Steve in surprise. “What? Why did I...laugh...?”
Steve was grinning with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “It's called tickling, Buck. Don't you remember?”

“Tickling....” Memories dredged up from the back of his mind flitted before him. Laughing so hard that tears rolled down his cheeks.... Giggling helplessly, even though Steve's wiggling fingers were a foot away....

Ever so lightly, Steve ran a finger down Bucky's side again. Unbidden, another laugh rose in Bucky's throat, and he jerked away from Steve's hand.

The only warning he got was Steve's widening grin. Before Bucky could react, Steve hopped up on the bed and started tickling him mercilessly. Squirming away from him, Bucky grabbed his pillow and tried to beat Steve's hands away, laughing breathlessly all the time. And the next thing he knew, they were in the middle of an all-out pillow fight.

Bucky finally gained the upper hand when he jabbed a finger at one specific spot on Steve's stomach. His hands almost seemed to move of their own accord, remembering what his mind had forgotten. Steve shrieked and nearly fell off the bed as he flailed wildly with his pillow.

Steve liked to say he wasn't ticklish at all, but Bucky had always been able to find the one spot that proved him wrong.

Once they'd finally called a truce, Steve and Bucky lay side-by-side on the bed, trying to catch their breath. Bucky hugged his pillow to his chest, just in case Steve decided to try to catch him off guard and start tickling him again. That was also something Steve was known to do.

Bucky realized that what had just happened bore a striking resemblance to certain unpleasant experiences he'd had with Hydra. Steve had pinned him and done things to him against his will, sending sparks of sensation zinging along his nerves. Bucky had been trying to escape, breathlessly telling him to stop, doing his best to retaliate...but he'd been laughing. He'd enjoyed it. Not for a single moment had he been frightened, nor had he felt that shamed helplessness that had been so common in his life with Hydra.

What was the difference? Besides the obvious point that tickling wasn't actually painful.

Bucky turned his head to look at Steve, whose eyes were closed as he lay there, breathing deeply. Steve never treated him with the impatient disdain Hydra always had. When his muscles had grown so stiff and locked up that he couldn't do his job adequately, they had done what they could to get him moving again—but they'd used every shortcut they had at their disposal, and had worked briskly without once asking him how he felt. They'd disregarded his pain, and as soon as they deemed him ready to go back into action, they'd forced him to do so.

But Steve had already put hours upon hours into caring for his friend. He hadn't bothered about whether Bucky was useful or not; all he'd been concerned with was making sure Bucky wasn't in pain. He took the time to learn what worked best and what made Bucky feel comfortable. He noticed when Bucky wasn't feeling well, and then devoted all his time to changing that—with his only reward a smile and a word of thanks.

Even if someone from Hydra had tried tickling him, Bucky knew he wouldn't have responded with laughter. He would have been frightened, trying to read past their actions to understand what they were trying to get from him. But when Steve did something, Bucky didn't watch him suspiciously and assume he had an ulterior motive for everything he did. Not anymore. The only ulterior motive he had, if it could even be called that, was his desire for Bucky's happiness.
Steve turned his head to look at Bucky. “What?”

“I love you.”

Steve just smiled.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing: heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled.

- Psalm 6:2
I loved writing this scene from Winter's POV. I just love exploring the sense of wonder Winter has every time he experiences something new, especially when he gets a chance to break free from the angst that takes up most of his time. In fact, this scene is probably the happiest the three of them are until the end. Winter has left his biggest problems behind, and they're all comfortable enough to really enjoy each other's presence before the stress and worry of the climax sets in. My favorite thing about writing this scene was finding all the little differences between the version we've already seen, and what Winter focuses on. Due to his hypervigilance, I think he notices a lot more subtle details than the others do. And that's a joy to write ;)

This chapter takes place in *Make Me Whole* chapter 10, “Into the Flames.”

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I know just what I came here for
I was once afraid but now I'm sure
    I made my mind up clearly
I won't wait for the answers to find me
I will ride the waves in the ocean of my dreams

This is where
I feel safe inside and can let go at the same time
    When I'm here
I am open so I can reach the infinite sky

- “Breathe” by Laura Brehm

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It was only when the seasons began to change that Winter realized how long it had been. How many months had passed—six? seven?—since he had taken the biggest risk of his life and come to this cabin with Steve and Sam?

Seven months since he'd gotten his life back. Seven months since he had been beaten. Seven months since pain and those terrifying Words had stripped away everything that made him who he was.

It had been seven months since he'd been the Winter Soldier. Six months since he'd needed Hydra's 'medicine'. Five months since he'd remembered what trust was. Four months since Steve had pulled him from the brink of death. Three months since he had asked the others for help. Two months since he had remembered how to smile. One month since he had put his knives away for good.
He was a new man.

During the winter, it had seemed that the frozen ground and biting wind would remain forever. But slowly, time passed and the temperature crept up again. Winter wasn't used to watching the seasons change—he would emerge from cryosleep to the blaze of summer or the chill of winter, and that was all he saw before they put him under again. So he found it fascinating to watch the snow melt away and tiny green buds slowly unfold into leaves on bushes and trees.

Rain settled in over the mountainside, hanging around for days like it intended to stay permanently. Winter remembered a few things about drenching rain like this, and none of them were very good. But he was a little surprised when he saw the others looking out glumly at the downpour, or heard their complaints about the weather. They wouldn't remember shoving someone's face into a puddle of rainwater mixed with their own blood, and holding them down till they drowned in it...so what did they have to fear?

But Winter kept quiet and continued to observe. There were many things about the others that he'd forgotten or just didn't understand, but usually he figured it out eventually.

Then he noticed that Sam flinched slightly every time thunder rolled across the sky. He usually tried to pass it off as some other movement, like blinking something out of his eye or suddenly scratching an itch. Steve didn't seem to notice, but Winter understood. Strange as it might seem, Sam was scared of thunderstorms. Suddenly, everything he'd ever said to encourage Winter about his irrational fears took on a different weight of meaning.

But Sam never let the fear get the better of him. At the first clap of thunder, Sam would immediately say something like, “Oh yeah, I just remembered—I found some music from your time, Cap!” and then loudly blast some music on his phone. Whether it was something that brought a nostalgic smile to Steve's face or turned out to be chamber music from the eighteenth century, it seemed a helpful distraction. From then on, Winter tried harder to maintain a conversation or ask Sam how to do something in the kitchen when thunder was in the air. He didn't want to see Sam in pain after everything he'd done for him.

So Winter was a little surprised when Sam walked out onto the porch on a rainy morning, as if the view out the window might be lying to him and it wasn't actually raining after all. Steve followed him out onto the porch, and Winter trailed after them. At least there wasn't any thunder today, so Sam wasn't jumpy and tense, but his low mood seeped into the air around him, as palpable as a scent.

“April showers bring May flowers,” Winter mumbled, the words flying to his lips before he was even conscious of them.

Steve looked over in surprise. “My mother used to say that every time I complained about the rain. Even when it wasn't April,” he added with a fond chuckle.

Winter's heart pounded. So that's where he had heard that saying. Steve's mother. Sarah Rogers. Miss Sarah, he suddenly recalled. *That's what I used to call her. For some reason, she never wanted me to call her Mrs. Rogers.*

An aching pit opened in his stomach. He missed her. He hadn't even thought of her until that moment, but all of a sudden he remembered her smell—like clean linen and fresh bread. Yes...and he always liked going over to Steve's apartment, because Miss Sarah would give him as big of a hug as she would her own son, and would ask him about his day and really *listen* when he spoke. Not like his own mother, who was always busy and frazzled, taking care of the girls and worrying about bills....
Suddenly a wave of emotion crashed over him, drowning him with memories of faces he felt guilty for forgetting. His mother, his father, his younger sisters.... What had happened to them? Were they all dead by now? He...missed them. He couldn't even think of their names right now, but he ached to see them again, to hear their voices calling his name....

Then the tide of emotion ebbed away. No, he reminded himself sadly. The name they would call would be Bucky. And that's not you anymore.

His depressed thoughts were suddenly interrupted as Sam let out a yell that made Winter jump. Before either of the others could ask what was wrong, Sam ripped off his shoes and socks, then bounded off the porch and into the rain. He was drenched instantly, but he let out a hoot that Winter realized was laughter. Sam spun around in a circle, arms outstretched, till he ended in the largest mud puddle in the yard, grinning with his face turned up to the rainy sky.

He's gone completely crazy, Winter thought, staring at him.

“"I used to do this with my brother and sister when we were kids!” Sam laughed. “Come on, you old fongies!” He waved his arms as if they were on the far end of a football field rather than just a few yards away. “Jump in a puddle! Feel the mud between your toes!”

With a chuckle and a roll of his eyes, Steve leaned against the wall of the cabin to take off his shoes and socks too. Winter didn't understand. Why did they want to do this? It looked cold and wet and dirty—not fun or pleasurable. Why were the others both so eager for something anyone would want to avoid?

“You're going to catch your death,” Steve told Sam mildly as he stepped off the porch into the downpour.

“And you're not?” Sam retorted with a grin.

“I have the immune system of ten men,” Steve said, in such an exaggerated tone of bragging that Winter was pretty sure he was joking. “You, my friend, do not.”

“Yeah, yeah, we'll see who's laughing when you get a cold.”

Then he jabbed at Steve with his elbow, and Steve yanked him to the ground, and Sam pulled his leg out from under him, and Winter's chest seized with sudden anxiety as his whole world turned upside-down because they were fighting each other, and—

Lying flat on his back in the mud, Sam began to laugh. Steve followed suit a moment later, spattered with mud and becoming more drenched by the minute. Still laughing, they staggered back to their feet, clinging to each other as their feet slid on the slick grass. Slowly, the sickening rush of fear subsided. They'd only been—what was the term?—teasing each other. Steve and Sam hadn't suddenly decided they hated each other. They were still friends. All was right with the world.

But then Sam called up to him, “Hey, Winter, come on down here! You haven't lived until you've run around barefoot in the rain!”

Winter looked uncertainly at the sea of mud and stubby grass that was the front yard. It was already chilly, just standing up here on the porch...and he didn't like getting wet if he could avoid it...unless it was a shower, he supposed....

“It's all right,” Steve said soothingly. “It's not that cold once you get used to it. I think you'll like it.”

Winter looked from Steve's patient, encouraging smile to Sam's happy, open grin. No one would
force him to step off this porch. No one would even be upset or disappointed if he decided that he'd rather stay dry. But...they were inviting him to join them in something they found enjoyable. They wanted him to be a part of it.

Winter realized that he did too.

Slowly, he sat down on the top step and pulled off his boots, then his socks. The wood was damp and rough beneath his bare feet as he stood up again and inched down onto the next step. If he went any farther, the rain would fall on his head.

“Come on!” Steve called. “It's fun! Just try it!”

He glanced furtively over at Steve and Sam, who stood watching him. A small part of him felt embarrassed, knowing that it was just rain, after all—perfectly normal, really. But there was no judgment in the others' faces, only patience and understanding. They knew he wasn't used to doing things like this. They wanted him to join in, but they were willing to wait until he decided he was ready. He had the power to choose, and to act.

He wanted to, but...he was afraid. Of what, exactly, he wasn't sure—the unknown consequences of the choices he made for himself, perhaps.

“I...I don't want to fall down...” he murmured uncertainly.

“Here,” Steve said immediately, stepping forward with hand outstretched. “Just hang onto me; I won't let you fall.”

In a moment, any trace of embarrassment or shame vanished. He put his hand in Steve's, and he was safe. Steve's skin was warm, his grip was firm, and the slight tug on his arm as he grasped Winter's hand was a gentle encouragement to take another step.

He did. Cold rain pattered on the top of his head, like when he had stepped into the shower for the first time and it had doused him before the water had time to warm up. Winter hunched his shoulders, hoping he wouldn't have a panic attack like that time too, but Steve's fingers encircling his were reassuring.

Peeping through dripping strands of hair, Winter glanced over at Sam, who stood watching a few paces away. Sam, who got nervous and tense when it rained, obviously trying hard not to flinch when he heard thunder. Sam, who refused to let his fear dictate his actions, but stood out here in the rain so he could share this time with his friends.

“Can...Can I hold onto Sam too?”

For a moment, as Sam's eyebrows rose in surprise, Winter's insides shriveled with embarrassment again, and he wanted to run back inside and hide where no one would ever look at him again. But then Sam stepped forward and said, as if he did this every day, “Sure thing, man.”

He couldn't feel Sam's hand close around his own, beyond a faint sense of pressure, but he knew that hand would be warm against his cold metal fingers. And he knew that if he slipped, that hand would tighten its grip and hold him up.

Gripping tightly to both of their supporting hands, Winter stepped down onto the grass. The first shock of cold sent goosebumps racing up his legs, and he tensed in anticipation of his body's reaction to this novel sensation. But he could hear the calm breathing of the men on either side, and Steve shifted his grip a little on Winter's hand, his thumb sliding across his skin.
Nothing painful was happening to him. There was nothing to fear. Neither Steve nor Sam would have rushed out here or urged him to follow if there was anything dangerous about it. They did it because they liked it.

He looked around the yard, wondering why. What was it that made them laugh? What was it about this rainy day that had made Sam shrug off his anxiety?

Rain poured down, pattering on the branches of trees and splashing in muddy puddles. It was like standing in the shower, true, but it was more...random than that. With a shower, you knew that the water would come pouring out from exactly the same place until you turned it off. But now that he stood in the rain, feeling every drop on the top of his head and listening to the sounds all around him, he almost thought it sounded...musical. The rain made different sounds on the newly-opening leaves of bushes and trees, and in the puddles on the ground, and against the roof of the cabin....

He noticed a higher-pitched plinking sound like the drops were hitting metal. Then he looked down and realized it was his own metal hand. He pulled it out of Sam's grip to examine it and watched the water pool in the crevices of his palm before trailing down his fingers and dripping down to the ground. Then he pulled away from Steve's hand as well, so he could catch the rainwater in his cupped hands. Somehow, he'd never really taken the time to appreciate how beautiful the rain was. How fascinating it was to watch how water flowed.

He let his hands drop and looked out across the yard again. As the Winter Soldier, he'd never had the time to appreciate the simple beauty of nature. He'd been too preoccupied with trying to survive and carry out the orders he'd been given. Hydra had no use for anything beautiful or soothing.

He raised his eyes to the mountains rising on all sides, their summits obscured by the thick clouds. Then he closed his eyes and tipped his head back further, so he could feel the rain running down what little of his face was exposed.

The Winter Soldier was steadily being washed away. The time he spent here rinsed away all the blood, all the fear, all the pain and distrust, and left him clean and new. Just as he had washed his body on that first day and put on new clothes that weren't stained with sweat and blood, every day of this new life took him further away from the darkness in his past.

Winter raised his hands over his head, luxuriating in the sensation of clean, cold water running down his arms. Let it all be washed away. He wasn't that man anymore. He was here because Steve wanted him to be here. Because Sam wanted him to be here. Because Winter wanted, more than anything else in the whole world, to be here with them.

Slowly, he started to spin. He didn't know why, but Sam had done it, and he wondered what it was like. Mud squelched between his toes, grass tickled his ankles, and the rain splattered on his upturned face. He spun faster and faster, his head whirling dizzily, every sense alive. He was here, in this moment, and he was...he was happy.

Suddenly, his bare feet slid out from under him, and he crashed onto his back. For a moment, all he could do was lie there, mind whirling dizzily at the sudden change in position. Then Steve ran towards him, gasping, “Winter, are you o—”

Just as Winter turned his head to look, Steve tripped and fell flat on his face with an impressive splash, sliding forward a few feet on the ground. When he lifted his head, his whole face was plastered with a thick layer of mud.

As he looked at Steve's messy face, something happened to Winter's breath. It came out in a short burst, almost a snort. He was so surprised that he stopped, trying to figure out what was happening. It
didn’t feel like the tightness in his chest before a panic attack....

Steve wiped the mud out of his eyes, leaving two light circles of bare skin in his mud-splattered face. He looked so...strange, like a raccoon or something. Winter’s heart lifted unexpectedly, and the corners of his mouth tugged upwards in an irrepressible smile.

Joy exploded in his chest, bubbled up his throat, and burst from his mouth. As the sound broke through the steady patter of raindrops, he suddenly understood what was happening to him.

He was laughing.

After a moment or two, the others joined in as well. The air rang with laughter, and for once, Winter was a part of it. He couldn't stop, he didn't want to stop. Steve laughed so hard that tears slipped through the tracks the raindrops left in the mud on his face. Sam hooted about a 'Captain America facial,' clinging to one of the posts on the porch to keep himself upright.

Their laughter died down and Winter lay in the grass, breathing deeply of rain-sodden air. Then he glanced over and met Steve’s eyes, and suddenly they were off again, laughing even more breathlessly than before.

Winter expected to feel disappointed when they finally stopped laughing. He expected that rush of exhilaration to leave him feeling empty, just like the adrenaline that used to race through his veins when he cut himself. But strangely, as they fell silent one by one and picked themselves off the ground, he found himself suffused with the warmest sense of contentment he'd ever known. It was as if, even though all they'd done was dance around in the rain and laugh themselves silly, they’d just been through an important experience together.

Winter smiled at the others, even though they couldn't see it. As Steve and Sam each threw an arm around his shoulders and they all slogged back inside, he thought maybe they could tell anyway.

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_He drew me up from the pit of destruction,
   out of the miry bog,
   and set my feet upon a rock,
   making my steps secure._

- Psalm 40:2
The Way to a Man's Heart

Chapter Notes

I thought it would be nice to look at Winter's early days (as in, withdrawal and afterward) through Sam's eyes. That naturally led me to think about cooking. Once again, I don't really know why I latched onto Sam as the resident foodie of the three, but by now it seems to fit so well I keep forgetting it's not actually canon XD This was meant to just be a fun, light-hearted sort of chapter, but of course with Winter around, angst isn't too far behind. Oh, and the onion solution was something I spotted on a forum somewhere. It was a single anecdote from a random person online, so I have no idea how plausible or accurate it might be.

This chapter takes place in *Make Me Whole* chapter 5, “Lines of Red,” and chapter 8, “Turning a New Leaf.”

Requested by Lucinda Cottontale on FFNet

~*~*~*~*~*~

When did this crowded room get so lonely?
And everyone keeps looking at me
I'm tired of faking my life
I'm so tired
I don't wanna feel this way

I don't wanna let you down
But I can't even pick up myself
I only wanted to make you proud
But I don't think I can do this anymore

- “Let You Down” by P.O.D.

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Sam was determined to treat Winter like a normal person. It was tempting to treat him like he was made of glass, after all the times he'd overreacted in fear, and the solid month he'd spent mostly bedridden. Steve and Sam had both gotten used to tiptoeing around him, tending to his needs and speaking with extra gentleness so as to alarm him as little as possible.
But the whole point of this endeavor was to help Winter adjust to life away from Hydra. And if they were going to do that, they'd have to start treating him like a semi-functioning and capable equal.

So once Winter had gotten through his withdrawal and regained enough strength to leave his room for longer than a few hours, Steve and Sam put him to work. They trained him on simple chores, like making his bed and helping to wash the dishes after meals. Gradually, they taught him about other tasks like laundry and cleaning the bathroom, and once or twice they even raked leaves in the front yard before all the trees were bare.

Winter never complained about the chores assigned to him. He listened carefully to their instructions, then hastened to mimic their actions. They usually only had to give him the explanation one time; if there was one thing he was good at, it was following orders. Sam supposed this shouldn't be surprising; it was probably due to his experiences as the Winter Soldier. If anything, Winter probably felt most comfortable when they told him exactly what to do.

At some point, Winter would have to get to a place where he felt confident enough to make his own choices, and to be comfortable saying no. But for now, it was good enough to just let him experience an ordinary routine with no fighting or torture.

It hadn't taken long before Sam was the designated cook of the three. Steve wasn't a bad cook, exactly. He just...had an extremely limited menu and almost no imagination. He'd never even heard of some of the spices Sam put down on the shopping list when they first stocked their cupboards. Even after he'd sampled some of the better dishes in Sam's repertoire, he never branched out or experimented. Maybe it had something to do with growing up when he had; he'd had to learn at a young age to be content with a very meager and repetitive selection.

So everyone was just happier with Sam in charge of meal planning. He'd always loved working in the kitchen, ever since the days when he would stand on a chair at the counter and lick a beater while his mother spread icing on a cake. It was fun to look up new recipes or experiment with whatever they happened to have on hand.

The best reward, of course, was the looks on the others' faces when they tried a new dish. As boring as Steve's own cooking was, he could still appreciate unfamiliar foods. And Winter...it was like watching a small child. Sometimes his eyes would widen with surprise as a new flavor hit his tongue, or his eyes would close as if to avoid any stimulus that could get in the way of savoring the food.

Sam first thought of teaching Winter how to cook when he started drinking coffee. He put an unconscionable amount of sugar and milk into it, but he seemed to like drinking some with his breakfast. At least, he looked perturbed one morning when Steve had forgotten to get it started. So instead of leaving him standing awkwardly by the coffee maker, Sam showed him how to operate it. From then on, Winter was usually the one to make the coffee—and after a few mornings of weak, coffee-flavored water, he was actually pretty good at it.

So that evening, Sam beckoned Winter to follow him down to the kitchen and set him to work rinsing and chopping vegetables. Sam kept up a running commentary as he threw together a stir-fry, feeling like he'd become a cross between a cooking show and his own mother. Winter just watched, listened, and followed Sam's instructions; learning how to pick ripe and tasty peppers and mushrooms, how to remove seeds and avoid bruises, how to mince without risking his fingers. It was meticulous, careful instruction under Sam's critical direction, and lessons Winter took his time learning to ensure he got them right. He frequently asked for confirmation he was doing something correctly, and Sam made a point to compliment him when he got it right. He couldn't tell what Winter's expression was behind the mask, but every time he got Sam's approval, his deft hands moved with greater confidence than before.
They also discovered, much to Sam’s chagrin, that Winter had no reaction to the smell of onions or garlic. He peeled and crushed and diced a pile of each without so much as a sniffle, while Sam's eyes burned even though he stood on the other side of the kitchen table. “Steeeeeve!” he wailed down the hall. “Do you supersoldiers have eyeballs of steel or something?”

“What?” Steve yelled back, his head popping out from the door to the laundry room.

“Tear gas,” Winter said quietly.

“Huh?” Sam turned back, grabbing a tissue and dabbing at his streaming eyes.

Winter glanced up, then returned his attention to the onion. “After tear gas...this isn't so bad.”

Sam wasn't sure what to say to that at first. He blew his nose to give himself a little time, reminding himself that he was trying to treat Winter normally. Finally, he cleared his throat and headed back over to the stove. “Okay, then,” he said briskly. “You get to be the onion expert from now on.”

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Winter heard footsteps on the stairs and hastily put the cap back on the orange juice. He shoved it back into the refrigerator just as Steve and Sam approached the kitchen, looking up and down with surprise at the island that served as their dining table.

“What's all this?” Steve asked, a smile spreading across his face.

“Surprise?” Winter said hesitantly, watching both of them carefully. He'd been awake anyway, and working in the kitchen had seemed like a better alternative to just sitting there and listening to the voice in the back of his head.

“This is awesome, Winter!” Sam cried, sitting at his usual place with a wide grin.

“Wow, a breakfast casserole and everything!” Steve spooned a generous portion onto his plate while Sam spread strawberry jam on a piece of buttered toast. “What’s the occasion?”

“I just wanted to,” Winter said softly, fiddling with the hand towel hanging from the stove. He didn't know how to put into words how it felt to keep failing, day after day. To start out with so many good intentions, only to fall short of each one...and then have to admit that to them. To see their faces fall with disappointment as they saw him struggling just as hard as he had three weeks ago, when he'd first decided he wanted to stop cutting.

His right arm throbbed with the evidence of hundreds of failures. He'd just wanted to actually succeed at something for once. To prove to them he was worth the time and effort they put into him.

Winter glanced up and saw Steve chewing on his first bite of the breakfast casserole. His heart lifted slightly, hoping....

Steve stopped chewing. His face was bright red. He started to cough, until finally he scrambled off his chair and darted over to the refrigerator.

Sam cackled as Steve poured out a glass of milk and chugged it down. “Looks like the white boy can't take the heat!” he called out in a sing-song voice. He ate a huge bite of the casserole, giving...
Steve a smug look as he chewed.

But then Sam's eyes widened and the smirk slipped off his face. He gestured wildly to Steve, who brought the milk over, and desperately started drinking straight from the carton.

Steve wiped his streaming eyes as he looked over at Winter. “What did you put in that stuff?”

Winter stood frozen by the stove, warily glancing between them. This wasn't exactly the response he'd been hoping for. “Hot... sauce?”

“How much hot sauce?” Sam demanded, still coughing.

“The recipe said just two cups...” Winter said in a tiny voice.

Steve exploded into another coughing fit while Sam darted over to the recipe book, still open on the counter. He flipped furiously through the pages, then stabbed his finger at the recipe Winter had used. “Half a teaspoon, Winter! Half a teaspoon!”

Winter peeked over Sam's shoulder and saw the line he was pointing to. $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp hot sauce, optional. Winter stared at it. Somehow, his mind had latched onto the 2.... He had thought it was a little strange that he'd had to go through so many bottles of the stuff.... Then he noticed the line above it read 2 cups shredded cheese. Oh. Too many 2s, just enough distraction. How could he have made such an error?

“Sorry,” he whispered, unable to look up from the recipe.

“Never mind,” Sam groaned, staggering back to the table and dropping back into his chair. “I think I'll just have toast.”

“What about these, Winter?” Steve asked, still a little croaky but obviously trying to salvage the breakfast that was falling to pieces all around them. He reached for a platter of little round cookies coated with powdered sugar. That had been the first thing Winter had made; they weren't exactly breakfast food, but he'd started making them before he'd gotten the idea of fixing breakfast.

“Russian tea cakes,” Winter said quietly, perking up slightly. He was rather proud of how they'd turned out. They were so pretty, like little snow-dusted hills. Maybe he'd at least done something right....

Steve and Sam both popped a cookie into their mouths at the same time. And almost immediately, Winter's heart plummeted to his toes. Steve pressed a fist to his mouth, looking like he was trying not to gag. Sam gave up immediately. He ran over to the sink, spat out the cookie, and desperately tried to rinse out his mouth.

Steve had managed to swallow the cookie, and was shoving toast into his mouth as fast as he could to get rid of the taste. Sam turned from the sink, chin dripping and a look of abject suffering on his face. “Did you put... baking powder on those things?”

Winter shrank into the corner next to the refrigerator, staring at the floor. You should have known better, the voice snarled. What made you think you could do anything right? They hate everything you've ever done with those hands—and why shouldn't they? You've ruined everything they've ever tried to do for you. Why did you even bother trying?

“I'm sorry...” he whispered, the kitchen tiles swimming before his eyes. “I'm sorry....”

“Hey, hey....” A hand reached out to him. He flinched, but Steve just laid his hand on Winter's
shoulder.

“It’s okay, man,” said Sam, patting his other shoulder. “Not a big deal at all.”

“I just...I just wanted....”

“I know, I know....” Steve murmured, rubbing his back.

“It was just a mistake,” Sam said. “We know you weren't trying to poison us.”

“And remember what we do when we make a mistake?” Steve gently prodded.

*You fail! the voice screamed. You give up because you know you'll never do anything but fail, and you know why? Because you're a failure, Soldier! You've never been anything but a failure and a disappointment to everyone who—*

“You just try again.”

Winter blinked away the tears and dared to look up again. Steve stood on his right, Sam on his left, both of them looking at him with gentle, encouraging smiles. There wasn’t a trace of the disgust they’d shown when eating his awful food. They weren’t frowning with anger or disappointment. They weren’t looking at him like he was worthless, nor were they abandoning him like he probably deserved.

“I guess....” Winter swiped his sleeve across his eyes. “I guess this means I shouldn't cook anymore, huh?”

“Nonsense!” Sam said, clapping him on the shoulder. “We know you'll never make those mistakes again, so you're already a better cook than you were to start with!”

“Everyone has to start somewhere,” Steve quipped, elbowing Sam in the ribs. “You think this guy was born a gourmet chef?”

Sam nodded in agreement. “First time I tried to make grilled cheese by myself, the stove top was smoking a little when I took the pan off. So I tossed one of my ma's oven mitts on it, thinking that would make it stop.”

“Oh, *Sam*....” Steve covered his mouth with his hand, trying not to laugh.

“Oh, yes. That mitt had a permanent three ring burn melted into it, and when Ma got home from work, she could *taste* it. Thought I'd set something on fire.”

“How old were you?”

“Maybe seven.”

Glancing between them in surprise, Winter sniffled and asked, “But...what if I make other mistakes?”

*Worse mistakes? Dangerous mistakes? What if...?*

Steve’s laughter settled into an understanding smile, and he shrugged. “Just learn from those too.”

“As long as you have a fire extinguisher, a pan lid, and a brick, you can pretty much survive any serious kitchen accident.” Sam winked at him, and Steve snorted. “Everything else is just food science.”
Winter didn't know if he should ask for an explanation on that or not.

Gracious words are like a honeycomb, 
sweetness to the soul and health to the body.

- Proverbs 16:24
I'd had this whole chapter in the back of my mind while writing the MMW version, but of course I couldn't show what Winter was up to while they were all separated. In the end, I decided not to go into great detail about how exactly Crossbones set this fire and trapped everybody in there, and just went with Winter noticing more clues while rescuing people. After all, he knows better than the other two exactly what to look for. And even though this all gets thrown on them really abruptly, I think this incident is really important for Winter's growth. This is the first time all three of them go on a “mission” of sorts, all of them working towards the same goal in a life-or-death situation.

This chapter takes place during Make Me Whole chapter 10, “Into the Flames.”

Requested by Meztii14 on FFNet

If I freeze you are the flame
You melt my heart, I'm washed in your rain
I know you'll always have the best of me
Destiny's got a hold on me
Guess I never knew love like love knows me
'Cause I...I need to feel you here with me

... 

Let it all fall down to dust
Can't break the two of us
We are safe in the strength of love

- “Fire and Fury” by Skillet

As Winter hopped out of the car, he looked up at the burning school building. The fire had clearly started at opposite ends of the building, rushing towards the middle. And it was burning much too hot and fast to have started naturally. Someone had to have set this fire. Winter had never been the one to set the fires, but he'd been involved in too many arson cases under Hydra's command to not
recognize the signs. The evidence was clear as day to someone who knew what to look for, even if not for the unbelievable coincidence of it starting at the same time as another fire at the other end of town.

A glance at Steve's stricken expression, and Sam's determined frown as he pulled off his sweatshirt and buckled on his wings, told Winter all he needed to know: They were going in there. He hastily shrugged out of his coat and unwound the scarf that hid his mask from view. He needed to be able to move as quickly as possible, and clearly stealth wasn't an option.

A strange shiver passed down Winter's spine when Steve pulled his shield out of the trunk, where it had lain hidden all these months. Winter had grown so used to Steve, he had almost forgotten Captain America. The last time he'd seen Steve hefting the shield, they'd been fighting each other. This would be the first time they would face physical danger as allies.

“Okay, there's three floors,” Steve said briskly, returning from consulting with those who had already made it out of the building. “Sam, you take the top floor; I'll take the second. Winter, the ground floor. Sweep every room for stragglers, even the bathrooms. Stay out front when you're done; I don't want you getting trapped.”

“On it,” Sam said, opening his wings and rocketing towards the top floor of the building.

As soon as he'd gotten his orders, Winter immediately started running towards the building. This was so natural to him, much more so than many of the strange things he'd been doing the past few months. He had his orders, he had his mission objective, and all he had to do now was carry it out efficiently. Yet somehow...this felt so much better than the missions Hydra had given him.

The front door of the school building was still open from when most of the people had evacuated, so Winter took the front steps three at a time and ran into the front hall. The front door was in the middle of the building, which branched off in three directions. Smoke was already drifting through the hallways, thin wisps clinging to the ceiling. But he knew there was no time to waste; soon, the smoke would grow too thick to breathe.

He started by heading down the hallway in front of him. It was wider than either of the others, and led to a large room that seemed to double as a gym and a cafeteria. Basketball hoops hung on either end of the room and bleachers lined the walls, but out in the middle of the floor were rows of long folding tables, set up as if for lunch.

Winter quickly checked the restrooms and locker rooms, but they were all empty. When he stepped through the last door into a hallway at the very back of the building, he heard a distant banging sound. He reached for a weapon, but of course he'd given his knives to Steve, and he hadn't brought any of his guns with him today. Stupid.

Winter cautiously made his way down the hallway to a set of double doors. He peeked through and saw a large kitchen, with an array of sinks and two ovens. Once he was reasonably sure the room was empty, he slipped inside.

The pounding sound started up again, and Winter's gaze immediately locked on a walk-in freezer in the corner. The pounding sound was coming from in there—the sound of fists slamming on the inside of the door. He could also hear muffled shouts, though he couldn't make out what they were saying. A cart had been wedged up against the door, but that wouldn't be enough to hold it shut—the handle must be broken.

Winter swiftly crossed the room and pulled the cart out of the way. The pounding on the inside of the door grew more frantic. Now that he was closer, he thought he could make out one phrase among
The muffled shouts. “Ayuda me!” Help me.

The door handle was broken off, leaving no way to open the door even if it were unlocked. Winter glanced at the hinges, taking note of how this walk-in freezer was constructed. It opened outward, but obviously whoever was trapped inside wasn't strong enough to kick their way out.

“Step away from the door,” Winter called in Spanish. He heard at least two sets of footsteps scurrying to the back of the freezer.

Winter slammed his metal fist into the steel door. It didn't break the door down, but it did leave a large dent in the middle and make the entire freezer ring like a bell. Winter threw all his strength into another punch, then another—and then he finally saw the edge of the door beginning to pull away from the latch as the metal bent in the middle. He wedged his metal fingers in the gap, and in one violent movement, the door ripped free of its hinges and flew across the room.

A wave of cold air escaped the freezer, along with three Hispanic women whose aprons and hairnets indicated they were kitchen staff. They gaped at Winter as they stumbled out, shivering. He wondered how long they'd been locked in there. They all talked over each other, their chattering teeth and hysterical tears making it hard to understand what they were saying, but Winter gathered that someone had shoved them all from behind into the freezer, saying they would be shot if they turned around.

“The building is on fire,” Winter said, breaking through their babble. “You need to get outside.” He pointed at the door at the back of the kitchen.

Steve probably would have said something calming, or at least would have softened his voice so as not to frighten the ladies any further, but Winter didn't know how. The kitchen workers hurried out the door, one of them glancing fearfully at his exposed metal hand. Oh well. At least they were safe.

Winter quickly backtracked to the main hall. Smoke filled the air now, dimming the fluorescent lights on the ceiling. He hurried down one hallway, checking each classroom, office, and restroom as he went. He made sure to duck down and check for feet under the desks, in case someone had gotten scared and decided to hide. But every room was empty, thankfully. Fire raged at the end of the hallway, hungrily eating up a trail of something that looked like gasoline spread between the last two doors at the end of the hallway. A scorched but still legible sign next to one read Chemistry Lab. Winter hastily retreated. Probably all the flammable substances had already caught fire, but he didn't want to stick around and see if something was about to explode.

He hastened down the other hallway, where he could see more flames spreading, hungrily devouring the cheerfully-decorated bulletin boards and posters. It was getting harder to breathe. His mask helped filter the smoke, but it wasn’t a gas mask. Sweat rolled down his neck and trickled down his forehead into his eyes. He wiped it away as he checked the first couple of classrooms, keeping an eye on the flames snaking towards him.

Then he saw a door that was almost completely blocked by a tall bookcase that seemed to have tipped over and landed crookedly on the locker standing on the other side of the door. Except that there were no other bookcases in the hallway. Someone had moved it there and deliberately blocked that door.

When he approached the door, Winter paused, listening. Beneath the crackling of the flames, muffled behind the wood of the bookcase and the door, was the sound of crying. Many voices, calling for help. Small voices begging for mothers that weren't there.

The bookcase was heavy, but Winter easily heaved it to the side. It fell to the floor with a crash that
silenced the cries behind the door. He tried the door handle, but wasn't surprised to discover it was locked. “Stand back!” he yelled through the keyhole, hoping they could hear him. “I'm going to break down the door!”

He peered through the keyhole, but he couldn't see anything, so he just had to hope they'd listened to him. This door was only made of wood, so it was easier to break through than the freezer door. Two solid kicks, and the latch broke. The door swung inward, revealing a classroom with tiny desks and chairs arranged in a semicircle before the whiteboard. A crowd of small children huddled in a pile of large pastel-colored pillows, all staring at Winter.

One little boy piped up, “Are you a fireman?”

“No.” He stared down at the ten or so children, some of them sniffling, one little girl sucking her thumb. Spanish was one thing... but how on earth did he communicate with small children?

“Follow me,” he said bluntly. “We need to get out of here before the building burns down.”

Oops. Wrong thing to say. The smallest girl began wailing, “But I d-don't want the building to burn dowwwwn!” The rest of the children looked frightened too—even more frightened than they'd been before. Great job, Winter, he snapped at himself.

“Heaven, just follow me,” he said, trying to sound reassuring. Why couldn't Steve have taken this floor? Or Sam? They would have known exactly what to say. “I'll keep you safe. Just do what I say.”

Winter glanced out the door. Smoke filled the hallway, but it was still clear of debris, providing the easiest and quickest route to get outside. “Okay. Everyone cover your nose and mouth like this—” He demonstrated by pressing his face into the crook of his elbow. “Head out into the hallway, okay? Single file, don't run....”

Despite his words, the children all rushed forward at once, crowding towards the doorway in a panic. Then Winter heard a crashing sound, and saw burning pieces of the ceiling falling down into the hallway. Moving faster than the children could react, Winter dashed forward and shoved them back out of the doorway. A huge beam crashed down from the ceiling. Winter shielded the children in front with his body, raising his metal arm to protect his head and neck.

The beam glanced off his arm, sending shudders through his body, and catching his sleeve on fire. He hastily tore the sleeve off before the flames could spread and stamped it out underfoot. The children all gaped up at his shining metal arm, but there was no time to worry about that. Waves of heat were now crashing against his back, and he could feel a cough tickling the back of his throat as his lungs protested the amount of smoke in the air.

Winter glanced around for another way out, and immediately found one. “Okay, we're going out the window,” he said, trying to herd the frightened children away from the blazing inferno in the doorway. It wasn't hard to convince them; coughing and crying too much to speak, the children stumbled over to the large windows that offered a view of the playground at the back of the school.

Smoke billowed through the open doorway now. Winter bent over as he crossed the room, trying to stay low enough so he could breathe. One of the boys fumbled at the window latch, but Winter motioned them to step back. Instead of taking the time to open the window normally, he smashed through the glass with his metal fist. He knocked out as many shards of glass as he could so the children wouldn't cut themselves, then hesitated when he realized they would be jumping down onto all those shards of glass outside.

Another quick glance around the room presented the solution. He grabbed two of the large pillows
on the floor and stuffed them out the window, so they fell the three or four feet to the ground and landed on top of the broken glass. He looked at the children and poked his thumb at the window. “Out.”

As quickly as they could, the children scrambled one by one out the window. Winter boosted the smaller ones out,dumping them unceremoniously onto the pillows, while the nimble ones clambered out on their own. Once they got outside, the children huddled in a fearful group only a few feet away, staring up at the flames engulfing their school. Finally, they were all out, and Winter grabbed the window frame to follow them, when he heard a wheezing sound behind him.

One of the girls gasped and pointed back inside. “Oh no! Marcos!”

Winter whirled around and saw a skinny little boy, crouching on the rug behind him on hands and knees. He clutched his chest, his dark eyes wide with panic as he strained to draw a breath of the smoky air. He coughed pitifully, his neck straining with the effort.

And suddenly, though this boy's skin was a dark tan and his hair was black, Winter could only see a blond-haired, blue-eyed wisp of a boy, gasping desperately for breath as his own lungs betrayed him.

It felt like the fire had invaded his body. Hot, sickening rage scalded his veins as it rushed through him. Up until now, this rescue mission had been just that—a mission. He worked to save these people because Steve had told him to, and he put his all into it not because he was afraid of what Steve would do to him if he disobeyed, but because he trusted Steve to know what was best.

But suddenly, everything that had happened shone with dazzling clarity, and he thought he might understand at last why Steve had been so determined to run into a burning building. These children were people. Someone out there felt the same overwhelming need to protect this little boy that Winter did about the skinny, coughing Steve of his memories. And whoever had set this fire had known some people would die. That had obviously been his intent. But that man had no right to take away this little boy's life. He had no right to touch one hair on his head. Winter wouldn't let him.

These thoughts flashed through Winter's mind in the second it took for him to turn around. He scooped the wheezing boy into his arms and ducked through the window, landing on the pillows. Still cradling the boy in his arms, he beckoned to the other children with a tilt of his head. “Come on,” he said, setting off at a brisk walk around the corner of the school, giving the burning building a wide berth. The children trotted along beside him, some of them still coughing.

The boy in his arms clutched at him desperately, still trying to gasp though his throat was closing. Winter found words tumbling from his lips, before he could even think of them. “Easy there, pal,” he murmured, pitching his voice so only the boy could hear. “I know it's scary, but you can relax now. I've got you. Nothing bad is going to happen to you, I swear. I just need you to breathe, okay? Can you do that for me? Just take it slow. You don't have to fight it. It'll all be over soon, you'll see. Just breathe.”

The boy's grip on his arm slackened, and Winter glanced down, afraid the kid had passed out. But he simply looked up at Winter with his big, dark eyes, and took tiny, measured gulps of air.

As Winter led the children across the street to where the rest of the survivors stood watching the conflagration, the wail of sirens met their ears. The emergency vehicles were finally beginning to show up. An ambulance pulled to a stop right in front of them, and Winter was able to hand the boy over to the paramedics immediately. Several of the adults rushed forward from the crowd to make sure the other kids were unhurt.

There were too many people. People on all sides, speaking quickly, staring at his mask and his arm,
asking him if he was injured. Nerves jangling, heart still pounding with adrenaline, Winter slipped away as soon as he found a chance. He spotted a red pickup truck parked at the edge of the crowd, with the tailgate down. Winter sank down on it—just for a few minutes. Just to catch his breath.

He noticed Sam walking up to the ambulance, speaking briskly with one of the paramedics and helping a woman put on an oxygen mask. He looked as exhausted and filthy as Winter felt, but he didn't appear to be hurt. That was good. But where was Steve? Was he still inside?

“Are you a angel?”

Winter looked down sharply and found the smallest girl that he had saved standing in front of him, gazing up at him with round, sparkling grey-green eyes. Her sweaty, sooty red hair was straggling out of its pigtails.

Stunned, Winter could only stammer out, “No, I'm not a.... Wh-Why would you ask something like that?”

“'Cause Mommy says my guardian angel pertecks me from bad stuff an' doesn't let anything bad happen to me an' he's real strong an' shiny.” She stuck her thumb in her mouth, not taking her eyes off him for a moment.

Winter stared back at her. She had no idea how much blood was on his hands. How could anyone call him an angel?

‘Course he's not an angel!” another voice declared from his other side. Winter started and turned to find one of the boys clambering into the bed of the truck next to him. “See the metal arm? That means he's a robot!”

“Nuh-uh! Robots are all metal, but he's only a little bit metal, so maybe he's just a half-robot!”

“Hey, mister, is your other arm metal too?”

“How 'bout your legs?”

“Do you hafta plug your arm in at night?”

Before Winter knew what was happening, he was surrounded by the children he'd helped out of the classroom, who were all chattering and tugging on him as though they hadn't just narrowly escaped a burning building. One of the boys knocked his knuckles against Winter's knee, as if to check and see if it were made of metal.

“How come you're wearing a mask, mister?” One girl asked brightly. “Are you a bank robber?”

“Um...no....” How was it that such tiny, innocent people could be so intimidating? Why wasn't he more intimidating to them?

“'Course he's not a bank robber,” another boy scoffed with a huge eye roll. “My brother said Captain America is here! I bet you're with Captain America, aren't you, mister? You're a superhero, aren'tcha?”

“Making friends, I see.”

Winter looked up and found Sam approaching, wearing a gleeful grin. Winter almost thought he would welcome the incessant teasing if Sam would just save him from this childish interrogation.
Still smiling, Sam sidled up to Winter and tweaked the redheaded girl's messy pigtails. She looked up at him, sucking her thumb and running the fingers of her free hand up and down Winter's metal arm. He hadn't even realized she'd been doing that.

The blare of sirens caught all the children's attention, and they turned to watch the large red fire truck pull in front of the school. As the firefighters hopped off the truck and began their battle against the flames, the children pointed and chattered excitedly among themselves.

While their attention was elsewhere, Sam asked Winter in an undertone, “You seen Cap yet?”

Winter’s stomach dropped into his shoes. It was obvious at a glance that Steve wasn't in the crowd of survivors. He shook his head, sharing a worried look with Sam. “Should I...?”

“Nah, I'll be faster,” Sam said, stepping a safe distance away before unfurling his wings again.

The children gasped and let out a chorus of ooh s and wow s as Sam rocketed back towards the burning building, this time heading for the second floor. He reversed in midair, then crashed through a window feetfirst. There were no flames shooting out that window, but the wall of fire was close to engulfing the entire building. Winter sat on the back of the truck, his stomach churning at the knowledge that there was nothing he could do.

Less than a minute later, though Winter could have sworn it was an hour, Sam emerged from the building again, carrying the limp form of an unconscious man—not Steve, he realized with a breath of relief. This man had grey hair. Sam landed next to the ambulance to hand him over to the paramedics.

Steve followed a moment later. Winter saw him as a blackened blur holding the shield, falling from the second-story window. He rolled to absorb the impact, then needed two tries before he could get back on his feet. But other than looking sweaty and exhausted, he didn't seem to be any worse for the wear.

As Steve and Sam made their way back over to Winter and the children, a van with the logo of a news channel pulled up. The crew piled out, preparing their equipment to catch a view of the fire before the firefighters could put it out. “Sam, Winter,” Steve said, his voice growing tense. “We need to leave. Now.”

Winter suddenly became aware of how exposed they were. He'd known from the moment Steve pulled out the shield that they wouldn't be able to hide, but so much had happened all at once that he hadn't had the time to consider all of the ramifications yet. But now he realized how many people were staring at Steve's flashy shield, at Sam's shining wings. And how many people had seen his metal arm and his mask.

They couldn't get out of there fast enough.

Winter sat in the back of the car, a chill settling in his bones as his sweat dried. Everything was fitting together with a horrible, familiar precision—the jaws of a trap snapping shut around him. Arson. Two fires, where they didn't have the resources to fight both at once. Forcing Steve into a situation where he'd have to emerge from hiding.

Maybe someone had recognized Steve on one of his trips to town. Maybe it was just a hunch, or maybe it was only one incident of many, a net cast wide in the hopes of catching their prey eventually. But this incident bore all the hallmarks of Hydra's cruelty. This was exactly how they liked to flush someone out of hiding.
And if there was even the slightest chance that someone had seen him.... A shudder ran down Winter's spine. If someone had snapped a photo of him while he wasn't looking...or if the arsonist had been watching from a distance...they would know he was alive. They would know he was with Steve, that he'd rescued people from that fire under Captain America's orders. They would hunt them down. They would kill Sam and Steve. They would capture Winter, and then....

He was vaguely aware of the others talking and moving about. In a distant corner of his mind, he knew he was standing in his room in the cabin, and that the others were bustling about busily. But all he could see was a white blur. The ice stretched out in all directions, clutching at him in a smothering blanket of white. The wind roared in his ears, not letting him think about anything but how cold he was. How alone. The only living thing, while death surrounded him on all sides.

Oh, how sweet death sounded, compared to the fate that he knew waited for him instead. A specter rose before him—a chair with wires and electronic panels with metal plates that locked around his head and bonds that held his arms and legs in place.

How had he ever dared to relax here? How could he have believed he was safe? There was nowhere in the entire world that was safe from them.

And the pain. How could he go back to that after all these months of peace and rest? Just the thought of it was unbearable. He'd often thought he'd rather be beaten bloody every day for the rest of his life than sit in that chair again. Now...it was the only thing he could see.

He couldn't stop shaking. He had so much to lose this time. Losing any amount of memory was bad enough, but for such a long time, the memories they'd stolen had been so muddled anyway that he wasn't even sure what he'd lost.

But now...they would steal everything he cared about, all over again. He wouldn't remember freedom. He wouldn't remember making choices, or discovering what he preferred. He wouldn't remember laughing in the rain. He wouldn't remember that feeling of joy, like his heart would burst through his chest, when he ran next to the others. He wouldn't remember Sam's cooking. He wouldn't remember the way Steve looked at him when—

“Winter?”

He blinked, and the whirling white immediately faded away. Steve was there, looking at him with concern, the same as always.

“Hey,” Steve said gently, squeezing his shoulder and shaking it slightly. “You okay?”

It was too much. He couldn't lose this. He'd rather die. What kind of a fool was he, to think they wouldn't hunt him down and strip away everything he held dear? “It's happening,” he groaned, dropping his head into his hands, as if the darkness would protect him from his terrifying reality. “I knew it would, and now it's finally happening.”

The icy wind was back, roaring through him, strong enough to send him spinning into that empty white expanse. His knees buckled, and he hastily sat down. Distantly, he was aware of the softness of the mattress beneath him, and the way it sank lower as Steve sat next to him.

“They're coming for me. They'll find me. They'll...They'll take me back.” The words spilled out, fleeing from the danger as he so desired to do. He gripped his head, staring into the freezing wind and shuddering as every gust hit him.

“I can't, I-I-I can't can't go back. Not now. Not...a-after this. They'll h-hurt me...I-I don't....”
He hung limply from the cold metal bonds that held him in place. If not for them, he would have tumbled out of this chair and sprawled on the floor. Every inch of his body ached, and his brain sloshed around in his head like they'd liquefied it. He couldn't remember how he'd got here or when this pain began. He couldn't even remember his own name.

He could only cry weakly and cling to the last thin shreds of the man he once was. “Steve...” he mumbled around the rubber mouthpiece that kept him from biting his tongue. “Steve....”

Was that his name? Was that why he clung to it like a drowning man, as he floated through this ocean of pain? No, somehow that didn't feel right.

“Steve,” he sobbed, over and over again. No face appeared in his mind, nothing that he could distinguish from the swirling mess of his thoughts. But...this 'Steve' had been...important. He'd been special. More valuable than he was himself. “Steve....”

Dark shadows surrounded him, calmly discussing what settings they would have to adjust to make sure he never remembered that name again.

“Hey, hey, shhh....”

Warmth enclosed him. The darkness lifted, the freezing clouds of white parted, and he found himself sitting in his room, looking into Steve's calm, steady gaze. His intent expression summoned Winter's attention, but didn't grab it roughly or demand anything of him. Not like his memories and fears.

“Listen to me.” Steve held his gaze, holding Winter's head in place with his warm, strong hands. “You're not going anywhere without us, understand? Hydra's not taking you away.”

“But....” He swallowed with difficulty, trying to hold the tears back. “L-Last time....”

“It's not going to be like last time,” Steve soothed, one thumb brushing a strand of hair out of Winter's eyes. “Sam and I are going to be right beside you every step of the way. Don't you remember what I promised you when we first met? I'm going to do everything in my power to keep you safe from them, to make sure they don't lay a finger on you ever again.”

He wanted to believe. He wanted to hope. “But...it's Hydra. Even if you say that....” It won't be that easy. Do you realize what lengths they'll go to get me back under their control?

“Winter,” Steve said calmly. “Do you trust me?”

The whole world shifted, reoriented, locked into place. He looked into those warm blue eyes that had watched him for so many months—eyes that had seen him at his very best, eyes that hadn't turned aside even at his very worst. When those eyes looked at him, they were always filled with compassion, concern—even delight. If there was anything he could trust in this perilous, terrifying world, it was that those eyes would always look at him the same.

Warmth flooded through him. If Steve had rushed off at a moment's notice to save the lives of dozens of complete strangers, how much more would he fight to protect someone he called a friend? Maybe Steve couldn't exactly give him a guarantee that Hydra wouldn't touch him again. Maybe it was enough just to know what lengths Steve would go to keep him safe.

Winter let out a long breath. Did he trust Steve? “Yes.”

Steve beamed at him, as if to confirm everything Winter had just been thinking about him. “Then let me worry about Hydra,” he said, patting Winter gently on the shoulder. “All you need to worry about right now is putting your things in this suitcase. Can you do that for me?”
Winter looked down at the suitcase sitting on his bed, and nodded.

Once he was able to focus on the task at hand, it didn't take long for Winter to fill the suitcase with all the clothes and other belongings Steve had given him. Before long, he took the suitcase down the stairs and outside, where the others were piling the last of their luggage into the trunk of the car.

Winter stuffed his suitcase in with all the others, then left Steve and Sam to their discussion of which safe house they might be able to reach in a reasonable amount of time. Winter climbed into his usual seat in the back of the SUV, behind the driver's seat, and stared fixedly out the windshield. Now that there was nothing for his hands to do, he could feel the anxiety mounting in his chest again.

He watched the curve of the driveway that turned out of sight through the trees, hiding it from view of the road. Every minute, he half expected to see a car with tinted windows, or the van from the news station, appear through the trees. What would they do then? Or what if Hydra agents were already hiding in the bushes, watching and biding their time for an opportune moment to strike? Why hadn't Winter paid attention to their surroundings as they left town? Steve and Sam were competent and careful, but they didn't know what to look for when being tracked down by Hydra.

He forced himself to take a deep breath and tear his gaze away from the windows. He trusted Steve. He trusted Sam. They were his friends. They wouldn't let anything happen to him. They wouldn't just stand by and let Hydra have their way with him. If Hydra did show up...they would fight. They would protect each other. That was the difference from every other time he'd failed to break free of Hydra’s clutches. This time, he wasn't alone.

Sam climbing into the driver's seat broke though Winter's thoughts. Winter expected Steve to get in the front passenger seat as usual, but instead the back door opened. Winter looked up in surprise to watch Steve get into the back seat with him. And instead of sitting next to the other window, once Steve closed the door, he slid across to the middle seat.

As Steve fastened his seatbelt and settled in next to Winter, Sam started the car and adjusted the rearview mirror, smirking back at them. “What's this, am I your chauffeur or something?”

Steve put on a lofty expression and flipped his hand carelessly. “Drive on, Sam,” he said in a British accent. “Drive on!”

Sam stuck his tongue out at Steve before putting the car in gear and pulling out of the driveway.

It was strange, but in the space of a minute, all of Winter's anxiety broke down and blew away like dust in the wind. The others were calm. They were even joking. That meant things were okay...right? They had a plan, and they were putting it into motion. Worrying about what might happen wouldn't help a thing.

Steve's presence was helpful, too. Winter wondered if Steve knew just how much he needed it right now. It was one thing to know his friends were backing him up, but it was another to feel it. Steve's shoulder rubbing against his, their knees knocking against each other as the car took the curves of the mountainous road...even just the warmth of someone sitting next to him was an immense comfort.

Winter felt the tense muscles in his back and shoulders slowly loosen, and it grew easier to breathe without drowning in terror. The icy wind didn't even threaten him anymore, because he was safe in here with his friends.

Without saying anything or even glancing in that direction, Winter let his right fist relax on his knee. He let his fingers fall open, making a silent request that he was too ashamed to voice. Especially after all the fuss he'd made, requiring Steve to waste precious minutes talking him down. He was okay
now. He wasn't afraid anymore. But...still...it would be nice if....

Steve didn't say anything either. His arm slipped between Winter's arm and his side, and his fingers laced through Winter's. He held Winter's hand with a gentle, warm pressure. With a sigh of exhaustion and relief, Winter settled against Steve's side. It was the safest place in the world.

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My times are in your hand;
rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors!
Make your face shine on your servant;
save me in your steadfast love!

...

In the cover of your presence you hide them from the plots of men;
you store them in your shelter
from the strife of tongues.

Psalm 31:15-16, 20
Lately, I've been blowing off steam by writing gobs and gobs of brofluff. So yes, be forewarned—this chapter is **overflowing** with fluff! All of the stuff that happens in this chapter has been in the back of my head ever since I finished up *Make Me Whole*, and now you'll actually get to see it all. Of course, when I hopped into Bucky's head, I couldn't keep the angst at bay completely...but I hope you enjoy this chance to see them actually get to be truly happy for once.

**This chapter takes place during *Make Me Whole* chapter 18, “Winter's End.”**

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And you stay
Stay with me when I break down
Like a dream comes saving
And if words should fail here
I'll just read the way you sound
Till I know the meaning of love
And life
And it could be I'm understating
What it means that you're standing behind
Every word you say
To make my day slowly dawning
I want you to know you're the heart of my temple of thought

- “Temple of Thought” by Poets of the Fall
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Happiness was a lot like fainting, Steve decided. He'd fainted and been knocked out an embarrassing number of times before the serum, so he was all too aware of the feeling of *unreality* that would creep up on him. Sometimes he felt like his soul was shriveling inside him, till he was just a wisp peering out of his skull at the world rushing away from him.

And on July 4\(^{th}\), 2015—which he would now remember as the happiest day of his life—Steve felt that same sense of unreality. For a few minutes, everything would seem to be normal. Sam put them all to work in the kitchen to get ready for their picnic that evening. The conversation flowed as naturally as ever, full of laughter and banter just as it always was, if perhaps a bit more jovial than usual. But then the man at the stove would turn his head to ask Sam something, and Steve found the normal world rushing away from him because that's not Winter, it's Bucky. And then his vision blurred and his ears rang with the unbelievable sound of Bucky's laughter...and the next thing Steve knew, he was crying into the potato salad.
It seemed the others were having similar issues with getting used to the recent changes. Sam kept on calling Bucky 'Winter' by mistake, or catching himself halfway through the name. Eventually, he threw up his hands and declared, “Okay, I'm just gonna call you Winbuck now!”

When they'd prepared a light lunch and finished putting everything on the table, Bucky immediately turned to leave the room. “Where are you going?” Steve called after him.

Bucky turned around in surprise. “To put on my....” His hand, reaching up to tap his mask, found his chin instead. “Oh, right.”

His little grin as he remembered he would never have to bother with the bandanna again was the most beautiful thing Steve had ever seen.

Whenever Steve found himself next to Bucky for a moment, he couldn't resist giving him another hug. There were years of loneliness to make up for, and he intended to start right away. He wasn't sure if it was just because he knew now who his friend was, but there seemed to be a slight difference in the way Bucky hugged him back. He hadn't thought Winter was holding back when they used to hug—at least not in the past couple months—but now he realized a barely perceptible hesitance was gone from Bucky's embrace. He wasn't exactly sure what had made the difference. Maybe it was just that Bucky felt he could be himself completely now.

After the picnic and the fireworks, they drove back home and sat in the living room with drinks. It started with just telling stories of past celebrations, including the time the Howling Commandos sang “Happy Birthday” to Steve while a Hydra weapons base exploded behind them, and the ways Sam and Riley had found to celebrate while on the front lines in Afghanistan. But as Sam got increasingly tipsy, the party devolved more and more into Steve and Bucky simply laughing at Sam's antics.

It turned out that Sam was a happy drunk. His usual cheerful laugh seemed to rise in pitch and frequency with each drink, till finally he collapsed on the couch, giggling uncontrollably even after he got the hiccups. His laughter was infectious, and Steve laughed along with him until his sides ached and tears leaked from his eyes. By the time he finally got his breath back, he looked across the room and found Sam fast asleep on his couch, the last beer bottle dangling precariously from his hand hanging over the side.

With a fond chuckle, Steve stood and stretched. “C'mon,” he said to Bucky. “Let's get him to bed.”

“I'll get his legs,” Bucky said with a mischievous grin. “You get his arms.”

Together, they carried Sam to his room, swinging between them like a cannibal tribe's spoils of war. When he knocked gently against the steps up from the sitting area, Sam snorted awake. He blinked groggily up at Steve, then began singing in an off-key slur, “Rock-a-bye baaaabyyyy, onna treetooop....”

Bucky caught Steve's eye, and they giggled their way down the hall and into Sam's room. By unspoken consent, they swung Sam back and forth a couple times before tossing him lightly onto the bed. As he flew threw the air, Sam let out a sleepy little, “Whee!” Then he squirmed up onto his pillow and fell fast asleep again.

Smiling softly, Steve untangled the covers from Sam's legs and tucked him in a little better. Bucky went to fetch a glass of water and some painkillers for the inevitable hangover in the morning.

Steve stood looking down at his friend for a moment. He would probably never be able to find the right words to tell Sam how grateful he was for this day. Not just for the fireworks and the food, not just for making him laugh. Sam had taken the incredible reveal of Winter's true identity in stride, just
as he did about everything else. He hadn't been angry at Bucky for keeping it a secret, nor had he betrayed a hint of jealousy when he found out there were years of history between his friends that he didn't share. He had simply been happy that they were reunited, and that Bucky wasn't holding back anymore.

“Good night, Sam,” Steve whispered, switching off the light and turning to leave.

With Sam safely in bed, Steve made a visit to the bathroom, brushing his teeth and changing into pajamas. He ventured back into the living room, not quite ready for this day to end. His heart lifted when he saw that Bucky hadn't gone on to bed either, but had returned to the couch they'd been sitting on before. When he stepped down into the sitting area, he saw that Bucky had changed into his *Winter Is Here* pajamas. His heart twisted into a knot of emotions even he couldn't untangle.

Bucky pulled his legs up onto the couch and hugged his knees against his chest. “Hey,” he said.

It was the simplest thing he could possibly have said, but somehow the way he said it, with that softness in his voice and in his eyes.... For a moment, Steve couldn't speak, or even breathe. He could only beam, then sit down next to him and pull him right up against his side. Bucky leaned against him, resting his head on Steve's shoulder and wrapping his metal arm around him. Steve propped his feet up on the coffee table, settling back comfortably into the couch cushions, cherishing the warm weight of Bucky against his side.

Steve was the first one to break the silence. “So...how much do you remember?”

“All of it...I think.” Bucky's voice was quietly thoughtful. “I mean...I think it's all there if I reach for it, but I don't always remember what to remember, you know?”

“Was it always like that?”

“No...yes...I don't know.” Bucky tensed slightly, his hand dropping down from Steve's side. He probably would have pulled his arm away if it wasn't pinned between the couch and Steve's back.

“There wasn't exactly...a point where things suddenly changed. I just kind of...remembered things, one by one. Until I finally realized I had the whole picture, I guess.”

Steve nodded, trying to adjust all his memories of Winter. He'd already known who he was, all those months. What had he remembered, and when? What had it been like, to slowly realize he knew Steve better than Steve knew him? Then a new question occurred to him. “So...when I told you about Bucky...I mean, about you....”

“Some of it.” Bucky's voice was barely above a whisper. “I remembered some of it. But I didn't...I mean, the way you described me....”

Steve tried to remember what words he'd used to describe Bucky. But somehow, all he could remember was Winter holding him close, his embrace solid and warm as he softly murmured, *Don't*....

“Do you wish I'd told you sooner?” Bucky suddenly blurted.

Steve turned to look at him, but from that angle he couldn't see Bucky's expression. He was hugging his knees even closer to his chest than before, his knuckles white around a clenched handful of fabric. “Yes,” he said softly. “But I understand why you didn't.”

That didn't seem like much consolation to Bucky. He stayed tightly curled in a scrunched ball, and he probably would have slunk away if Steve didn't have an arm around him.
Steve reached out with his free hand and gently loosened Bucky's grip, settling their hands in his lap. “Mostly I just wish you hadn't been so afraid. I wish I could've helped you believe this would be the outcome.”

“I'm sorry.”

“That's enough sorries,” Steve said firmly. “I don't want you to be sorry, I want you to be my friend.”

Bucky drew a deep breath and let it out. “Just like we've always been?”

Steve squeezed his hand. “It's all I've ever wanted.”

As if that had somehow made up his mind, Bucky gently extricated himself from Steve's embrace. But instead of getting up or moving away, he simply turned to the side and lounged against the arm of the couch, stretching out his legs so they lay across Steve's lap. It was a position they'd often settled into in days past—lounging around their apartment, or trying to get comfortable in an army camp. They would sit like that for hours, sometimes, quietly reading and drawing, or talking about anything and everything.

It showed, more than anything, how much Bucky had been holding back all this time. He'd never been able to sit like this as Winter, because it would have reminded Steve too strongly of their history.

Steve looked over at Bucky and smiled, glad he could see his face now. Taking Bucky's right hand in his again, he said, “You remember that time we had to ride back from Rockaway Beach in the back of that freezer truck?”

Bucky's face instantly melted into a reminiscent grin. “Was that the time we used our train money to buy hot dogs?”

Steve chuckled. “You blew three bucks trying to win that stuffed bear for a redhead.”

Bucky screwed up his face, squinting at the ceiling. “What was her name again?”

“Dolores. You called her Dot.”

With a shake of his head, Bucky said, “She's gotta be a hundred years old right now.”

Steve nudged Bucky's knees. “So are we, pal.”

“Ninety-eight years...” Bucky mused. “Hey, do you remember the time Miss Sarah baked you that three-layer cake—“

“And then Becca sneezed all over it!” Steve laughed, remembering the look on his mother's face—as if she couldn't decide if she were horrified or amused.

They went back and forth for a while, sharing memories of times long past. Steve drank it all in like rain on thirsty soil. This was the only person on the face of the earth who could share these memories with him. The only one who had been at his side from the beginning...and he had found him again.

“What?”

Steve realized he'd just been staring silently at Bucky for a long time. He smiled wryly. “What did I ever do to earn you back?”
Bucky took their clasped hands and pressed them to his heart. “Everything.”

Two feet away was too far, even with Bucky's legs resting on top of his. Steve pulled Bucky upright and held him as close as he could. He couldn't find his voice, so he just hugged him as tightly as he could.

After several minutes, Bucky mumbled into Steve's shoulder, “One thing I don't remember is you crying this much.”

Steve let out a choked, wet laugh. “M-Making up for lost time,” he said, sniffling. “Got...s-seventy years' worth of tears...bottled up in here....”

Bucky's hand slowly rubbed back and forth across his shoulders, instantly calming him down. Soon, the tears slowed and then stopped, but Steve still clung to Bucky. He never wanted to let him go again.

“You really did miss me, huh?” Bucky's voice sounded...not surprised, exactly, but as if he couldn't quite believe it.

Steve turned so his forehead pressed against the side of Bucky's neck. He could just barely feel Bucky's pulse. “When you fell...when it really sunk in what happened...I thought I’d rather be dead.”

Bucky was silent for a moment, then said fervently, “I'm glad you're not.”

Steve shifted to a more comfortable position, but didn't let go. “Me too.”

They were silent for a long time, just holding each other and breathing together. When Bucky finally broke the silence, he sounded on the verge of sleep. “Steve...’m scared.”

“Scared of what?” Steve asked, gently running his fingers through Bucky's hair.

“That...if I close my eyes...I'll just wake up and find out it's a dream.”

It was true, this day had often felt unreal, almost dreamlike. Steve was no stranger to vivid dreams. He'd even dreamed about Bucky still being alive, after all. He remembered waking up—had it really been just this morning?—with his heart sinking into his toes as he realized none of it was real.

“What if I haven't actually told you yet?” Bucky continued. “What if I wake up and have to go through all of this again? Or...what if you don't—“

Steve kissed him firmly on the cheek. “This is real. And if there's ever a me that doesn't love you, that me isn't real.” That didn't make a whole lot of sense, but...well, he was pretty sleepy too.

“Okay...” Bucky murmured, settling against Steve.

Uncounted minutes passed. Slowly, Bucky relaxed more and more in Steve's arms. His breathing grew deeper. His arms slipped downwards, loosening their tight grip. Steve smiled, content for a while to just listen to Bucky's breathing. But eventually, when he found himself starting to nod off, he decided he should probably head to bed. They would both regret it if they fell asleep sitting up.

Steve carefully got his feet under him and stood, trying to move smoothly so as not to jostle Bucky in his arms. He carried Bucky into his room, yawning widely, and laid him down gently without bothering to turn on any lights. Bucky cracked his eyes open as Steve tugged the covers out from under him to cover him up. When Steve straightened again, intending to leave, he found metal fingers closing around his wrist.
“Mm-mm,” Bucky grunted, his eyes sliding shut again but his grip remaining firm.

Steve shook his head with an exasperated smile, but he was too tired to argue. Not that he would have put up much of a fuss even if he'd been fully awake. He nudged Bucky a little closer to the wall, then slid under the covers and settled down on the pillow with a contented sigh.

This was something else he'd been used to before Bucky had fallen. As kids, whenever one of them would sleep over, they would always have to share a bed, or sleep on a pile of couch cushions on the floor. In the years before the war, when they'd shared an apartment, they would often sleep under the same blanket to stay warm during the winter months. And in the war, they always shared a tent or slept side-by-side on the bare ground. Steve hadn't realized how much he'd missed the simple comfort of knowing his brother would be right there, warm and safe, through the night.

Steve turned onto his side, pulled Bucky closer, and wrapped an arm around him. Bucky snuggled in closer, curling up against Steve's chest. And so the best day of Steve's life drew to a close.

~*~*~*~*~*~

The first thing Winter became aware of when he woke was a warm weight pressing against him. Something heavy, but soft, half draped over him, moving in time to the deep breathing in his ear. Gradually, he realized that his forehead was pressed up against the chest of someone breathing deeply in sleep.

Steve, of course. Who else could get this close when he was so vulnerable, without giving him the slightest twinge of fear?

Winter slowly cracked his eyes open. Steve lay on his side, tilted so he was almost on top of Winter, pushing him down into the pillow. One of his arms draped loosely over Winter's right side, while the other one was tucked comfortably under Winter's neck. It was such a snug, warm position, Winter didn't want to move. He was surrounded by Steve's smell, encased in a bubble of his warmth. All he wanted to do was lie here in the shaft of sunlight streaming through the window and listen to Steve steadily inhale...exhale...inhale....

Moving slowly so as not to disturb Steve, Winter wormed his right hand up to brush the sleep out of his eyes. But instead of rubbing against a smooth mask covering the lower half of his face, his fingers met his rough, unshaven cheek.

Oh. Right. He wasn't Winter anymore. He was Bucky.

A smile spread across his face. He could feel it happening under his hand. Ah, no wonder Steve's warm, comforting smell seemed so much stronger than usual. No wonder the pillow felt so warm and soft beneath his cheek. There was no mask to get between them now.

Bucky pulled back slightly, just enough to take in Steve's sleeping face. Memories from the day before flooded into his mind, memories he could hardly believe were his.

Bucky...Bucky... Bucky....

This is the best day of my life.

You're my best friend, Buck, and I love you.
He'd done it. He'd told Steve the truth...and Steve was still here. He hadn't abandoned Bucky in disgust as soon as he saw his face. He'd welcomed Bucky back with open arms—without hesitation, without judgment, without reservation. It was too good to be true.

Of course. Because it's not.

Bucky's heart plunged into his stomach with a swoop of all-too-familiar dread. The voice in the back of his head had been silent ever since he'd made the choice to take off his mask, but now it was back with a vengeance. He didn't want to have to deal with it now, not when he was so content. So safe. It's not a dream, he thought desperately. This is too real to be a dream.

But what's he going to say when he wakes up? Are you actually going to sit there and tell yourself he'll be happy to see you?

He was happy yesterday, Bucky retorted, his heart lifting slightly as he remembered the way Steve smiled every time he looked at him....

Yes, but now he's had time to think it over. I bet he sat there looking at you after you fell asleep, thinking about how disappointing you are.

Bucky's fist closed around the fabric of Steve's shirt, his stomach twisting tighter with every word that echoed around his head.

Come on, admit it. You know you're nothing like the man you used to be. The person that he mourned, that he cried over and heaped such glowing praises on? That's not you anymore—you said so yourself! He wants the old Bucky he used to know, and he was fine settling for Winter. But you're not either one anymore. And now he's stuck with you.

Shut up. Bucky gritted his teeth, staring fixedly at knuckles turning white. He said he wasn't angry. He said I was his best friend. He said...that he'd always love me....

Idiot, the voice said scornfully. At best, he was fooling himself. At worst, he was lying to your face. There's no way he could keep loving you when every day reminds him of how damaged you are.

You're wrong, Bucky thought fiercely. You always lie to me. He said he loved me. He said I'm his best friend. I've believed him all this time; I'm not going to stop now.

But what if you're wrong? the insidious voice snaked through his thoughts. What if he's just pretending? What if he feels obligated to say those things and be nice to you, because you used to be friends? Wouldn't he feel it was his duty? But it's not real. Don't fall for it, or you'll just be proving what an imbecile you are. Every time he smiles at you, he's just hiding how much he despises the person you've become.

No matter how much defiance Bucky mustered up, he couldn't deny that the words running through his mind hurt. Whenever the voice described him to himself, it sounded accurate. And it was so hard to believe anyone could truly, honestly think anything different.

But he knew better than to rely on that voice for truth.

Raising his eyes back to Steve's sleeping face, Bucky drew a deep breath. No. I would rather trust him and be proven wrong than live another minute in your prison of fear.

Before the voice could say anything more, Steve began to stir and everything else faded into an insignificant buzz. Steve drew in a long, deep breath and stretched a little, his arm pulling away from where he'd draped it over Bucky. He blinked himself awake, his eyelashes fluttering and glistening
in the warm sunlight.

As soon as his groggy eyes cleared, they focused on Bucky's face inches from his own. Immediately, he beamed. “It wasn't a dream!”

“What wasn't?” Bucky asked, his voice hoarse from disuse.

Steve brushed a stray lock of hair from Bucky's face, then let his warm palm rest against Bucky's cheek. “You.”

Bucky had to clear his throat to speak past the enormous lump that made it hard to breathe. “What are you talking about? Everyone knows I'm a dreamboat.”

Steve laughed—that wonderful laugh you almost had to surprise out of him, the one that made his eyes crinkle up till they squeezed shut. His thumb stroked back and forth across Bucky's cheek. “That's right,” he said, his voice softening into a low rumble that put to shame every feeble seed of doubt the voice had tried to plant in him. “You are literally a dream come true.”

Bucky swiped a hand over his eyes. “Come on, man,” he sniffed. “I cried my fill yesterday; don't get me started again.”

With another chuckle, Steve pulled him closer and kissed his forehead. “Love you, Buck.”

“Love you too, Stevie.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.

- Psalm 17:15
I have to confess I was a little relieved to not have to rewrite this battle scene, since Winter isn't conscious (as Winter) for any of the actual fighting. I just got to focus on all the angst instead :P And oohoh boy, does this chapter have angst! In Make Me Whole, Steve was naturally focused mostly on Crossbones, with little attention to spare for Winter until the Words put him in the spotlight. But now we get to see what it was like for Winter during that time, even though he doesn't say much. These characters routinely surprise me, even after all this time, and in this chapter what surprised me most was how calm Winter was through most of the chapter. He truly has come a long way.

This chapter takes place during Make Me Whole chapter 12, “Ultimatum,” and 13, “Inferno.”

Requested by SunnySides on FFNet

~*~*~*~*~*~

My heart's an artifice, a decoy soul
I'll lift you up and then I'll let you go
I've made an art of digging shallow holes
I drop the darkness in and watch it grow
My heart's an artifice, a decoy soul
Who knew the emptiness could be so cold?
I've lost the parts of me that make me whole
I am the darkness
I'm a monster

- “Monster” by Starset

~*~*~*~*~*~

The change hadn't been a conscious one. There wasn't a specific point in time that Winter could say he had realized that his concern for the others' safety outweighed concern for his own. Yet here he was, deliberately endangering himself more with every day, simply because he wanted to make sure nothing bad happened to Steve and Sam.

Maybe the change had come when he'd rescued those people from the burning school building. He'd understood, finally, something he sensed he used to know implicitly. He'd realized that all those people trapped in the flames were people. They felt fear just as strongly as he did. There were people
waiting for them at home who cared for them as deeply as he cared for Steve and Sam, who would cry for them as hard as Steve cried for Bucky. And if he hadn't helped them escape the fire, they would never again be able to experience all the things he was learning to love about this world. They would never dance in the rain, never drink another sip of hot chocolate, never relax in the sweet-smelling warmth of a bath. And they wanted to experience those things just as much as Winter did.

Or maybe he'd changed when he'd realized that Crossbones was after them. How could he have stayed the same, after that icy weight of dread had settled in his stomach and he'd been forced to acknowledge what dire straits they were in? He'd pieced together all the signs, all the signature marks of the cruelest man Winter knew, and it had been all he could do not to crouch in the corner and shudder until Crossbones himself came through the door.

Winter didn't know what Crossbones' problem was—whether he was trying to impress his cruel superiors and win himself a promotion, or whether he just got his kicks from others' pain—but there was no mistaking his handiwork. Winter could all too easily imagine the gleam in his eyes as he'd watched those poor children burn. Or when he'd penned the letter to send to the press, knowing how it would upset Steve.

And when he'd realized Steve was intending to confront Crossbones, Winter's resolve had become rock-solid: I cannot let him hurt Steve. Or Sam.

He didn't ever want to see either of them screaming as Crossbones laughed with perverse glee at their pain, or to watch their blood staining the ground at his feet. Winter wanted to hear Sam's laughter. He wanted to see Steve's smile. He wanted to watch Sam twirling around in the rain, and feel Steve's warm embrace, and listen to the peaceful sound of their breath while they slept. He wanted them to be happy. As happy as they had made him.

But he knew that they never would be if Crossbones had his way.

So Winter could remain confident and calm, even when Crossbones contacted them with his ultimatum and they made their preparations for a final stand. It was simple, really. He knew his objective, and he knew how to achieve it. All that remained was carrying out the mission.

They rose early that morning, hoping to catch Crossbones off his guard. He'd told them where—and even when—he would next strike, making it obvious to all that he was intending to trap them. Normally, Winter would have advised them to simply turn around and go the other way. But one look in Steve's eyes had told him that would never happen. Not when they knew Crossbones was planning to hurt more innocent victims. In a way, he'd already trapped Steve in an impossible position.

Winter stayed in the room he'd chosen for his own use, double- and triple-checking all of his guns to make sure they were in good working order and fully loaded. He'd brought these weapons with him when he'd run away from Hydra, and it felt fitting that they would finally be put to use in this way after so many months of disuse. Winter wouldn't be sorry if every single one of these bullets found their mark in Crossbones' heart.

A knock on the open door tugged Winter's attention away from this vicious line of thought. He looked up and immediately froze. Steve stood in the doorway, grasping a knife. He held it unthreateningly—it was sheathed, and the handle was pointing towards him—but Winter's heart thuddered with a sickening rush of adrenaline all the same, as if that blade was pressed against his neck.

It was one of his knives. One he'd cut himself with, over and over again. His stumbling block, the weight around his neck dragging him down. This was the very same knife he'd given Steve, the
night he'd finally broken free of the awful voice in the back of his head.

Why was Steve testing him? Did he doubt his resolve, after all this time? Why now?

“I hope you won't need to use this,” Steve said, “but I'd feel so much better if you had something for close combat.”

Oh. It wasn't a test. Steve wasn't trying to tempt him or taunt him with failure. Of course he wasn't.
By giving him back the knife, Steve was showing how concerned he was for Winter's safety. More than that, he trusted Winter. He trusted him to use his weapons properly, to defend himself and his friends, and to stop their enemies. By giving Winter his knife back, he was saying, *I have nothing to fear from you.*

But could Winter say the same thing about himself?

Winter reached out to accept the knife, but his fingers paused right before they touched the handle. What if the voice in the back of his head came back, howling with vengeance, as soon as he picked up the knife again? He hadn't touched it since that night when he'd finally managed to throw off the shackles in his mind. The night he'd defiantly told the monster in his head that he didn't need it anymore. He didn't want to hear it again. It had always been so painful to listen to....

*You don't have to listen to him....*

Winter looked at the hand offering the knife to him. The same hand that had accepted the knife that night. Yes, that night he'd had to suffer the abuses of that awful voice in the back of his head. But he also had a defender. That night had begun with anguish and tears, but it had ended in Steve's arms.

The clouds parted in his mind, and suddenly he could see things clearly. He didn't need to worry about whether he could trust himself. Steve trusted him, and that was all he needed to know.

His fingers closed around the knife.

Nothing happened. Nothing changed. There were no thunderclaps, no torrent of noise on the inside of his skull. Steve just turned to leave while Winter slid the knife back into its usual place on his belt.

But Winter wanted to find some way to thank Steve for the confidence he'd just demonstrated. “I....”

Steve stopped in the doorway and looked over his shoulder.

Winter wrestled with himself to find the right words, then blurted out, “I won't let you down!”

A warm smile crossed Steve's face, full of confidence and even—was that...pride? In him? “Don't even worry about that, Winter. It would be impossible.”

Warmth shot through him from head to toe. If Steve was that confident about it...then maybe he was right. Maybe there was nothing to worry about after all.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Winter opened the car door, rifle in hand, before Steve had even pulled the SUV to a stop. Practiced eyes darted across their surroundings, seeking out likely hiding spots for snipers or men waiting in ambush. But there were no suspicious shadows, no gleam of sunlight on metal where it shouldn't be.
All was still and silent as Steve and Sam cautiously emerged from the car as well.

The building in front of them appeared to be some kind of garage. The large sliding doors at the front, where cars could be driven inside to be repaired, were wide open, beckoning them into the darkness. Steve took point, holding his shield at the ready as he stepped cautiously forward. Sam and Winter fell into place behind him, guarding his flank as they slowly advanced.

A young man—almost certainly one of Crossbones' hostages—lay sprawled just inside the door. Blood trickled from a corner of his mouth, and his eyes stared blankly. “We have a soldier down,” Steve whispered. While he and Sam reached down to check the man’s vitals, Winter peered into the darkness to cover for them.

Winter was the first one to see Crossbones. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom of the garage, he found his gaze drawn to the other side of the room. Bodies sprawled across the floor in a grisly trail of carnage—young lives snatched away, devoured by the insatiable maw of Hydra's most ruthless agent.

Standing casually in the doorway on the opposite side of the room was a man in full body armor and a helmet that covered his face, but Winter didn't need to see the white X painted on it to know that it was Crossbones. Winter kept his rifle trained on him, though he knew it would be difficult to land a hit through his armor and helmet. Another man stood next to Crossbones, identifiable immediately by his stance and the skull painted on his helmet. The two men were practically doubles of each other, evenly matched in their taste for blood and fear.

Even though their faces were hidden behind their helmets, Winter could easily imagine the leering smiles both men were probably sending his way. An icy shiver of dread ran down his spine. These were probably his two least favorite people in the world. At least that he could remember, anyway. Even just a few months ago, he would have given anything to avoid this impending confrontation.

Steve straightened and took a step forward, raising his shield as he noticed Crossbones. Catching the bright red of the shield in the corner of his eye, Winter felt his fear ebbing away. He had a very good reason for being here, facing down his worst enemy. Two reasons, he thought as Sam stood and joined them as well, falling into place on Steve's other side.

“Don't look at me like that, Cap,” Crossbones drawled lazily. His voice was raspier than Winter remembered—hoarse, as though he'd done nothing but scream since Hydra fell. “I never said I wouldn't hurt them.”

“Tell me why,” Steve said through gritted teeth. Winter had never heard so much suppressed rage in Steve's voice before.

Crossbones shrugged with careless disdain. “I didn't need them anymore, and they would've just gotten in the way. But at least they brought you and your little friends here in a hurry.”

Even at such a distance, Winter became suddenly aware that Crossbones was looking at him. “Long time no see, Soldier. Gotta admit, I was surprised when I saw you'd survived. And the company you keep these days!”

Winter's spine crawled as he felt Crossbones' greedy eyes bore into him. A jumble of confused memories jostled against each other in the back of his mind. Whips. Chains. Metal bars. Laughter. Sweating, burning, every nerve screaming for a shot of the drug cocktail that kept him tethered to his tormentors. And...the chair. The chair.

Crossbones' next words yanked him back to the present. “Tell me, Soldier—did it break your poor
Captain's heart when you showed him your face?"

His heart lurched up into his throat. Winter glanced fearfully between Steve's confused expression and the impassive helmet hiding Crossbones' face. He knew. Of course he knew. Why hadn't Winter realized? Crossbones had seen his face numerous times, and of course he knew all about Captain America and Bucky Barnes. They were famous. Children learned about them in school. Crossbones had to have known all along that the Winter Soldier, Hydra's Asset, was none other than Steve Rogers' best friend.

But Steve was still frowning in confusion, glancing between the two of them.

Crossbones roared with laughter. “You mean you haven't shown him? You've spent all this time with him, and he doesn't even know?”

Don't say it, Winter silently begged him, staring wide-eyed at Crossbones. Don't tell him, don't you dare.... Of all the ways he'd ever feared Steve discovering the truth about him, this was by far the worst. He could feel the situation spiraling out of his control. The freedom, the ability to decide how much others knew about him...it was all being ripped away. He was naked. Exposed. One more rip, and Steve would see the truth in all of its ugly, shameful totality.

There was nothing he could do. Crossbones was a wolf whose teeth had sunk into his neck and would never let go.

“So trusting and oblivious,” Crossbones was chuckling, shaking his head at Steve. “That's the Steve Rogers I know.”

But it seemed Steve had had enough of this conversation. He took a threatening step forward and snapped, “What makes you think you know anything about me?”

Still chuckling, Crossbones pulled off his helmet. Unlike the many, jumbled memories Winter had of him, Crossbones' face was now covered with twisted burn scars. It was like someone had peeled back the smooth facade Crossbones had worn so well, and now his true face was exposed for the world to see—a hideous, mangled thing. The face of a monster.

Would his face look like that to Steve when he took the mask off?

As soon as he saw Crossbones' face, Steve recoiled with a look of pure horror. “Rumlow?”

Wait...Steve knew this man? Winter's mind whirled. There was too much information to process. He wanted to slow down and figure out the implications of everything, but all he could do in the heat of the moment was register the look of sick realization on Steve's face and the expression of cruel glee on Crossbones'.

“I think I look pretty good, all things considered.”

The others were talking, the words washing over Winter like meaningless rain. His mind felt frozen with fear, until the harsh sound of Crossbones' laughter shocked him out of his daze.

“Listen to yourself! Are you actually trying to make me switch sides?” Crossbones howled with laughter. “People don't change, Cap! Not really. The real you will always come out sooner or later. And you've barely experienced the real me.”

“You're wrong,” Steve said. “People can change. I've been living with the perfect example of that for the better part of a year.” He flung his arm out towards Winter. “Just look at how much Winter has grown. He made the choice to change for the better.”
But just when Winter's heart began to lift hopefully, Crossbones sneered, “What do you think, 'Winter'? Think you've changed? Think you're any different from the way you used to be?” He shook his head dismissively, almost pityingly. “You can use a different name and pretend all you want, but at the end of the day there will always be something pulling you right back to who you've always been.”

Winter felt like a rodent, trapped beneath Crossbones' shoe. There was no escaping the cold, cruel truth gleaming in Crossbones' eyes as their gazes locked across the room. He knew, better than almost anyone else alive, how true it was. It didn't matter what Steve and Sam had done for him. It didn't matter how hard or how long he'd fought to claw his way out of Hydra's grip. There was no escape. He was still their prisoner.

“Once I discovered you were still around,” Crossbones said, slowly pulling some kind of small device from his pocket, “I just had to share the news. So I looked up an old friend of yours. He had some verrry interesting things to say. Wouldn't you like to hear them?”

He pressed a button, and a voice crackled over the loudspeakers—a voice Winter hadn't realized he remembered, but one he knew he never wanted to hear again. “Longing.”

Everything inside him twisted in a paroxysm of fear. He didn't remember what that man's name was, but he could still see his face, as unyielding as a concrete wall.

“Rusted.”

“No...” he whispered, trembling all over.

But no one listened to him, of course. The inexorable voice ground on.

“Seventeen.”

He could already feel the chill creeping up his limbs, the unbearable cold of a cryo chamber. It was associated with all his worst fears....

“Daybreak.”

“No...” he gasped. “S-Stop....”

He should have known this would happen. He should have known better than to hope that he could make his own decisions, not when Hydra still owned the key to his shackles. Crossbones was right. There was nothing he could do to escape who he really was. All this time, he'd only been pretending. He wasn't Winter. He wasn't the person Steve and Sam had tried to make him.

“Furnace.”

Oh no. Steve. Sam. He would become the Winter Soldier again, and they would be here. They would fight.

He didn't want to fight them. He didn't want to hurt them. Please, don't let me fight you. I don't want anything bad to happen to you, I don't want to, please leave now.... Get away from me, while you still can....

“Nine.”

Maybe if they got enough of a head start, they could outrun him. Or maybe if they tied him up now, he wouldn't be able to do what the voice told him. But it seemed that all Winter could do was stand
there, staring at nothing. It had been so long since he’d had to hear these Words that now he was frozen stiff. He’d grown so used to living without this kind of dread. This...terror.

“Benign.”

Winter dropped to his knees, his gun clattering to the floor as he covered his ears. He began to scream, desperate to drown out that terrible voice. But he knew it was pointless. That voice was inside him. Part of him. No matter how far he ran or how loud he screamed, there was no escaping his own traitorous mind.

“Homecoming.”

Nononononono.... Please kill me now, kill me quick, I don't care if it hurts, just don't make me.... I can't live with myself if.... Pleasepleaseplease, I'll do anything....

“One.”

Steve....

Walls of darkness towered above him, shutting out all light.

“Freight car.”

As the last five syllables fell upon his ears, Winter's voice choked in his throat. The darkness closed in around him, then crashed down like an icy wave, drowning him and obliterating his autonomy.

There was no fear.

There was no pain.

There was no Winter.

~*~*~*~*~*

Be not far from me,  
for trouble is near,  
and there is none to help.

...

Oh you my help, come quickly to my aid!  
Deliver my soul from the sword,  
my precious life from the power of the dog!  
Save me from the mouth of the lion!

- Psalm 22:11, 19-21
Good Grief

Chapter Notes

I wasn't expecting this chapter to get so long, but I guess I just like to indulge myself with everything that happens after the reveal. Also, I decided I wanted to have all three POVs in this chapter, to show all angles of them dealing with the aftermath of such an earth-shattering revelation. These scenes are ones that I've had in mind for years, so it's a little surreal to finally put them down on paper for real. One minor note: The book I mention Bucky reading is by John Knowles, and is one I think both he and Steve would love. I highly recommend it!

This chapter takes place a few days after Make Me Whole.

You locked yourself in the bathroom
Lying on the floor when I break through
I pull you in to feel your heartbeat
Can you hear me screaming, “Please don't leave me”?

Hold on, I still want you
Come back, I still need you
Let me take your hand, I'll make it right
I swear to love you all my life
Hold on, I still need you

- “Hold On” by Chord Overstreet

~*~*~*~*~*~

The stairs to the second floor of the cabin stretched ahead of him, only seeming to grow taller and steeper with every second as he pounded up them three at a time. He gasped for breath, running with all his might, but he already knew he would be too late.

His feet splashed in puddles of blood as he finally reached the top of the stairs. The blood trailed from the open door of Winter's room, then trickled towards the stairs, turning it into a sickening red waterfall. He slipped—nearly fell—caught himself on the door frame and whirled into Winter's room.

Light shone out the open door of the bathroom, beckoning him onward to the source of the blood. As he ran towards it, the distance to the doorway grew longer and longer. A breathless sob ripped from his throat. “Please...Winter....”

There he was, sprawled across the pure white tiles of the bathroom floor. Winter lay in a pool of his
own blood, metal fingers still curled around the handle of his knife. His whole right arm was bathed in red, so much that he couldn't even see the old scars anymore. The only thing he could see was that gaping wound.

“Winter....” He crashed to his knees next to the body of his friend. He knew even before he reached out to feel for a pulse that Winter was gone. His eyes were open, blank and still glistening with unshed tears. He didn't move a muscle—not a breath, not a single twitch. He was dead.

“No....”

The mask fell away at the first brush of his fingers. Bucky's dead, still face stared up at him with a silent accusation. Why couldn't you help me? Why didn't you know? How could you not see me, when I was right there in front of you?

I thought we were friends.

Steve woke with a shuddering gasp. He lay, safe and sound, in his bed in a completely different cabin from the one where he'd found Winter bleeding on the floor. It was just a dream...just a dream....

But when he pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, the image of Winter's dead body flashed bright against his eyelids. Steve shot upright, shaking his head fiercely. His heart was pounding as if he were still running up those endless stairs, splashing through puddles of blood to find....

His breath caught in his chest. Winter hadn't killed himself...had he? No, no, he'd gotten to him in time, right? They'd stitched him up.... But there he lay, vivid and real and unmoving....

The bottom seemed to drop out of the world. Winter...Bucky...gone? Dead?

“No,” he choked out, struggling with the sheets twisted around his legs and staggering over to the door. His hand was trembling so hard it took him a moment to grasp the doorknob and turn it.

There were no rational thoughts in Steve's mind as he stumbled across the living room and down the hallway to the first door on the right. He just...needed to know. Now.

Steve had just enough presence of mind to stop himself before bursting through the door. The whole cabin was dark and silent, wrapped snugly in the embrace of sleep. So Steve paused just long enough to quiet his breathing a little, then slowly turned the doorknob and eased the door open.

The room was dark and silent, just like the rest of the cabin. The curtains were closed, leaving only the vaguest outlines of furniture visible. Steve tiptoed inside, softly closing the door behind him and carefully turning the doorknob back into place before letting go.

Steady, even breathing was the only sound in the room. Just listening to it instantly made Steve's heart rate slow down...but he still wanted to check. Just to be sure.

He tiptoed over to the bed as quietly as he could, the sticky sounds of his bare feet deafening in the silence. Finally, when he was close enough to make out the lumpy shadow that was the man lying in the bed, he bent over—leaning closer, trying to make out the features in the darkness....

Suddenly the man snapped into action. A light blazed right in Steve's eyes, but not before Steve caught a glimpse of a knife blade whipping through the air towards him. He threw himself backward, barely catching himself before falling flat on his back.

“Steve?” A curse, then a thump as something landed on the bedside table. “Don't do that; I almost
stabbed your eye out!”

The flashlight that had dazzled Steve flicked off, then with a click, the lamp on the bedside table switched on. Steve sat on the floor where he'd fallen, blinking at Bucky sitting up in bed. “Sorry....”

With a sigh, Bucky scrubbed his right hand over his face and squinted groggily at Steve. “No...’s fine, just...don't lean over me like that, okay?”

“'Kay.” The word came out shaky, and Steve swallowed hard in an attempt to keep his composure. But that was Bucky. He was alive and well. The wound bathing his arm in blood had become nothing but a neat, straight line running down his forearm. They'd saved him. He hadn't succeeded in killing himself that night. It wasn't real.

Bucky's expression sharpened as several seconds ticked by. “You okay?”

“Yep.” Steve hastily pushed himself to his feet, not trusting himself with a longer answer. He turned to leave, mumbling, “Sorry to wake you up.”

“Wait.” Bucky's hand shot out and caught his arm, holding him in place. He peered up at Steve, who quickly glanced away. “You had a nightmare, didn't you?”

Winter's body. Blood everywhere. Dead eyes, staring straight back at him....

Steve pressed a hand over his mouth, but not before the sob broke out. Another sob followed on the heels of the first, then another and another. Trying to hold them in was like trying to keep from vomiting.

“Okay, okay, come on....” Bucky gently tugged on his arm, coaxing him down to sit on the mattress beside him.

Steve collapsed, what little strength he'd tried to piece together crumbling instantly. He sank onto the bed and slumped against Bucky, clinging to his warm, real, and very much alive best friend. Sobs shook his whole body, but he tried to hold them back, if only to reassure Bucky that nothing was really wrong. Because it wasn't. Bucky was here, so it was all okay again.

Bucky combed metal fingers through Steve's hair as he held him close. “Must've been a pretty bad one,” he said calmly.

An explosion of tears ripped out of him as he saw Winter's dead body again. The mask falling away to reveal Bucky's face....

“Don't l-leave me,” he sobbed, pressing his face against Bucky's chest. “Please...please d-don't leave me again....”

Bucky held him tighter, pressing their cheeks together so he could whisper right into Steve's ear. “I'm not gonna leave you, pal. Not ever. I made you a promise, remember?”

...the end of the line...

Steve shifted until his ear was pressed against Bucky's chest, where he could hear his heart beating steadily. He let that sound, and the soothing motions of Bucky's hands rubbing back and forth across his back, carry him far away from the bloody dream. This was real. Not death and despair. Not the helpless, sickening knowledge that he hadn't been able to help someone he loved so much.

It seemed Bucky still remembered how to calm him down, even after all these years apart. Steve
found his shuddering breaths slowing down to match the rise and fall of Bucky's chest, and his pounding heart found the rhythm of the thumping in his ear.

“Shhh....” Bucky scooted back until he could lean against the wall, tugging gently on Steve until they were sitting side by side, their legs out straight instead of tangled in an uncomfortable heap.

Steve kept his arms locked around Bucky's chest. He sniffed miserably. “I dreamed you died.”

“I gathered as much.”

Steve peeked up at Bucky's face and found that he was—inexplicably—smiling. He tugged his sleeve down over his metal hand and gently wiped the tears from Steve's cheeks.

“Unfortunately,” Bucky said in a light tone, “it was all just a dream, so I'm afraid you won't get off the hook that easily.”

“Don't joke,” Steve said sharply, squeezing his eyes shut against the image of Bucky bleeding out on the bathroom floor. “I...I dreamed that you...killed yourself.”

“Oh.”

All levity was gone now. Steve sat staring at the knife on the bedside table—the same knife, he suddenly realized, with which Winter nearly had killed himself that day. The specter of that awful night hung over them both, a dark memory nearly as bad as the nightmare that still clouded Steve's mind.

“Steve,” Bucky finally said, breaking the heavy silence. “I...I'm really sorry about that. If I...had realized how much it would still be hurting you...if I'd just stopped to think....”

Steve shook his head, squeezing Bucky a little tighter. “You don't have to apologize,” he murmured. “I just...when I think about...I-I-I don't know what I'll do if I lose you again....” He bit his lip as more tears welled up.

Bucky clicked his tongue and dabbed at Steve's eyes with his sleeve again. “You're not gonna lose me. I promised I'd be with you to the end of the line, right?”

“Yeah,” Steve sniffled, “but if you die—“

With a huff of impatience, Bucky nudged Steve's chin up to force their eyes to meet. “A line extends infinitely in both directions, Stevie. You'll never get to the end of it.”

Steve blinked, absorbing this. “You,” he said, unable to suppress a smile, “are such a nerd.”

Bucky looked rather proud of himself.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Sam yawned as he shuffled through the living room to the kitchen. There was only one narrow window on the eastern wall of the kitchen, so most of the main living area of the cabin was rather dimly lit this early in the day. He hadn't heard either of the others stirring yet, but he'd dragged himself out of bed because he was usually the only one who remembered to put the trash cans out before the truck came by. They weren't supposed to put them out the night before, in case of bears,
which meant getting up at the crack of dawn or letting the garbage pile up.

After gathering up the trash in the kitchen, Sam stepped out the front door and found Steve sitting on the steps. “Morning,” Sam mumbled, rolling his eyes as he stepped around Steve. Of course he couldn’t have taken out the trash himself, when he was already up so early....

Steve didn't reply, but Sam was too busy dragging the trash and recycling bins up the drive to the main road to notice. Only when he turned and strolled back to the house did he catch the brooding expression on Steve’s face. Steve sat staring into the distance, the way he did from time to time—like he was a thousand miles away. Or maybe seventy years away.

So instead of heading back inside and poking around for some breakfast, Sam sat down on the top step next to Steve. “Talk? Or just sit?”

“How?” Steve stirred, looking over as if he'd just noticed him for the first time. He straightened a little, rubbing his eyes. “Oh...sorry. Guess I'm not awake yet.”

Yeah, as if you expect me to believe you slept at all, Sam thought, noting the way his eyelids drooped, puffy from the way he’d been crying at the drop of a hat lately. Understandable. But the emotional roller coaster had to be exhausting. Sam gently knocked his shoulder against Steve's. “So how come you're not still in bed, drooling on Bucky's shoulder or something?”

A feeble smile crossed his lips, but soon slipped off again. Steve let out a deep sigh, leaning over and staring at his hands dangling between his knees. “I don't know what's wrong with me, Sam.”

“Aha,” Sam thought, settling back more comfortably against the banister. Talking it is, then.

“I...I'm happy to have Bucky back,” Steve continued. “I am. I couldn't have even dreamed of something so wonderful....”

“But?” Sam prompted when Steve trailed off.

Steve looked over at him, brow pinched together worriedly. “But...sometimes, I almost feel...sad.”

“Well, you can't expect to be happy all the time,” Sam said reasonably.

“But...I should be.” Steve frowned at the ground, as if it had done him a personal wrong. “I should be overjoyed every time I look at him...but sometimes...I just....” He shook his head with a frustrated huff. “I have no reason to be sad that Bucky is alive and well.”

“Hey.” Sam put a hand on Steve's shoulder to get him to meet his gaze again. “You're grieving, Steve. Let yourself feel like that. It's okay.”

Steve blinked, his expression of frustration turning into one of confusion instead. “Grieving? But...I don't have anything to grieve. Not anymore.”

Sam let his hand fall from Steve's shoulder again. “Every change means some kind of loss. Even good changes.” He quirked an eyebrow when Steve looked skeptical. “Why do you think people cry at weddings?”

Steve went back to frowning at the scenery, though at least he looked thoughtful instead of brooding. “But...he's the same person. The only thing that's really changed is that I know that now.”

“But doesn't that change everything?”
Steve looked at him for a long moment, not saying anything. But Sam could see the gears turning. It was subtle, but there were differences Sam had noticed in the way he interacted with Bucky, compared to what his friendship with Winter had been. Winter had slowly been growing into the person he now was; taking off the mask was just the final step that crossed the threshold into a new identity. Sam didn't think Bucky would be waking him up to distract him from cutting himself, for one thing. And while that was undeniably a good thing...well, a small part of him would miss those days. It was much less of a challenge to get Bucky to smile, laugh, and carry on a conversation than it had been with Winter. And even though that meant Bucky was happier now, Sam had enjoyed the challenge.

“It's okay to miss Winter,” Sam said softly, “even while you're happy to have Bucky back.”

Steve let out a breath. “Like it was okay to miss Bucky while I had Winter?”

He tipped back his head, closing his eyes as the cool morning breeze picked up, ruffling gently through his hair. The sun peeked out from behind a tree branch, bathing Steve in its golden light. The light caught in the lines of his face, deepening them, but somehow...he looked so much more peaceful than he had just a few minutes ago.

When the breeze died down, Steve opened his eyes and looked over at Sam. His smile was small, but genuine. “How is it you always know exactly what to say?”

Sam grinned and pushed himself to his feet. “It's down in my job description.” He held out his hand, then yanked hard when Steve accepted it. “Along with taking out the trash while you're too busy brooding.”

Steve laughed as he stumbled to his feet. “I owe you one,” he said, squeezing Sam's hand before letting go.

“Mmm, more like one hundred.” Sam nudged him in the side as they walked through the front door.

“Here you are,” Bucky said, standing at the kitchen counter and spraying a mountain of whipped cream on top of his usual morning cocoa. “I was wondering where you'd got to.”

He slid two mugs of coffee down the counter towards them—black for Steve, just the right amount of cream and sugar for Sam. Murmuring a word of thanks, Sam took a grateful gulp of coffee. Now that was the right way to start off the day.

Steve was just standing there with his mug in his hand, his head cocked to one side as he watched Bucky with an odd expression. He said, “You didn't used to like chocolate that much.”

Bucky paused, his mug halfway to his lips. “Oh?”

“Yeah. You used to say you didn't like the aftertaste.”

Sam shook his head. Apparently this guy had always been weird.

Bucky sipped his hot cocoa and smacked his lips appreciatively, apparently oblivious to the blob of whipped cream on the tip of his nose. “Well...now it's my favorite.”

~*~*~*~*~*~
“You seen Steve?” Bucky asked.

Sam looked over lazily from where he lounged on the couch, watching a baseball game. He looked mere minutes away from nodding off. “Nah,” he said. “He said he might join me, but he never showed. I thought he was with you.”

Bucky shook his head. He hadn't seen Steve since lunch, but he hadn't really thought anything of it. He'd spent most of that time finishing up *A Separate Peace* in the hammock out back.

The commercials ended, and Sam's attention returned to the TV, so Bucky wandered through the cabin to investigate. Steve wasn't in his room or the closed-in porch out back. Where had he disappeared to?

After poking his head into each room, Bucky finally found him in the spare bedroom. Steve had slept there the first night they'd spent in the cabin, but after they'd fought Crossbones, he'd moved to the master bedroom on the other side of the house. There had been no reason to move back, so he'd stayed there even after his wounds had healed.

But when Bucky pushed the door open, he found Steve sitting in the corner on the floor, knees drawn up to hide his face from view. The curtains were closed, leaving the room only dimly lit by the glow of sunlight behind them. “Steve?” he said tentatively, stepping into the room. Was he sleeping, or...?

Steve raised his head, exposing his tear-stained face. “Hey,” he said in a choked voice.

Alarmed, Bucky closed the door behind him and stepped closer. “Steve, what's wrong?”

Steve shook his head, trying to mop up his tears. “No, it's...it's okay, I'm f-fine. Just...you being... you...hit m-me real hard...a few minutes ago....”

A few minutes? Steve had to have gone missing at least an hour ago. Had he been sitting back here in the dark all this time? Bucky stood there awkwardly for a moment or two, watching Steve sniffling miserably. He didn't know how to help when he was the cause of those tears. Finally, he decided to just ask. “How can I help?”

He wasn't sure if those words did it, but when Steve looked up, more tears ran down his cheeks, which were already rubbed raw from all this crying. “It's o-okay,” he sniffled unconvincingly. “You can go, I-I'll be fine. Just...Just give me a m-minute....”

Bucky looked at him carefully, trying to read him past the tears and the puffy, bloodshot eyes. “Do you want me to go?”

Steve's chin trembled. He opened his mouth to reply, but it seemed all he could do was shake his head.

So Bucky sat down next to him, leaning back against the wall. This reminded him a lot of that day several months ago, when Steve had spent most of the day crying over Bucky's death. His death. Or...supposed death. He'd felt similarly awkward then as he did now, because Steve was mourning him even though he was sitting right there.

He glanced sidelong at Steve, who sniffed and hugged his knees to his chest. Steve had been doing an awful lot of crying and staring wistfully at him ever since Bucky had taken off his mask. He hadn't really explained why, but Bucky thought he knew. It was a huge pill to swallow, finding out that a man who was dead and gone had been right beside you for months without telling you....
Bucky sighed, picking at a stray thread dangling from the cuff of his jeans. “If this hurts so much...why do you keep doing it? I mean...I'm not the same person I used to be. I'm not the old Bucky, I'm not Winter anymore.... If it's too hard to deal with that...I get it. I know you care about me, but we can...you know, take a step back or something.” He swallowed with difficulty. Leaving Steve, even for a day, was the last thing he wanted to do, but that didn't matter if Steve was hurting so much. “Maybe you have to say goodbye to the old me before you’ll be ready for the new me.”

Steve was already shaking his head. “That's just it, Bucky. That's exactly what I'm trying to process.” He swiped his hand across his eyes again, then turned to look at Bucky with a watery smile. “You are the same person, no matter what they did to you or what you've been through. They had to go to such lengths to force you to do all those things.” Another tear rolled down his cheek, but he quickly brushed it away.

“You still knew,” Steve sniffled. “Somewhere deep inside, you knew what was right. And you weren't able to do much...but you did everything you could to survive and break free. They couldn't erase that drive, no matter how hard they tried. That was still you.”

Never before had he thought of it quite like that. Every other time Bucky had ever thought of those horrible years, he'd only considered the fear and trauma, the shame and guilt staining him from the things he'd done when he had no control and couldn't even remember the people most important to him.

But he'd always been trying to fight them. Most of the time, he hadn't been able to do anything but obey...but he'd never agreed with them. He'd done their dirty work, but he would never have willingly joined them if they'd given him the choice. Maybe it was simply because they treated him so poorly, but maybe Steve was right. Maybe some small part of the man he used to be, the man who fought to protect the weak rather than hurt them, had still been there somewhere. He had run away on his own, hadn't he? And what had it taken for him to leave Hydra behind forever? Nothing but a single encounter with the first person to extend mercy to him.

Bucky had been staring into space as he considered this, but he looked up when Steve's arm wrapped around his shoulders. “I'm glad you're here with me, Buck.”

Scooching a little closer, Bucky wrapped his arms around his best friend. “And I'm glad you found me. I wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for you.”

Steve let out a shaky laugh. “Took the words right out of my mouth.”

After a moment, Bucky shifted a little, trying to straighten his back without leaving Steve's embrace. Finally, with an impatient huff, he stretched out on the floor instead. “How can you sit like that for so long?” he grumbled. “My back's already killing me....”

“Sorry,” Steve said hastily, stretching out his legs and planting one hand on the wall as if to push himself to his feet.

But Bucky plopped his head and shoulders into Steve's lap, settling down comfortably so Steve couldn't get up. “Just hold me as long as you need to, okay?”

There were still tears in Steve's eyes, but he was also smiling as he trailed his fingers through Bucky's hair. “Don't tell me that. We'll be here for ten years.”

Smiling contentedly, Bucky shrugged. “That would be about sixty years too short.”
Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

- Matthew 5:4
A Reason to Fight

Chapter Notes

I know a lot of people have been eagerly anticipating this chapter, myself included! It was more challenging than I’d expected, trying to get in all of the thoughts and reactions I wanted Winter to have, fitting them in and around the action I’d already established in Make Me Whole. But I hope this will be satisfactory for everyone who’s wondered what was going through Winter’s head during this climactic battle.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 14, “Taking a Stand.”

When I thought that I fought this war alone
   We were one with our destinies entwined
When I thought that I fought without a cause
   You gave me the reason why

... 

So will you please show me your real face?
   Draw the line in the horizon
'Cause I only need your name to call the reasons why I fought

- “War” by Poets of the Fall

~*~*~*~*~*~

The first thing Winter became aware of was pain. Aches. Bruises. Weary muscles that weren't used to being overworked. Overworked? What had he been doing...?

With a jolt of realization, he snapped his eyes open. Very quickly, he became aware of three things: There was something hard and solid against his back, thick chains around his arms prevented his escape, and a man loomed over him, blocking the light. Fear jolted through his nerves, but then he realized it was Sam. And he wasn't in that dimly-lit garage anymore, but back in the cabin. He was sitting with his back against one of the wooden pillars in the living room, chained up tightly.

He looked up at Sam, his dry throat making swallowing difficult. “What did I do?”

Sam looked down at him with an inscrutable expression. “Enough.”
A movement at the edge of his vision drew Winter's attention. He glanced to the side and saw Steve in the next room, lying on his back on the dining table. His chest was bare, wrapped up in bandages, one of his arms in a sling. Winter's stomach lurched, and he quickly looked away.

“I knew this would happen,” Winter groaned, letting his head fall back against the pillar. Yes, he’d known—but what had he done to prevent it? How could he call himself their friend when he’d let himself get caught off guard? Why hadn’t he just...left? While he'd still been himself?

Instead of berating him, Sam stepped closer and reached out to dab some alcohol on Winter's forehead. The stinging sensation told Winter he had a cut there, though he couldn't remember getting it. Alarmed, Winter tried to pull back, but the chains made that hard. “Don't be stupid!” he snapped, trying to turn his head away. “How-How do you know that I'm not...?”

But Sam just calmly continued patching him up. “The Winter Soldier wouldn't be worried about me or Steve. Besides, I need your help to move him to the couch,” he added, jabbing a thumb over his shoulder at Steve. “So I think I'll take my chances.”

There was nothing Winter could say to that, so he let Sam untie him, then got to his feet and followed him over to Steve. Close up, Steve looked worse than ever. Winter could see several scrapes and bruises, probably from the fight he didn't remember. How horrible was it to not even remember hurting your friend this badly? He noticed a breathing tube sticking out of Steve's chest, and realized his lung must have collapsed. Had he done that, or had Crossbones?

He couldn't bear to raise his eyes to Steve's face. He didn't deserve to touch him, or even to breathe on him, after what he'd done. Most of all, he didn't deserve the second (or was it the third, fourth, hundredth) chance he knew Steve would give him.

But Winter meekly followed Sam's instructions, helping him carry Steve to the living room and situate him on one of the couches there. Winter scurried about, fetching blankets, water, pills... Anything to stay busy.

But finally there was nothing more to do. Winter stood by Sam's side as they both looked down at Steve. As if drawn by a magnet, Winter's eyes slid up to meet Steve's. His heart quailed, expecting to see fear, anger, reproach, disappointment... But Steve's eyes were soft and warm, like they always were when they looked at him. It was like nothing had happened. Nothing had changed.

Steve's voice was barely above a whisper as he mumbled, “Okay,” and drifted off to sleep.

Winter wasn't sure if that meant Don't worry; I'm okay or I'm glad you're okay. Maybe a bit of both.

Once Steve's eyes closed in sleep, Winter wandered over to the kitchen counter, where Sam had left all of their weapons. Next to Steve's shield was a familiar knife. Winter reached for it, but then he noticed a reddish stain on the handle. The blade had been wiped clean, but clearly this knife had tasted blood. Winter thought of the bandage wrapped around Steve's chest, and pulled back his hand as if it had been burned.

“What happened to Crossbones?” he asked Sam, who was wearily bustling around the kitchen. Winter deliberately turned his back on his bloodied weapon.

“He got away,” Sam said, grabbing three plates from the cupboard. “Skull's dead, though. Crossbones left when reinforcements started showing up. We haven't seen the last of him.”

Winter nodded. Crossbones never gave up on his prey once he'd caught their scent. He hated Steve, that much was plain to see, and he would definitely be coming back to finish him off. And this time,
Steve had a collapsed lung and a dislocated shoulder. He wouldn't be able to fight or defend himself. He was utterly vulnerable.

“Here.” Sam shoved a plate into Winter's hands, with a sandwich and an apple on it. “Try to eat something, okay?”

Winter couldn't look up, even though he could tell Sam was trying to catch his eye. He took the food into the bathroom, rather than putting on his bandanna like he'd been doing for months. Once he was alone, he sat with his back to the door, mechanically shoving food into his mouth and staring at the floor.

He was a liability to the others. Why hadn't he realized it before now? If he couldn't stop Crossbones from turning him into the Winter Soldier again, he wouldn't be able to keep from hurting them. And next time...what if they didn't make it out alive? What if his knife found its way to Steve's heart next time? What if he shot Sam in the head? What if he simply stood by and let Crossbones torture them to death?

He was a danger to them. He had to leave.

When Winter left the bathroom and brought his plate back to the kitchen, he found the others fast asleep in the living room. Steve lay stretched out on the couch where they’d placed him earlier, chest rising and falling steadily thanks to the breathing tube. Sam slumped to one side in the armchair next to him, snoring softly.

Winter stood over his friends, studying their sleeping faces, for a long time. Like the Grim Reaper, casting his baleful shadow across their blissfully serene faces. Even now, they didn't realize how close they were to mortal danger.

Sam looked so exhausted. He must have been the one to get them off the battlefield, Winter suddenly realized. Steve had been wounded. At best, Winter would have been unconscious—at worst, actively trying to kill them. But Sam had patched them up and brought them back to safety, silently going above and beyond the call of duty. As he always did. He asked for no reward, and all too often, he got no reward—save for the dubious honor of calling them friends.

And Steve...somehow, he looked so small, lying there with no shirt and his uniform pants still crusted with blood and grime. With the bandages, bruises, and haggard look of pain on his sleeping face, he looked so much like he used to. Before the serum. Before Captain America vs. Hydra. Before everything had gotten so messed up.

Winter's chest felt heavy with the weight of all those years. He could remember, so vividly it hurt, all the times he'd taken care of Steve when he'd looked like that. He'd bring Steve home, clean him up, bandage his wounds.... Sometimes he'd have to beat off whoever was using his friend as a punching bag.

But now what had he done? He'd been the one beating Steve up. He'd stabbed Steve right in the chest, and now he couldn't even breathe without help.

*I hurt you,* he thought, gazing down at his best friend. *You gave me the clothes right off your back...protected me...hid me.... You saved me from myself, over and over again. And I hurt you. How could I hurt you?*

But it would never happen again. Even if Winter had to shoot his own brains out, he would make sure he never laid a finger on them again.
His steps were heavy as he forced himself away from the couches and began to make preparations. He knew this was the right thing to do. He would leave them, draw Crossbones' attention, and stay far enough away that he wouldn't bring any more danger to them. It would mean never seeing them again—it might even mean dying—but that was the price he'd have to pay. And he was willing to pay that steep price. Their safety was worth it.

Even so, he found his movements reluctant and sluggish. He set about packing up his things, just the bare minimum of what he'd need. He packed a backpack full of non-perishable food, a change of clothes, and as much ammo as he could fit. But as he did so, he kept finding himself falling still and staring into space.

One such time, he passed by the couches where his friends lay slumbering, and slowly sank down to sit on the coffee table next to the extra rolls of bandages and Steve's half-eaten sandwich. He stared at Sam's hand, dangling over the armrest. Steve's hand, resting on top of his stomach. Winter longed, with unexpected intensity, to reach out and hold those hands, though he knew it would wake them. He wanted to feel their warm, comforting presence. To look at them, and see Sam's quick grin. Steve's eyes softening as they looked at him. He wanted to join them in laughter, to listen to them talk, just to reach out and know they were there.

But if they were to have the opportunity to do any of those things again, Winter wouldn't be around to see them. That was the cruel irony of the current situation.

A creaking sound told Winter that he was gripping the edge of the table too hard, so he quickly let go and stood up. “Goodbye, Sam,” he whispered. “Goodbye...Steve.”

He walked over to the kitchen counter with all their weapons, and took one of his pistols. His other hand reached for the knife, but came to a stop as abruptly as if it had run into an invisible wall. He...He couldn't. A shudder ran through him as he imagined the impact running up his arm when the blade bit into Steve's chest. The warm blood splashing over his knuckles....

No. He just couldn't. Winter left the knife on the countertop, and turned to leave.

When Winter opened the front door, he hesitated in surprise. The sun had dipped behind the mountains and darkness set in swiftly. He'd wasted too much time on regrets. If he didn't hurry, he'd never manage to get away.

Closing the door carefully behind himself, Winter made his way to the car. He'd thought this part through already. It was the obvious choice—Steve and Sam would need the car, but he could use the motorcycle to get away quickly on his own. It wasn't even stealing, right? Steve had given it to him...right? He'd even said the purpose of the gift was to help Winter when he was ready to move on.

*Here I go, Steve,* he thought. *Moving on. And I can only do it because you gave me the right tools. Just...don't hate me when it's all over? I'm trying to do my best.*

He was strapping down his bag on the back of the motorcycle when he heard a voice behind him. “Never pegged you as the type to run away.”

Winter whirlled around, whipping out his weapon, only to find Sam leaning casually against the hood of the car, as if he'd been there the whole time. When had he gotten so good at sneaking around? Or was Winter really that preoccupied?

With a huff, Winter tried to expel the anxiety coiled like a giant spring in his chest. He turned back to the motorcycle, shoving the gun back into its holster and picking up his helmet. “I'm not running
“Oh, do you prefer 'sneaking off in the middle of the night without even saying goodbye’?”

“It's the only way,” Winter said curtly, setting the helmet back on the seat. It hurt to have to spell it all out for Sam like this. Speaking the words out loud made them too real. “I'm a danger to both of you as long as I've still got Hydra in here. I'm just...trying to protect you.”

Sam crossed his arms over his chest. “And what happens when Crossbones comes back? Because he will be back, I can guarantee you. He won't stop until Steve is cold in his grave.”

“Then I'll draw him away from you,” Winter said, hating each word he spoke even though he knew it was the right thing to do. “I'll make sure he follows me far away, until you can escape.”

Sam kept talking, but Winter's attention flitted away from him. The bushes rustled and Winter frowned into the darkness around them. Had he heard the sound of footsteps, or was he just being paranoid? Was that the **snick** of a door closing?

“Shut up,” he muttered, peering into the darkness around the front door.

“Look, you can't just—”

“No, shhh!” Winter listened intently, but he couldn't hear anything more. His nerves were jangling, every sense alert for the slightest disturbance. Had he waited too long? Should he have left earlier to draw Crossbones off?

When Winter peeked around the corner of the cabin, he saw nothing amiss...but something still wasn't right. Glancing over at Sam, he saw that he'd picked up on it too. Winter inched cautiously forward, holding his gun at the ready. The filmy curtains in the front window prevented him from seeing any details inside, but he could make out a shadow bending over...like a man leaning over one of the couches....

Winter's heart leapt into his throat, but his mind stayed clear as he quickly latched onto a plan. He pressed the gun into Sam's hands, whispering, “Kitchen window. You distract him.”

Moving as swiftly and lightly as possible, Winter crouched down out of sight and circled around to the back of the cabin. The only lights inside were the lamps in the living room, so the kitchen was completely dark. Thankfully, though the ground sloped down where the closed-in deck was, one kitchen window was close enough to the ground that he could reach it from the outside.

Winter longed to smash through the glass and race inside, but he forced himself to move slowly, making no sound as he eased the window open. Cautiously, he hoisted himself up and crawled through the window onto the counter. His foot nudged against a glass sitting on the counter, but just at that moment three gunshots cracked through the air in quick succession, covering up any sound he'd made.

Winter dropped silently to the floor, crouching low and hoping those bullets hadn't been meant for him.

“Step away from him,” Sam's voice said from the front door. “Now.”

“Well, well, well,” Crossbones sneered. “The dog leaps to defend his master, but he's all bark.”

Winter crept closer, keeping low and circling around behind Crossbones. As he moved, he caught sight of the bloody knife Crossbones held in one hand, pointed down towards Steve's still form. With
a sickening jolt, Winter recognized the knife. *His* knife. The one Steve had given back to him. The one that had nearly killed him, now held in the hand of the most ruthless person they'd ever known.

The sickening dread hardened into fear, then rage. He couldn't tell from his angle whether Steve was even alive or not, but Winter was through with standing by and watching him get hurt. He would die before he let that knife touch Steve again.

“And what did you do with the mutt?” Crossbones continued. “Couldn't wait to get rid of him, could you? Finally realized you're dealing with nothing but a feral—”

Winter charged forward, ramming his left fist into Crossbones' side. The man's body armor protected him, but the blow still knocked him off balance. Winter pushed his advantage, driving Crossbones back from Steve's couch.

Crossbones' eyes widened in surprise at first, as he hastily raised his arms to fend off Winter's blows. But then his lips curved upwards again in another cruel smile. It was a gleeful, eager grin—like he finally had the chance to do something he’d never been allowed to before.

*I'm going to kill you,* that smile said. *And I'm going to enjoy making it hurt.*

“What's the matter?” Crossbones sneered as Winter barely managed to get his left arm up in time to block the knife from slashing at his face. “I think you're losing your touch!”

Winter tried to grab his wrist and twist it, to make him drop the knife, but Crossbones snatched his hand away.

“You've gone soft, hanging around these two,” Crossbones spat as they traded punches, circling around each other in the limited space they had. “They let you forget your place, and now you think you deserve this? Don't let them fool you! You're nothing but a tool, and they'll throw you out as soon as they don't need you anymore!”

“You're...wrong...” Winter panted, still grappling desperately for the knife. But Crossbones stood at the top of the steps leading down to the seating area, and Winter couldn't get the right leverage.

Crossbones loomed over him, little more than a silhouette against the dim light of the lamps. “Then why don't you take off the mask? Isn't it because you know they'll hate you when they find out what you really are?”

“No....”

Crossbones' fist collided with the side of Winter's head, deliberately aimed to miss the protection of his mask. Winter groaned as pain lanced through his temple and stars exploded in his vision. For a moment, he almost thought he was back in the chilly concrete room where they would beat him until he stopped resisting. Until they'd shove him back into the chair....

“A liar and a pathetic coward,” Crossbones continued, grin widening. “That's what you are, Soldier! If they told you any different, it's because they're stupid enough to buy your lies!” His fist landed squarely in Winter's stomach. Pain scorched through him as he doubled up, all his breath gone.

Winter curled in on himself, everything going dark for a moment.

*Bang!*

For a moment, Winter was sure Crossbones had shot him and everything was over. But when he opened his eyes and peered upwards, he found Crossbones facing away from him, aiming his gun across the room at....
Winter reached out and yanked as hard as he could on Crossbones' leg, making him stagger to the side just as he fired his handgun again. The sound of shattering glass as a lamp toppled over met his ears, rather than the sound of Sam hitting the floor.

Crossbones tried to kick Winter, but Winter had recovered enough to roll away. He used his momentum to roll to his knees, fending off Crossbones' furious blows. Winter staggered to his feet, using his metal arm to defend himself from Crossbones' furious swipes with the knife.

Over Crossbones' shoulder, Winter caught sight of the front door, open wide to the night. *If I can just get him over there....*

Winter resumed the attack with renewed vigor. He didn't let up for a second, knowing that if he did, Crossbones might level the gun on him—or worse, one of the others. Winter punched and kicked him as fast as he could, not worrying about strength or accuracy so much as keeping Crossbones occupied. Crossbones backed up, stumbling when he reached the top step. Winter lunged forward, hoping to knock him over. But suddenly there was a knee slamming into his unprotected stomach, knocking the breath out of him. Winter fell, coughing and gasping, to the floor, knocking over the coat tree with a crash. It felt like the outline of Crossbones' kneepad was etched into his midriff.

*Just stay down,* a menacing voice murmured in the back of his head. *There's nothing you can do. You can't even save yourself. You're pathetic. Weak. Useless.*

Strange. The voice in the back of his head used to sound like his own voice, or sometimes like Steve's. It had fallen silent for so long, Winter had actually thought the monster was gone. But here it was again—and it sounded like Crossbones.

*You've already hurt them so much,* the voice continued as Winter gasped and struggled to get his hands and knees under him. *Why don't you just give up and die already? It's what you deserve.*

Once again, a gunshot cracked through the air, but Winter didn't feel a burst of pain. With difficulty, he craned his neck around and saw Crossbones facing away from him, pointing his gun at Sam.

Sam stood in front of Steve's couch, favoring his bloody left leg. But even though he wavered as if the slightest breeze would knock him over, Sam held his ground. In both hands, he clutched Steve's shield, ready to defend both of them.

In a flash, Winter remembered the night when he'd fought that last desperate battle for his soul, when he'd finally told the voice to go away. Steve had shielded *him* then. The memory of Steve's unfailing kindness had chased away every shadow. The star on that shield had been his guiding light for so long. How could he have forgotten, even for a moment?

Sam took only a second to aim, then threw the shield at Crossbones with all his might. Crossbones barely dodged out of the way in time; the shield glanced off his wrist and clattered onto the floor. The gun fell from Crossbones' hand, but he raised the knife instead and stomped over to Sam. “That's the *last* time you'll get in my way.”

Winter desperately pushed himself to his feet with the aid of his metal arm, but his ribs still ached with every gasping breath. He lost his balance and had to grab one of the wooden pillars to keep from falling down again.

He could only watch as Crossbones knocked Sam to the floor. As Steve reared up from the couch, desperately clawing with his one good hand. As Crossbones slammed his foot viciously onto Sam's wounded leg.

_The shackles cut into his arms and legs. White-hot iron pressed against his bare chest, digging into his flesh with the sizzling sound and smell of burnt meat. He screamed._

“You see?” said a gruff voice with a thick accent that almost obscured his words. “Already, he heal. This one? Yesterday. Healing is good for Asset, is no so good for rememberings. He forget pain, so you have to do many time. Then he forget, but body remembers, yes?”

“Got it,” said a young voice, quivering with anticipation. Eager to impress.

“You do now,” the gruff voice said. “So he know who to fear.”

_The young man grabbed the branding iron and advanced, keeping a wary eye on the Winter Soldier, like a dangerous beast barely held in check. The Soldier bared his teeth like the wolf he was, but they all knew it was an empty threat. He couldn’t move an inch as the branding iron closed the distance and seared his flesh again._

_Crossbones’ face was smooth and clean-shaven, devoid of the lines and scars he would acquire over the years. But his eyes gleamed with the same perverse delight as he drank in every last scream._

Winter closed his fist around Crossbones’ neck from behind, yanking him back from his helpless victims. He didn’t remember moving, but he was right behind the man now, his fingers clenched tightly around Crossbones’ throat. In one easy motion, Winter flipped the surprised man over his shoulder and threw him to the ground.

Winter cast a quick glance over his friends. Steve lay on the couch, face scrunched up in pain, his left arm cradled against his chest, but still breathing. Sam sprawled on the floor, clutching his blood-soaked leg with both hands and panting heavily. Winter longed to drop everything and help them both, but instead he turned his back on them and faced Crossbones once more.

Crossbones had regained his feet, coughing and swearing in a voice even more hoarse than before. “Why do you keep fighting?” he rasped, backing up a little and switching the knife to his right hand. “You know your place.”

Winter squared his shoulders and raised his fists. “My place is right here.” Standing in between the life that had been forced upon him, and the one he’d chosen for himself. Defending the only friends he had, prepared to throw everything away for their sake.

Crossbones let out a harsh laugh, and for a moment Winter thought his eyes flashed red. His arms turned to tentacles, his tongue lashing the air like a serpent’s. For a single terrifying minute, he could hear the sound of every creeping doubt and fear that had plagued his mind.

“Do you really think they’re your friends?” Crossbones sneered in the same scornful tone as the voice in the back of Winter's head. “I know what kind of people they are, and I know what you've done. Captain America is the last person in the world who would ever care about you.”

The monster towered above him, seething with rage. But Winter was not afraid.

“It doesn’t matter who I am,” Winter said, as something heavy and round pressed against his foot. _The shield._ “And it doesn’t matter what I’ve done. Cap might be the last person in the world to care about me...but he was also the first. I won’t let you hurt him.”

Winter flipped the shield into the air with his foot, snatching it easily with his right hand. Crossbones’ eyes flashed with hatred, but when Winter slammed his metal hand between them to block the knife,
for once he felt no fear. Up till now, every time he'd fought had either been an act of mindless subservience or cowering desperation. All he'd been able to focus on before was his fear of pain and punishment, or the terrible things that would happen if he failed.

But Steve and Sam were behind him now. He couldn't see them, crouching wounded and helpless at his back. But he could feel them. He could hear their labored breathing, he could sense their eyes watching his every move. He almost thought he could feel the warmth of their hands as they entrusted their lives to him.

He didn't worry about the consequences. He didn't ask himself if he'd be able to defeat Crossbones, or wonder how much it would hurt if he didn't. Steve and Sam needed him to protect them.

So he did.

His movements were effortless. It was astonishingly easy to knock the knife out of Crossbones' hand and grab it himself. Suddenly, the tables were turned. Crossbones backed up, blocking Winter's blows as best he could and retreating towards the open door again. His eyes widened with fear, his teeth clenched in a rictus of disbeliefing fury.

An unexpected wave of exhilaration rushed through Winter as he fought. Of course he'd felt a burst of adrenaline every time he'd fought before, but it had never felt like this. No, this...this almost felt like joy. Like when the three of them went running together—pushing their bodies to the limit, all working towards the same goal.

He didn't feel the perverse pleasure that had lit Crossbones' face while he tormented the others. But somehow, even as Crossbones lunged at him and knocked him to the ground, as they rolled over and over, grappling with all their strength...it felt right. As if he'd finally, finally found the true purpose of his life.

He was the Winter Soldier. He'd been made into the deadliest weapon man could contrive—against his will, true, but that didn't change what he'd become. It had been wrong for Hydra to force him to fight their battles...but now that he was able to make his own choice, he discovered he'd thrown himself right back into the fray.

He was Winter. He was the Soldier. He was their Soldier.

Crossbones rolled on top of him, pinning him down with his weight, and wrenched the shield away with a sudden twist. He lifted it over his head with both hands, ready to smash it down on Winter's face. His eyes gleamed with triumph.

Winter saw the opening and took it without a moment's hesitation. He plunged the knife deep into Crossbones' neck.

The shield was still heading straight for his face, falling from Crossbones' faltering fingers. Winter hastily knocked it aside with his left arm. The shield fell harmlessly to the floor with a clatter that sounded deafening in the sudden silence.

Crossbones let out a few choking, rattling breaths, then he lay still, slumping back awkwardly on Winter's legs. Winter lay tense on the floor, half expecting him to suddenly lunge at him again. But Winter's knife stuck all the way through Crossbones' neck. Blood pooled around him, soaking in a wet, warm patch on Winter's knees.

The monster was slain.
Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

John 15:13
EVERYTHING IN THIS CHAPTER IS UTTER CRACK PLEASE DO NOT TAKE SERIOUSLY AT ALL. I suppose it would have been more fitting if I'd posted this chapter on April 1st, but that would have been predictable! Also it didn't fit into my posting schedule :P I often come up with stupid jokes to myself as I'm writing, so I indulged myself when the opportunity arose to actually include some of them as outtakes. Feel free to suggest any of your own that may have occurred to you!

From *Shards of Me* chapter 3, “Hydra's Revenge”

Winter looked over his shoulder and realized that, in his haste to get to the toilet, he'd left the bathroom door ajar. He quickly pushed himself to his feet and flushed the toilet, hoping Steve wouldn't try to force his way in. As quickly as he could, he washed out his mouth, trying to get rid of the sour taste of bile, and then buckled his mask back on. He let out a shaky breath.

“Winter?” Steve's voice said again. “I just want to help.”

Winter tried to stand up straight, but just ended up crumpling against the door frame. His face in the mirror was deathly pale, and the floor seemed to be swaying underneath his feet. He couldn't ignore the horrible truth: He needed help.

Almost as soon as this logical thought occurred to him, everything else inside of him reared up, screaming out all the reasons he was an idiot for even considering opening that door. *Don't let him in, don't let him see....*

... 

Steve stood next to the door to Winter's room, listening carefully for any sound of its occupant. But suddenly the door was thrown open, banging loudly against the wall as the sound of singing echoed into the hallway.

“Let it go, let it go! Can't hold it back anymoooor!” Winter stepped out into the hallway, belting out the song at the top of his lungs. “Let it go, let it go! Turn away and slam the dooooor!”

He proceeded to follow his own advice, slamming the door shut and then spinning around dramatically to face Steve and Sam again.

“I don't care what they're going to say!”

With a dramatic flourish, he ripped off the mask and tossed it to the side.

“Let the storm rage oooooon! The cold never bothered me anyway!”

Steve and Sam could only gape at him open-mouthed.
“They’re moving out, Boss,” Skull said, peering through his binoculars at the SUV pulling away from the little cabin.

“All right, men, we're moving out,” Rumlow ordered over the comms before starting their car and driving along behind Rogers’ vehicle at a discreet distance. On all sides, his men moved from their carefully calculated positions—some driving on ahead, others monitoring side routes. Now that their target was on the move again, they couldn’t let them disappear.

But as the days rolled by, it became increasingly clear that Rogers and the others knew they were being followed. Not only that, but they were expertly drawing Rumlow’s crew along after them, always one step ahead. Rumlow knew exactly who was to blame for this expertise, and it was a name he cursed daily: the Asset.

His signature was obvious in every move they made. What galled Rumlow the most was that he seemed to keep the three of them hidden with such ease—even though he apparently insisted on wearing his mask at all times. Every time Rumlow thought they were closing in, Rogers and his little friends would disappear into the crowd. How could they keep doing that, when the Winter Soldier made them so conspicuous?

In Kentucky, Skull spotted Rogers heading into a local carnival. Rumlow hurried after him, keeping his eyes open for any sign of a menacing figure in a mask among the flashing lights and cheerful crowds. But all he saw was someone in a bear suit selling ice cream cones.

In Missouri, they almost ran straight into Wilson, who scurried off and led them on a chase through crowded backstreets that seemed to be entirely occupied by Middle Easterners. Several times, Rumlow almost thought he’d found one of the three, trying to hide with a veil and head covering. But every time he reached out to yank the veil aside, he found nothing but a scandalized woman who would shriek at him. Finally, they had to admit defeat and let themselves be chased away by several irate husbands.

In Kansas, Rumlow was utterly convinced he’d seen the three of them heading into a building full of strobe lights and dancing youngsters. But once Rumlow and Skull reached the door, two enormous bouncers blocked the way forward. They were both wearing masks—one that looked kind of like the one in Phantom of the Opera, the other one similar to Batman's mask. “Sorry, dude,” Batman said, crossing his beefy arms over his chest. “No mask, no entry.” And apparently helmets didn’t count, so Rumlow was forced to back off.

In Colorado, they tracked their targets to a ski slope that stayed open even this late in the year. Rumlow could actually see the three of them, sitting on the ski lift several rows ahead of him. Scarves shrouded their faces, but Rumlow still knew it was them. By the time he and Skull reached the top of the slope, Rogers and the others were already heading back down. But by the time Rumlow slid to the bottom of the mountain, they were nowhere in sight.

As Rumlow threw his skis angrily onto the ground, Skull nervously cleared his throat. “Hey, uh...Boss? You ever thought of just...you know...calling him? Make him come to you instead?”

Rumlow froze, staring at his right-hand man. Then he patted Skull on the shoulder. “This is why I keep you around.”
From *Make Me Whole* chapter 13, “Inferno”

Steve turned in alarm to fight off both Rumlow and the Winter Soldier, facing off against too many enemies in the dimly-lit garage.

“Don't worry!” Sam cried, unfurling his wings and rising into the air. “I got Skull!”

“Aww, maaan...” the burly man on the other side of the garage whined, his machine gun drooping as he hung his helmeted head. “Why does everyone keep calling me that? I have a name, you know!”

“Suck it up!” Rumlow snarled, trading punches with Steve. “Just be glad no one knows your real name...Leroy.”

Skull's eyes widened. “Hey, no fair! I told you to call me Jack! Just because you have a tough name like Brock....”

Sam stood off to one side, quirking an eyebrow at the pouting Hydra agent. “So...are we gonna fight, or do I need to charge you for a therapy session?”

From *Make Me Whole* chapter 17, “Pulling Back”

As Sam pulled up in front of the cabin, Steve looked out his window at the front door. He'd expected Winter to be standing there, waiting to greet them. But no one was in sight. He shared a look of concern and confusion with Sam.

Leaving their bags behind, Steve and Sam strode up the front steps and opened the front door. They both blinked at each other in surprise when a blast of lively music crashed over them. Violins and flutes and...were those bagpipes?

Hesitantly, Steve ventured inside, peeking around one of the pillars in the center of the living room. Winter had pushed the couches and coffee table out of the way, leaving a large space of bare floor in front of the TV. He was watching a program on TV, which was where all the music was coming from. But he wasn't just watching. He was dancing along in time to the music, his feet flying and his heels knocking against the floor as he mimicked every movement he saw on the screen. But he kept his arms held stiffly against his sides, concentrating only on his feet.

Sam stepped forward, staring at Winter. “Is that...Riverdance?”

Alternately...

As Sam pulled up in front of the cabin, Steve looked out his window at the front door. He'd expected Winter to be standing there, waiting to greet them. But no one was in sight. He shared a look of
concern and confusion with Sam.

Leaving their bags behind, Steve and Sam strode up the front steps and opened the front door. They both blinked at each other in surprise when the strains of some kind of stringed instrument met their ears. It was peaceful, calming...and completely out of place, because Steve was pretty sure it was an instrument from East Asia, like China or Japan.

Hesitantly, Steve ventured inside, peeking around one of the pillars in the center of the living room. Winter had pushed the couches out of the way, leaving a large space of bare floor with only the coffee table left. Winter sat—no, knelt—behind the table, wearing a black kimono with voluminous sleeves. On the table in front of him lay a piece of paper and a small pot of ink.

As they watched, Winter raised a paintbrush in his right hand, carefully held his sleeve out of the way with his other hand, and dipped the brush into the ink. Then, moving slowly and smoothly, he proceeded to write a character on the paper.

Steve and Sam watched him, mesmerized, until Winter finished what he was writing. He carefully laid the brush down, then picked up the paper and held it up so they could see it. “Okaerinasai,” he said. “Welcome home.”

Sam peered suspiciously at a stack of DVDs next to the TV. “You've been watching a lot of anime, haven't you?”

**Alternately...**

As Sam pulled up in front of the cabin, Steve looked out his window at the front door. He'd expected Winter to be standing there, waiting to greet them. But no one was in sight. He shared a look of concern and confusion with Sam.

Leaving their bags behind, Steve and Sam strode up the front steps and opened the front door. The first thing Steve noticed when he stepped inside was a rocking chair in the living room that definitely hadn't been there before. Sitting in this new addition to their furniture was an old man.

When he saw them, the old man levered himself to his feet, groaning with the effort. His hair was white, hanging down his back almost to his waist. His white beard was just as long, so bushy that it covered up the entire lower half of his face. The man grabbed a hand-carved cane and leaned his frail weight on it as he hobbled over to them.

“Sir...” Steve said uncertainly, suddenly wondering if they'd somehow gotten the wrong cabin. “Who...?”

“It's me, of course!” the old man cried in a hoarse, cranky voice. “Winter!”

They gaped at him. Finally, Sam choked out, “But...But you're...old!”

“Of course I'm old!” Winter cried, shaking a trembling metal fist at them. “You took so long to come back, I turned old and grey waiting for you!”

Then Steve noticed that Winter's white mustache completely covered his nose. While Winter was distracted by complaining to Sam, he reached over and gently tugged on the beard. It fell away immediately, revealing the mask underneath.
“Hey!” Winter cried, too slow to keep Steve from yanking off his white wig too. Underneath, his hair was dark brown, just as it had been a few weeks ago.

“Nice try,” Sam said, folding his arms across his chest. “I wasn't fooled for a second.”

Winter straightened, no longer pretending to be hunched over with age. “My point still stands,” he said with dignity.

From Make Me Whole chapter 18, “Winter's End”

Winter faced Steve, steeling himself. He'd promised himself he would take the plunge and tell Steve once and for all. He deserved to know the truth. Taking a deep breath, Winter announced, “I...I remembered my real name.”

Steve blinked, and for a moment he only looked surprised. Then an enormous grin spread across his face. “Really? That's great! What is it?”

“It's....” But the name stuck in his throat. Two syllables, that's all it was. Two syllables that would change his life forever. Winter ran a hand through his hair and shook his head, his heart pounding crazily in his chest. “No, no, I can't just say it....” But he was stuck now. He'd told Steve he knew what it was; he had to tell him everything now.

“That's okay,” Steve said soothingly, holding out a hand as if to help him take the next step. “Maybe I can guess what it is. Just...you know, give me a hint.”

Winter looked up at him uncertainly, mind going blank. A hint? “Well, it rhymes with 'lucky'....”

He could have kicked himself. That wasn't a hint! He might as well have just given him the answer right away!

Steve's eyes widened. “Wait...are you saying...?”

Winter closed his eyes, resigned to the inevitable, and nodded grimly. “That's right. I'm sorry I didn't say so before, but...I was afraid of what your reaction would be....”

“Your name is Ducky?”

Winter's brain screeched to a halt and he stared at Steve's wide, innocent eyes. “Um...no...?”

Steve frowned, tapping his chin in thought. At last he suggested, “Trucky?” He smiled sympathetically. “Don't worry, if you don't like your real name, I can still call you Winter if you like....”

Winter waved his hands frantically. “No, no, no! My name is not Trucky!”

Steve thought hard again. “Plucky? Okay, it's a bit unusual, but it's still better than some of those dwarves in Snow White. At least you're not Dopey, you know?”

“What?” Winter yelped. “What are you talking about? None of these are even real names!”

Suddenly Steve's eyes widened in horror and he took a step back. Oh no, Winter thought, his heart sinking to his toes. He's finally figured it out. This is it.
Steve shook his head as if he were staring down his worst nightmare. “No...you can't mean....”

Winter nodded.

Steve dropped to his knees and screamed, “Noooooo! My best friend's name is Stucky!!!!!!!”

A loud smack echoed around the room as Winter's palm found his forehead.

“Alternately...”

“That's okay,” Steve said soothingly, holding out a hand as if to help him take the next step. “Maybe I can guess what it is. Just...you know, give me a hint.”

Winter looked up at him uncertainly, mind going blank. A hint? “Okay... It, um...starts with a B....”

That was too obvious, wasn't it? Surely Steve would start putting two and two together....

“Hmm....” Steve frowned thoughtfully, then suggested, “Bill?”

“No.”

“Bob?”

“No.”

“Oh!” Steve looked worried. “But what if it's a name I've never heard of before? I wouldn't be able to guess it then.”

Winter met his eyes, using all of his strength to keep from bursting into nervous laughter. “Trust me, you've heard it before.”

“Okay....” Steve put a hand to his chin in thought, his brow furrowing as he thought through all the B names he knew. “Bernard?”

“No.”

“Barney? Bert? Boris?”

Winter pinched the bridge of his nose. “Really, Steve, you're thinking way too hard about this. It's a name that you're familiar with. Really, really familiar.”

At this, Steve's face instantly brightened. Surely, he understood now. “You're Bruce, aren't you? Bruce!”

Winter threw up his hands and walked out of the room.
Chapter Notes

I'm not entirely sure why I felt the need to devote an entire chapter to the cleanup after the Crossbones battle, but I did, so here we are. Hopefully it won't just bore you all to death—because then Winter will have to add your body to Crossbones' shallow grave. *crickets chirping* Anyway, not much to say here. I just had way too much fun thinking through all the details of everything Winter would have to do now that he's the only uninjured one in the house.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 14, “Taking a Stand.”

We hold on to each other
You are everything I need
You feel like forever
You’re the second chance for me

... 

It's good to be alive
I was lost and I was gone
I was almost dead inside
You and me against the world
It's a beautiful night
It's good to be alive

- “Good to Be Alive” by Skillet

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Winter lay on his back, breathing hard and staring up at the ceiling. It all looked so ordinary, the rafters meeting in the middle, one of wooden pillars holding it all up at the edge of his vision. So mundane. Not the backdrop one would imagine for the fight that had just reached its conclusion.

For a few moments, he could only lay there, breathing hard, spent muscles trembling. But then he became aware of shuffling, rustling sounds over by the couches. Sam slumped against Steve's couch, clutching his wounded leg and groping for the last clean bandage on the coffee table. He had a tourniquet wrapped around his upper thigh, but the patch of blood on the carpet was still getting bigger by the second.
Winter realized Crossbones' body still lay on top of him. With a shudder, he kicked his way out from under the corpse and got to his feet. He tugged his knife out of Crossbones' neck and gingerly wiped it off on the dead man's clothes before hurrying to Sam's side.

He dropped to one knee, setting his knife down on the coffee table and resting a hand on Sam's shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Sam looked up at him, eyes swimming with exhaustion and forehead scrunched up with pain. His face shone with sweat, and his hands were covered in blood. Okay, maybe that wasn't the best question to ask.

But Sam just reached up and placed one blood-slick hand over Winter's. It was wet and trembling, but it was warm. “I'm alive.”

Steve lifted his good arm to clasp their hands. Winter glanced over at him and let his gaze linger for a moment on the additional injuries he'd sustained at Crossbones' hands. The cuts all over his chest were shallow, some of them already starting to close. One side of his face was swollen and purple, from where Crossbones had hit him. He could only manage a weak, shaky smile.

But they were alive. They were all alive.

A pained grunt from Sam broke the spell, and their hands parted as Winter straightened with a start. “I'll get more bandages.”

“And towels!” Sam called after him in a strained voice. “And boil some water!”

Winter had to step over Crossbones' body as he scurried around gathering supplies. He'd have to do something about that too. But only after he was sure Sam was stable.

When Winter returned to the living room with an armful of supplies, Sam half-lay, half-sat with his back against Steve's couch, eyes closed and hand still clutching a bloody bandage to the wound. When he heard Winter's approach, Sam's eyes slid open again. “I can see the bullet,” he said tightly. “Didn't go too far. Shouldn't be too hard to dig it out.”

Winter gave him a flat look as he set the supplies down on the coffee table. Right. Not too hard. Except that he would be inflicting agonizing pain on his friend and run the risk of making the wound even worse. He remembered all too well what it had felt like when Hydra had dug bullets out of his own flesh, usually without any anesthesia.

But they had no choice. The bullet had to come out. So Winter rummaged around until he found a pair of needle-nose pliers and, following Sam's instructions, sterilized them with the rubbing alcohol from the first aid kit.

Winter pulled on a pair of gloves and Sam pulled the bandage away, revealing a glint of metal in the sea of blood. Steve reached out and grasped one of Sam's hands, and Sam clenched a pen between his teeth, taking deep breaths as he braced himself. Then Winter stuck the pliers into the open wound and fished around for the bullet.

Winter hated every second of it. He tried to focus only on his hands—one of them bracing Sam's leg, the other guiding the pliers past bloody muscles and trying to grasp the tiny object between them. But every flinch, every grunt of pain, reminded Winter of the many times he'd felt harsh, cold metal implements jabbing into him. They didn't care how much pain they caused, and they often weren't even very careful, because they knew his body would just heal again no matter how they damaged it.

And he could still hear the echo of Crossbones' laughter and Sam's screams.
Finally, Winter pulled the bloody pliers out of the wound with the bullet clamped tightly in its grasp. Sam sucked in a shuddering gasp and let the pen fall to the floor. He leaned his head back, closing his eyes again and pressing his lips together. He looked like he was trying not to be sick. When Sam let go of Steve's hand, Steve placed it on top of Sam's forehead. He murmured weakly, “Okay now.... The worst is over....”

Without opening his eyes, Sam gave Winter terse instructions for cleaning out the wound with water and iodine, then covering it with clean gauze and bandaging it snugly. He could breathe a little more easily once that was done and he could be sure that Sam wasn't about to bleed out.

Sam's pant leg was irretrievably ruined, so Winter cut it off above the bandage with his knife. Once he'd gingerly cleaned Sam's leg off as much as he could, Winter carefully gathered Sam into his arms. He tried not to jostle the wounded leg too much, but Sam still bit his lip and let out a grunt of pain as Winter carried him over to the sofa opposite Steve's. He tucked one cushion under Sam's head, then used the rest to prop up his leg. By the time Winter draped a blanket over him, Sam was out cold.

When Winter turned around, his eyes fell immediately on Crossbones' body. It hadn't begun to smell yet, but it was only a matter of time. He was loathe to leave his two wounded companions alone, but he'd have to do it sometime. And this might be the best opportunity, since they both seemed to be sleeping.

So Winter made sure that Steve and Sam had their phones and glasses of water within easy reach, then approached the cold corpse on the floor. Distasteful as it was, Winter grasped the body's limp hands and dragged him across the floor to the open door. The blood had stopped flowing from Crossbones' neck, but it still left a red smear that Winter would have to clean up when he got back.

Once he'd dragged his burden out the front door, Winter dumped the corpse unceremoniously onto the ground. He closed the door securely after himself, then remembered the window he'd climbed through. After jogging around the cabin and sliding the window shut, Winter finally decided he'd done everything he could to protect the others. He grabbed a shovel from the shed, heaved Crossbones' limp body over his shoulder, and headed off into the forest to find a likely hiding place.

Winter didn't think much as he went about his grisly task. His mind was blank—blissfully calm after the torrent of adrenaline and worry. He didn't have to reason or calculate or predict. All he had to do was find a good clearing, drop the body to the ground, and start digging.

It wasn't a very big shovel—probably more useful for planting flowerbeds than digging graves—but he wasn't concerned about doing a thorough job of it. If a wild animal dug up Crossbones' body and started gnawing on it, Winter wouldn't mind.

Finally, the hole seemed long enough and deep enough. Winter clambered out of it, then kicked the body until it flumped to the bottom. Crossbones lay sprawled on his face, arms and legs twisted in a position that would have been highly uncomfortable if he'd been alive.

For a moment, Winter hesitated as he stood over the shallow grave. Crossbones didn't look remotely dignified, nor threatening, anymore. It was hard to believe that this lump of flesh and bones had once turned Winter's blood to ice. This man—who would soon decay in the warm earth, worms squirming through his skull and bones slowly turning to dust—had once been his tormentor. He'd killed so many people, yet here he lay, dead himself. His corpse was no more impressive than any of the ones he'd made.

The first shovelful of dirt fell onto Crossbones' back. Another one followed, then another. Soon, he couldn't see anything of Crossbones' body at all.
Winter shoveled the last bit of dirt on the mound and patted it down for good measure. Then he stepped back to admire his work and swipe a hand across his sweaty brow.

A robin chirping cheerfully in a tree nearby drew his attention. Winter looked around in surprise, realizing that the early morning sun was shining in his eyes. The night had passed. The day had come.

Winter stood there for a moment more, breathing deeply of the fresh mountain air, clearing his lungs of the smell of blood and death. Then he turned towards home, leaving Crossbones' grave behind him. He didn't look back once.

On the way back, Winter spotted a long, straight tree branch dangling from a tree nearby. It had probably snapped off in a storm or something. It looked about the right height, and one end branched off into a very handy Y shape. Winter tugged it down, snapped off the smaller twigs, and set one end down on the ground. Sure enough, it stood just a little shorter than his shoulder. He could whittle it down some, maybe see if the shed had some sandpaper, and it should make a fairly serviceable crutch for Sam.

Back at the cabin, Winter found both Sam and Steve lying safe and asleep exactly where he'd left them, though Sam's water glass was empty. Winter refilled it, then left them again to take a shower.

Standing under the stream of warm water, watching blood and dirt circle the drain, Winter suddenly realized that he was exhausted. He'd fought for his life—for all their lives—and hadn't taken more than a moment's rest since. And even more than that, he realized that he'd been tense for weeks. Ever since he'd realized Crossbones was after them, he hadn't really been able to relax. He hadn't been consciously anxious that whole time, but a chord of worry had thrummed in the back of his mind, waiting for the inevitable moment he would come face-to-face with his past.

Well, it had happened. They were still alive, and he would never have to worry about Crossbones again.

Slowly, every muscle in his body aching, Winter stepped back out into the living room. He was immediately aware of how disheveled everything was. There was a large puddle of blood on the carpet and a long smear of it leading to the door, not to mention the bloody bandages and various medical supplies scattered across the coffee table. The coat tree lay on the floor, and one of the table lamps was in pieces.

Still so much work to be done.

Moving as quietly as he could so as not to wake the others, Winter started cleaning up the living room. The pieces of the lamp and the soiled bandages went in the trash. The basin of bloody water got poured down the drain, then refilled with soapy water so he could scrub at the floor. He made sure to put all of their weapons safely away as well.

Winter had cleaned up the largest blood stains and had just decided the rug couldn't be salvaged when he heard Sam stirring.

With a grunt of pain and a rustling of blankets, Sam sat up enough to take a gulp of water. Winter hastily abandoned the rug and brought him two of the strongest painkillers they had.

After swallowing the pills, Sam looked up at him. “Hey...you even sat down all night?”

Winter decided he must look even worse than he felt. Instead of answering the question, he looked over at Steve. “Think I should put him in bed? I keep worrying he’ll roll right off the couch.”
“Sure,” Sam said. “Stick him in the master bedroom; it's closest—and then take a nap.”

Winter made no reply to that. He carefully tucked his arms under Steve’s knees and shoulders, then lifted him, blanket and all. Steve stirred a little when Winter laid him down on the big bed in the unused bedroom, but he didn't wake, not even when Winter arranged the blankets and pillows snugly around him.

When he stepped back out into the living room, Sam greeted him by throwing a cushion at him. It bounced off his chest, and Winter raised an eyebrow at him, too tired to even be startled.

Sam cupped his hands around his mouth and said, loudly and clearly, “Get—some—sleep.”

Winter rolled his eyes. “Who made you the captain?”

“Common sense, which apparently you don't have.” Sam smirked at his tired glower. “C'mon, just help me into the bedroom. I'll keep an eye on Steve for a bit.”

Winter gave one last feeble protest. “But...what if you need something?”

“Just leave the door open, and I'll yell.” He gave Winter one of those looks that only he could pull off—like his gaze pierced right down to Winter's soul, but with a warm understanding rather than judgment. “You've done everything you need to do, Winter. You deserve to rest now.”

With a weary sigh, Winter finally gave in. He carried a chair into the bedroom, then carefully transferred Sam to it, hovering anxiously while Sam grimaced and bit his lip to keep from making a sound. Then Sam took a deep breath and straightened a little in the chair, turning his attention to Steve instead.

Winter leaned the makeshift crutch, which he still needed to work on, against the bedside table where Sam could easily reach it if he needed to get up. He started back towards the living room, but paused in the doorway, peeking over his shoulder at Sam. Finally he blurted out, “I'm sorry I couldn't keep him from hurting you.”

Sam looked up from his inspection of Steve's chest. “Is that what's eating you?” he asked. “You kept him from killing me. That's good enough in my book.” He shook his head, turning back to Steve. “You're a hero, Winter. You've got nothing to be ashamed of.”

Winter stood frozen in the doorway, staring at his two friends. He felt an overwhelming urge to hug them, but they were hurt and he was tired. Well...maybe he'd do that when they'd all rested a bit.

“Wake me in a couple hours,” he mumbled to Sam, making a beeline for the couch. He collapsed onto it, pulling up the blanket Sam had been using.

Winter slept for six hours—a deep, peaceful sleep free of any lingering shadows.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Wondrously show your steadfast love,  
O Savior of those who seek refuge  
from their adversaries at your right hand.
Psalm 17:7
These Things We Do

Chapter Notes

I'm not sure why, but this chapter took me a really long time to write. I felt like I had to sit there and ruminate over every paragraph twice as long as usual, just to get into Sam's head during this time. But it was certainly worth it, because his thoughts ended up being really interesting to explore—and very different from Steve's during this time. Also...I don't know about anyone else, but I feel like every time I write a Sam chapter, I just end up respecting him more and more each time. P.S. For those who don't know, the title comes from the U.S. pararescue motto: “These things we do, that others may live.” If there was ever something that could sum up Sam's character in one sentence, that would be it.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapters 6 (“On the Edge of a Knife”), 7 (“Cross the Distance”), and 8 (“Turning a New Leaf”).

Requested by a guest on AO3

So your scars fade away
You soaked up the pain
A better person 'cause you lived through those days
And now you know what it's like to prove
You can overcome anything that gets to you
Well, it's all right
We're sayin' our goodbyes
To the past and everything that ain't right
We won't waste another day
With all these silly things in our way

- “No Giving Up” by Crossfade

Sam let out a heavy sigh as Steve started up the stairs. Turning around, he saw the dishes piled up all around the kitchen, so he rolled up his sleeves and set to work. Maybe keeping his hands busy would keep him from worrying so much.

As he pulled out containers to put away the leftover food (which was always a surprisingly small
amount; those two went through more food in a day than Sam did in a week), Sam ran through the events of that evening again. At first, the evening had looked like it would go well. Both Steve and Winter seemed to like the food, though Winter was especially quiet today. Then there had been the gift exchange. Sam had enjoyed Winter's looks of bemusement as much as Steve's expressions of delight and the gifts he'd received himself.

But then.... Sam closed the refrigerator and stood frozen for a moment, remembering the way Winter had thrown the keys at Steve's feet and stormed off. He hadn't needed to see Winter's face to know what his expression was behind the mask; anger was written into every line of his body. And then, the way Steve's face had fallen as he watched Winter stomp up the stairs....

Sam shook himself and headed over to the sink. He hoped whatever they were talking about up there would smooth things over. He wasn't sure exactly what had upset Winter so much, but he did know that Steve was taking it too hard. This whole thing was probably hardest on Steve, come to think of it. The problem was that he took too much responsibility for this on his own shoulders. Even though Winter was the one cutting himself, Steve tended to act as though he was the one wielding the knife.

But maybe that was the root of this tension between the others, Sam thought as he scrubbed vigorously at a pot. Winter could tell how much Steve disapproved of his habit, to the extent that it colored every interaction they had these days. Maybe he interpreted it as Steve being angry with him for what he was doing.

After all, it wasn't like Winter was used to dealing with normal, healthy reactions to his own choices. He had to know by now that they wouldn't beat him or torture him when he did something they didn't like. But maybe it was somehow even more terrifying to him, not knowing what to expect when he displeased them. There was no way for him to know that Steve and Sam were telling him to stop cutting himself because they cared about him. In a sad way, it was almost like a two-year-old throwing a tantrum because his mother wouldn't let him stick his finger in an electrical outlet.

Letting the last of the water drain out of the sink, Sam sighed and got the coffee pot going. He put in decaf—no reason for them to stay up all night—and started drying the dishes as he waited for Steve to return.

It was hard to stand by and watch what Winter was doing to himself. Sam understood that it was an addiction, a substitute for the drugs that had probably given him the only high he’d ever known. And he’d watched plenty of people struggle through addictions before. His brother, of course, but also lots of people he'd talked to at the VA. He'd spoken with many veterans who'd turned to alcohol, drugs, or self-harm like Winter to deal with the pain they carried with them. He'd seen what addiction had done to so many strong men and women.

He'd been to several of their funerals.

The coffee had just barely finished when Sam heard Steve's footsteps on the stairs. Sam poured the coffee into two mugs, then turned to watch Steve trudge into the kitchen. He looked exhausted as he sank onto a stool at the kitchen table, his shoulders sagging and his eyelids drooping.

“He's fine,” Steve said, running a hand through his hair and leaning his elbows on the table. “I think he thought we were trying to get rid of him or something.” He shrugged slightly. “But it's okay for now, I guess. He went to bed.”

Sam grabbed the coffee and brought it over to the table, watching Steve carefully. “And what about you? How are you holding up?”

Steve looked up, smiling shakily. “I'm tired,” he said, his voice breaking at the end of that word. His
chin trembled, and the facade of calm crumbled instantly. He covered his face with his hands, his shoulders heaving with a silent sob.

Immediately, Sam put down the coffee and rounded the table to put a hand on Steve's back. Steve dropped his hands from his tear-streaked face and grabbed blindly at Sam's sweater. One fist closed on the fabric and yanked Sam forward, then both strong arms closed around him, holding him so tightly Sam could feel his spine pop. Steve probably didn't realize his own strength in that moment, but Sam didn't protest. He just hugged Steve back, letting him vent the emotions Sam knew he'd been trying to deal with in silence.

“I can't take this anymore,” Steve choked out, his voice muffled in Sam's shoulder. “I've been trying so hard...but n-nothing I do...ever helps. It's...just getting worse, and ev...everything I say just p-pushes him farther away!” He heaved a huge gasp for breath, his hands tightening around Sam's sweater. “I can't do it, Sam, I j-just can't do it anymore. It hurts too much....”

“So...what?” Sam said gently, carefully keeping his voice neutral and calm. A lump was growing in his own throat, but he focused his attention on Steve instead. “You're giving up on him?”

With a whimper far too tiny for such a big man, Steve shook his head fiercely. But he didn't seem able to talk. His whole body shook with his surprisingly quiet sobs. Sam found himself rubbing Steve's back and patting it soothingly, the way he'd done when babysitting his nieces and nephews when they were little. He didn't say anything or try to get Steve to stop crying; he knew Steve needed this outlet. For too long, he'd been carrying the weight of stress and worry while trying to keep a brave face on a situation that was so far outside his experience or control.

Steve gulped and finally managed to gasp, “Of course I'm not giving up on him. How could I? It's just...nothing I do ever seems to make a difference. He's hardly better off than when we first met him.”

Sam clicked his tongue and rested his cheek on top of Steve's bowed head. “That's not true and you know it.” He thought back to the skittish man they'd brought to this cabin in the beginning. “He used to get panic attacks if you so much as looked at him, but he's a lot calmer now. He hardly ever hides in the corner looking like he's about to run. He even lets us touch him now. He's made unbelievable progress.”

Steve sniffed loudly, then let his breath out in a long sigh. “But he still has so far to go.”

“And we'll be with him every step of the way.” Sam patted Steve on the back, then let his arms drop when Steve straightened up again, breaking the embrace. Steve sniffled again, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. He still looked utterly miserable, still looked like he was trying to carry the whole world by himself.

Then it dawned on him. He remembered the first time they'd discussed saving Winter, back when Sam had barely known Steve at all. Natasha, who'd known him for much longer, had tried to assure him that the Winter Soldier's problems weren't his fault. And what had Steve said? It doesn't matter whether it's my fault or not. It's my responsibility to help him. I may be the only one who can.

Here he was, months later, having poured out his heart for this man day in and day out, and Winter seemed determined to resist every attempt to help him.

“Steve,” Sam said quietly, waiting until the other man met his eyes. “It's not your fault.”

Suspicion confirmed. Steve's eyes immediately filled up with tears, and he covered his face with his hands again. His shoulders shook with another sob, silent except for his gasp for breath. “It...It kind
of is."

Sam shook his head firmly and pulled Steve's hands down. "No. Don't you *dare* start blaming the wrong person now, Steve." He squeezed Steve's hands in his, not letting Steve look away. "Everything Winter's struggling with right now is Hydra's fault. *You* have done nothing but help him from the first time you laid eyes on him. Now it's up to him to make a change. We can't make that change for him. All we can do is support him along the way."

This time, he could see the change in Steve's eyes. Steve squeezed his hands back and sat a little straighter, drawing a deep breath that seemed to banish the weight from his shoulders. Sam let go and grabbed a tissue from the nearest box, handing it over with an understanding smile.

After wiping his eyes and blowing his nose, Steve tossed the tissue into the trash can and let out another sigh. "Thank you," he said quietly. His smile was still a little shaky, but genuine. "I...guess I needed that."

Sam returned the smile, hoping this conversation would give Steve the strength to continue on a little longer. "What you *need* is some sleep," he said, nudging Steve off his seat and towards the stairs.

Steve chuckled a little as he obediently headed towards the stairs. He paused with one foot on the first step, turning back to Sam again. He looked like he was about to say something—to thank Sam again, or something to that effect.

So Sam preempted him by saying, "Merry Christmas, Steve."

The fairy lights strung around the banister sent a soft, warm glow over Steve's face, softening the hard lines and deep shadows. His smile widened, his eyes twinkling like stars. "Merry Christmas, Sam."

Turning away as Steve continued up the stairs, Sam noticed the untouched mugs of coffee. He dumped them down the drain, then rinsed them out and left them to soak in the sink. He leaned against the counter for a moment, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.

Why did he suddenly miss Riley with such a fierce intensity? Maybe he just wanted someone to give him what he'd tried to offer Steve. It was undeniably stressful to not only try to help Winter through his issues, but also to support Steve and give him an outlet. There was no way he would refuse to give them that help. He was happy to be in this position. He was honored. But sometimes...like tonight...he wished he could talk to someone about it. Someone who wouldn't feel guilty to know he was struggling too.

Suddenly, his thoughts were shattered by a scream from upstairs. "Sam! *Sam!*"

Before he knew what he was doing, Sam had reached into the cupboard under the sink and grabbed the pistol and first-aid kit he kept there, just in case. He bounded up the stairs three at a time, not sure what he was going to find at the top.

Following Steve's cries into Winter's room, Sam burst through the door and came to a stop in the doorway to the bathroom. He took in the whole scene in a glance, like a horrifying snapshot. Winter sprawled on the floor, eyes closed. In one hand, he held a knife. The other lay in a puddle of blood that had to be his own. Steve knelt at his side, clutching a hand towel to Winter's right arm and looking up at Sam with wide, desperate eyes.

Sam quickly set his gun down on the floor out of the way and knelt on Winter's other side, hurriedly pulling out the supplies he'd need. For a moment, as he looked down at Winter's ashen face and the
red speedily soaking into the white towel, Sam's heart clenched with the same terror that shone in Steve's eyes. His friend had just tried to kill himself.

But then Sam blinked, and shoved all unnecessary thoughts to the back of his mind. He was a paramedic, and his job was to save lives.

So he did.

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“There we go,” Sam said, tying off the bandage around Winter's forearm. “All done. Guess that'll probably be healed before too long, but keep the bandage on and I'll check it tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” Winter said quietly, pulling his arm back and tugging his sleeve down to cover the bandage. He glanced between Steve and Sam a few times; it was hard to tell under the mask, but he looked embarrassed.

Sam busied himself with gathering up the first-aid supplies scattered across the table while Steve led Winter out of the room, talking casually as though nothing were out of the ordinary. Things were definitely better than they'd been on Christmas night, but in the week or so since then, the peace felt precarious. Like they were all waiting for the next crisis.

Sam just hoped Winter's latest scar would serve as a reminder of what could happen if he went too far....

A loud clatter broke into Sam's thoughts, and he looked down to discover that the first-aid kit had fallen from his hands and burst open. The bandages were unrolling across the kitchen floor, the scissors were by his feet, the rubbing alcohol was leaking across the tiles, spreading out in a puddle.... He looked down at his hands in surprise. They were trembling violently.

Frowning, Sam bent down to pick everything up again, but then the world seemed to tip to one side. “Oh,” he said, and sat down abruptly before he could fall down.

Yep, there it was. The anxiety of watching his friend almost die, the stress that he'd pushed to the back of his mind for too long so he could focus on what needed to be done. He looked at his trembling hands and took a deep breath. Apparently it was time to deal with some of that now.

“Sam? You okay?”

He looked up and saw Steve standing over him, glancing around at the mess with a look of concern.

“Yeah, fine,” Sam said, but it came out croaky. He took a deep breath, squeezing his hands into fists to control the trembling. “I just, uh....” He cleared his throat and forced himself to look up at Steve instead of the mess he'd made. He tried to smile. “It just got to me all of a sudden, you know? We almost lost him. If you'd found him a few minutes later....”

“I did, though,” Steve said, lowering himself to one knee and putting a hand on Sam's shoulder. “We saved him—you saved him. Just remember that.”

Sam nodded, rhythmically clenching his fists and relaxing them as he breathed steadily in and out. The image of Winter's unconscious body lying in a pool of blood kept shoving its way to the front of
his mind, but each time he consciously followed it up with a memory of Winter after that had happened. Yes, he'd witnessed Winter teetering between life and death. Yes, it had been terrifying to hold his friend's life in his hands. But he was alive. That's what was important.

After a minute or so, Steve seemed to decide Sam had it under control, and started cleaning up the mess on the kitchen floor. Sam stayed where he was, focusing on calming himself down. He looked down at his clenched fists, and for a moment it seemed they were still covered in Winter's blood.

*That's how it looks when you save someone's life.* Riley had told him that once, when both of them were drenched in blood up to their elbows.

“The first time I couldn't save someone,” Sam said quietly, “I didn't know how I could go back to work the next day. What if I messed up? What if someone else died?”

Steve, who was mopping up the spilled rubbing alcohol with a wad of paper towels, paused to look over at him.

Sam smiled slightly, unclenching his fists. They were clean. “But then I looked up and saw a whole line of soldiers I'd just helped save. So I knew I couldn't give up just because there was a chance I'd fail.”

Steve stood up and stepped closer, holding out a hand. Sam grabbed it and let Steve pull him to his feet. The world had stopped spinning, and he didn't feel so shaky anymore.

“You know,” Steve said, “when I asked you to help me take down S.H.I.E.L.D., it was because I knew how skilled you were. I should've realized you were also one of the bravest men I'd ever meet.”

Those words made Sam's heart soar, but he crossed his arms with pretended offense. “Okay, first of all, you didn't ask me to help you; I volunteered and you couldn't say no. And second, one of the bravest?”

Steve grinned cheekily. “Well, there's always me.”

Sam snorted and rolled his eyes. “And so modest, too.”

As he shook his head and turned away to put the first-aid kit away at last, he felt Steve's hand brush his shoulder again. He glanced back at Steve, whose expression was serious again. “Thank you, Sam. For not giving up.”

Sam gently punched Steve on the shoulder. “Never.”

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Though he didn't want to seem like he was staring, Sam couldn't help glancing at Winter a little more than usual as they worked on the breakfast dishes together. Winter looked exhausted, and little wonder—apparently, he hadn't gotten much sleep after that tussle he'd had with Steve in the middle of the night. Sam wasn't entirely sure what all that had been about, but from what he could gather, Winter had startled Steve and their instincts had gotten the better of them.

To Sam's surprise, Winter didn't seem upset about it. Steve must have found some really good things
to say after Sam had gone back to bed, because despite the dark circles under Winter's eyes, he stood straighter than he often did after a rough night. He kept spacing out and staring out the window, but that was probably due to his exhaustion. And a few sneaky peeks at Winter's wrist showed that at least he hadn't broken his clean streak yet. Or...at least he hadn't cut his wrist. Sam frowned at that thought as he poured the last of the dirty water down the drain.

“Sam.”

“Hmm?” He looked up from drying off his hands and found Winter standing in front of him, shifting awkwardly as though he couldn't figure out what to do with his arms.

“I...have to...want to...tell you something.”

Sam leaned back against the counter, ready to wait for Winter to find the right words. “Shoot.”

“I, um....” Winter looked down at his hands, fiddling with his sleeve. “I-I'm not cutting anymore.”

“Mm-hmm.” Sam waited for more, but nothing seemed forthcoming, so he gently prodded, “And how's that coming today?”

Winter's eyes darted up to meet his, then dropped back down as he shifted from one foot to another. “No, I mean...I'm really not. At all. I mean...I haven't for two weeks, but...but last night.... I...never again. I mean, I...I wanted to, but...I didn't. And now I don't.”

Slowly, it dawned on him what Winter was trying to convey. Sam pushed away from the counter, tilting his head to one side to try to catch Winter's eye. “Really?”

Winter looked up and nodded.

Sam beamed. “That's awesome, man!” He could see the corners of Winter's eyes pinching together, and realized Winter must be smiling back.

“So...” Winter looked away again, dipping his head almost shyly, scuffing the toe of his boot against the cracked corner of a tile in the floor. “I just, um...wanted you to know. 'Cause I told...Cap, last night, but you didn't...so...yeah.”

Pretty soon, Sam's cheeks were going to start hurting if he didn't stop smiling. “Thanks for telling me. I mean it. This is awesome.”

With a deep breath, Winter looked back up at Sam, and this time he didn't look away after a moment, though he twitched as though he wanted to. “And I need to thank you. And...And say I'm sorry. You really helped me...all this time. And I never said thank you for...for saving my life. But I am grateful. And sorry. And-And-And....”

He stopped himself abruptly, took another deep breath, then said a little more calmly, “I just want you to know that you don't have to worry about me anymore.”

Grinning wider than ever, Sam threw an arm around Winter's shoulders. “Hey, after everything we've been through together, we're bros now. And that means I have the privilege of worrying about you until the day you die.” He poked Winter in the chest for emphasis.

Winter's eyes crinkled up into another smile as he tentatively draped an arm around Sam's shoulders as well. Then a mischievous twinkle lit up those blue eyes. “So...if we're 'bros'...that would make you my baby brother, wouldn't it?”
Sam's eyes widened as dread dropped into the pit of his stomach. A lifetime of unmitigated teasing stretched before him. “Oh, you better take that back now!”

Winter just smiled at him and pinched his cheek.

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On the day I called, you answered me;
my strength of soul you increased.

- Psalm 138:3
A Member of the Pack

Chapter Notes

This chapter was really hard to pull together; I didn't feel like I even knew quite what I was going for until I was halfway through it. I had a bunch of short, vague ideas for things that could happen and thoughts that Winter could have during his withdrawal, but I wasn't sure if I could pull them all together cohesively enough to make a worthwhile chapter. I'll let you decide if I managed to achieve that in the end.

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapters 3 ("Withdraw") and 4 ("Step into the Light").

You know my heart is heavy  
And the hurt is deep  
But when I feel like giving up  
You're reminding me  
That we all fall down sometimes  
But when I hit the ground

You lift me up when I am weak  
Your arms wrap around me  
Your love catches me so I'm letting go  
You lift me up when I can't see  
Your heart's all that I need  
 Your love carries me so I'm letting go

- "Lift Me Up" by The Afters

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requested by CapGirlCanuck on AO3

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There was a painting in Winter's room. It hung on the wall opposite his bed, positioned perfectly so he could easily see it if he lifted his head slightly. It depicted a mountainside covered with pine trees, not very unlike the forest that surrounded the cabin. In the foreground, its snout pointed up at the full moon, sat a single wolf. Its pelt shone white, bright against its dark surroundings, reflecting the cold
light of the moon.

It was hard to think straight while suffering from withdrawal from Hydra's drugs, but one thought that clung to him in the whirl of his feverish mind was that he was that wolf. He was alone, left abandoned on a craggy precipice far from any other living creature. Any warmth or light was so far removed from the cold stone where he sat, howling his pain to the unsympathetic sky.

*That's right,* growled the shadows that drew closer and closer to that wolf on the mountainside. *No one knows you. No one cares that you're hurting. This is your punishment for all the things you've done. Monster. Murderer. Animal. Anyone who sees you will run away in horror.*

Winter's vision swam as he stared fearfully into the darkness around him. He could see shadowy forms circling him, disappearing and reappearing like ever-shifting mist. What were those creatures in the darkness? He thought he could see light glinting on their eyes...sharp teeth, bared and ready to sink into his flesh....

*You're surrounded,* came the growling voice of all his fears. *You have nowhere to go. You are utterly alone.*

“No...” Winter gasped, his eyes filling with tears as his heart pounded, sending fevered pain through every nerve. “Please....”

The wind blew gently through the trees, filling his ears with a sound like a mother shushing her child. Something cold touched his brow, and he looked up. The moon hung above him, sending gentle rays of milky-white light down to caress him. He raised his head, opening his eyes wide to fill them with moonlight instead of shadows. Then he opened his mouth to howl into the night.

“I don't want to be alone. Please...I'm afraid....”

“I'm here, Winter,” Steve said, gently wiping a cool cloth over Winter's sweaty skin. “I'm not going to leave you.”

“But...wh-what about...” He pointed into the shadows...but he couldn't find the menacing shapes circling him. His pointing finger searched in all directions, but suddenly he couldn't even seem to find the shadows themselves. Everything was suffused with that gentle white light.

“You're safe,” said Sam, slowly putting a hand on his shoulder and gently pushing him back down onto the pillows. “Just rest now. There's nothing to worry about.”

He was so tired.... Winter plucked at the blankets, and Sam helped him pull them straight again. “What if...they come back?” he mumbled.

Sam looked over at Steve, and Winter instinctively turned to him as well. He was the leader. He would know what to do.

“We'll protect you,” Steve said firmly. “No matter what. I promise.”

Winter nodded, letting his eyes slide closed at last. The last thing he saw was the picture on the wall. He'd never noticed before, but now he saw that there were more wolves in the forest. Sleek creatures with glittering eyes and sharp teeth, slinking through the shadows.

But then he realized: They weren't hunting the white wolf. They weren't threatening him while his neck was exposed to the sky. They were protecting a member of their pack.
Winter sat with his back propped against the headboard, blinking sleepily out the window. He felt a little more lucid than usual, but his thoughts were still sluggish and wandered aimlessly.

Beep beep.

The sound reminded Winter there was a thermometer under his tongue. He pulled it out again, careful not to mess up his bandanna, and handed it over.

Sam, who sat next to the bed, looked at the thermometer and nodded approvingly. “Hey, we're down to 100! That's progress in the right direction, at least. Okay, now drink up so we can get some fluids —”

Winter turned from the window just in time to see something long and narrow moving towards his face. With a gasp, he jerked back, throwing up his hands to defend himself from the knife—the cattle prod—the red-hot poker—the gun barrel—the....

It was a straw. Sam was holding a glass of water out to him, with a straw that bent over the rim so he could easily get a drink without moving the bandanna.

Slumping back against the pillows, Winter gasped for breath as his heart pounded crazily against his chest, as if fighting to break through his ribcage. It was just a straw...a straw. Nothing to be scared of...so why wouldn't his heart stop racing? Come on, calm down! he thought desperately.

Yes, hurry up and calm down! the voice in the back of his head said, which only made his heart beat faster than ever. Better do it fast, or Sam will look at you funny. He probably already thinks you're strange. Who wouldn't? You overreacted so much to his simple attempt to help you. So ungrateful.

Winter glanced over nervously at Sam, who was...just sitting there, looking at him with an expression of...what was that? It wasn't frustration or anger or disgust. He didn't look like he was about to throw the water in Winter's face and leave in a huff, which was what Winter had almost expected.

Instead, Sam sat there patiently, as if he were just...waiting for him.

“Sorry,” Winter gasped, trying unsuccessfully to take shallower breaths and slow his galloping heart. “It's not.... I can't even look at a straw without....” He swore, letting his head fall back against the headboard and squeezing his eyes shut.

“Hey, don't worry about it,” Sam said. “I mean, you never know when a straw is gonna come murder you in your sleep, right?”

Seriously? Sam was going to make a joke about this? Winter looked over at him in consternation, but Sam was just smiling blandly at him.

“It's okay, Winter,” Sam said, idly stirring the ice cubes around with the straw. “So you have an irrational fear of straws—so what? Did you know that Cap's afraid of spiders?”

Winter stared at him in surprise.

Sam nodded, grinning. “Strongest man on earth, took down Hydra twice even when everyone said it was impossible...and he makes me squash the spiders in the shower.”
"I do not!" An indignant Steve poked his head into the room. "I asked you to look at that spider because I thought it might be a brown recluse!"

"Yeah," Sam chuckled, "and then you jumped about a mile when it started moving. And I'm pretty sure your words were, 'Kill it, Sam, before it gets away!'"

"I don't have to take this kind of abuse," Steve said as he left again.

Sam winked at Winter and whispered, "Told ya. Scared stiff."

Winter wasn't sure how to respond to that. But then he realized that his heart wasn't pounding anymore. The panic attack was over.

"It's okay to be afraid," Sam said quietly, serious once more. "Everyone's afraid of something, so there's no need to be ashamed of it. Just don't let your fear control you. You're stronger than it is."

Winter swallowed hard. "It doesn't feel like that a lot of the time."

"Trust me. Fear tries to make you just hide under the covers and never do a thing. So all you have to do is get up and do something even though you're scared of it. For example..." He held the glass of water out again, moving more slowly this time. "Why not take a drink with this super-scary straw?"

Slowly, Winter reached out and accepted the drink. When he slipped the straw under his bandanna and took a sip, Sam smiled at him proudly as though he'd done something incredible.

Winter wasn't sure he deserved such admiration, but...he really liked it when Sam looked at him like that.

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The picture of the wolf looked different at different times of the day. Winter spent long hours gazing at it, wondering what kind of magic paint had been used to catch the sunlight in just such a way that, during the day, the wolf pack in the shadows was nearly invisible. But during the night, they came out to guard the lone wolf on the mountainside. He wondered if Steve knew about such techniques. He'd seen Steve drawing in his little notebook, which had dredged up a vague memory of Steve standing in front of an easel with paint splotches on his face and hands.

Speaking of which, Steve had just stepped into the room. It must be his shift. He walked over to the bed. "Hey, Winter...I was thinking. You've been lying in bed for such a long time."

Uh-oh. Was he going to tell Winter to hurry up and get better? Were they tired of taking care of him?

"You've grown so weak," Steve said, looking at him with concern. "I think you should try walking a little, just to get your strength back."

"Walking?" He looked up at Steve in surprise.

Steve nodded. "Just up and down the hallway for starters. I'll be right there to help you, to make sure you don't fall."

Steve had acknowledged how weak Winter was...but he was going to...help?
Uncertainly, Winter took the hand Steve held out to him and got to his feet. The floor seemed to sway beneath him, and he wobbled unsteadily, but Steve looped his arm around Winter's, holding him upright.

“Come on, one step at a time. Lean on me if you stumble, okay?”

Winter took a step, sure he would fall flat on his face. But Steve was there at his side, his arm pulling him upwards even as gravity pulled him downwards. Hesitantly, Winter took another step. Then another. And another. He stared down at his feet, putting one in front of the other as if he were a baby just learning to walk for the first time.

“That's it.... See, we're already heading through the door....”

Winter looked up and saw that he was right. Steve pressed a little closer against his side as they squeezed through the doorway, but Winter discovered that he didn't mind the proximity. Somehow...it wasn't that frightening to feel Steve's breath on the back of his neck or the way his arm held Winter in place.

Because...Steve made him feel...safe.

Safe? Really? Was that...possible?

“Just a few more steps,” Steve murmured in his ear. “Good....”

Somehow, they'd made it all the way to the end of the hallway. “Here, let's take a break,” Steve suggested, positioning Winter so he could lean against the wall.

As soon as he let go, Winter's knees buckled and the ground came rushing up towards him. He managed to lean back against the wall and let himself slide down, and Steve caught at his shoulders to keep him from sitting down too abruptly. Winter let his head fall back against the wall, breathing hard.

So pathetic. You can't even walk down a hallway. You're so weak, you're no use to anyone. He's going to leave you sitting here, reflecting on how worthless you are. Or maybe he'll stand there and laugh at you as you try to crawl back to bed like the insect you are. He spent all this time and effort to get you off those drugs, but now look at you. He'll realize it was pointless to bother.

Steve squatted down next to him. “Can I carry you back? You did really good for a first try, but you've earned a rest.”

Winter blinked up at him, uncomprehending. He wasn't complaining about what a bother Winter was. He wasn't calling him worthless or weak. He'd said he'd...done a good job. That he deserved to rest. When Hydra had told him he'd done well, that had simply meant a short reprieve from pain. But...Steve was offering to carry him. To help him when he was weak, rather than laugh at him and assert his dominance.

Part of him was screaming to prove that he didn't need help, that he could still be of some use. But the greater part knew that he wasn't going to make it like this. He couldn't do it on his own. He needed help.

“Yes,” he breathed.

When Steve lifted him into his arms, Winter couldn't help tensing up. He could feel the warmth of Steve's body through his shirt, and the strength in his arms. It was just like when Steve had given him an arm to lean on to help him walk, magnified tenfold. He felt utterly protected in Steve's arms, like
nothing could possibly hurt him.

Steve laid him down in his bed, and the soft blankets and pillows seemed to rise up around him, welcoming him into their warm embrace.

Winter worked hard to get better. Once the fever broke and he was able to start eating again, he tried his best to get to the point where the others wouldn't have to wait on him hand and foot anymore. He couldn't even find words to describe how grateful he was to both of them, but he hoped he could repay them at least a little by taking care of himself.

It seemed apparent by now that Steve and Sam weren't going to get annoyed at every little thing he did wrong and throw him out. They'd both proven they were incredibly patient. But...he didn't want to push his chances, either. At the very least, he decided he should probably make it clear that he was making progress.

So he pushed himself a little harder each day. He tried to walk farther, clean up after himself, and stay quiet and obedient. As long as he was as little of a bother as possible, they were less likely to kick him out, right? Maybe, eventually, he could even start doing things that would help them, instead of just taking from them all the time.

Soon, he was up to three walks a day. He would eat the meal Sam brought up to his room, wait for a little while to let the food settle, and then try to make his way up and down the hallway. At first, he had to have one of the others to lean on, but after a few days he felt steady enough on his feet to forego their support. Usually, they would still walk alongside him or watch his progress, in case he needed help getting back to bed.

But finally, Winter thought he was strong enough to try the stairs. He hadn't set foot on them since that first night; at times, it seemed his entire world had shrunk down to the tiny space of his room, the bathroom, and the hall. Truth be told, he felt a little restless, ready for a change of scenery.

He decided he was going to surprise them. Now that he was a little more self-sufficient, they didn't stay by his side 24/7 anymore. They still kept him company through most of the day, but they'd stopped sitting at his bedside through the night. They kept the doors open so he could call for help if he needed it, and they also took turns checking on him every few hours just in case. But if both of them needed to do something at the same time, they knew it was fine to leave Winter alone for a while.

This served Winter's purposes perfectly. Sam was headed off for the morning run he liked to take every couple days, and Steve had gone to take a shower (after making sure Winter was settled, of course). So as soon as he heard the water turn on and the front door close after Sam, Winter slipped out of bed and headed for the stairs.

He could see it clearly in his mind's eye. He would sit on the top step and wait for either Steve or Sam to find him. They would ask, “What are you doing there?” and he would say proudly, “I walked all the way down the stairs and up again—by myself.” They would congratulate him, then tell the other, “Did you hear? Winter walked all the way up and down the stairs today!” “Wow, he's getting better so fast!”
Well...maybe not. But they'd probably be a little bit happy for him, right? It was farther than he'd gone so far.

It started out pretty well. He made it down the hall, like he'd done so many times before, and instead of turning back the way he'd come, he stepped onto the top step of the staircase. Winter paused for a moment, peering down uncertainly at stairs that suddenly looked a lot steeper than he remembered. But he took a deep breath, grasped the banister with his left hand, and started down.

Winter discovered that if he looked down at his feet, he would get dizzy, so he fixed his gaze on the fireplace that slowly came into view in the living room. By the time he made it to the bottom of the stairs, he was out of breath, so he paused to look around at the first floor. He could see evidence of the space being lived in now, different from the bags and boxes that had littered the kitchen and living room areas that first day. He glanced out the front windows and remembered Steve sitting on the front porch with a plate of sandwiches for him.

He cocked his head to one side and realized that he could no longer hear the shower going. He needed to get back up the stairs before Steve emerged from the bathroom.

Turning around and grasping the banister with his other hand, Winter realized what a daunting task lay before him. Somehow, the stairs had gotten even steeper since he'd come down, and going up the stairs would be twice as hard. But it was too late to back out now.

As soon as Winter had climbed two steps, he realized this whole endeavor was a mistake. Both legs were trembling, and he found himself gripping the banister harder and harder to keep himself from falling. It was still too far for him to go. He was too weak.

But...he had to keep going. He kept lifting his feet that felt like leaden weights, heaving himself up onto one step after another. Surely...Surely it wasn't too much farther....

Then one socked foot slid out from under him, and he lost his balance. His knee crashed into the step ahead of him, his hand slipped on the banister, and he slid down to the bottom of the staircase. He lay still for a moment or two, breathing deeply as his brain caught up with what had happened. Then, tentatively, he stretched out his limbs and made sure everything was intact.

Laboriously, Winter rolled onto his front and propped his elbows on the first step, craning his neck to look up at the progress he'd just lost. His heart quailed when he saw the distance he still had to go—surely twice as long as it had been the first time he'd started up the stairs. He was trembling all over, his arms already protesting holding him up. He didn't think he'd even be able to crawl up the stairs at this point.

His forehead dropped to the bottom step. He really had been getting ahead of himself. The others wouldn't be proud of him now, they would just laugh at how ridiculous he looked and remind him that he couldn't do anything without their help.

Help.... Yes. He needed help. He couldn't just lie here forever. And he couldn't do anything on his own.

“Help....” Even his voice was trembling and weak. No one would hear him. No one would see him until they tripped over him and hurt themselves. “Please,” he said, trying to raise his voice. “Help me....”

A door banged open upstairs. “Winter?” Steve's voice cried. There was a pause in which Winter couldn't even raise his head, and then footsteps thundered down the stairs.
Winter didn't have the strength even to cringe away, but the bare feet that came into view on the step above his head didn't kick him or step on him.

“Winter, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

Steve's strong hands caught him under the armpits and raised him from the floor, pulling him upright and holding him there. Winter caught his first glimpse of Steve—chest bare, towel slung over one shoulder, one cheek shaven and the other slathered in shaving cream. He had obviously dropped everything in an instant to rush to Winter's rescue.

“I'm sorry.” Winter hung his head. “I was just...trying to walk down the stairs...by myself....”

He waited for Steve to scold him, but all he said was, “Oh no! Did you fall? Did you hit your head?” His fingers ran lightly over Winter's skull, as if to check for bumps, but they carefully stayed away from the bandanna.

“Just...slid, mostly,” Winter said. “I...I'm okay, I just....” He pointed up the stairs. “Can't make it back.”

“Here, let me help you.” Without even needing to be asked, Steve gathered Winter into his arms and got to his feet again, like Winter's dead weight was nothing.

Pressed tightly against Steve's chest, Winter could feel the warmth radiating from his skin. He could smell Steve's shampoo. And he could feel Steve's voice vibrating against his cheek as he spoke.

“You have to take care of yourself, Winter. You really scared me there; for a second, I thought you were seriously injured....”

“I'm sorry,” Winter mumbled again.

Steve carried Winter into his room and laid him gently on his bed again. “It's okay, I just.... I don't want to lose you. I want you to be safe.”

Winter looked up into Steve's eyes—not judgmental or accusatory, not angry or frustrated. They were full of concern and compassion.

Was this what it meant to belong? To have people who would protect you and take care of you, not because you were useful, but simply because you were one of theirs? Was he...accepted?

Steve pulled the blanket up to Winter's chin and straightened up. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

A burst of gratitude shot through his heart. “Okay.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Bear one another's burdens.

- Galatians 6:2
Identity

Chapter Notes

I've been trying to work in the first two scenes of this chapter since the first draft of *Make Me Whole*. For one reason or another, I just couldn't get them to fit into the themes and events of those chapters (and I realize now that they work much better from Winter's POV), so I'm really excited that I found an excuse to include them here. And even managed to fit them into the same chapter! The first scene started out as an early version of that part just before the reveal when Steve gives Winter a drawing as a “birthday present,” but it's turned into something completely different. I really wish I had any amount of drawing talent at all, because I can see the drawings so clearly in my mind, but there's no way I can put them on paper :( I guess I'll just have to hope that you can all imagine them well enough from my descriptions.

This chapter takes place in *Make Me Whole* chapters 11 ("Hail Hydra"), 15 ("A Change in the Wind"), and after the end.

\[ I \text{ have crossed the horizon to find you} \\
 I \text{ know your name} \\
 \text{They have stolen the heart from inside you} \\
 \text{But this does not define you} \\
 \text{This is not who you are} \\
 \text{You know who you are} \]

- "Know Who You Are" from Moana

Winter carried two large stacks of laundry up to the loft just as Steve was stepping into the bathroom to get a shower. The front door closed after Sam while Winter put his clean clothes away, and he heard the car crunch its way out of the driveway, on its way to the store in town. Once he'd finished straightening up his area, Winter glanced around for something to do until one of the others were able to keep him company.

His eyes fell on a small, leather-bound book lying on Steve's bed. The sketchbook Steve carried around with him practically everywhere, drawing in it whenever there was a spare moment. He also used the sketchbook Sam had given him for Christmas, but those pages were larger and Steve seemed to like using them for bigger projects, like that drawing of the first cabin he'd spent an entire week on. Winter glanced over at the closed bathroom door, behind which he could hear the shower running.

He knew he should ask permission first, but maybe...he could risk it. Just a short peek wouldn't
hurt...right?

Slowly, he picked up the book and looked at it. It was monogrammed in the corner with Steve's initials, and held closed with a small clasp. Winter ran his right thumb over the SGR in the corner, then slowly inched it up to the clasp. He drew a deep breath, then in a quick motion, he undid the clasp and opened the book to the first page.

The first drawing startled a tiny snort of laughter from him. The Statue of Liberty. How appropriate.

Carefully grasping each page by the corner so as not to smudge the pencil drawings, Winter slowly continued through the sketchbook. The first few sketches were simply buildings from interesting angles. A bridge that he was pretty sure he'd seen in New York City. A quiet park with immense detail in every line of a large oak tree, but pedestrians passing on the pathways were just vague blurs.

After a few pages, faces began appearing among the landscape pictures. A mother pushing a baby in a stroller. A little girl on a swingset in a park, her pigtails flying out behind her as she laughed. An old man with a thousand wrinkles, sipping coffee in a cafe. Just like with the skyscrapers and park scenes, Steve seemed to have picked his subjects simply so he could capture something interesting about them. Winter was certainly no art critic, but as he stared at the drawing of the girl, he almost thought he could hear her carefree laughter. He could almost imagine the old man's hand trembling as he lifted the coffee cup to his lips. There was a drawing of a woman smirking mischievously over her shoulder, and even though it was just a monochrome pencil drawing, somehow Winter knew that her hair was red.

Then he started seeing things he recognized. A mountainside covered with pines, the very same view he used to look at every day from his window in the old cabin. The river that ran around the back, sparkling in the sun. Sam, in his element at the kitchen stove, flipping pancakes.

Winter, lying asleep in bed with his bandanna on, a strand of hair plastered to his sweaty forehead. Winter and Sam, drawn from behind as they stood side-by-side at the kitchen sink. Sam's head turned slightly with the hint of a teasing smile. Winter, wrapped tightly in a blanket in the big armchair in front of the fire, knees tucked under his chin as he stared sleepily into the flames. There were several pages filled with hands in various poses, and one double-page spread filled with drawings in varying amounts of detail of Winter's metal arm. Steve seemed to have been fascinated with how the metal plates interlocked and slid over each other, allowing him as much range of movement with his left arm as his right.

When he turned the next page, Winter noticed the torn remains of several pages that had been ripped out of the book. He ran a finger over them, wondering what had been on those pages. What drawings had turned out so horribly that Steve, who was such a good artist, had yanked them out of his collection entirely?

Then Winter looked at the sketches on either side of the torn section. They were both of him, simply standing there looking up out of the page, from the waist up. At first glance, both drawings seemed to be almost identical. Two drawings of Winter standing, facing Steve straight on.

But then Winter looked closer and began to notice subtle differences between the two—and not just differences that would come from drawing the same thing at different times. On the left page, Winter's shoulders were hunched, strands of hair hanging in front of his face, hiding one eye from view. The other eye seemed to be pointed downwards, as if staring at the floor or drooping with weariness. But on the right page, Winter stood straighter, his eyes facing forwards, as if they could look through the page and see whoever was holding the book. His hair was tucked behind one ear, not hiding his face or his mask anymore. There was something much more confident and assured in his stance than the one on the other page.
He glanced between one Winter and the other, then his eyes fell on the remains of the torn pages again. What had happened between the times Steve had drawn these two pictures? What could he have been drawing in the meantime that he wanted to erase?

Then Winter noticed that Steve had dated both of those drawings, and he understood.

Many things had happened between the time he was so depressed and ashamed he could hardly look the others in the eye, and the time he'd finally claimed his life for himself again. Winter wondered what Steve had drawn during that time. More studies of Winter's arm—the right one this time? Sketches of knives and blood, of Winter sitting hunched in the bathroom, clutching his arm? Drawings of him crying...bleeding...dying?

But whatever those pages once held...they were gone now. Probably torn to bits and thrown into the fire, or maybe even sitting in a recycling plant being turned into a cardboard box or something. The drawings on those pages had probably been just as good as the rest of the ones in this book. Steve had no doubt found interesting details and angles to focus on, capturing them and somehow making a few lines of pencil come alive on the page.

And he'd ripped them out.

Steve's sketchbook was a sort of journal, chronicling his life in pictures rather than words. Flipping through this book, no doubt Steve would remember where he was when he drew each picture, what was happening at the time, how he felt.... These were little pieces of his life that were important to him, that stood out to him to such an extent that he wanted to remember them.

He didn't want to remember when Winter was cutting himself.

Should he be upset about that? It almost sounded like wishful thinking, like Steve was hoping that if he closed his eyes and stopped his ears, he could pretend none of it had happened. But...somehow Winter didn't think that was it. Nothing could change the past. One glance at Winter's right arm would be enough of a reminder for the rest of his life.

But this felt like...forgiveness. That's what Steve had given him from the very first, wasn't it? Forgiving Winter didn't mean forgetting what he'd done. Neither Steve nor Sam would ever forget that he used to be their enemy...but they never held it against him. No one would forget that Winter had been so depressed he'd tried to kill himself. There would still be the jagged edges of torn pages in his life, but they didn't have to keep staring at those pictures. That didn't have to be part of their story anymore.

Slowly, Winter turned the page. There were two more pictures of himself—one of him running, and one just of his face. Steve had made the running picture look like everything was streaming past him, like he was running through tendrils of mist. Just like in every other picture Steve drew, Winter felt like it was almost moving. He could hear the wind howling in his ears, he could feel his heart pounding as exhilaration rushed through him....

The other page depicted his face, tilted back slightly. Most of his face was covered with the mask, of course, but Winter found himself staring at the uncovered half. His eyes looked sort of...scrunched up. Steve had paid great attention to detail in this one, tracing out every line radiating from the corner of Winter's eyes....

Then it hit him: He was smiling in that picture. That must be what it looked like to Steve. Strange...there was so little to go on, since no one could see Winter's mouth, but Steve had still managed to make it clear that Winter was happy.
Steve could tell? He could see that? His artist's eye, so adept at translating the world around him to lines and shapes on paper, could also look at someone like him and tell what he was thinking and feeling?

When Winter turned the next page, something fell out. He picked up a small piece of paper from the bedspread, folded into a square small enough to fit snugly into the small sketchbook. It looked like a different kind of paper, rather than a page torn out of this book.

“So? How'd I do?”

Winter nearly jumped out of his boots, dropping the sketchbook like it had burned him. He'd been so absorbed in what he was doing that he hadn't even heard Steve open the door, but now he stood at the foot of his bed, setting down his dirty clothes.

“Sorry,” Winter said quickly. Suddenly realizing he still held the little square of paper, he hastily dropped it next to the sketchbook. “I didn't mean...I should've asked...I-I....”

“No, no, it's okay,” Steve said with a reassuring smile, holding up a hand to forestall his apology. “I don't mind.”

“Still...shouldn't've....”

Steve waved his concerns away and leaned over to pick up the book and leaf through it. With a reminiscent smile, he thumbed through the pages. “I should probably be asking if you mind me drawing you without asking.”

Taken aback, Winter could only stare at him. Why would he mind? Steve drew pictures of everything around him. It wasn't like he asked the birds and trees for permission. They were simply part of his life. But when Steve glanced up at him with an almost nervous expression, Winter realized he was serious.

Clearing his throat, Winter glanced down and saw that the book was open to the page of Winter smiling. “It's okay,” he said softly. “I mean, they're all so...good.” What an inadequate word to describe what he felt when he saw his face in soft lines of lead, drawn by Steve's strong hand.

Inadequate or not, Steve smiled. “Thanks. I always do better with a model to draw from. Even with my memory. So...thanks for your help.”

Then he closed the book and reached down for the little square of paper. He paused for a moment, then carefully unfolded the paper, spreading it out on his bed where they could both look at it.

Winter's heart thudded in his throat. That was his face. Bucky's face.

“See?” Steve said, his voice traveling a thousand miles to reach Winter's ears. “I started off trying to draw your face from memory, but then halfway through I realized I was drawing Bucky. Guess that's why he kinda looks like you.”

He would figure it out. Surely he would see now who Winter truly was. The evidence was staring right at them. In the picture, Bucky's hair was much shorter than Winter's, and of course he wasn't wearing this wretched mask. He was smiling a small, gentle smile, his eyes almost seeming to glow in the middle of the paper. It was like the man he used to be was looking down the long expanse of years that separated them, looking up at both of them out of this paper with...affection.

“You...were trying to draw me?” Winter asked breathlessly.
“I started to,” Steve said with a nod. “But...that was back when...well. When I realized I was actually drawing Bucky, I remembered that it was getting close to the day he....” He swallowed and didn't finish the sentence.

Winter stared down at Bucky, and Bucky gazed back up out of the paper. This picture seemed to be moving too. The longer Winter looked at it, the more it seemed that Bucky's smile was widening, his eyes softening and crinkling into the wrinkles he'd seen in the sketchbook.

He looked so...happy. Kind. Had he ever really looked like that? Had he really looked at Steve like that?

Winter glanced down at the sketchbook Steve still held. In it was a picture of him smiling. Maybe even laughing. Steve had drawn so many pictures of him over the past several months, telling the story of how much he'd changed and grown since they'd met.

Steve stood looking down at the picture of Bucky, like he wished he could step through it into the world of paper and pencil. Or that he could reach through it and pull Bucky back.

Those shoes were too big for Winter to fill. Even though they were his own.

“Did you...used to draw him...before?”

Drawing a deep breath as though rousing himself from a trance, Steve looked up from the picture at last. “Yeah,” he said with a sad sort of smirk. “All the time. He used to complain that I always got his nose wrong, but I think he liked it anyway.”

“I think he'd still like it,” Winter said softly. He was too afraid to meet Steve's gaze, so he looked down at the drawing instead. “I...I think he'd like this. It's really good. You're good at...capturing what's really there.”

“Thank you, Winter,” Steve said, sounding surprised. “That's so kind of you to say.”

“It's true.” Truer than you could ever know.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Think you've changed? Think you're any different from the way you used to be? You can use a different name and pretend all you want, but at the end of the day there will always be something pulling you right back to who you've always been. You know they'll hate you when they find out what you really are. A liar and a pathetic coward.

“Winter? Did you...hear what I said?”

Winter jerked back to the present, blinking to banish the memory of Crossbones' sneering face. He glanced over to Steve, who sat in his favorite chair, looking at him with concern. What had they been talking about? Winter cast his mind back, but couldn't remember a single word.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “I wasn't paying attention. I...my mind just wandered, sorry.”

Steve cocked his head to one side. “What's on your mind?”

It was selfish of him to turn the conversation back on himself and focus only on his problems, rather
than what Steve had wanted to talk about. But even so, Winter blurted out, “It's just...something Crossbones said. That...I can't escape who I've always been.”

“You don't believe what Crossbones said about you?” Steve said, softly incredulous.

Winter hung his head. “I just...can't stop thinking about it.” There were lots of things like that, weren't there? Dark words stuck in his head that he wanted Steve to shake loose.

“Who am I, really?” Winter continued softly, looking down at his hands. “There are lots of things in my past that I can't remember, even more that I can't escape.... Am I what they made me? Or what you made me? I know I can never be what I was...but how can I possibly know who I am?”

“That's easy. I know who you are.”

Winter whipped his head up to gape at Steve. No, surely not.... How had he given himself away? He wasn't ready for this, for Steve to know the full truth, for them to have this confrontation now....

“You're Winter.”

He relaxed slightly. Steve was smiling at him, the same way he always did. He wasn't looking at him differently; there was no knowing glint of triumph as he revealed the hidden knowledge of Winter's identity. Just a small, honest smile.

“Winter has brown hair and blue eyes. Six feet tall. Nifty metal arm, likes masks and blue bandannas.” He smirked a little, then tapped his chin thoughtfully as he continued his description. “His favorite thing to drink is hot chocolate, his favorite thing to eat is blueberry pancakes even though he usually gets maple syrup all over his bandanna. Let's see...he's right-handed, he's pretty good at chess, his favorite color is red, and he really likes dandelions for some reason.”

Winter blinked in surprise. How could he know all of that?

If possible, Steve's smile softened even further. “There are a lot of things I know about Winter, but the most important thing is that Winter is the strongest man I know. He endured more than anyone should ever have to suffer, and Hydra forced him to do the things he hated most. But he never stopped fighting them. Every time he saw the chance to break away and make his own choice, he took it. He resisted every instinct they gave him, and never stopped the struggle to start over again. He's still fighting, every day. And you know what? He's winning.”

He reached over and tucked a strand of Winter's hair behind his ear. “I think that's enough to be going on with, don't you?”

Winter couldn't breathe. Crossbones had told him—his own mind had told him, over and over, that Steve would hate Winter if he knew who was under the mask. But in just a few minutes, Steve had trampled right over all of those assumptions. His description of Winter was so....

*The strongest man I know. He's winning.*

“But....” He swallowed with difficulty, fingers brushing unconsciously across his mask. “You don't even know what I look like....”

Steve let out a confused chuckle. “Why would I need to know what you look like when I know you?”
Bucky turned the picture frame around and placed it carefully on top of his dresser, making sure the stand was in place so it wouldn't fall over. He was about to turn and leave his room, but the picture in the frame grabbed his attention. The time he'd spent looking at this drawing probably added up to hours, but somehow it looked different in the frame.

He—well, Winter, really—stood with his arms outstretched, face turned up to face the sky. Raindrops ran over his mask and dripped from his fingers. How had Steve managed to make his hair and clothes look so wet, using only a narrow stick of charcoal?

Sometimes it was hard to remember that he was Bucky again, and he didn't need to worry about his mask or watch his words. Other times, it was hard to believe he'd ever been Winter. How could he have distrusted Steve and Sam, or even been afraid of them? Why hadn't he tried showing them his face sooner? It would have saved them all a world of pain.

But when he looked at the drawing in the frame, it all came rushing back. The way the mask felt. The cold, refreshing drops of rain washing over his whole body. Spinning, twirling, cold grass stabbing at his bare feet, mud squelching between his toes...laughing. Laughing, because he was so full of love and joy that it was the only possible response.

Steve had seen that. He'd been watching Winter, laughing with him. He'd encouraged Winter to step out and try something new, and he'd been there to support him the entire time. Even with the mask and the fear holding Winter back, Steve had seen him. He'd felt the importance of that moment, and captured it forever on paper.

*Is this what I look like?*

*It's what I see.*

“Did it fit?”

Bucky started slightly, turning to find Steve standing in the doorway, watching him. “Yeah,” Bucky said hoarsely, then cleared his throat. He turned away, embarrassed to be caught just staring at his picture like an idiot. His eyes fell instead on the other framed picture he kept there: a photo he'd insisted on getting printed, taken the night after he'd taken his mask off. He and Sam leaned in on either side of Steve, all three of them grinning cheerfully.

“Hey, Steve,” he said thoughtfully, “do you ever draw yourself?”

“You mean like a self-portrait?” Steve said. “Yeah, I've done a few. It's easier drawing other people, though. You have to use a mirror, and that makes your face actually look backwards....”

Bucky reached out and picked up the framed photo, gazing down at Steve's smile frozen in time. “What do you see when you look at yourself?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

He brushed his thumb along the edge of the frame. “Because I see the most stubborn man I've ever met—and I can remember everyone I've met now, you know, so that's saying a lot.”

He peeked through his hair at Steve, who was wearing a perturbed frown at this description of himself.
With a smirk, Bucky continued. “Steve Rogers is someone who never gives up once he's set his mind on something. Even if it's impossible. Even if there's no reason he ought to feel responsible for it. Even if it means sacrificing everything he has. When he decides he needs to do something, he'll get it done, and nothing anyone does or says will get him to stop.”

Bucky's smile widened as he looked at his best friends in the photo. “There were a lot of times I almost wished Steve would stop picking fights with every bully in the world, so I wouldn't have to keep scraping him off the pavement and finishing his fights for him. But then...there were also plenty of times I thought he was extra annoying like that just to reassure me he wasn't an angel in disguise or something.”

He could practically feel the look of consternation Steve was sending his way. He didn't get it, did he? That was the problem with Steve—he was so humble he couldn't comprehend the full scope of what he'd done, or just how extraordinary it was. “Maybe I used to save him all the time from getting creamed...but he's been saving me my whole life. Hundreds of times, ways I can't even describe....” He shook his head with a little sigh at how inadequate his words sounded.

“I don't know,” he said quietly, setting the photo back in its place on his dresser. “Maybe that's why I've been following him all this time. Maybe that's why I decided to follow him again, even when I didn't really know who I was. Sometimes I'm still not quite sure who I am...but I have no doubt who he is.”

He turned to look Steve in the eye. “He's the one who saves me. He's my hero.”

Steve stared at him. His mouth opened, but he couldn't seem to think of anything to say. He closed it, opened it again, then seemed to give up and crossed the distance between them. Bucky smiled as he welcomed Steve into a tight embrace.

It was several long minutes before Steve mumbled haltingly, “Buck...I....”

Bucky patted him on the back. “You're welcome.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

*I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.*

- *Exodus 33:12*
Alone

Chapter Notes

I'm not entirely sure why, but this was actually the chapter I've been most reluctant to write. Maybe because not much really happens in it; it feels like a very sluggish sort of chapter. But then...it needs to be, I think. I kept scribbling away at this in small little bursts over the space of a month or two, not really eager to just sit down and devote a huge chunk of time to it. Then I suddenly realized I'd amassed enough material to fill a whole chapter! I guess slow and steady does win the race sometimes ;)

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 16, “Age of Ultron.”

I've had so many words
But I had no courage
Now we're saying goodbye
Don't want to miss you, tonight

... 

Don't be shocked if I cry
You've changed me inside
I turned my back on you
You were the only reason I pulled through
I pulled through

Tell me it's not over now
I can change your mind somehow
My head feels so heavy
My heart is so empty

- “Give It All” by He Is We

~*~*~*~*~*~

requested by Unajet on FFNet

~*~*~*~*~*~
Winter stood on the front steps of the cabin, watching until the car disappeared around a bend in the road and the sound of the engine faded into the distance. He stood there, listening to the breeze rustling in the trees all around him. Birds sang overhead. Something went shuffling through the underbrush. A beetle buzzed angrily against one of the front windows.

Somehow, life went on. Even after the core of his whole world had left him behind.

Just then, his new phone buzzed in his pocket. He fished it out and opened the text that he’d just received. It was from Steve, of course—he only had two numbers on his contact list, after all.

*Miss you already! We'll be back as soon as we can. :)*

The words blurred, but Winter kept staring down at his phone till the screen turned black. He took a shaky breath and blinked his eyes clear...then the phone vibrated again in his hand, making him jump.

*Sam says that if you eat one of his 29 Oreos while he's gone, he'll kill you in your sleep.*

A snort of unexpected laughter escaped him. Had Sam actually counted them? Winter went back inside, distracted for the moment.

Sure enough, the package of Oreos on Sam's shelf in the pantry contained exactly 29 cookies. Winter smirked to himself, then went to pour himself a glass of milk. He could easily remember the first time he'd eaten Oreos since leaving Hydra.

“Hey, fellas,” Steve said, walking through the front door with an insane number of shopping bags in his hands. “I picked up some Oreos, you want some?”

“You mean they had Oreos back in the Dark Ages?” Sam said, taking a couple bags off Steve's hands and rummaging through them. He produced a gallon of milk and the bright blue package of cookies.

“Ah-ah-ah!” Steve slapped Sam's hand before he could open the package. “No Oreos unless you help me put everything else away first! And Winter, go put on your bandanna—you've gotta try one!”

“So bossy,” Sam moaned, dragging his feet as he picked up the bags again and trudged over to the refrigerator.

“Yeah, you'd think I was a captain in the Army or something.”

“Ha. Ha.”

Winter smiled to himself. He could hear their voices almost as clearly as if they were in the room with him. And an echo of their warmth seemed to hang around the empty kitchen.

“What. Are you doing?”

“No, no, I actually remember this.” Winter carefully peeled the little circle of cream off the chocolate cookie and added it to the neat stack on his plate. “This is how you eat Oreos.”

“Yeah—if you're a barbarian.” Sam pointedly licked the cream off an Oreo, then dunked the chocolate cookie in his glass of milk, never breaking eye contact.
“Says the man dripping milk down his shirt like a toddler,” Winter retorted, then laughed when Sam looked down in alarm only to find that his shirt was perfectly clean.

“Oh, because that's real mature,” Sam grumbled.

Steve walked past the table, snagged an Oreo from the package, and ate it whole. The others stared after him, scandalized.

Winter had already put on his bandanna and returned to the kitchen when he realized there was no one around to see his face. He didn't really need to keep wearing it when the others weren't there...but...he wasn't ready for that yet. It was just easier to continue as he had been.

Returning his attention to the Oreos, Winter felt the smirk returning to his face. He poured himself a glass of milk, set a plate next to it, then selected one of Sam's precious cookies. He picked one that was intact, not broken or crumbly, and placed it in the middle of the plate. Then he pulled out his phone and snapped a photo of it, sending it to the group chat Sam had set up for the three of them.

Snickering to himself, Winter carefully pulled apart the Oreo, peeled off the disc of cream, and placed the three pieces in a row on the plate, then took another photo.

Winter sent a series of photos to Sam, showing a bite-by-bite destruction of the cookie. Finally, after sending a photo of nothing more than crumbs littering the plate, he got a text back from Steve.

*Sam says that your death will be slow and painful.*

Winter just laughed and started brainstorming creative photos he could take of the remaining 28 Oreos in the package.

With so much on his mind, he barely noticed the hours rolling by.

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The first day or two weren't so bad. The novelty of having the whole cabin to himself kept things interesting. He kept up with the chores, which took much more time to get done now that he was the only one there. He tried out some new recipes that looked interesting, and sent pictures of the results to the others. On the second day, feeling very brave, he pulled all the curtains closed, double-checked all the locks, and sat carefully facing a corner where no one could possibly see his face at first glance...and he ate without his mask or bandanna.

But as the days dragged on and on, Winter found himself growing increasingly bored. Sure, there were plenty of things he could do on his own, a lot of the same things he'd been doing with the others. The bookshelves were well-stocked, there were hundreds of channels to choose from on TV, and the internet was an endless source of distraction. He could try making new things in the kitchen to surprise the others when they got back. He could go running or riding the motorcycle, at least after dark or when the roads were empty enough that no one would notice his mask.

But after he'd flicked through all the channels, played his tenth level of Candy Crush in a row, and flipped through a stack of books without taking a word in, he flopped onto his back on the couch and admitted the truth: Being on his own was boring.

It wasn't that there was nothing to do, it was just...why bother? Sam wasn't around to tease him.
Steve wasn't there to smile at him. He couldn't even sit there and listen to the others' conversation if he couldn't think of anything to say himself. Even just sitting and listening to them breathe while they slept would be preferable to this empty nothing.

Funny. Only a few months ago, peace and quiet were things he'd barely ever experienced. Hydra had never left him alone for more than a minute or two, and even then he was usually under some kind of surveillance. Back then, the thought of lounging around alone, able to choose for himself how he spent every minute of the day without consulting anyone, wouldn't even have entered his wildest dreams. Now it was boring.

The difference was that he had friends now. Winter stared up at the exposed rafters on the ceiling and thought about that. It had been seventy years since he'd gone so long without speaking to or even seeing another living soul. Time in cryo didn't count. As he thought about it, he realized this might even be the first time he'd ever gone so long without seeing someone. Before, there always would have been guards. Fellow soldiers, even if he didn't know them. Strangers on the street. But now...this isolation made him feel like he was standing in the middle of a dark forest, without even the moon to light his way. He just wanted to go home.

No, he wasn't just bored. He was lonely.

Oh, boohoo. I'm lonely after three days because I'm just that pathetic.

The mocking voice echoed in his head. With a growl, Winter grabbed the remote from the coffee table and switched the TV on, turning the volume up as far as it would go.

“IN OTHER NEWS—“ the reporter on the screen blared, so loudly Winter could feel his chest vibrating.

You're so dependent on them. Like a parasite. I bet they were relieved to find an excuse to not have to put up with you anymore.

But then the words Captain America blasted into Winter's ears, and he bolted upright, forgetting all about the voice in his head. He turned down the volume a little so it wouldn't hurt his ears.

“—the first definite sighting in six weeks, though Captain Rogers has still made no official statement at this time. It seems that questions as to his whereabouts for the past nine months, as well as his alleged involvement with several terrorist attacks around the country, remain unanswered.”

Winter stared at the screen, where they were playing some old footage from some battle Steve had been in. Not from the war—the picture was in color—but Winter didn't know the circumstances behind it. He hoped he wasn't the cause of the exhausted, harried look on Steve's face.

Even though Steve wasn't looking at him or smiling that gentle smile (he was talking to a police officer in a manner Winter instantly recognized as his 'Captain America' stance that made most people scurry to follow his orders), seeing him on TV was almost as reassuring as having him here. He didn't like the insinuations the news anchor was casually throwing around, almost making it sound like Steve had been responsible for Crossbones' atrocities, but Winter knew the truth. He could see, even in this old footage, that Steve was running himself ragged to protect people. To do what was right. To save people who couldn't save themselves.

People like him.

Winter continued watching to the end of the story, letting his mind wander when the commercials started up again. Steve was out there somewhere, trying to track down a deadly artifact that was
probably in Hydra's clutches...and what was he doing? Sitting around, safe and snug in this cabin, feeling bored.

*And you want them to come back,* the voice in the back of his mind sneered, now that he had little to distract him. *You want to take them away from what they really want to be doing—what they really need to be doing. So selfish. So needy. You're pathetic.*

Winter knew he shouldn't listen to anything the voice said. But it was so hard not to when everything it said was true.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Winter lay in bed. He'd slept for...how long? Too long. Longer than was probably healthy. He wasn't sleeping now, but he didn't get up.

What was the point? He wasn't hungry. He didn't feel like doing anything. There was no reason to do anything. And nothing to look forward to.

The voice was actually leaving him alone for once. It knew that this cold, empty silence was punishment enough. He couldn't even distract himself with self-hatred. And it seemed that when the mocking, accusing voice of his own personal monster stayed quiet, he couldn't hear the voice that sounded like Steve either.

How many days had it been? Four? Five? Twenty-five?

Did it matter? Did anything matter? Probably not.

It was his bladder that finally got him out of bed. He lay there for twenty minutes before he finally managed to convince himself it would be preferable *not* to wet the bed, then another ten minutes to laboriously push back the covers, heave himself to his feet, and shuffle next door to the bathroom.

As he slowly saw to his body's needs, Winter dimly remembered those first few days with the others, clouded with the haze of withdrawal. He'd been so sick with the fever and headaches, so paralyzed with fear and distrust, that he hadn't been able to take care of himself at all. He hadn't even been able to recognize the signals his own body was sending him, after so many years of having every need seen to by someone else.

He remembered feeling moisture running down his legs, followed by a burning, sickening mortification as he waited for the others to mock him, laugh at him, or cry out in disgust and beat him like an animal for causing them even more trouble.

But he also remembered them supporting his weight with gentle hands, helping him hobble into the bathroom. He remembered them speaking to him kindly, as if a grown man wetting the bed were an everyday occurrence, not a source of deep shame.

“*Oh.... Sam, could you give me a hand here? No, no, you don't have to apologize, Winter. Now, I'm going to touch your hand and your shoulder and help you sit up, then we'll see if we can go into the bathroom and get you cleaned up, okay?*”

They were always like that, Winter mused as he shuffled back into his room. Cleaning up his messes, helping him out of the pathetic problems he made for himself. And they didn't complain or look
down on him, just offered their strength.

He picked up his phone to check the time before returning to bed, but discovered his phone had died. He plugged it in again and waited for it to power up, staring vacantly out the window. Suddenly the phone started vibrating with all the notifications waiting for him. He looked down in surprise. Three missed calls and over ten texts....

Winter played one of the voicemails, and immediately his ears rang with Steve's familiar voice.

“Hey, Winter, guess you don't have your phone with you right now. Listen, I just wanted to let you know that we've run into a dead end here, so Sam and I are headed your way tomorrow. I'll let you know once we work out the details. Okay, bye.”

Heart pounding, Winter checked the timestamp on the voicemail. It had been sent last night. He hastily tapped on the second one.

“Good morning, Winter!” Steve's voice was cheerful, but a note of concern had entered it now. “Hope you're doing okay. I haven't heard back from you yet, but we'll be home soon. Okay, guess we'll talk then.”

The third voicemail was from Sam. It sounded like he was in some crowded place. “Yo, Winter!” he said, sounding like he was trying to keep his voice down so someone wouldn't hear. “I don't know what's going on, man, but Steve's doing that thing where he pretends that he's not worried but it's totally obvious anyway. He's checking his phone every five minutes.... Anyway, we're about to get on the plane, but send him a text or something when you get a chance, okay? See you soon.”

Winter hastily opened the string of text messages, all of which were from Steve. First he'd sent their flight details and the time they estimated getting back to the cabin. Then, every few hours he'd sent a short message, starting with things like Miss you! and Can't wait to see you! But even in those simple bits of text, Winter could hear the worry Sam had talked about.

Are you okay?

It's just that you've been really quiet.

I'm probably just being paranoid.

Sorry, just tell me if I'm being annoying and I'll stop.

The last text read, We're on the plane now. Please just let me know when you get this?

Winter hurriedly sent a text to both of them: Really really sorry, didn't realize my phone died. I'm so glad you're coming home!

He barely had to wait a minute before Sam responded. He lives!

Steve's text came only a few seconds later. We just landed in Denver. Should be there in time for lunch!

Winter looked up from his phone and suddenly became aware of the sunlight streaming through the window, glowing on the rug by his bed. In that moment, he forgot his listless apathy. There was no time to mope around in his bed! He had to get a shower, tidy up the cabin, wash those dishes that had been piling up in the sink....

Winter realized he was smiling. His brothers were coming home.
The intense relief and joy of seeing Steve and Sam again only made the prospect of the next goodbye more unbearable than it had been the first time. Winter knew now what he had to look forward to. He knew what it would be like, to sit around this empty house with only an occasional text and the voice in his head to break the monotony.

He stood on the front steps, hugging Steve with all his might, and he didn't want to let go. He couldn't let go. He knew exactly why Steve and Sam were leaving, and he knew the world needed their help, but everything within him screamed that this was wrong. He should be going with them. He needed to be there, in case things went south as drastically as they had with Crossbones. What if someone else wounded them that badly, and he wasn't there to protect them?

So if they died...it would be because he cared more about keeping his secret than keeping them safe. He was so selfish. Even now...holding Steve, knowing this might be their last farewell, he was too scared to tell him the truth.

He hated himself.

A murmur in his ear broke the chain of his thoughts. “I'm sorry, Winter...but I have to go.”

Just look at him—clinging to Steve like a greedy little child. He couldn't even let Steve go save countless thousands of people without throwing a tantrum. But the loneliness of the days ahead crashed over him already, and it was all he could think about. “What will I do if...you don't come back this time?”

It's what you deserve, the voice in the back of his head whispered, daring to appear now that Steve was nearly gone. If you hate yourself for how you're acting, imagine how disgusted he must be. All you ever think of is yourself. I hope he dies out there. I hope he dies never knowing who you really are.

“Hey,” Steve said, his hand rubbing soothing circles into Winter's back, “I promised you I would. Don't you believe me?”

“Yeah...but what if something happens? What if I...n-never...” What if I never get a chance to show you what's under my mask? What if I never tell you the truth? What if you die, and I'm still such a coward that you never found out I'm still alive? The words caught in his throat, tangled up with the vicious attacks of that voice.

Steve put his hands on Winter's shoulders and pushed gently. Winter thought he was trying to get away, but he stopped when their faces were inches apart, just far enough so they could look each other in the eye. “You've changed me, Winter. I'm not the way I used to be. And that means I carry a little piece of you with me wherever I go. It's not the same as being with you for real, but...sometimes it's almost like you're still there. I hope it's a little like that for you too.”

Winter looked deep into his eyes, as gentle and warm as ever. I don't hate you, they seemed to say. No matter what you tell yourself, I don't hate you. It's going to be okay. We'll see each other soon.

He nodded, letting Steve step back and slip from his arms. “Winter!” Steve called as he got into the
car. “We'll be back before you know it!”

Winter stood there as they drove away, but he couldn't watch. His heart was a ball of lead sinking to his toes.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
Consider and answer me...
lest I sleep the sleep of death,
lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

- Psalm 13:1-4
As usual, I found this Sam chapter challenging to write, and thus I’ve been putting it off for too long. (It was originally going to be chapter 33, so that should tell you something—I had to write three Winter chapters before I could dredge up enough inspiration for this one! XD) I’m nowhere near as awesome of a person as Sam is, nor am I that humble, so it's always hard for me to figure out how to write this selfless guy just being himself. I certainly wouldn’t be reacting to these events like he does!

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 3 (“Withdraw”), 7 (“Cross the Distance”), and 10 (“Into the Inferno”).

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Life hurts and there's no warning
Lightning strikes, my heart is storming

The rain is a blessing in disguise
The flood's coming and it's drowning all the lies

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I will face everything and rise
Never gonna quit until I die
Angels keep falling from the sky
I'll take the broken wings and learn to fly
I will face everything and rise

- “Face Everything and Rise” by Papa Roach

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Requested by a guest on AO3

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There were some things Sam had been prepared for when he tagged along with Steve and Winter. Things like hiding out in a remote cabin and coming up with a cover story when they went into town so that no one would suspect who they really were. But there were also a lot of things Sam would never have expected in a million years—things like starting awake in the middle of the night to the sound of a delirious man in a bandanna pleading at the top of his lungs in Spanish. (Sam didn't know a whole lot of Spanish, but he at least knew what whimpering cries of no and por favor meant.)

As the days dragged on and Winter's withdrawal progressed only at a snail's pace, both Sam and Steve could feel the stress wearing them down. They took six-hour shifts at Winter's bedside, making sure they were on hand to tend to Winter's needs immediately. That meant neither Steve nor Sam were able to get more than a few hours of sleep at a time, in between going to town for groceries, fixing food for themselves, and at least attempting to keep the rest of the house from turning into a pigsty.

Rather than complaining or regretting his choices, however, Sam felt a deep satisfaction he'd rarely felt except when he was patching up someone's wounds. It wasn't exactly contentment or happiness—bandaging a dozen bullet wounds before a soldier bled out was nerve-wracking at best, as was trying to restrain the Winter Soldier when he was so out of it that he thought you were a Hydra agent. But when he dabbed at a feverish soldier's forehead with a damp cloth or helped him sip cool water and gently assured him he was going to live to see the sunrise...he knew he was where he needed to be. Whether in the desert or in this bedroom, this was the right place for him.

And, especially once they'd figured out their routine, there were plenty of quiet hours too. Times when Winter would sink into a deep, healing sleep without the muttering and restless movements. Times when Sam would venture into town and get to enjoy a long ride through the twisting mountain roads, either in silence or with the windows rolled down and his favorite tunes playing. And when he discovered that Steve had never heard of cardamom or lemon grass, he also started going all out in the kitchen. After all, it was more fun to cook for other people than just for himself.

A few days into their little adventure, Steve found the used bookstore. Sam would never have pegged Steve as a bookworm, but he soon discovered how wrong that assumption was. It seemed that whenever Steve had a spare moment to himself, on his own or while sitting at Winter's bedside, he was doing one of two things: drawing or reading. Sam had to laugh when he realized this little detail that every history book had neglected to mention: Steve Rogers was a total nerd.

Then Steve started reading The Lord of the Rings to Winter. Not the first choice Sam would have made for an ex-assassin who was mostly incoherent these days and probably had no idea what to do with high fantasy. But Steve seemed to be enjoying himself, at least.

Sam had never read the books, though of course he'd seen the movies. He'd always been a little disgruntled that the character who shared his name was a chubby little gardener—and there had been a few years where he couldn't so much as look at a potato without all of his friends telling him to boil 'em, mash 'em, stick 'em in a stew! But...well...he liked listening to Steve reading those books. Even if he had to put up with the amused looks Steve sent his way whenever Samwise Gamgee came onto the page.

When listening to some of the earlier chapters, before Frodo had even left the Shire, Sam was surprised by a sudden affinity he felt for Frodo's friends. “You can trust us to stick to you through thick and thin—to the bitter end,” Steve read, smiling at Merry's loyalty. “And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours—closer than you keep it yourself. But you cannot trust us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo.”

Interesting. Sam had never thought of Steve resembling Frodo before. Not that he'd spent much time
comparing the people he knew to the characters in that story. If he'd stopped to consider it, he would
have expected Steve to seem more like Aragorn—someone noble and brave, a strong leader who
was nevertheless humble and kind. But here at the beginning, at least, he could definitely see Steve
in the way Frodo had naively thought he could sneak off on his dangerous quest without anyone to
help him.

“If you have to go, then it will be a punishment for any of us to be left behind, even in Rivendell. We
have come a long way with you and been through some stiff times. We want to go on.”

Sam smiled to himself. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all to share a name with a Hobbit. Even if he
was described as an excellent fellow, and would jump down a dragon's throat to save you, if he did
not trip over his own feet.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Sam had just emerged from the bathroom, yawning and scratching an itch on his back, when he
nearly ran into Winter. “Oh, sorry,” he mumbled, stepping around him. He was barely awake—it
was 5:45 when nature called this morning.

“I, um....”

Something in Winter's tentative whisper halted Sam in his tracks. He squinted over his shoulder at
Winter, taking in his posture. Winter stood next to the railing around the stairs, hugging himself and
darting furtive glances up at him. Sam turned to face him fully, his brain sluggishly waking up.

“Yeah?”

Winter looked down at the floor and mumbled something indistinct, but Sam caught the word
running. Then he noticed the way Winter was using his right arm to pin his metal one tightly against
his chest, as if it might reach for a knife on its own if he didn't.

“You wanna go for a run?” Sam said. “Sure, just let me change real quick.”

With a grateful glance up at him, Winter nodded. “Okay.”

As Sam changed into his running clothes, he tried not to think too hard about his sore muscles from
their run the day before. And the day before that. And the day before that.... Not to mention how
much weight he was losing. He hadn't been fat to start with, but even though he tried to make a point
of eating extra these days, he couldn't keep up with the number of calories he was burning off by all
this running.

It sure would be helpful if Steve could chip in with helping distract Winter from his cutting problem.
Steve took much longer to tire than Sam did, and his enhanced healing abilities would probably leave
him without any aches and pains afterward. But...Winter had specifically asked him not to tell Steve
what they were doing. As much as he longed to get Steve in on the plan, he couldn't go back on his
word.

Sam opened the door to his room again and found Winter standing exactly where he'd left him,
fidgeting impatiently with his right sleeve. He practically leapt for the stairs as soon as he saw Sam,
hurrying down them and making a beeline for the front door. The urge to cut must be pretty bad this
morning. Sam wondered how long Winter had been resisting it before he’d gone for help. Or if he’d
been waiting until he finally heard Sam get out of bed.
As they were putting on their hats, shoes, and gloves by the front door, Steve came down the stairs after them and strode into the kitchen. Sam eyed him, half-wishing Steve would come right out and ask them what they were doing. Instead, he just puttered around the kitchen, getting the coffee pot going and studiously not looking in their direction. He looked like a puppy who had to stay in his kennel while everyone else in the house went for a walk.

And then it hit him. He couldn't tell Steve about the plan to help Winter cope, but he could still recruit his help.

“Hey,” Sam whispered in Winter's ear, nodding over at Steve. “You mind if I ask him to join us? He just looks really left out, you know?” Winter looked alarmed at this suggestion, so Sam hastily added, “I won’t tell him why we’re doing this unless you want me to. But I think he’d enjoy it.”

Winter's eyes darted between him and Steve. Then slowly, reluctantly, he nodded.

Sam tried not to let the triumph and relief he felt show on his face. “Hey, Cap, we’re heading out for a run. Wanna join us?”

Steve's expression immediately cleared as he looked over at them. “Okay,” he said, a grin splitting his face.

It only took a couple more minutes for Steve to get ready and join them, and Sam did his best to engage Winter in conversation during the wait, to get his mind off his arm. But soon, they began their slow jog across the lawn and up to the main road. Once there, Steve naturally took the lead, setting the pace to one that Sam immediately knew he wouldn't be able to keep up for long.

Steve was in the middle, with Winter on his other side, so Sam couldn't see the other man's face. But suddenly, with no warning, both of the others shot ahead like human missiles, their arms and legs moving so fast they were just blurs. “Aw, c’mon, no fair!” he gasped after them.

After a few paces, Sam staggered to a stop and bent over to catch his breath. It was just like when he'd first met Steve...except now there were two of them.

Sam couldn't suppress a smile as the cold mountain air stung the back of his throat. He still wasn't entirely sure why Winter had been so adamant about keeping the reason for these runs such a secret, but he hoped this was the beginning of a change for Winter. Maybe this would show him that Steve could help just as much as Sam, if not more.

Once he could breathe properly again, Sam turned and began a leisurely walk back to the cabin. As his sweat dried, the early morning breeze made him shiver. Maybe he should have put on another layer or two after all. Still, it was nice to just enjoy the scenery without gasping for breath as he and Winter jogged back. This really was a pretty place, with the snow-capped peaks and pine trees poking up against the brilliant blue sky. He’d have to remember this area for future vacations.

By the time Sam got back to the cabin, his nose felt like an icicle and his toes were numb, so he made a beeline for the shower. He lingered in the hot water, thawing himself out and soothing his worn-out muscles. But even though he took his time cleaning himself up and tossing in a load of laundry, the others still hadn't returned. So, obeying the rumbling of his stomach, he set to work getting breakfast ready. Two supersoldiers running full-tilt would probably be able to eat an elephant in one sitting.

Since they were fresh out of elephants, Sam just whipped up two big bowls of pancake batter—one with blueberries and one with chocolate chips. He set the table, put three mugs next to the coffee machine (with a packet of hot cocoa mix next to one for Winter), and put milk and maple syrup on
the table for anyone who wanted them.

Hmm. Still no sign of the others.

He wasn't sure how fast Steve and Winter had been running, but at that speed, they could be miles away. After considering for a moment, Sam pulled on his coat and got into the car. He drove in the direction they'd gone, keeping his eyes peeled for any sign of his friends. Hopefully neither of them had broken a leg due to their insane speed on this winding mountain road. Had Steve taken his phone with him?

Thankfully, it didn't take too long before he rounded a bend and spotted them, walking towards him. Steve had an arm slung casually around Winter's shoulders, and Winter didn't look tense or uncomfortable with the proximity. Sam's heart lifted to see that.

There were no other cars around, so Sam just slowed to a stop in the road and lowered a window to say, “You know, I oughta just let you guys walk the whole way after leaving me behind like that.”

Steve opened his mouth to banter back, but Winter beat him to it. “It's not our fault you're a slowpoke.”

Sam stared at him. Had he...made a joke? Really? Mr. Doom-and-Gloom had discovered humor? Steve started to chuckle, and Sam let out a surprised laugh as well. It wasn't a very funny joke, but just the thought of Winter joking at all cracked Sam up more than anything. He and Steve shared a look as they laughed helplessly, more for joy and relief than anything else. And the look of consternation on Winter's face only made them laugh harder.

Chuckling and wiping tears of mirth from his eyes, Sam said, “Come on, let's go home. It's getting cold.”

Back at the cabin, Sam shooed the others off to take showers while he got the griddle going and spooned out the first few pancakes to start cooking. He'd just finished the first batch and slid them onto the serving plate when he heard footsteps descending the stairs. Already?

He smelled Steve's sweat an instant before Steve's arms wrapped around him from behind. “Hey!” he cried, wriggling out of Steve's grasp and grimacing. “I told you, no breakfast until you wash up!”

But when he turned around, he saw that Steve was beaming at him, his eyes sparkling like a kid at Christmas. Instead of responding to Sam's protest, he said in a hushed voice, “Sam...he wants to quit.”

“What?”

“He gave me his knives. All of them. He's...going to try to stop!”

Wow. Sam had been hoping the experience of running with Steve would help Winter, but he hadn't expected the change to come so...abruptly. He grinned, feeling some of Steve's palpable euphoria for himself. “That's great!”

And Winter had given Steve the knives. Not Sam. That was significant. It meant that, despite whatever misunderstandings and resentments they'd been struggling with up to this point, Winter was willing to set them all aside, because he knew that Steve could help him.

Sam was so proud of them both.
Great. It was raining again. It had been raining, or at least sprinkling, nonstop for the past week. Now, the three of them stood on the porch, staring out at the steady drizzle drenching the already-soaked front lawn.

Sam hated rain. Well, mostly he hated lightning and thunder, of course—inevitably, it made him think of Afghanistan and a hundred things that had happened there he'd rather forget. But even when it was just a steady rainfall like this one, without even a single grumble in the sky, he felt antsy. Like there was an itch on his back he couldn't quite reach. When it rained, he always felt like he was tensing up, waiting for the first flash of lightning that would turn his day from lousy to downright miserable.

Such an unrelenting stint of rain had made things especially challenging. He always put in extra effort to stay cheerful (or at least to act cheerful) when it rained. Not only did it keep others from worrying about him, it helped his mood more than brooding and feeling sorry for himself did. That was all right for a day or two, but a week? Even he was finding it hard not to grumble and glower like a certain ex-assassin he knew.

As if he could tell Sam was thinking about him, Winter spoke up from where he stood between Steve and Sam. “April showers bring May flowers.”

Steve glanced over, his glum expression brightening into a reminiscent smile. “My mother used to say that every time I complained about the rain. Even when it wasn't April.”

Sam's mother had said that too. Or had that been his grandmother...?

It suddenly occurred to him what his mother would say if she could see him now. Keep frowning like that, Sammy, and your face will get stuck like that! Now, stop feeling sorry for yourself—it's not going to do anyone any good. Nothing will get better unless you get up and do something about it.

He couldn't keep back a small smile as his mother's familiar voice rang in his head. How many times had she scolded him like that? Gideon had never paid much attention to her lectures, and Sarah had told Sam once that she found their mother's blunt words more hurtful than helpful in the wake of their father's death. But Sam had always listened, and taken her wisdom to heart. Somehow, what she'd said had always made sense to Sam.

And now, he needed to put that advice into practice. He'd paid enough attention to his anxiety and gloom. There had to be a silver lining, right? That's what his mother always said.

As he gazed across the muddy expanse of the front lawn, he thought of another grassy yard from long ago. Not the cramped one at his mom's house, not the pitiful strip of weeds in front of their apartment building where they'd lived in the city. No, the big backyard at his cousins' house in the suburbs. They'd gone to visit during the summer, just a few months before his father had died. A big summer storm had rolled through, and he and all of his cousins had gone racing around barefoot, splashing in puddles and yelling like crazy. Sarah had been too young to worry about her hair, and it was before Gideon had drifted away and become a stranger.

It was one of his favorite memories, one that brought a smile to his face even now. He glanced sidelong at Winter and Steve, and wondered....

Well. No better way to find out.
With a loud whoop to psych himself up, Sam kicked off his shoes and socks, then bounded down the steps. The rain crashed over his head, harder than he'd been expecting. Colder, too. But he embraced it, holding out his arms and spinning in a circle just like he had as a kid. He tipped his head back, making sure every inch of him got as wet as possible. Mud squelched underfoot, sucking at his heels and splashing up onto his ankles as he danced around the yard.

It was like he was that boy again, racing around carefree and barefoot, with nothing to grieve and nothing to fear. He let out a laugh of sheer joy and called out, “I used to do this with my brother and sister when we were kids!” He looked over at Steve and Winter, who still stood on the porch. “C'mon, you old fogies! Jump in a puddle! Feel the mud between your toes!”

Steve was the first one to follow his advice. After sticking one sock into each shoe and neatly lining them up at the top of the steps next to Sam's hastily-discarded ones, he calmly walked out into the yard, squinting a little until he got used to the rain pattering on his head. “You're going to catch your death,” he said, sounding even more like Sam's grandmother.

“And you're not?” Sam said, raising an eyebrow.

Steve puffed out his chest, his eyes twinkling with humor. “I have the immune system of ten men. You, my friend, do not.”

“Yeah, yeah, we'll see who's laughing when you get a cold.” Sam said this casually, then whipped his elbow out and jabbed at Steve's side. Steve slipped on the wet grass, grabbing onto Sam's arm to keep himself upright. Too late, Sam realized he was going down as well. But he was determined to take Steve with him. He grabbed at Steve's leg, laughing in triumph as Steve lost his balance and sat down right in the middle of a large mud puddle. Sam didn't care that he'd slipped down onto his back. That was half the fun of playing in the rain in the first place: getting as dirty as possible.

The surprise slipped from Steve's face as he looked over at Sam and joined in his laughter. He staggered to his feet and held out his hand to Sam. Sam grabbed it, trying to pull Steve back down, but Steve was ready for this and had his feet planted firmly on the ground this time. With a grin, he effortlessly hauled Sam upright.

They shared another couple of friendly jabs, trying to knock each other down without losing their own footing. Then Sam glanced over at the porch, where Winter still stood high and dry. “Hey, Winter, come on down here!” he yelled, beckoning eagerly. “You haven't lived until you've run around barefoot in the rain!”

It was too far for him to see Winter's expression, but he didn't move.

“It's all right,” Steve said, still grinning. “It's not that cold once you get used to it. I think you'll like it.”

Oh, right. Winter was probably thinking of that time he'd gotten snow down the back of his shirt and panicked. Sam felt a rush of deja vu, even though their surroundings looked completely different than they had on Christmas morning. Then, as now, he and Steve had run around the yard like little boys while Winter watched from the safety of the porch. Back then, they'd coaxed him down to join them, and it had ended with him screaming and flailing around in the snow. Would something like that happen this time too?

But almost four months had passed since that day. Winter sat down on the top step, taking off his shoes and socks with deliberate movements. Then he stood up and went down one more step. He stood, as if steeling himself, looking warily out at the rain.
“Come on, it's fun!” Steve coaxed. “Just try it!”

“I...I don't want to fall down...” Winter murmured hesitantly, his voice nearly lost in the rush of the stream out back.

Steve strode over to the stairs, holding out a hand. “Here, just hang onto me. I won't let you fall.”

Winter's expression immediately cleared a little as he reached out and took Steve's hand. He ventured onto the next step, flinching when the rain finally found him. Sam found himself tensing up at the same time, waiting for screams to split the air. He inched closer, in case he had to help Steve restrain him or something....

“Can I hold onto Sam too?”

Sam met Winter's gaze, surprised. He wasn't sure how he could help, but he wasn't about to refuse. “Sure thing, man,” he said, rubbing his hand over a less-muddy portion of his shirt as he walked over to join them. Sam grabbed Winter's metal hand, which was cold to the touch.

Winter looked from one of them to the other, then cautiously stepped down the rest of the way onto the grass. Winter's metal fingers were tight around Sam's hand, but he could tell that Winter was holding back his full strength. Very different from the times he'd hallucinated and tried to fight them.

For a minute or two, Winter just stood there, shoulders hunched, letting the rain beat on top of his head and soak him to the skin. Then his metal fingers slid from Sam's grip. He turned his hand over and over, holding it out in the rain as if to see its glistening surface shimmer in the light. Next he pulled his other hand from Steve's, cupping both hands together to catch the rain.

Slowly, Winter relaxed. Sam watched it happen—slowly seeping through him, like a litmus test in a science experiment. His head raised, then his shoulders lowered, then he dropped his arms to his sides and stood straighter. He tipped his head back, shaking sopping strands of hair out of his face, and closed his eyes as he let the rain wash over him. Then he slowly raised his arms over his head, as if to embrace the stormy sky.

When Winter started to spin in lazy circles, Sam and Steve backed away quickly, giving him room to move. Sam stood up against the porch, watching his friend spinning around the lawn just because he could. Watching Winter...he forgot about himself. His anxiety and gloom faded into the background, suddenly less important than the simple joy of a man finally letting himself free. The man who spun dizzily through mud puddles for the sheer sensory pleasure of it had been hiding inside Winter all this time, but only now had it emerged for the rest of the world to see.

Sam smiled. He'd found his silver lining.

Especially when both Winter and Steve fell flat on their faces and made complete fools of themselves, and the air rang with their laughter. Both of their laughter. Winter lay on his back, laughing up at the stormy sky.

Sam joined in, laughing till he could hardly breathe. Let the thunder roll.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than
yourselves.

- Philippians 2:3
A Hairy Problem

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the extremely punny chapter title; I couldn't resist! XD This chapter is proof, as if anyone needed it, that I do much better with angsty hurt/comfort than I do with happy, fluffy stuff like this. I can write for hours about Winter cutting himself and battling his inner demons, but the minute I decided to write a chapter about ordinary, everyday hygiene routines, my muse skipped town. I only managed to coax her back by promising a few angst sprinkles throughout and then making sure the next chapter is much angstier. So there's that to look forward to, I guess. Also, as I hope is obvious to all, I'm not a man and thus everything in the first couple sections is me using my imagination and YouTube tutorials to try to write about something I have no actual experience doing.

This chapter takes place after the end of Make Me Whole.

You're taking me deeper
You're making me whole

...

You hold my head up
You remind me who I am
You hold my head up
I'm alive in you again
I'm made new

- “Made New” by Lincoln Brewster

~*~*~*~*~*~

It had been almost a week since Bucky had taken off his mask, but Steve was still getting used to seeing his whole face. He caught himself staring at Bucky's chin and cheeks when he chewed or yawned, or even just when he spoke. He tried not to make his staring obvious, in case it made Bucky self-conscious, but...it was so strange. So surreal.

Steve probably wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been watching the way Bucky's jaw moved as he chewed a piece of toast that morning. But because he was fascinated by the way Bucky's newly-shaven cheek bulged out as he ate, Steve noticed a fresh cut just above his jawline.
Bucky, who had been gazing absently into space, suddenly seemed to notice Steve's scrutiny. "Whmph?" he asked through a mouthful of toast.

"You cut yourself shaving," Steve said, indicating the spot on his own face.

"Mmm." Bucky finished his bite, tapping his finger against the cut to check for blood. He shrugged. "Yeah, happens a lot."

Steve leaned in for a closer look, then noticed a second cut close to Bucky's ear. "You're cut here too...." When he rubbed his thumb across the mostly-healed cut, he noticed how rough and dry Bucky's skin felt. "Your cheek's all raw and irritated," he said with concern, noticing tiny red spots dotting the space he'd shaved that morning.

Bucky leaned back in his chair, out of Steve's reach, and covered both cheeks with his hands. "Look, I know I'm not good at it like you are," he said defensively, "but I didn't shave myself for seventy years, so I'm still a little out of—"

"You run out of shaving cream or something?" Sam interrupted, watching them from where he stood by the coffeepot.

"Shaving cream?"

Sam's eyebrows rose incredulously. "Yeah—white stuff, looks like whipped cream but tastes a lot worse? You put it on so the razor slides easier?"

Bucky dropped his hands into his lap and hung his head slightly, his eyes sliding from one of them to the other. His face was slowly turning redder and redder. "I...thought that was...face...soap?"

Steve resisted the urge to drop his face into his hands. Sam, meanwhile, was suffering from a sudden coughing fit that sounded suspiciously like laughter. "Don't worry, Buck; I'll show you what to do tomorrow."

While Bucky washed his face with warm water the next morning, Steve found his shaving cream and examined the label curiously. Early on in their time together, after Winter's withdrawal was through and he'd started taking care of his own hygiene, Steve and Sam had both let him sample the products they used and let him choose which ones he liked best. It had been an early opportunity to encourage him to make decisions for himself.

Winter had chosen the same shaving cream that Steve used, but now that he was looking at it, Steve realized for the first time that it didn't actually have the words 'shaving cream' on the front. Anyone else looking at the canister would know immediately what it was, but...Bucky wasn't 'anyone else.'

"Okay," Steve said when Bucky hung up his washcloth. "You put this—" He squirted a little shaving cream into his hand and held it up for Bucky's inspection. "—on your face first."

Bucky cleared his throat and glanced away, his cheeks turning pink again.

"Like this." Steve proceeded to spread the shaving cream over Bucky's stubble. He'd originally intended to hand over the can, but Bucky immediately relaxed at his touch, even closing his eyes as
Steve's fingers stroked against his cheek. So Steve smiled and continued spreading the cream around.

Bucky didn't open his eyes until Steve was finished and rinsed off his fingers. Looking at his reflection, Bucky said, “Okay...yeah, I do remember doing this. I don't know why I didn't think of it before....”

Steve shrugged. “Seventy years of not shaving versus...what, ten? Fifteen?”

“And they didn't exactly care about the quality of their grooming,” Bucky said softly.

Steve wasn't sure what to say to that sobering thought, but Bucky drew a breath and said briskly, “Okay, so now I use the razor?”

“Right.” Steve picked up the razor himself and gestured tentatively with it. “Do you...mind if I...?”

“Go ahead.” He turned his lathered cheek in Steve's direction.

As Steve proceeded to shave Bucky's face, gently holding his head in place with his free hand, he remembered a time when Bucky had been the one showing him what to do. Bucky's father had taught him, giving him his own shaving kit on his thirteenth birthday. But Steve had never known his father, and his own peach fuzz hadn't even become noticeable until he was seventeen.

“Remember when you taught me how to shave?” Steve said, turning Bucky's head so he could reach his other cheek.

Bucky grinned, forcing Steve to pull the razor back as his cheek bunched up. “You almost lopped your own nose off!!”

“And you just about had a heart attack,” Steve chuckled. “But we were using straight razors back then. These things are much less dangerous.” He indicated the disposable razor in his hand, then continued his work.

He had tilted Bucky's head back to take care of his neck when Bucky mumbled, “That's how I started cutting.”

Steve stopped, watching Bucky's Adam's apple slide past as he swallowed. “What?”

Bucky lowered his head enough to look at Steve. “I cut myself shaving. It...made me wonder. What it would be like. If I was the one...to cause the pain.”

It shouldn't have been surprising to hear Bucky talking about this. Steve knew full well that Bucky was Winter, so he had been the one struggling with that deadly habit all along. But he was still getting used to the idea that the friend whose strong, gentle hands had guided his first shaving experience had been the same one cutting himself over and over again.

Bucky quickly looked away again. “Sorry. Don't know why I thought of that. Shouldn't've said anything.”

“No...it's okay.” He looked down at Bucky's arm, criss-crossed with scars of various shapes and sizes. Resolutely, he grabbed Bucky's hand and pressed the razor into it. “Why don't you finish up?”

Immediately, he second-guessed himself. “I mean...unless it's still...difficult to...you know, if it's too much of a tempt—”

“Don't worry.” Bucky interrupted, grabbing the razor and leaning closer to the mirror to see the portions Steve had missed. “You taught me how to do it the right way.”
Their eyes met in the mirror, and a shared smile made it clear that the deeper implications of his words weren't lost on either of them.

~*~*~*~*~*~

Most of the time, Bucky didn't consider his life very different now that he wasn't wearing a mask. Well, of course no one called him Winter anymore, and it was wonderful not to have to watch his steps so carefully for fear that he would let something incriminating slip. It was nice not to have to worry about switching between the mask and the bandanna, and so much more convenient to just go into the kitchen and get a drink right away if he was thirsty, instead of having to take his glass into the bathroom or something. It was easier to talk and smile and even yawn, now that the stiff mask wasn't restricting his jaw anymore.

The one thing he hadn't expected his mask to affect was his hair. He had no idea when it had been cut last; he assumed some Hydra handler must have done so at some point, but he had no memory of it. And they'd let it grow long over the months he'd spent with Steve and Sam; there had always been so many more important things to worry about.

By now, his hair reached the middle of his back. He hadn't really noticed it getting so long, since it happened so gradually, but now that his mask was gone, he couldn't seem to stop noticing. He kept on getting strands caught in his mouth when he ate, now that the bandanna wasn't protecting his face. When he went outside on a windy day, his hair whirled around his face like a brown whirlwind, and it became impossible to talk without getting a mouthful of hair.

And the more he noticed his hair, the more he noticed other annoyances about its length. It took twice as long to wash and brush his hair as it used to. His hair kept getting caught on things or trailing into his food or flopping onto the page he was trying to read. Sometimes Steve's fingers would get tangled in it and there would be lots of yanking and apologizing before he could extricate himself.

Finally, after trying to read in the hammock one day and battling his hair instead, Bucky decided he'd had enough. He marched back inside and rummaged around in his shaving kit. There was a pair of sharp scissors in there, for the purpose of trimming one's beard, which he'd never used. He grabbed them and took them to Steve, who was busily sketching the hummingbirds congregating around the feeder out back.

Steve looked up questioningly when Bucky dropped the scissors with a clatter onto the table at Steve's elbow. Bucky grabbed a fistful of his own hair and said, “Could you cut my hair? Just...chop it all off. I'm tired of this.”

Slowly, Steve put down his sketchbook and picked up the scissors instead. “I have been wondering if you were ever going to get a trim. You've never had hair this long before.” He smiled as he pushed himself to his feet. “I guess that's part of why I never recognized you.”

“Do I really look that different with long hair?” Bucky asked in surprise as he followed Steve into his bathroom.

Steve grabbed a chair on his way in and placed it in the middle of the bathroom. “Well...taking everything else into consideration...yeah, kinda.”
Bucky thought about that as he sat down and let Steve comb the windswept tangles out of his hair. Of course it wasn't just the hair that had helped him keep his secret for so long. There was the mask and the metal arm, not to mention Steve's belief that Bucky was dead. Besides, Bucky had acted differently back then. Even now, he knew he wasn't exactly like the man he'd once been.

“So...how short?” Steve asked, breaking into his thoughts. “You really want me to cut it all off? Like the way it was before?”

Bucky frowned, fingerling the straggling ends thoughtfully. “Well...I don't want it getting in my face....” He thought about how short it had been, all of his life up until Hydra. It would certainly be easier to take care of....

“I'm sensing there's a 'but','” Steve said.

Bucky glanced up at him, then looked down at his hands twisting in his lap. Why was this embarrassing to admit? Steve had to know already, or he wouldn't do it.... “But I...I like it when you...run your hands through it.”

He was studiously looking down, hiding behind the long curtain of hair that slipped down over one shoulder. So he couldn't see the expression on Steve's face, and there was a beat of silence that he couldn't decipher. Then he felt a hand on his head, fingers nestling into his hair. Fingertips scratched gently against his scalp, then stroked smoothly down the back of his neck. He felt the gentle tug on his hair all the way down to the end, halfway down his back.

Bucky peeked up at Steve, who smiled and stroked his hand down Bucky's hair again. “What about this length?” Steve asked, stopping his fingers at Bucky's shoulders. “It's about as long as it was when I first saw you. I mean...in D.C.”

It was almost half the length Bucky's hair currently was. That would make it much easier to care for, and would probably lessen the other problems considerably. But it would still be long enough for Steve to run his fingers through it. “Yeah, that sounds good.”

Steve wrapped a towel around Bucky's shoulders and got to work, snipping away at Bucky's hair. After the first few cuts, he said, “Remember when we used to cut each other's hair?”

Memories he hadn't thought of in ages flew through his mind. Memories of carefully snipping bits of thin blond hair that fluttered down onto his toes. “Back when we were too poor to go to the barber shop?”

“I always had to do twice the work,” Steve chuckled. “Your hair grows so fast; no wonder it's already this long.”

Bucky dredged up more of those ancient memories. “It was your mom who taught us, right?”

“Yeah—she had to go to work with a few uneven trims before I got the hang of it.”

They laughed and reminisced the rest of the way through the haircut. In no time, it seemed, Steve pulled the towel off Bucky's shoulders and told him he could stand up. Bucky checked his reflection in the mirror, tugging at locks of hair that now brushed his shoulders.

“How is it?” Steve asked, stepping up behind him and running his fingers through Bucky's hair again.

Bucky closed his eyes to savor the sensation of Steve's fingers stroking his scalp again. “Perfect.”
I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive me to glory.

- Psalm 73:23-24
You know what's really hard? Writing something moderately profound on command. When I decided what this chapter was going to be about, I knew I needed to have Winter say something helpful to Steve, something that would make him sit up and pay attention, and focus on what he really needed to do. But what on earth do you say in the face of such horrific tragedy? So if I'm really being honest, this whole chapter sprang up primarily so I could stall for time and hope that something would occur to me :P While doing so, I also indulged myself in some super-angsty flashbacks, which is basically my favorite thing to do. And after all, I did promise my muse that we'd go there after all the fluff of Chapter 37 ;)

This chapter takes place in Make Me Whole chapter 11, “Hail Hydra,” and 12, “Ultimatum.”

I wanna be the first in line  
Be the one to save your life  
All I wanna do is hold you

But somebody shot you down right in the middle of a war outside  
Words mean so little when you've heard those lies  
You need someone to make you believe  
Make you believe

I will be your soldier  
I'll stand and fight until it's over  
And if your heart is getting colder  
You know I will always be your soldier

- “Soldier” by Backstreet Boys

Winter was sweeping the kitchen floor when he heard Sam swear loudly. He looked up in surprise to
find Sam scowling at his phone. Winter went back to his sweeping, assuming it was some technical problem. But when Sam didn’t stop the stream of profanity as he continued to scroll down, Winter propped the broom in the corner and went over to investigate.

Sam was looking at the front page of the local newspaper's website. Winter read over his shoulder as Sam flipped back up to the top of the article to read it more slowly:

At 6:30 Thursday morning, local police received a letter allegedly written by Captain America, claiming responsibility for the Lee Memorial Park bombing. The bomb, which detonated at approximately 4:15 Wednesday evening in a playground area in the middle of the park, left 12 dead and 8 in critical condition in St. Mary's Hospital.

A police representative, who preferred to remain anonymous, stated that the letter they received contained details about the bomb not disclosed to the public. “As far as we can tell, this letter was composed by the actual bomber,” the representative said. “We are pursuing several leads as to the identity, but it’s too early to say whether the writer is using Cap's name as an alias or not.”

Captain America has not made a public appearance since the S.H.I.E.L.D./Hydra data leak seven months ago, and other known members of the Avengers declined to comment. Only Stark Industries’ public relations office confirmed the Captain's whereabouts at this time are unknown.

Due to the ongoing investigation and in consideration of the victims and their families, police released this redacted copy of the letter with purportedly only bomb-specific information removed.

I am Captain America.

I left a present for little Johnny Warner and his friends to find, and everything went according to plan. You're probably wondering why I did it. Why did I blow all those happy little smiles away, and on Johnny's birthday too?

It's because I don't care. I don't care about you. I don't care about your families. I don't care if this whole country goes up in flames. I started by destroying your first line of defense, and I won't stop until the rest of the country has burned to the ground along with its precious heroes. Only then will we have equality.

Hail Hydra.

Winter's heart pounded in his ears as Sam tapped on a link to pull up a video of a reporter saying many of the same things. The tinny sound of her voice was like so much static to Winter, and he barely noticed the video of emergency vehicles and police tape surrounding the site of the bombing.

All he could see were those two short words, standing out sharply against the white background of the webpage. Hail Hydra.

Anyone who knew anything about Steve would know that he hadn't actually written those words. And Winter knew, with terrifying clarity, exactly who had. It all fit. He'd just been desperately trying to deny it until now.

The school fire. The bomb that had detonated yesterday. Brazen acts of terrorism carried out in broad daylight. Targeting helpless, innocent children. Killing them in the most frightening, painful way,
attracting media attention so he could easily watch the aftermath play out. The letter that mocked everything Steve fought for and cared about, throwing the blame on Steve and claiming it in the name of Hydra in one breath.

Winter could recognize his handiwork as surely as if he were looking at his fingerprints.

Crossbones.

The Soldier sat, outwardly calm, while a technician repaired the damage done to his metal arm in the fight. Inside, his mind was a whirl of confused thoughts and sensations. Captain America had been his target, and he’d been doing everything he could to kill him...but that man had said, I don’t want to fight you.

Why? Why on earth had he talked about how his masters hurt him? Of course they hurt him—when he did something wrong, when he didn’t obey fast enough, when they thought he needed it....

Captain America's voice still rang in his ears. You deserve better than that. Come with me. You'll never have to let anyone lay a finger on you again.

The sound of a heavy vault door opening broke through the Soldier's thoughts. Without moving his head, his eyes snapped over to the door, through which Alexander Pierce marched, followed by his most trusted thug. The Soldier's gaze flicked between Pierce and Crossbones, knowing they were the two most dangerous people in the room.

Pierce motioned for the men surrounding the Soldier at gunpoint to stand down as he strode over to face his Asset. Tucking his glasses into a pocket of his grey suit, Pierce eyed the Soldier closely. “Mission report,” he barked.

The Soldier immediately responded, obeying the instincts that had been pounded into him over the years. “Mission report, September 23, 2014. Target: Captain America. Mission status—” Suddenly his voice caught in his throat as he realized what was coming. He hadn’t eliminated his target. And that meant punishment. He tried to continue his report, but he could hardly force another word out. “F-F-Fail...Failure....”

A blast of pain across one side of his face. As the Soldier's head snapped to the side, he could feel where the ring on Pierce's finger had hit his cheekbone when he backhanded him. “Mission report, now.”

The Soldier tried. He really did. But when he looked up at Pierce, everything inside him seemed to shrivel up. “T-T-Target was-was-was acc-comp...accomp-panied b-by—“

Pierce turned away from him with a sound of disgust and wave of his hand that shut the Soldier up immediately. Pierce rounded on the two technicians who had seen to the Soldier's arm and dose of medication. “What is this?” he demanded in a deceptively calm voice. “Will someone please explain to me why the Asset is failing so spectacularly at the one thing he was created to do?”

The technicians stammered something about 'traumatic complications' and 'temporary conditioning failure,' but the Soldier could hardly even listen to them. He stared straight ahead at the man who still stood in front of him. Crossbones stood, seemingly at his ease with his hands held loosely at his sides, waiting for orders. But his dark, glittering eyes were fixed unblinkingly on the Soldier. There was the tiniest curve to one corner of his mouth, as if he were on the verge of a feral grin.

He was ready. Eager. He knew what was coming.

The Soldier couldn't help flinching when Pierce turned back to face him again. He tried to hold
himself together, to prove that he was still useful, that he would obey without further encouragement...but he knew it was useless. He'd already failed.

Pierce's lips pressed into a tight, disappointed line, and the Soldier had to clench his fists to keep from throwing himself to the ground and groveling at his feet, begging for mercy. “I'm starting to think this is more trouble than it's worth,” Pierce said, a dismissive wave of his hand indicating 'this' as the Winter Soldier. “You said Rogers talked to him?”

“Yes,” one of the technicians said, holding up the recording device the Soldier always wore on missions. “We have the recording if you'd like—"

“Doesn't matter,” Pierce said, already turning away. “Wipe him and start over. And once the job is finished, dispose of him.” He directed the last sentence at Crossbones with a meaningful look.

“My pleasure,” Crossbones said, his eyes boring into the Soldier's for a long moment before he turned to follow Pierce out of the room.

Sam's voice suddenly broke through the memory. “Cap, there's something you gotta see!”

Winter blinked hard and took a deep breath, trying not to make it too obvious. He glanced over at Sam, still watching the video with a fierce expression on his face. Then Winter looked over at the sound of hurrying feet on the stairs, and saw Steve approaching. A little of the fear dissipated at the sight of his friends. Even if it was Crossbones after them...he knew his friends would protect him with everything they had.

He watched Steve's expression as Sam showed him the article. Shock, horror, grief, disbelief...but most of all, anger. Blinding, all-consuming rage. A cold shiver ran down Winter's spine. He'd never seen that expression on Steve's face, not even when they'd been fighting each other. Steve set Sam's phone down on the table, his hands trembling as if they wanted nothing more than to strangle whoever was responsible for this atrocity.

Winter picked up the phone again and scrolled through the article. He double-checked the signs, trying to confirm his suspicions. If anyone could have survived the fall of Hydra, it was certainly believable that Crossbones would. And who else would be brazen enough to claim Captain America had killed children, after he had destroyed Hydra almost single-handedly?

“I think I know who did it,” Winter said, putting the phone down and meeting the others' surprised looks. He suddenly felt self-conscious, and scrambled to explain. “I...I don't know his real name. Everyone in Hydra uses code names, to hide their identities even from each other. They called him Crossbones.”

Steve slowly straightened, his expression of shock and horror settling into one of determination. The blistering anger was still there, but restrained and harnessed for a purpose. “What can you tell us about him?”

Winter swallowed hard, his heart beating a crazy rhythm in his chest. “When...When Hydra needed to get rid of an individual...quickly and efficiently...I was the one they'd use.” Memories rushed at him, springing up from the darkness of his past. He wrestled them back; there was no time to deal with them now. Taking a deep breath, he continued. “But if they wanted to kill lots of people, and they didn't care how much mess it made, or they wanted to give someone a warning...they'd send in Crossbones. I...I worked with him...sometimes. He was one of...P-Pierce's favorites.”

His voice gave out. It was one thing to know that Hydra was hunting them down. It was quite another to put a name and face to their pursuer, to know that Crossbones was the one after them. The
man who had beaten him over and over, who smiled when they pushed him into the chair, who had practically volunteered to kill him. If he found them, he would draw out their deaths as long as possible, making them suffer for his perverse delight.

But no. They wouldn't let that happen. And they had to stop him before he killed any more innocent bystanders. Winter couldn't stand the thought of Crossbones sitting in some secret hideout, laughing at the grief and terror he'd sown.

Winter had to clear his throat before he could manage to form words again. He did his best to focus on the facts, rather than letting his fears take over. He needed to do everything he could to help Steve stop him. “He's a leader. Crossbones never works alone; he'll have a whole team backing him up. They'll all be as skilled as they come—and disciplined; Crossbones hates disorder. Even if Hydra doesn't have enough manpower to give him a whole team, he has a partner who's almost as bad as he is. Ruthless. Merciless. As long as he gets to kill someone, he doesn't care who it is.”

“So what's the partner's name?” Sam asked. “Skull?”

“Sam.”

Winter looked up, realizing belatedly that Sam had been joking. He'd been too busy thinking of that man's cold, unsmiling eyes. “Whoever Crossbones kills,” Winter said, glancing back and forth between them, “he'll make sure they die in the most painful way possible. He...likes making people hurt.”

Once the job is finished, dispose of him.

My pleasure.

Winter shivered. Crossbones would get a chance to finish his mission soon.

~*~*~*~*~*~

In the past few days, Winter had watched from a distance as Steve and Sam did what little they could to help in the aftermath of Crossbones' attack. Because of his mask, he had to hang back and watch over them from afar. So he kept an eye out for any sign of danger as the others helped with the cleanup of the park, as they donated blood to help the survivors and money to help pay for funeral expenses, and as Steve visited the children who were still in the hospital.

He could see, even from the distance he had to maintain, how hard Steve was taking this. Steve seemed to alternate between barely-contained anger and soul-crushing grief. Winter knew he probably just wanted to fight Crossbones once and for all, to attack an obvious enemy rather than facing the fallout that he couldn't change.

Winter shifted slightly in his perch in the branches of a large tree, careful not to shake the leaves more than the gentle breeze did. A short distance away, Steve stood before a row of new graves, in a secluded corner of the town's cemetery. The small headstones stood in an even row, with little mounds of earth in front of them. Fourteen little lumps that marked the resting place of the children who had died at Crossbones' hand. The two at the far end had actually survived the initial blast, apparently. But hours of surgery and blood transfusions hadn't been enough to save them.

Steve had said he wanted to be alone, so Sam had stayed in the car and Steve had turned off the
communication equipment they’d been using to stay in touch while wandering through the town. Winter couldn’t hear what Steve was saying, but he could see his lips moving, murmuring soft words to each grave as his fingers brushed against the names carved into each one. Even from this distance, Winter could read one phrase that Steve repeated over and over: I'm sorry.

Winter wanted to say something that would make everything better. He wanted to gouge all of that pain out of Steve’s heart and lay it on his own shoulders instead. He already carried the weight of so many innocent deaths. If only he could carry those fourteen as well so that Steve wouldn't have to. He didn't deserve the accusations, the doubt, the guilt—not when he'd done everything he could to keep this kind of thing from happening.

“Steve...Steve, come on....”

Steve roughly pulled his shoulder away from Bucky's grip, turning back to the pile of rubble he was digging through. There were clean streaks running through his dirt-crusted face, but it was impossible to tell anymore which ones were sweat and which were tears.

“They're gone, Steve,” Bucky murmured. “We've done all we can.”

With a cry, Steve heaved an enormous block of concrete onto its side, exposing only more rubble. And a leg. A severed leg, still wearing its boot. Who knew where the rest of the body was, but Bucky didn't have to be a medic to know that the man would have bled out in minutes after sustaining a wound like that. Ally or enemy, he was dead.

“Steve....”

Steve whirled to face him. “Then why can't I do more?” he shouted, flinging an arm out to encompass the bombed-out village they'd been too late to save. “We've done all we can'? Then why is this all I can do?” He grabbed a fistful of his grubby uniform, stretching out the white star on his chest. “What use is this if I can't even—“

But Bucky knew he wasn't angry. Not really. So he stepped forward and pulled Steve into a hug. Steve was so tall and strong now, it was easy to forget sometimes that he was the same man Bucky had grown up with. The same kid who used to get into fistfights he knew he couldn't win because some bully had pulled a girl's pigtails.

Steve crumpled in Bucky's arms, burying his face in the hollow of Bucky's neck. His shoulders heaved, and Bucky could feel something wet trickling down under his shirt. “I'm supposed to be strong,” Steve mumbled, sniffing quietly. “Why can't I be strong enough to....”

“Stevie,” Bucky whispered into his ear. “Even you can't save everyone.”

Steve shook with one of his almost-silent sobs. “It's...It's worse than that,” he choked out. “They're d-dead... because of me. Because Hydra knew we were coming.... If-If we hadn't come this way....”

Bucky cut him off. “Then Hydra would have destroyed some other town somewhere. Don't take responsibility for all the evil in this world, Stevie. You're only responsible for doing what good you can.”

Winter blinked the memory away, glancing around quickly to make sure no danger had crept up on them while he'd been lost in thought. But the cemetery was empty as the sun fell towards the horizon. Steve was the only one walking through the gravestones, slowly making his way to the end of the row.

Finally, Steve straightened up from the last of the graves. After pausing a moment to look back along
the row of casualties, Steve turned to head back to the car, head bowed. Winter took one last careful look at their surroundings to make sure no one was watching, then dropped from the tree and strode briskly through the graves until he caught up with Steve.

They were almost at the car, where Sam sat in the driver's seat, watching Steve's approach with concern. Winter looked over at Steve, then mumbled, “Don't take responsibility for all the evil in this world. Just do what you can. And all you have to do is try, right?”

He was aware of Steve coming to an abrupt halt, but Winter hurried ahead to the car. He could have kicked himself for using the exact words he'd said to Steve all those years ago. If he could remember exactly what he'd said, Steve certainly could. Would Steve accept it as a mere coincidence?

He couldn't bring himself to so much as glance up until Steve climbed into the front seat. When he raised his head, he found Steve looking over his shoulder at him. Their eyes met, and Steve's lips raised in a slight smile. There was no suspicion in his expression, just sadness and gratitude.

Steve let out a weary sigh as he turned to face the front again. “Let's go home.”

~*~*~*~*~*~

Let the lying lips be mute,  
which speak insolently against the righteous  
in pride and contempt.

- Psalm 31:18
Wish You Were Here

Chapter Notes

I'm not entirely sure why, but this chunk of the story (Winter hanging out on his own) is possibly the one I've been most reluctant to work on in the entire thing. Maybe I was afraid it wouldn't be interesting enough to spend time on. But I ended up having fun anyway—especially with the little background characters I came up with for this chapter. I just hope this chapter doesn't come across as disjointed as it felt while writing it. Apologies for a bit of grossness/innuendo if you squint at one part.

This chapter takes place during Make Me Whole chapter 16, “Age of Ultron.”

You build your walls
Then break them away
’Cause that is what it takes
You saved yourself
You found who you are
That never goes away

And I know you wish for more
And I know you try
And now you realize
You know the time is right

The whole world is watching
When you rise
The whole world is beating
For you right now

- “Whole World Is Watching” by Within Temptation

~*~*~*~*~*~

Winter gave himself a day. One day to feel sorry for himself, and to let the voice in his head call him names for secretly wishing that Steve and Sam had stayed to keep him company rather than hunting down mystical weapons that had fallen into the wrong hands. The hours stretched on and on, leaving him empty and alone, stuck in this cabin with nothing to do.

When he woke up on the morning after they'd left, a strange thought occurred to him: He didn't have to say here. Naturally, he needed to be here when they got back, but what was preventing him from venturing out on his own in the meantime? Of course, he couldn't go out in public with his mask on, unless he wanted to draw a lot of stares....
But he could take the mask off.

He didn't actually need to wear the mask now that Steve and Sam were gone. The only reason he wore it was to make sure Steve didn't figure out who he was. But if he were around perfect strangers...it wouldn't matter if they saw his face, right? No one would recognize him. Even if someone thought he looked like Bucky Barnes from the history books, no one would expect to see him alive after all these years.

Of course, it was one thing to reason it all out to himself, but an entirely different matter to actually implement his plan. Winter began by closing all the curtains so no one could possibly see in, then taking off his mask inside the cabin.

At first, it was strange and even frightening to walk around with his face exposed like that. Even though there was no one to see, he kept on fighting the urge to cover his face with his hands. He hadn't realized how much he'd come to rely on the protection the mask afforded. But gradually, over the course of the next couple days, he began to grow more comfortable with not wearing the mask. It was a bit like taking it off when he was in the bathroom, only extended to the entire house. He could handle that well enough.

The next step was venturing outside without his mask. He set foot outside the first morning after he'd started this little experiment, because he needed to take the trash out. He knew the nearest house was miles away, and no one would be going for a walk or a drive before the sun had even risen, but his heart was still pounding all the way up the drive and back. He was grateful to shut the door safely behind himself.

But he made himself go outside again several times over the next few days. The cabin was in a secluded area, so there was very little chance of anyone catching sight of him. So he deliberately went for a few walks along the side of the road in broad daylight. A few cars swept past, but nothing catastrophic happened just because his face was uncovered. There was nothing to be afraid of.

On Friday, Winter took the plunge.

He dressed very carefully for the occasion. He deliberately chose dark clothes that hopefully wouldn't draw much attention, and he donned a pair of leather gloves to hide his metal hand. He also borrowed one of Steve's leather jackets to complete the ensemble. Hopefully, he would look like an unremarkable biker out for a relaxing drive or something.

Winter's heart was pounding as he drove into town. He knew there wasn't anything to be scared of, but it seemed like everyone he passed was staring at him. Why did the motorcycle have to be so loud? He drew attention to himself every time he accelerated, and he couldn't even hide behind tinted windows.

At first, he just drove around, looking at the scenery and trying to convince himself that no one was staring at him suspiciously. But finally, he decided if he was going to remain inconspicuous, he probably needed to stop driving around in circles.

Winter found a park in the middle of town and decided that was as good a place as any to start. He dithered about the motorcycle, pretending to struggle with the clasp of his helmet while actually scanning the small park for signs of danger. At this time of day, the playground in the middle of the park was crowded with mothers and small children. There was a grey-haired couple walking along one of the paths, and a teenage girl walking two small dogs on another.

Taking a deep breath, heart pounding as if he were entering an enemy stronghold, Winter ventured into the park. He walked along a paved pathway that circled in a lazy loop around the entire park,
eyeing everyone within view.

The old couple were coming his way, he suddenly realized. They were talking quietly to each other, keeping pace with the ease of long practice. As they approached, every muscle in Winter's body tensed up, readying for flight at a moment's notice. He shoved his gloved hands into his pockets to keep them from flying up to cover his exposed face.

They were almost upon him. The man's eyes flicked up to meet Winter's briefly, and Winter prepared to spin on his heel and run off at top speed....

"...but then I said no, it was 2.75 a gallon, so we should wait till we found a better deal, and then she said...."

The old couple passed by, deep in conversation. They'd barely even noticed he was there. Winter continued on his way, casting a furtive glance over his shoulder at them. It was okay. They hadn't noticed anything strange about him.

Slowly, the tension leaked out of his body and his heart rate slowed again. He could do this.

Winter meandered slowly along the park's pathways for at least an hour. When his route took him past the playground, he watched the children running around shrieking, or swinging on the swing set, or yelling for their mother to catch them when they went down the slide. They reminded him of the children Crossbones had targeted to hurt Steve, except that these children were happy rather than coughing and crying. Or dead.

As he watched, a small boy tripped and fell. Immediately, he burst into loud wails, clutching his skinned knee. His mother rushed over, enveloping him in an embrace while murmuring soothingly to him. She pulled out a brightly-colored band-aid for his knee and kissed it, while her son clung to her, sniffling miserably.

As he passed, Winter's enhanced hearing picked up on the words the mother was murmuring to her crying child. “It's okay, honey.... I know, I know.... You're okay now.... I've got you, sweetie....”

Why did that make him think of Steve?

By the time Winter had circled around to the other side of the playground, the little boy was already running around with his friends again, pain forgotten, tears wiped away.

He thought of Steve and Sam patching him up every time he made a mistake. He thought of laughing with Sam mere hours after he'd woken up screaming in the middle of a thunderstorm. He thought of holding Steve until he'd cried himself out, then smiled through his tears.

That's the way life was. The way it was supposed to be. You fell, you got hurt...and then someone who loved you picked you up and helped you smile again.

Eventually, after walking all the way around the park, Winter thought it might be nice to sit down for a bit. There were plenty of benches scattered alongside the path, but he wondered if it would look strange for him to just sit there, not doing anything. He didn't have a book or a newspaper or even breadcrumbs to feed pigeons or something....

His eyes alighted on a coffee shop across the street, which had little tables set up outside under umbrellas. Perfect. He could sit out there, sipping a drink and watching passersby without attracting attention.

There was just one snag in his plan: He would have to talk to someone to order a drink. Of course,
he didn't realize that until he'd crossed the street and opened the door to the cafe with the tinkling of a bell.

Winter glanced around the room, his heart pounding again. It wasn't very busy; there were only three people in there, all of them glued to laptops or phones and guzzling tall cups of coffee. He warily shuffled over to the counter, trying to keep all of them in sight while also breathing in a dozen delectable scents of coffee and pastries.

“Hi there!” called a chipper voice. “What can I getcha?”

Winter tore his eyes away from the dizzying array of drink choices written up on the wall behind the counter and found a smiling girl in her twenties standing behind the cash register. His eyes were immediately drawn to her hair, which was cropped close like a boy's, and dyed a vibrant shade of pink. She had half a dozen earrings hanging from one ear, and none from the other. A tiny stud sparkled in one nostril. Her name tag, which she had pinned to the visor that was part of her uniform instead of to her shirt, identified her as 'Mindy.'

Winter tried not to be intimidated by a girl who was smiling and who probably didn't even know how to hold a gun properly. “Um...hot chocolate?” He tried to remember if he'd seen that on the menu or not.

“Okie-dokie! What size?”

“Uh...medium?”

Mindy grabbed an appropriately-sized cup from a stack on the counter and stood poised with a marker. “And can I get a name?”

Winter froze or a second and did some of the quickest thinking in his life. 'Winter' was too strange of a name; it would draw too much attention. But he balked at the thought of calling himself 'Bucky.' Not yet. So that left... “Uh...James,” he blurted out, hoping he hadn't paused too long and looked like an idiot who'd forgotten his own name.

If Mindy noticed anything odd about his response, she didn't let it show. She just cheerfully told him the price and waited for him to fumble his credit card out of his wallet.

While Mindy prepared his cup of hot chocolate, Winter stood off to one side and pretended to look out the window. Never, not once in his life, had he gone by 'James' before. It was his first name, but he'd had an uncle with that name, so it would have been too confusing. And 'Buchanan' was an awful mouthful of a name to go by, so it had always been 'Bucky.' Until, of course, he'd lost his name entirely and then been named 'Winter.'

Someone else was always the one who chose his name. First it had been his parents, of course, choosing family names and then shortening it to a usable nickname. Steve had started calling him 'Buck' after a while, as if his nickname wasn't short enough already. Then Hydra had chosen to call him the 'Winter Soldier' and the 'Asset,' names that Steve and Sam had softened into the simple name 'Winter.' But when he'd gotten a chance to pick his own name, it had been none of those.

“James,” Mindy called, setting the cup down on the counter.

Strange. It didn't seem like it should mean him at all.

Winter murmured a quiet word of thanks and took his cup of hot chocolate outside. He sat at one of the little tables set up underneath umbrellas at the front of the cafe, where he could watch passersby and feel the cool breeze on his skin. Somehow, that made the hot chocolate taste even better.
Over the next week, Winter drove into town every day. He walked in the park and wandered up and down the streets, people-watching and stepping into shops that caught his fancy. He tried out several restaurants when he got hungry; he especially liked the Chinese buffet, and there was a burger place that made delicious fries. He found a little candy shop and couldn't resist buying a box of fancy chocolates, each with a different-flavored filling. The public library was also a favorite destination; even though he didn't have a library card, he loved to sit in one of their comfortably worn chairs and read for hours.

Somewhat to Winter's surprise, he discovered that it wasn't so bad to venture out into public. No one knew who he was—if anyone behind the counter asked for his name to tell him when his order was ready, he simply told them he was James. There were no stares or pointed fingers; no one seemed to recognize him as Bucky Barnes or the Winter Soldier or...anyone. He was just...himself. And as long as he kept his left hand hidden in a glove, everyone would assume he was completely normal.

As the days passed, Winter grew more and more comfortable with leaving his mask off. Sometimes he still had to consciously move his hand away from his mouth when he ate, or to remind himself that he could open his mouth wider when he talked instead of speaking through a closed jaw. Still...it was kind of nice, not to worry about anyone seeing his face. He liked the feel of a cool breeze brushing over his chin, the warm sunlight reaching farther down than his forehead.

He could get used to this.

But no matter what he did, Winter found that his thoughts kept on returning to Steve and Sam. He wasn't locked in the throes of depression like he'd been before, thankfully; there were too many things to do and see. Yet not a day—hardly an hour—passed without him thinking of the others, wondering what they were doing at that very moment. Everything he ate only made him hungry for Sam's home cooking. Every time he found an interesting book in the library, he wanted to show it to Steve and ask him if he'd read it. Every time he drove the motorcycle around a bend in the road and came upon a new, breathtaking vista of the mountains and forest all around, he just wanted to share it with them.

Worse, he kept catching himself on the verge of telling them about his experiences. He'd take a picture of the nonsensical fortune he got in his fortune cookie, then remember that he couldn't let them know he'd been to a Chinese restaurant. He couldn't tell them about the books he was reading, because they were from the library. There were many times he got halfway through drafting a text before he realized he'd almost said, When I went into town today.... Then he would erase everything he'd written and simply send a text that said, Miss you, hope you're okay.

Their lives had diverged. Slowly but surely, they were veering away from each other. Winter was discovering more and more about the things he liked, the things that made him feel good. Steve and Sam...they were following their purpose too, doing what they did best. And as more time passed, as all three of them grew more involved with the things they were doing separately, their messages back and forth grew shorter and more sporadic. They had less to say to each other, because they had less in common.

Winter tried not to think about it too much. He couldn't. It was like an ingrown toenail: painful, impossible to ignore, but easiest to leave alone and hope it would get better on its own.
One day, while doing his best to ignore these niggling thoughts in the back of his mind, he pulled up outside the coffee shop. He liked to go there at the same time each day, when Mindy was on duty. She always greeted him with a cheerful smile, and never looked at him strangely when he asked what various drinks on the menu were but always ended up getting hot chocolate after all. And she always sang out a delighted word of thanks when he dropped some coins into the tip jar.

But this morning, when he pulled open the door and set the bell jangling, Mindy didn't call out, “Be right with ya!” as usual. The coffee shop was empty except for another customer at the counter, so Winter hung back a little, in no rush to get his daily dose of sugar.

Then he tuned in to what the man in front of him was saying. “C'mon, beautiful, you can at least give me a smile, can't you?”

Winter's eyes flitted over to Mindy, who stood holding a large paper cup in front of her chest as if hoping it would shield her. Her face was set—her jaw clenched, her eyes tight, not a shadow of a smile anywhere on her face. She looked resigned, as if she'd dealt with this situation one too many times. “I just need to know if you want cream and sugar, sir,” she said flatly.

The customer—a broad-shouldered man in a leather jacket, standing well over six feet tall—planted a beefy elbow on the counter and leered over it at her. “Wouldn't say no to both,” he said in a highly suggestive tone, casting his eyes up and down.

Mindy's nose wrinkled slightly in disgust, but she turned without a word and set about fixing the drink. “That'll be three dollars even, sir.”

The man was staring openly in a direction that made Winter's blood boil. “Tell you what, babe,” he said, straightening up from the counter and digging out his wallet. “I'll throw in a nice tip and you give me your number.”

“No thank you.”

“Aw, don't be like that, sweet cakes, I'm just trying—“

“Hey, jerkface,” Winter said, slapping a hand down on the man's shoulder. “The lady said no.”

The man looked over his shoulder in surprise, as if he hadn't realized anyone else was there. Anger swiftly followed the surprise, and he looked down his nose at Winter. “What's your problem, man? Wait your turn.”

Winter squeezed the man's shoulder—hard. “I'll give you one chance: Apologize to her.”

With a scoff, the man tried to brush Winter's hand off. “Or what? Get your hands off me, you—“

It was ludicrously easy to grab the man's wrist and twist his arm behind his back at an angle that would be particularly painful. Winter gripped the collar of the leather jacket and briefly contemplated shoving this idiot's face onto the counter he'd been leaning on a minute ago. But that would probably knock over the tip jar and the stacks of cups, and he didn't want to make more trouble for Mindy. So he turned the larger man around and marched him towards the door.

The man swore and tried to jab his elbow back at Winter, but Winter had been expecting that. He let go of the jacket and easily blocked the man's arm, shoving it hard. The man's fist collided with his own chin on the way back. He grunted and stumbled, and only Winter's grip kept him on his feet.

“I'll keep it simple so you can keep up,” Winter growled, guiding the stunned man to the exit. “Leave, and never darken this doorstep again.” He leaned in closer, twisting the man's arm viciously
and lowering his voice menacingly. “And if you don’t learn some manners, I’d be happy to teach you.”

He let go, shoving the man at the door. The man caught himself on the handle, then looked over his shoulder at Winter. Fury mingled with fear in the expression on his red face, and blood dribbled out one corner of his mouth. Maybe he'd bitten his tongue. Winter hoped so.

Winter feinted towards him, raising his fists, and the man scrambled to open the door and hurry out. Once he'd made sure that the man had gotten into his car (a cobalt-blue convertible that looked as stupid as his face), Winter returned to the counter.

To his surprise, Mindy had a cup of hot chocolate waiting for him already. When their eyes met, she gave him a relieved smile. “Thanks. He's...come here before.”

“Hopefully that was the last time,” Winter grumbled, pulling out his wallet. “They shouldn't let you work here alone.”

“Yeah...we're a little short-staffed right now.” When Winter tried to hand over his credit card, Mindy hastily waved her hand, holding up the dollar bills the man had left on the counter. “Oh...no! As far as I'm concerned, he paid for your drink. And actually....” She ducked behind the glass case that displayed all of the cafe’s pastries, and put the largest blueberry scone into a little paper bag. She handed it to him and put a finger to her lips. “On the house,” she whispered.

Winter stammered his thanks and took his free drink and scone to his usual table outside. As he sat there, people-watching and breaking off little bits of the scone to nibble on, he had to shake his head at himself. *Who do I think I am, Steve Rogers?*

Usually, Steve was the one to leap to someone's defense first. How many times had he found Steve in an alleyway or a back lot, fighting for the honor of a girl who probably wouldn't look at him twice? Apparently some of that had rubbed off on him.

Once the scone was gone, Winter pulled out his phone and started idly scrolling through the photos he had on it. Most of them were ones he'd taken in his forays through the town, but eventually he reached the first few he'd taken, back when he'd first gotten the phone and Sam had taught him how to use it. There were a couple blurry pictures of Sam just talking, still in the middle of his explanation, gesturing with both hands. A selfie, depicting his own face peering into the camera with confusion. Steve, smiling and waving. Steve and Sam together, Sam holding up two fingers to give Steve bunny ears. And a selfie of the three of them, squished together so they could all fit into the frame. Steve's eyes were squeezed shut in the middle of a laugh, and Sam wore a goofy expression. Winter's expression, of course, was hidden by the mask.

Mindy came out to wipe down the tables outside. Winter leaned forward with his elbows on the table, looking down at the photo with a sigh. He missed them. And he hated not being able to tell them something as simple as, *This jerkwad was harassing the barista so I told him to take a hike. With my fist.*

Something was missing when they weren't there. He felt like he kept listening for Sam to make a sarcastic comment, followed by Steve's laughter. But all he heard was silence.

A tiny “Oh!” of surprise made Winter look up. Mindy stood at the table next to his, frozen in the middle of wiping off the glass surface. She was looking at him, her eyes fixed in the direction of his hand.

For a terrified moment, Winter thought she was looking at the picture on his phone and had
recognized Steve. But then he realized that, at her angle, she couldn't possibly see the screen behind his cup of hot chocolate. Which meant she must be looking at...his arm. He looked down and realized that the right sleeve of his shirt had gotten pushed up as he leaned against the table, exposing a few inches of bare skin. Even that small stretch of skin was covered with dozens of criss-crossing scars, including part of the one from his suicide attempt. Winter hastily tugged the sleeve back down, though he knew it was too late.

He peeked up at Mindy, wondering what she must think of him. He waited for horror. Disgust. Fear. Maybe pity.

Instead, Mindy smiled sadly as she straightened up. She pushed aside a wide wristband she always wore around her left wrist, revealing a scarred stretch of skin right over her veins. There was also a small tattoo underneath it. The words Hands Off in a curly script, followed by a set of numbers that appeared to be a date.

Winter looked up at Mindy with renewed sympathy. It was hard to imagine that someone who always seemed so happy had ever known the darkness Winter had struggled so long to escape.

“It was my boyfriend,” Mindy said softly.

“What?”

She fiddled with a chain at her neck, and for the first time Winter noticed a pendant shaped like two interlocked golden hearts. “My boyfriend found out what I was doing, and he.... We weren't even dating at the time, but he drove me to every single one of my therapist appointments.”

Winter smiled and nodded. “I have two friends...two really, really good friends.... They saved my life when I didn't even want to be saved.”

“They make it all worth it, don't they?” Mindy beamed, staring off into the distance. The sunlight sparkled in the stud in her nose and flashed off the many rings in her ear. The breeze fluttered through the bright pink strands of her hair, and in that moment Winter thought she looked like a butterfly. Like she could sprout wings and soar into the air, a tiny spot of joy shining in a world of ugliness and despair.

“Yeah,” Winter said with a soft smile, his fingers closing around the picture of his friends. “They're worth everything.”

~*~*~*~*~*

For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

- Isaiah 55:12
Works inspired by this one

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