# All the Words You Never Said

**by Taste_is_Sweet**

**Summary**

When Danny Williams visits New Jersey after the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., the last thing he expects is to find a feral Sentinel curled up in the back seat of his car.

Wait, scratch that. The *actual* last thing Danny expects is for the feral Sentinel to be Bucky Barnes.
But Danny's a Guide, and Bucky is in deep distress, so of course Danny brings him home. The plan is for Danny to get Bucky back into his head, then back to his Guide, Captain America. Bucky will be safe, he and Steve Rogers can reaffirm their bond, Danny can go back to Hawaii and Danny's Steve can go back to throwing himself off things. Everyone will be where and with whom they belong, and they'll all live happily ever after. Easy.

There's just one problem: Danny Williams' life has never been easy.

Notes

The title for this fic comes from the song "Speeches" by Walk off the Earth.

This is a gift fic for my friend darkmoore, because she sent me a wonderful, wonderful present and I wanted to give her something in return. ♥

This is a sequel to her fic, written with her permission. :D You don't have to read that story to understand this one, but you should anyway. It's full of angst, H/C, love and humor.

I ALSO NEED TO ADD that this story was her idea! I actually haven't got to her plot yet xD (that will be chapter 3 11, I think hope to God), but this fic came from several conversations about how she wanted to have Guide!Danny and Sentinel!!Steve meet Guide!!Steve and Sentinel!!Bucky. I loved the idea so much that I asked if I could just go ahead and write it. She said yes. :D

Big, big thanks to Shazrolane and Squeaky, who were both kind enough to read this chapter as a WIP and tell me it didn't suck. (I'm also thanking them in advance for all the other times I'll ask them to do that. xD)

Finally, there is an Easter Egg in chapter two just for Stargate: Atlantis fans. Because I am a dork, and Danny always reminded me of Rodney. ;)

See the end of the work for more notes

- Inspired by Care and feeding of Lieutenant Commander Steven J. McGarrett, USNR by darkmoore
Right Place; Wrong Sentinel

There was a Sentinel curled up in the back seat of Danny's car.

Now, this wouldn't have been unusual if the Sentinel had been, say, Steve. Steve would have been in the driver's seat, naturally, because God forbid Danny drive his own car. But still, Steve the Sentinel being in his Guide Danny's car would've been a normal, everyday Guide-Sentinel thing. No problem.

This Sentinel wasn't Steve.

He'd been sleeping or something that looked like it, because he startled like fuck when he heard Danny coming, but only when Danny was practically touching the passenger door. The Sentinel bolted upright and shoved himself to the far side of the seat, then froze like a raccoon under porchlights.

They stared at each other.

He wasn't anyone Danny recognized, though that part at least made sense: Danny was in New Jersey, and he hadn't exactly been trying to meet Sentinels when he lived here. He'd only ever known two who also knew Danny was a Guide, and one of them was safely six feet underground in the cemetery behind him.

Jack Rollins had been a Grade-A, smug bully of an asshole Sentinel who'd bought it working for fucking terrorists, more-or-less exactly how Danny predicted he would when they'd met eight years before.

Well, it wasn't so much 'predicted' as Danny saying, 'I hope you die in a fire', and Jack Rollins actually dying in a fire. But Jack had been totally on board with killing 20 million people, so Danny wasn't going to feel guilty about it.

Leslie Rollins, however, had been one of the few decent human beings in Danny's old police station. She was the sole person he regretted leaving behind in that hellhole, and her brother had just died in a fire. So Danny flew back to the Mainland for the funeral.

Of course, Steve wasn't in Danny's car because he was back at Danny's mom's house, probably glaring at everything and pacing a trench in the nice hardwood floors. Steve and Danny had only bonded recently, which meant they pretty much had to be together all the time. So far on this trip that had been the opposite of a problem, other than Steve's sad puppy-eyes at not being able to throw himself off things for a couple days.

Except, Leslie Rollins was also a Sentinel, and she'd wanted Danny to be her Guide, back in the day. Danny had refused for the same reason almost no one even knew he was a Guide before Steve. Unfortunately, Leslie had been bouncing from one Temp Guide to another for years. She was a wonderful person, but Danny had a feeling that showing up as a brand-new bonded pair at her brother's funeral would be a little too much salt in the wound.

Not to mention that Steve had been overprotective and territorial as fuck even before he came online. Danny was almost certain Steve wouldn't, say, rip Leslie's arm off and beat her with it if she looked at Danny too longingly. But why risk it?

So, yeah. Right place; wrong Sentinel. What the hell.
Danny stood there for a moment, outside the car with the doors still closed—and how did this mystery Sentinel even get in without triggering the alarm?—trying to figure out what he should do. Other than run. Sentinels didn't hurt Guides. Supposedly they were physiologically incapable of it, the same way Steve was physiologically incapable of making rational decisions. Danny wasn't in physical danger, but this Sentinel's wild, frantic energy was battering at his shields like hail. He really, really wanted nothing to do with that, thanks.

But he was a Guide. And even if he hadn't been, he couldn't refuse someone in such obvious need of help.

"I am way too stressed for this," he said. It was through the window but even a normal human could've heard him. "You couldn't've done this when my mom was in the car, huh? She used to work at a Sentinel Wellness Center. You'd like her, she's very calming. I, on the other hand, do not have the first clue what I'm supposed to do here. Wanna help me out, Babe?"

All the Sentinel did was keep staring silently at him with his big, stormy blue eyes. They were pretty eyes, admittedly. The Sentinels' face was very nice too, even framed by lank chunks of filthy hair. He also looked familiar, the longer Danny stared at him. It was in that niggling, have we met? kind of way, though Danny was pretty sure he would've remembered someone with eyes like that.

The Sentinel was wearing a grey jacket that had seen better days a decade ago, dirty jeans and oddly complicated black combat boots. Like a hobo goth. He was also wearing gloves, though the weather was too warm for any of that. Even Danny was down to a light jacket, and he was used to a ridiculous amount of heat.

Nothing about this situation made any sense. "Great. Didn't think so," he said on a sigh. "Are you at least gonna tell me why you're here?"

The Sentinel blinked a few times, then looked away. It was freaky; all he did was move his eyes, nothing else.

_Feral_, Danny had the sudden, awful realization. Fuck.

Okay, this was bad. Not just weird-bad, but bad-bad. He wasn't worried for himself—if anything feral Sentinels got more protective of Guides, not less. No, Danny was fine. It was the Sentinel who was fucked.

See, as far as Danny knew, there were very few things on the list of what could make a Sentinel go feral, and 'Dead Guide' was the first three of them. 'Critically Injured Guide' was right up there, but a Sentinel would never leave an injured Guide. Hell, there was special First Responder protocol for peeling Sentinels away from injured Guides so the Guides could be helped.

Which left door number one. Fucking hell.

So the poor bastard had gone feral because he was in shock from a violently severed bond. Sometimes Sentinels could come back from it; sometimes they couldn't. Most of the time they didn't want to.

Not every Sentinel died as soon as their Guide did. Those were considered the unlucky ones.

"I'm opening the door, okay?" Danny said, pitching his voice as gentle as he could. It wasn't hard: his heart was breaking for this Sentinel he'd barely met.

The Sentinel flicked his eyes to Danny's face and back again.
Danny took it as tacit permission. "Thank you." He eased the door open. "You lost your Guide, didn't you?" he asked in the same gentle voice.

The Sentinel didn't move at all that time, not even his eyes. Danny figured that was answer enough.

"Yeah." Danny swallowed around the tightening ache in his throat. "I figured. I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry. Was it in Washington?" That epic fuckup had barely been a couple weeks ago, and it would've been easy for a shocky Sentinel to wander away in the chaos. "Are you with S.H.I.E.L.D.?"

Of course it couldn't be that simple. That question got no response at all.

"No wonder you crawled into my car. You..." Danny breathed through his nose a few times until his eyes stopped stinging. Jesus, he was fighting tears and he hadn't even thinned his shields yet.

It was just, he kept picturing Steve in this stranger Sentinel's place. Lost and alone with his Guide dead, feral with grief and without anyone to help him. "I guess you could tell I'm a Guide, huh?" he rasped. Most Sentinels would only be able to tell Danny was a Guide if they were right next to him. But some—some rare, powerful Sentinels—could do that: smell a Guide's particular hormones or taste them in the air, or see their residual energy or whatever. He hadn't figured this Sentinel for one of those, 'cause there were so few of them. But maybe he was. It made sense, anyway. "You're trying...."

He'd been trying to find comfort, the way drowning people grasp at anything.

"I'm going to help you, okay?" Danny didn't expect an answer, but he was incredibly relieved when those remarkable eyes darted up to his again. "You're not alone anymore. I'm right here, and I'm going to help you. I want to get into the back here and sit next to you. Is that okay?" He tried to remember everything his mom had taught him, back when she was encouraging him to train as a Guide Counselor like her, rather than give up on the Guide thing entirely.

Danny would never, ever regret meeting Steve, but he kind of wished he'd listened to her now.

The Sentinel's eyes flicked again.

"Thank you." Danny sat down, moving slowly the whole time. "My name's Danny, by the way." He put his hand on his chest like he was talking to a child. "Sorry I forgot to introduce myself. What's your name?"

Not even a flicker for that one. Fuck.

"That's fine. You don't have to tell me right now. Can I touch you?" Danny reached for him, hands hovering. "I want to help you get your shields back up. You're kind of flapping in the wind there, Babe. I can help you pull it all in so you won't..." He couldn't say, So you won't hurt anymore, because he didn't think the kind of pain the Sentinel was in could be stopped. "Won't hurt as much."

The Sentinel flicked his eyes, and he didn't move as Danny put his hands on either side of his head. The first and only time Danny had done this before was with Steve, and that had involved a lot of shirtless hugging. That would be far too intimate—and cold—to try here, but Danny had been practicing since he and Steve bonded. He was sure this amount of contact would be enough.

"Thank you," Danny said again. "I'm going to link us up, so I can help you get your shields back. It won't hurt you, but it does mean I'm gonna be feeling what you're feeling for a little bit. Can I do that?"
He wouldn't have thought that someone as deathly pale as the Sentinel already was could lose more color in his face, but he managed it. He also jerked back like Danny's touch had burned him.

Danny pulled his hands away immediately. "Okay. It's okay. You don't want me feeling anything from you, right?" That got a couple eye flicks. "I'll take that as a 'fuck no,'" He let his hands fall to his lap. "Thing is, Babe, I know you're in pain. You've got, like, nothing between yourself and the world, do you?" He didn't bother waiting for an eye flicker since he knew he was right. "Honestly, I'm amazed you're not zoned on basically everything. You need your shields back. And, I don't think you're up to repairing them yourself right now. So, let me help?"

In response, the Sentinel pulled even further away from him. At this rate he was going to shove himself right through the car door.

"Right. I get it," Danny said on a breath. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Figures I'd end up with the second-most stubborn Sentinel on the planet. Is it me? Do I just attract the really pretty, boneheaded ones? Do I have a sign on my forehead? A particular aroma, maybe? Is it my karma? Seriously, how is this even my life?"

The Sentinel blinked at him. Possibly in confusion; it was hard to tell.

Danny licked his lips. "Will you let me try something else? Something that doesn't need me to lose my shields? I won't feel anything from you that way. I just...I'm a Guide—I mean, you know that, you're in my car—so, I have to help. It's, like, in my genetic makeup, going back to the first dumbass monkey who wandered over to another monkey and said, 'hey, You look like a stubborn, reckless idiot. Let's share emotions!'. So, your rejection is wounding me on an evolutionary level, here. Just saying."

It was a joke, Danny running at the mouth the way he generally did when he was anxious, frustrated, or—as Steve liked to say—conscious. But this Sentinel's eyes widened as if Danny had really been trying for emotional blackmail and just hit the jackpot. He slowly sat up, then turned so he was facing Danny and leaned towards him. Then he bowed his head like a supplicant before a king.

"Holy shit," Danny breathed. That was...this was not in the plan, okay? Not anywhere near the plan. Continents away from Planland. "Okay, no," he said immediately. "We are not doing that. Get up. Get up, please. Don't do that. I don't want you to do that. I'm a Guide. I'm not...." Danny swallowed down the sour bile bubbling up his throat. "I'm sorry. I was kidding. I'm not going to make you do anything. I swear I will not do a damn thing if you don't want me to, okay? You understand?"

The Sentinel slowly straightened, thank God, but now he looked confused. As if....

As if what? He expected Guides to fuck with his mind without consent? Guides? What the hell?

Danny took a few deep breaths, centering himself. "All right. We're going to try this again. How about...can you blink once for 'yes' and twice for 'no'?"

The Sentinel still looked confused, but he blinked once.

"Beautiful." Danny sighed, infinitely relieved. "Now, may I touch you again?"

The Sentinel hesitated, but he blinked once.

"Thank you," Danny said seriously. He carefully reached out with only one hand, moving slowly so the Sentinel had every opportunity to change his mind. He stayed still, so Danny wrapped his hand loosely around the Sentinel's right wrist, under his ratty jacket. It wasn't as good as skin to skin, but
any contact would work. "I'd like to try something that doesn't need me to thin my shields, but should still help you feel better. Is that okay? One blink for yes, two for 'go to hell'."

One blink.

"Great. That's great." Danny took a few more breaths, then gathered up as much of his own energy as he could. That part was easy. The hard part was making a hole in his shields, shoving the energy into the Sentinel and then closing up the hole before he accidentally pulled in any of the Sentinel's emotions. It was a trick his mom had taught him: one specifically for helping Sentinels in such emotional turmoil that the Guide would be in psychic jeopardy if they linked with them.

Danny had practiced it a few times to make his mom happy, but he'd figured he'd never actually use it. He hadn't even thought about the technique for decades. Now he regretted his lack of diligence. Deeply, deeply regretted it.


_Grief, like a rent in your soul._

Danny cried out, he couldn't help it, then slammed his shields back into place like fucking blast doors. He slapped his palms over his face, sucking in air and doing his best not to start screaming. He only lowered his hands when he was mostly sure he wasn't going to lose it, then wiped his eyes.

His hands were trembling. Jesus Christ, how could this Sentinel stay so still with all this inside him? Danny had barely felt any of it, and he was ready to shake apart.

And Steve had felt it, back at his mom's house. Fuck. And now he wanted to know what was wrong. Danny sent back reassurance, grateful that Steve couldn't see his face.

The Sentinel was staring at him again, his stormy eyes wide with horror. And then he lunged for the car door.

Danny still had his hand around his wrist. He tightened his grip without thinking. "No, wait! Don't go, please! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that. My bad. Totally my bad. It was an accident 'cause I'm an idiot. But I wasn't trying to hurt you. I wasn't trying to hurt you, swear to God."

The Sentinel's eyes flicked to his wrist. Danny let him go immediately. "I'm sorry," he said again. "Please don't leave."

The Sentinel swallowed. He blinked twice with eyes that glistened with unshed tears.

"Thank you," Danny sighed. He rubbed his forehead. "Fuck. My mom's gonna kill me."

He felt the barest touch on his arm, so fleeting for a second he wasn't sure it'd even happened. But when Danny raised his head the Sentinel was looking right at him. He blinked twice.

Danny blinked too. "Wait. Are you saying my mom's not going to kill me? 'Cause, yeah. She totally is."

The Sentinel touched his wrist again, then blinked twice.

"No…for me? You mean, I didn't hurt you?"

The Sentinel blinked once. He swallowed again, then deliberately touched his chest and blinked
once again. Then he touched Danny's wrist.

"Oh," Danny said softly. "You mean, you hurt me."

One blink.

"No, Babe." Danny shook his head. "You didn't. You didn't do anything. That was all my dumbass mistake." Danny thought of the millstone of guilt the guy was carrying around. "Is that why you didn't want me to link with you? 'Cause you didn't want me to feel all that?"

One blink.

Danny winced. "And then I felt it all anyway. Which was not your fault," he added quickly, then, "Is that why you wanted to leave, just now? 'Cause you figured you hurt me?"

One blink.

"Okay, let's get this straight, here. You did not hurt me. That was my bad," Danny said again. "You get that? It was me. You didn't do anything." He waited.

The Sentinel blinked once, somehow managing to convey every iota of his obvious skepticism.

"Wow, you remind me of my own Sentinel," Danny said. "You two are probably soulmates. I bet you love throwing yourself off things too. You do like that, don't you? Yeah, you seem the type. You probably think grenades are an awesome birthday gift."

The Sentinel didn't get near to cracking a smile, but something in his eyes softened a tiny bit.

"Figures," Danny said with mock annoyance. "All right." He put his hand back over the Sentinel's wrist. "We're going to try this again, and this time you're gonna let me drop my shields and do this right. Okay, Babe? And by 'okay', I mean, 'this is my choice so fucking let me do it.'"

The Sentinel started flatly at him, the blinked once. Very, very slowly.

"Yeah, yeah. Screw you too." Danny grinned to take any potential insult out of it. "You ready?" He waited until he got another single, reluctant blink, then linked them again. Properly, this time. Which meant he lowered his shields.

It hurt like hell. Not physically, though the Sentinel was in plenty of actual pain: not just the wailing agony of all his senses, but deep, gnawing hunger and a constant, heavy ache radiating from his left shoulder. No, it was the psychic onslaught of the poor Sentinel's emotions. It was this side of unendurable, despite how Danny had known what was coming. He endured it because he had to. But fuck, it hurt.

It was slow going, rebuilding the tattered remains of the Sentinel's shields piece by piece. The Sentinel tried to help, but unlike Steve, even with Danny showing him exactly how to do it, the best the guy could manage was to flare his energy a bit, like a kitten batting tiredly at a toy. It didn't help.

Danny was in tears, practically sobbing in sympathetic agony by the time he got the Sentinels' shields back in place. Danny reinforced them with his own energy, made sure they were solid and strong, then retreated and threw his shields back up so fast he could practically hear them slamming.

"Oh, thank God." Danny gave himself a couple minutes to just collapse against the seatback and let the residual energy drain out of him. He was still crying. He wiped his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Not your fault," he rasped. "God, no wonder you're like this. I would've dug the deepest fucking
hole in my head I could and jumped in, too." He sniffed. "I'm honestly astonished you can still function at all. I mean, I keep thinking of Steve—"

He didn't get further than that, because the Sentinel gasped, then gaped as if Danny had just shot him.

Danny blinked. "Steve?" he repeated. Same deer-in-headlights face, check. "Is your name Steve?"

Two blinks.


One blink. Then two blinks.

"Uh, yes or no, Babe. That was kind of both."

The Sentinel blinked three times.

"Yes and no," Danny said, confused. "Wait. You don't know. Is that what you're saying? You don't know if Steve is your Guide?"

One blink. But now the Sentinel looked scared again.

"It's okay. It's fine. You've been through hell, here, haven't you? I mean, your shields were in shreds. It'll come back, though. It'll all come back. I swear. You just need time." Food and a shower wouldn't hurt either, especially since Danny had felt how hungry the Sentinel was. "I felt...I felt a bit of what you're going through. But, you'll get through this. You're going to be okay."

The Sentinel blinked, and this time the tears in his eyes rolled down his cheeks.

It kind of made Danny want to start crying again too. "I can only imagine how hard this must be right now," he said, channeling his mom. "But, you came to me 'cause you wanted help, right?" He didn't bother waiting for a blink. "So, you're not giving up. And that is beautiful. I am so proud of you. And I will help you, okay? I can take you to the Wellness Center—"

The Sentinel went deer-in-headlights again, coupled with a sharp inhale. He blinked twice. Then again, then again.

"—Or not. I can not do that. That will not be happening." Danny bit his lip. Steve—Danny's Steve, not most-likely-dead-maybe-the-Sentinel's-Guide Steve—was getting impatient and worried, which for him went together like PB&J, if the PB were handguns and the J was grenades. Danny couldn't stay here much longer or Steve would come looking for him. And he really didn't think that, "A feral, unbonded, strange Sentinel broke into my car. Can I keep him?" would go over well with anyone but his mom.

Danny sent soothing energy to Steve along their link. It was met with deep skepticism. Well, fuck you, Steve.

Yeah, these two Sentinels really were soulmates.

"Well, I'm afraid we've got a problem then, Babe," Danny said. "'Cause I'm trying to help you, but I don't know what to do. Why can't I take you to the Wellness Center? That was rhetorical, by the way. But, that's what they do, you know? They're a bunch of Guides who've made their living helping Sentinels. I mean, yeah, I had some shitty experiences at Centers too, but the Wellness Centers aren't like that. My mom's a Guide, and she was the head of her Wellness Center in New
Jersey before she retired, and she made sure the people who work there don't suck. So, I know that they can help you. They can make it easier.

The Sentinel twisted his wrist and yanked it away. It didn't hurt, but Danny definitely felt it.

"Okay. You really don't want to go to the Wellness Center. I get it. I get it. Actually, I don't get it at all. But, that's what you want, so....." Danny rubbed his mouth, thinking. This was a bad idea. No, this was probably a terrible idea. Steve was obviously rubbing off on him. "Can I take you to my mom?"

He cringed inwardly even as he said it. Except, the more he thought about it the less terrible it seemed. "She can help you," he said gently. "Better than I can. I mean, she's not an Alpha Guide or anything, but she's a Guide Counselor. And she's really, really good. And I don't think you're doing so well right now, are you?"

The Sentinel blinked twice then looked away.

"Yeah, that's what I figured," Danny said softly. "And it'd be my house, not a Center. And it'd be just her, and me, and my Sentinel." That part, of course, might be the problem. Steve had a habit of considering any place he spent longer in than five minutes his territory. He couldn't help it; it was part of his desperate need to protect everyone all the time. He most likely could handle another Sentinel in a space he'd claimed as his own, but he was a Navy SEAL. If it came to a fight he'd probably tear this poor guy apart.

The Sentinel in the car with him looked wary. He blinked three times.

"I hear you. I'm not sure either. Tell you what? Lemme call my mom. Will that be okay? Can I do that?" He waited for the blink. He got one, though he could clearly see the uncertainty in the way the Sentinel slowly sat up straighter with his shoulders going tight. "Thanks," Danny said, and dialed.

He was not the least bit surprised when Steve picked up. "Where the hell are you?"

"Hi, sweetheart, how are you? The funeral was fine, thanks for asking." Danny had put his phone on speaker, because the Sentinel would hear both sides of the conversation anyway.

"I don't care about the funeral," Steve said. "Where are you? Are you all right? I felt..... I thought you were in trouble."

"I'm fine. Pinky swear," Danny said seriously. "When have you known me not to bitch and complain if I was hurt?"

"But, I felt it," Steve insisted. "You were in pain."

"That wasn't me," Danny said. "But I need to speak to Mom. Is she around?"

There was a moment of silence while Steve decided whether or not he'd be stubborn about it. "We're not done talking about this," he said, but then Danny heard him calling Clara and handing over the phone.

"Hi, sweetheart," she said immediately. She sounded worried too. "Steve said you were in pain. Are you all right? Why aren't you home?"

"I'm fine, really." Danny let out a breath. Stupid, but after nearly 40 years, just knowing she was there could make him feel all right. "I just got delayed by someone."

Danny steeled himself. "A feral Sentinel broke into my car. He needs help. I was hoping I could bring him to you."

"What? No!" Steve must've had his mouth right next to the phone, because his voice came through loud enough to make Danny wince. The Sentinel hissed in pain and clapped his hands over his ears. "Get away from there!"

"He's perfectly safe, Steven," Clara said, then Danny heard her snapping her fingers. "Okay, out. I need to deal with this and you're not helping."

That was definitely true. The Sentinel had gone all deer-in-headlights again with his hands still covering his ears. Of course, Steve could engender that reaction from anybody.

"Are you telling me he's got a feral Sentinel in his car and you're okay with that?" Steve demanded.

"Yes. That's exactly what I'm telling you," Clara said. "Ferals are instinctively protective, not aggressive. Especially to Guides. Danny's actually safer with him right now than he would be by himself. But I need to talk to him, so you need to leave."

"I'm going to listen," Steve said sullenly.

"That's fine," Clara said. It wasn't like she could stop Steve anyway. "Just do it in a different room."

Danny heard Steve finally leaving the kitchen. Somehow he made his footsteps sound sulky.

"There," Clara said on a sigh. "Your Sentinel has excellent instincts. He just needs to learn when to curb them."

"Welcome to my life," Danny said.

His mother gave a short laugh. "All right," she said, entirely serious again. "Tell me about this Sentinel. Is he with you right now?"

"Yeah. He's right next to me. We're in the back seat."

"And he broke into your car?"

"Yeah." Danny nodded even though she couldn't see him. He glanced at the Sentinel. He'd relaxed marginally, maybe. At least he'd lowered his hands. Maybe this really was as much a terrible idea as Danny had originally thought.

The Sentinel blinked once.

"He just confirmed that," Danny said. "He didn't break anything or trigger the alarm. So he is possibly a ninja. But I think…I'm pretty sure he found my car on purpose."

"You mean, he knew you're a Guide?" Clara sounded as shocked as Danny was when he'd realized it. "Is he an Alpha?"

Danny blinked. "Whoa. I have no idea. Maybe? He reminds me a lot of Steve, but it was more because he's really stubborn…""

"Sentinels tend to share physiological and mental traits," Clara said diplomatically. "You said he was
feral. That's a common result of deep trauma. Did he tell you what happened?"

"No," Danny put his hand around the Sentinel's wrist again. He couldn't tell if the Sentinel benefited from the touch, but he allowed it. "I think his Guide is dead. But, he couldn't tell me. He can't talk. He's been blinking once for 'yes', and twice for 'no'."

"Oh. Oh, dear," she sounded exactly like Danny had felt since he'd found the Sentinel in his car. "Can you call me back on videophone? I'd like to talk to him, with his permission."

"Just a sec," Danny turned to the Sentinel. "Is it okay if my mom talks to you?"

There was a long hesitation, but he finally blinked once.

"Great, thank you," Danny said, meaning it. "He blinked once, so I'm hanging up now and I'll call you back."

"I love you," Clara said, the way she always did whenever either of them got off the phone, even though Danny literally called her again five seconds later.

She looked worried, but she smiled when she saw his face. "Hi, honey. Can I speak to your friend?"

Danny dutifully turned the phone so Clara and the Sentinel could see each other.

His mom gasped. "Oh, my," she said. Danny privately agreed. The guy looked rough, eyes and cheekbones notwithstanding. "Danny, sweetheart. He's definitely an Alpha. I can't help him. I'm not powerful enough. You really found him in your car?"

"Yes, I really found him in my car. And, what do you mean, you can't help him? How do you know he's an Alpha just from looking at him?"

"Oh, he's absolutely an Alpha," Clara said. "And I mean, I can't help him. If he was completely present, sure. But if he's feral… You're going to have to do it, pull him back."

"Oh, fuck," Danny murmured. "You mean, right now?"

"Of course not. At home. Let me talk to him."

"I wasn't the one stopping you," Danny complained.

His mom ignored him. "Hi," she said to the Sentinel, smiling warmly. "My name's Clara Williams. Danny said you've been blinking once for yes and twice for no. Is that correct?"

The Sentinel blinked.

"Wonderful. Would you like to keep communicating like that?"

The Sentinel blinked again.

"That's great. I'm pleased to meet you. I'm so glad you found Danny. He's an excellent Guide. You're safe now, we're going to take care of you. Can you tell me your name?"

The Sentinel blinked twice, then three more times.

"Three times means he doesn't know," Danny said.

"It's fine if you can't right now," Clara said immediately. Her smile didn't change, as if she had phone
conversations with feral Alpha Sentinels who couldn't say their own names all the time. "Can I give you a name for now? Would that be all right?"

One blink.

Clara beamed. "Thank you. That will make things a lot easier. Everyone should have a name. I'd like to call you Jame—Jay," she corrected quickly, when something like glacial terror slammed into the Sentinel's eyes. "How about 'Jay'? Is the name Jay all right?"

The hesitation this time was so long that Danny was sure the Sentinel would blink 'no'. But then he jerked his chin in an infinitesimal nod.

"I'm glad you like it," Clara said, while Danny was sitting there gaping. If anything her smile got brighter. "This is how you can say your name." She made a fist with her pinky sticking out, then traced the letter 'J' in the air. "Do you want to try that?" She did the gesture again.

He copied it verbatim, with a crisp precision completely at odds with his appearance. Something about that made Danny think of Steve.

"That was perfect!" Clara exclaimed. "So, Jay. Danny wants to bring you here, to my house, so he and I can help you. You can get clean, and eat something if you're hungry, and you can have a warm place to sleep, if you're tired. You'll be able to leave whenever you want. Is it okay if Danny brings you here?"

Jay looked at Danny, then back at Clara. He lowered his eyes, but gave her another tiny nod.

"Thank you. I'm so glad you're allowing us to help," Clara said. "There will be rules, though," and now she sounded like every spine-chillingly gentle lecture Danny had received in his life. "There's another Sentinel here. His name is Steve. He was on the phone before, and I'm sure you can hear him right now in the guest room. He's Danny's Sentinel. He wants to keep him safe, just like you do. But you need to remember that this is my house. It's not your territory, and it's not Steve's. It's not even Danny's. It's mine. Do you understand?"

Jay nodded.

"Good." Clara smiled again, but Danny could see the ferocity around the edges. "I know that you're both a little anxious right now, but I will not tolerate any hostility in my territory. That goes for you as well, Steven." She turned her head, directing her voice at him. "Sentinels can get along perfectly well in the same space, and I expect that from both of you. Understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Steve hollered down the stairs.

Jay nodded.

"Excellent." Clara went back to her ray-of-sunshine beaming. "I look forward to meeting you in person, Jay. See you both soon. I love you, Danny."

"You too, Mom." Danny hung up. "Good. Great," he said on a breath. "Okay, I need to get into the front seat to drive. You can stay back here or ride shotgun. Just make your choice before the car starts moving. That was a joke," he added, because he wasn't sure Jay knew that.

Jay squished himself up against the door again.

"Good enough." Danny gave his wrist a little squeeze, then got out and went around to the front. He almost got into the passenger side by reflex, then rolled his eyes at himself and sat behind the wheel.
"Don't forget your seatbelt." He waited until he heard the *click*, then turned the engine.

"This has been a very strange day," he said.

In the rearview mirror, Jay blinked once.
Clara Williams, with her long blond hair and bright, friendly smile, looked more like a former movie star than a former Guide Counselor and head of a Sentinel Wellness Center. But she had worked with distressed Sentinels since before Danny was born: first at a Government Sentinel and Guide Center, and then at a Wellness Center with Sentinels alone. She’d never bonded, and Danny had only seen her bluebird spirit animal a handful of times. Not bonding had never bothered her, and she’d tried very hard to get Danny to train as a Counselor when he was deemed ‘unmatchable’ and ‘unsuitable for bonding’. She’d told him being unsuitable for a single Sentinel was a blessing in disguise, because it meant he could help all of them. It’d been her calling her whole life, and she thought it could be his, too. But Danny had been so dispirited, that at 16 he’d decided he just wouldn’t be a Guide at all.

His mom had respected his decision, and he’d become a damn good cop and eventually bonded with Steve. Everything had worked out for the best. And now he was going to have a crash course in Wellness Center Guiding anyway. Which had to be serendipity. Or something.

"Hello, Jay. I'm glad to meet you. Please come in," Clara said. "You can put your coat on the hook there, and your boots on the mat." She stood way back from the door, leaving a nice, clear space for Jay to move through. Their foyer led into the living room, and Danny noted immediately how the minimal clutter he and Steve had left was gone. The floor looked freshly mopped too, probably with the most natural, least offensive cleanser known to Man. He also noted how his own, personal Sentinel was nowhere to be seen. He wondered if Clara had banished him to the guest room for the duration, or if Steve was still sulking. Maybe he'd gone for a therapeutic 100-mile run.

Danny poked him gently through their bond. Steve poked back. He was okay, then. Good.

He could smell pasta, and that his mom had been frying something. He'd bet his badge she'd made tomato soup, mac 'n cheese and grilled cheese sandwiches. Comfort Food of Champions. It made him simultaneously want to hug her and roll his eyes.

Jay walked through the door like a cat in a strange house, which wasn't all that far off, really. He immediately catalogued the size of the space, the nearest exits, and what was available as an improvised weapon. Danny had witnessed Steve doing it often enough to tell.

…Which was weird as fuck, actually. Why the hell was Jay doing Navy SEAL 'I-might-have-to-
fend-off-an-intruder-with-a-throw-pillow' shit? Was he a SEAL too? Wouldn't the Navy know if they'd misplaced one?

The slight head tilt/nostril flare/pupil dilation combo as Jay expanded his senses to get the full lay of the environment was also familiar, though something about it made Danny sad. Maybe because with Steve, there was always a kind of enthusiastic ferocity with it. Steve loved being able to use his heightened senses to save the innocent and get the bad guys and ride off into the sunset. But Jay was doing it out of fear.

He didn't take off his outer gear. Not even the gloves.

"You're safe, sweetheart, I promise," Clara said, picking up on exactly the same thing. She took in his full, miserable appearance with a single sweep of her eyes. "I've got food for you in the kitchen, but I think maybe you'd be more comfortable if you get clean first. It's up to you, though. What would you like? One blink for a shower, two for food."

Jay's eyes darted around the room. He turned to look up at the top of the stairs, then back at Clara. He let out a tiny, uncertain growl, like an angry kitten.

"You're worried about Steve, Danny's Sentinel," Clara said. Jay blinked once, though it hadn't really been a question. "Do you remember that I said it was my territory?" Another blink. "You're safe here. He's not going to hurt you on my territory unless you try to hurt him or either of us, which I know you won't. Do you want to meet him?"

Jay gave her a tiny nod.

"Hey, Steve, get your hypersensitive butt down here and meet Jay!" Danny didn't have to raise his voice, but he was so used to hollering up and down the stairs that he didn't think about it anymore. "Sorry," he said much more quietly when Jay winced.

"I'm coming, keep your pants on," Steve said. He sounded like his normal, everyday SEAL self, but Danny could feel his worry taut as a wire through their bond. Danny sent back his confidence and reassurance—which were almost entirely real—and his love, which definitely was.

Steve came tromping down the stairs, but stopped as soon as he had both feet on the living room floor. Clara, Danny and Jay were nearer to the front door, about twenty feet away from him. Not much distance if Jay and Steve decided to go for each other. But Steve was just projecting his usual fierce protectiveness, with a less usual layer of anxiety underneath. Steve didn't want to start a fight here, any more than it seemed like Jay did.

He didn't come any closer. In fact, to Danny's complete astonishment, Steve slouched as much as his SEALness would let him, then lowered his eyes.

"Hi," Steve said, as uncharacteristically subdued as his posture. "I'm Steve McGarrett, Danny's Sentinel." He gave Jay a little wave by tilting up his hand instead of raising it above his waist.

He was trying really, really hard to make himself unthreatening: Guarding them all by ignoring his ego and his own instincts, instead conceding to share the space with Jay. Danny hadn't thought he could love Steve more than he already did. It was nice to be proved wrong.

Jay dropped to his knees. He put his hands behind his back and tilted up his chin, exposing his throat.

A cry of sheer, absolute horror punched out of Danny's chest, as immediate and visceral as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. The wordless sound Steve made echoed his own. Clara just gasped and
slapped her hands over her mouth.

Because this was…this was disgusting, okay? The nightmare fodder of slave trade woodcuts and documentaries about war crimes. This wasn't just submission: the posture signified complete subjugation. It was only imposed on Sentinels, and considered as evil as sexual assault.

And Jay had just done it purposely. Automatically. The way he'd offered up his mind to Danny in the back seat of the car.

"Stop it. Stop. Get up," Danny rasped, the first one who could even find his voice. His mother still had her palms over her mouth, her eyes glistening. Steve's hands were in fists, his eyes blazing with anger Danny could feel.

Jay barely glanced at Danny, and only with his eyes. No other part of him moved, except the steady rise and fall of his breathing. He was used to this. This was normal for him.

This was normal. What the hell had happened to him?

Danny turned desperately to his mom, hoping like hell she'd know what to do. She just stared back at him, looking exactly like he felt.

Steve slowly came over to them, then lowered himself to the floor next to Jay. He sat cross-legged, purposely making himself appear smaller and more submissive. He put his hand on Jay's back. Jay flinched, but slowly relaxed when Steve didn't do anything else. When Jay's breath evened again, Steve rubbed circles on the dirty cloth of his coat, then moved his hand up to massage the back of Jay's head. He murmured something too quietly for Danny to hear, his voice as gentle as his steady, rhythmic touch.

Slowly and so, so warily, Jay lowered his head. He started trembling in fear, watching Steve out of the corner of his eye. Steve gave him one of his beautiful, megawatt grins, only a little creased around the edges. He started talking to Jay again, rubbing the back of his neck.

It probably took ten minutes—it felt like forever—but Jay finally relaxed. He blinked owlishly at Clara and Danny like he'd forgotten they were there.

"Good job," Steve said, grinning again. He lifted his arm for Danny to help him up, which was ludicrous in the extreme, given how he was twice Danny's size. Danny made sure to complain about it, even as he hauled his Sentinel to his feet. It let them ignore the turmoil of concern, disgust, sorrow and anger churning inside both of them. Danny used their bond to calm each other down. At least he felt less like puking afterwards.

Clara held out her hand to Jay. "Please get up, sweetheart." Danny could hear the tears in her voice. "You don't have to do that. You're safe now. You never have to do that again. No one will ever force you to do that again." She wiped delicately at her eyes with the fingers of her free hand. Her smile was lopsided and wet, but warm as always. "Please get up, Jay. Let us help you."

As slowly as he'd lowered his head, Jay reached out and took her hand.

If anything, Jay was more subdued and docile after the godawful kneeling. Danny didn't know if it was the kindness, or how hard Steve had worked to not be a threat, or if it was because Jay was reeling from being treated like a human being. Danny kind of figured 'all of the above'.

Whatever the reason, Jay didn't seem as afraid anymore. Instead he took in everything with a kind of watchful hope. It was as if he was sure things would go to hell any second, but exploring the
possibility that they wouldn't.

It was great, because Jay added a headshake for 'no' to his vast repertoire of blinks and uncanny imitations of Steve. He also answered Clara's yes or no questions that much faster, as if he'd decided she wasn't going to yell 'PSYCH!' and start beating on him the instant he dared to make a decision.

The fact it was clear someone had done almost exactly that was the sad-eyed elephant in the room none of them mentioned. Jay's submissive kneeling was a pretty good hint.

Jay even took his boots off, and his coat. Danny badly wanted to shove it in a garbage bag—or burn it, burning it would be good—but he didn't have Jay's permission to do that, and he definitely didn't want to go through the pockets for whatever Jay might want to keep. Steve had, with his usual terrifying efficiency, run out and got Jay a new winter jacket and two fresh sets of clothes in the twenty-three minutes it'd taken Danny to drive home. Danny was certain they'd fit perfectly too.

In the end Jay had blinked for food over cleanliness. He'd followed Danny and Clara to the kitchen like a big, taciturn duckling, and eaten everything she put in front of him. It was macaroni and cheese, tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches, exactly like Danny had thought. Danny would have liked some as well since he was starving, but Jay was literally starving, and skittish enough that Danny wasn't sure he'd be willing to eat if Danny was eating too.

Not to mention that Clara wasn't eating either, and Steve had vanished up to the guest room again. Eating when his Sentinel and his mom weren't didn't seem fair. So Danny just handed his mom stuff when she asked and poured milk or whatever, trying to act like they fed random Sentinels all the time.

Clara had cleverly made food that could all be eaten using just a spoon or your hands. Jay hadn't seemed to lack for coordination, but right now higher-order thinking was as far beyond him as speech. Danny was almost certain that if Jay had a fork he wouldn't accidentally stab himself, but pasta could be tricky.

Jay handled the spoon like a pro, however, even if he held it toddler-style in his fist. Unfortunately, he ate the grilled cheese without taking off his gloves, which was distressingly unhygienic. But Clara didn't say anything so Danny didn't either.

Jay's brief, uncomprehending shock when he finished what Clara gave him and then got more, was just another heartbreaking piece of the miserable puzzle wrapped in a sorrowful enigma that Jay already was. Of course, he looked equally shocked that the food tasted good. Which was almost as bad.

He didn't smile at Clara, or seem to know what she meant when she asked if he liked it. But his eyes softened a little, the way they had at Danny's verbal goofiness back in the car. Jay wasn't happy—It was hard to imagine a happy feral Sentinel—but right then he was as close to it as he could probably get.

Danny did not get teary about that. At all. He just had to blink a lot.

Jay didn't seem to recognize the word 'shower', but he nodded when Clara asked him if he wanted to get clean. Danny was incredibly relieved when she led Jay down the stairs to the basement bathroom without asking Danny for help. He would have, but the last time he'd washed someone else, they were less than three feet tall and thought *Teletubbies* was the height of sophistication. He really didn't want to deal with a naked adult who wasn't Steve.

Jay was still wearing his gloves; Danny had no idea what his mom would do about that. He mentally
wished her luck, then fled to find his Sentinel.

Steve was pacing in the upstairs hallway and radiating angry/sad/frustrated/worried vibes like crazy. Danny was completely unsurprised when he all but dragged Danny into the guest room, then kicked the door shut and yanked Danny into a bearhug that practically lifted him off the ground. Steve wasn't crying or shaking, but he buried his nose in Danny's neck, grounding himself on his Guide with every desperate cell of his body.

"Shhh. Shhh. It's okay, Babe. It's okay. I got you. I'm right here." Danny ran his hands up and down Steve's back, enveloping them both with whatever calmness he could dredge up like a tattered but warm blanket. "You did an amazing job downstairs. I am so proud of you. I know that wasn't easy. Actually, no. I know that was hard as fuck 'cause I was there. But you pulled him out of it, and you helped him feel safe. And I am so, so proud of you."

"You sound like my dad," Steve muttered.

"That's unfortunate, because I was about to tell you all the filthy, filthy things I will do to you later to show you how proud I am," Danny said. "But now you brought your late father into it and made it weird."

"You make everything weird," Steve said, because he was mentally two. But Danny could feel the low rumble of his laugh, and his eyes weren't so haunted when he lifted his head. "I didn't think it'd be so hard," he said. "But I keep looking at him and thinking, 'that could be me'. Like, if I'd been online as a Sentinel when Wo Fat captured me. He would've…" Steve winced. "He would've made me do that. He would've done that to me."

"I know," Danny said seriously. "But you weren't, and he didn't. And whatever happened to that poor bastard downstairs is over now, and we can make sure no one ever hurts him like that again—"

"Wait," Steve said. "You don't know who that is?"

Danny blinked at him. "Jay, the hobo goth ninja who broke into my car?"

Steve blinked right back. "You seriously have no idea who that is downstairs right now."

"I believe I made that fairly obvious, Steven," Danny said. "I think the real question is, why do you know who he is? Who is he, anyway?"

"I know who he is because that's James Buchanan Barnes," Steve said.

"Who the hell is James Buchanan Barnes?"

Steve upped his game from blinking to a full-on gape. "Bucky. That's Sergeant Bucky Barnes of the Howling Commandos."

Danny stared at him. "Bucky Barnes. The Winter Soldier. That's the Winter Soldier in the downstairs bathroom right now."

Steve nodded, looking bewildered. "How could you not recognize him? His face was all over the news last week. What about the urgent bulletin we were emailed from the Center? The one asking for help finding him? And saying he had to be exonerated of all the crimes he committed for Hydra, because it was obvious he'd been tortured?"

"Because he'd attacked a Guide at all, let alone the Guide he was bonded to," Danny said. "Sure, I remember that—Holy shit, that's him? That's the ninja who broke into my car?"
Steve nodded again, bafflement still all over his beautiful, stupid face. "That's how come your mom knew he's an Alpha. She recognized him. You really didn't?"

"No I did not," Danny said. He didn't mention that he hadn't done more than skim the bulletin and barely paid attention to the news about Sergeant Barnes on purpose, because all he could think about was that happening to Steve. He had enough sleepless nights already, thanks. "Is my mom safe?"

Well, she must have been, since Jay—Bucky Barnes, fucking hell—was a Sentinel. But, well. Bucky had also attacked his own Guide. Danny had to ask.

"Yeah, Danny." Steve put his big hand on the back of Danny's neck and dropped a kiss on his forehead. "She's safe. You know I would've never let him near her if she wasn't."

"Yeah. I do. Of course I do." Danny let out a deep breath. Then blinked again. "Jesus Christ, his Guide is Captain America." Who wasn't dead, as far as Danny knew. "He's not dead, is he? Please tell me that Captain America isn't dead."

"Captain America isn't dead," Steve responded loyally. "Clara said Barnes probably went feral from the trauma of being forced to hurt his Guide, but not a severed bond. She also thinks that's why Barnes abandoned him, even though Rogers was injured. Barnes is trying to protect his Guide, but he's the one who put his Guide in danger. He had a psychotic break, trying to follow his instincts and fight them at the same time."

It made sense. Horrible, awful sense. Bucky must have been tearing himself apart.

"So that's why she wanted to call him 'James'," Danny said softly. "I wondered what was up with that." It didn't explain why hearing his own name had apparently freaked Bucky out, but Danny figured he could happily go for the rest of his life without knowing the reason for that. "Shit. No wonder you were so submissive. If you'd threatened him he would've killed you."

"You think I couldn't hold my own against the Winter Soldier?" Steve sounded actually offended, the giant idiot.

"Steven," Danny said with what he thought was a miraculous amount of patience, considering the day he'd already had, "Captain America couldn't hold his own against the Winter Soldier, and he can lift motorcycles over his head. Jesus Christ. I was thinking he was in danger from you. Fuck. Fucking hell." He pulled Steve back into a hug. "He would've killed you. Fucking hell, Steve, he could've killed you!"

"Hey, hey. It's okay, Danno. I'm fine. I'm right here. Everything's okay. I knew he wasn't going to hurt me."

Danny pulled back to stare at him in baffled incredulity. "You knew he wasn't going to hurt you," he said. "And what, pray tell, was the amazing, magical Sentinel power that let you know that?"

Steve shrugged. "He didn't smell hostile. He smelt scared."

Danny kept staring. "He didn't sm—animals are more likely to attack when they're scared, Steven! And that includes people! Animals! Sentinel people! animals!" He scrubbed his face. His hand was shaking. Again. "You are going to give me a heart attack, I swear. Between James Barnes the Feral Ninja and you and your suicidal idiocy, my heart is going to explode like one of your favorite grenades."

Steve chuckled then pulled Danny back into his arms, using his entirely unfair height advantage to kiss Danny's crown. "You are my favorite grenade."
"I am both touched and insulted by that." Danny held Steve tighter. "That explains why he didn't take off his gloves. He's not showering with them, is he?"

Steve looked apologetic. "Actually, your mom just asked me to tell you she needs help."

"Ah, fuck." Danny gently thumped his forehead against Steve's chest. "I really, really, did not want to deal with a naked, feral Sentinel with hygiene issues. The only Sentinel I want to see naked is you."

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. "Imagine he's Charlie."

"Thank you. You just made it worse," Danny said.

Jay, otherwise known as Bucky, wasn't in the shower. He wasn't even in the basement bathroom, or the very nice rec room Danny had been quite fond of growing up. No, Bucky was in the laundry room with the unfinished walls and exposed wiring, smushed under the large sink.

It was a lousy hiding spot, all things considered. Danny had learned that the hard way over several drastic losses at hide and seek. Were he so inclined, which he wasn't, he could've just grabbed one of Bucky's ankles and dragged him out of there. Bucky hadn't even put himself in a good position for self-defense. He was just...smushed up under the sink. Like a scared child.

"I don't know what happened," Clara said. "He had no problem following me until we went into the bathroom. Then he fled under here."

"I'm surprised he didn't just leave," Danny said. The back door was practically right next to the sink. Bucky could've busted through it like tissue paper. He didn't know if Bucky stayed because he felt safe, or if he stayed because he didn't think he could go. Clara had told Bucky he could go, but maybe he hadn't believed it.

"Me too." Clara was sitting on the floor, close enough to Bucky to hopefully offer comfort, while far enough not to crowd him. "I'm glad he didn't, but he's retreated even further. He hasn't responded to me at all."

"Not even blinking?"

She shook her head. "Not even blinking. It's like I'm not here. And I can't feel anything from him either. He's too well shielded. Normally I'd ease his shields down so I could get in there and help. But he's an Alpha."

"Well, that is inconvenient." In a way, it was as reassuring as it was discomfiting, to know his mom was as much at a loss here as Danny. Mostly discomfiting; Danny wasn't used to Clara needing his help for something she was the expert in. He ran his fingers through his hair, then covered his mouth with his hand. He poked gently at Bucky's mind, testing the shields he'd built for him. He'd done a good job. He'd have to bust through them to get to the psyche underneath, and there was no way in hell he was going to do that. "The shields are kind of my fault. I can't get through them either. I mean, I could, but I won't."

"Of course not," Clara murmured. She bit her lip. "I'm hoping that since you were able to make a rapport with him earlier that you can coax him back now. Or at least find out what's wrong."

"Everything is what's wrong," Danny said. He went closer, moving slowly. "Hey, Bu—Jay. Looks like you've wedged yourself in there pretty good. It's kind of useless as a hiding spot, though. I know that because I tried it a couple times. Word of advice: if you're playing hide and seek, use a spot
where people can't actually see you. Just saying."

He was hoping the bullshit patter might help set Bucky more at ease the way it had in the car, but Bucky didn't react to him any more than he'd apparently reacted to Clara. He was staring sightlessly at the wall, chest heaving as he gulped air through his mouth. Tears streamed down his face, but the only sound he made was his breathing. "Is he zoned?" Danny asked Clara over his shoulder. He'd pulled Steve out of a zone, so he knew what that looked like on moderately-traumatized Sentinels. Unfortunately Bucky was in the trauma big leagues, and Danny couldn't tell if this was a regular thousand-yard stare, or if something had caught, skinned and mounted Bucky's attention.

"No. He'd be calmer if he were," Clara said. "Zones are trancelike. This definitely isn't that."

"Great." At least he knew what to do with zones. Danny had no fucking idea about this. "Hey. Yo, Jay. You in there, Babe?" He crept to an arm's length away, then sat just as slowly as he'd moved, giving Bucky plenty of space.

Bucky growled.

It wasn't a real growl, despite how Danny had to send frantic assurances to Steve that he wasn't about to have his throat ripped out. It was like the noise a frightened, cornered animal makes when they're out of options. Bucky wasn't going to do anything to him, regardless of what he sounded like. No more than a growling kitten would fight instead of run.

There was no reason for Danny to be afraid, and he wasn't. He was just really, really sad.

"Shh, it's okay," he said. He stayed where he was, cross-legged and literally sitting on his hands so he wouldn't reach for Bucky by accident. "You're safe. No one is going to hurt you. We just want to get you cleaned up. I mean, I hate to say this, but you smell like a burning helicarrier that crashed into the Potomac. And I'm sure Steve can smell you all the way upstairs. Your clothes are probably a biohazard."

Maybe it was a stupid thing to do, bringing up the Winter Soldier's recent shenanigans. On the other hand, Bucky's eyes shifted to him, just for a second.

Danny managed not to cheer. His mom did make a tiny, happy noise behind him. "Yeah, exactly. I can see you agree with me, because you are a Sentinel and therefore extremely cognizant of proper hygiene. So, how 'bout that shower, Babe? My mom has special organic Sentinel body wash. You'll smell like sanitized apples. It'll be great."

Bucky looked at him again, maybe for a nanosecond longer, but then he scooched a little further back under the sink. His neck was bent at an awkward angle because of the drainpipe.

"You have a problem with smelling like apples? I'll have you know that apples are very appealing. Guides love the smell of apples. It's a thing."

No reaction. Fuck.

Danny rubbed the back of his neck. He might, eventually, be able to talk Bucky out from under the sink. Or he might be sitting on the floor making one-way conversation for the rest of his life. It was a tossup. He stood slowly, gratified when Bucky looked at him briefly but didn't growl again. "I'm not leaving you," he said quietly. "I'm just gonna check something out, okay? I'll be back really soon, I promise. I'm going to see what's in the bathroom," he said to Clara, shrugging. "Maybe there's something weird in there."

"It's the same bathroom we've had for the last thirty years," she said. "The weirdest thing is the 70s
clear plastic toilet paper holder."

"Maybe it offended his sensibilities," Danny said.

Clara smirked a little, then started talking with Bucky the way Danny had, except what she said was sweeter and less stupid.

Danny went to the bathroom and stood in the doorway, trying to see the room through the eyes of a formerly tortured, highly traumatized Sentinel. He was a detective; most of his job was about noticing. But it was hard to see the room as anything other than the uninterestingly familiar place he'd known his whole life.

It was small, which might've been a problem by itself, though Bucky hadn't minded Danny's smaller car. The ceramic tiles were possibly the most boring tan color in existence, but probably not worth hiding under the laundry sink for. The bathroom sink was white ceramic set in a standard white plywood cupboard, with nothing inside it except extra rolls of Sentinel-approved toilet paper. There was an unopened toothbrush, an new bottle of the apple body wash, and an unopened package of soap so inoffensive a baby could eat it. The tall cupboard across the room from the toilet held nothing but unbleached towels.

The toilet itself was probably as old as the house. It was the same standard white as the sink and cupboards and almost as uninteresting as the tile. It was hard to imagine that scaring anybody, let alone as thoroughly as whatever had terrified Bucky Barnes.

So that left the mirror in front of the medicine cabinet—and unless Bucky was scared of his own reflection that also seemed fairly benign—and the shower.

The shower was a narrow, glassed-in rectangle with an open top, using the corner near the toilet to make two of the four walls. The glass was frosted, but translucent enough to see the rest of the room. One wall was a big, glass door that scattered water whenever it was opened. There were two shelves built into the wall inside the shower, both just small enough to be nearly useless. And of course the showerhead, which was...just a showerhead. Nothing special there at all.

Danny went all the way inside the room with his hand on his mouth, tapping his lips as he considered. "What if I didn't know what it was, though?" If he didn't know it was a shower, it just looked like a big, glassed-in box with a couple shelves and a nozzle thing attached to it. It was completely dry, since it hadn't been used in months. So there was no real reason to assume the nozzle thing delivered water, as opposed to, say, poison gas.

Hell, for all Danny knew, Bucky might've taken one look at the shower and decided it was a walk-in freezer meant just for him. Or a big, upright coffin.

"Jesus Christ," Danny breathed. No wonder Bucky was sort-of hiding and growling and silently crying his big, beautiful eyes out. He must have felt so fucking betrayed.

"Well, screw that," Danny said. He marched up to the shower and turned it on full blast, as hot as it could go. He left the shower door open, waiting until steam billowed into the colder air. Then he went back to the laundry room.

Bucky had stopped crying, and he was even more-or-less looking at Danny's mom. But his fear had been replaced by abject, hopeless resignation, which was that much worse. At least Bucky's eyes immediately flicked to Danny when he walked into the room. Score one for Mom.

Danny sat down as carefully as he had before. "You can hear that noise, right?" he asked him. "I
can, so you have to be able to. Can you feel the steam as well?" He was sure he wouldn't get an answer so he didn't wait for one. "That's the shower running. The big, glass box in the bathroom. It rains water on you when you turn it on, hence the name. It's not as relaxing as a bath, but the water falling all over you feels pretty nice, especially if you're sore. Which I know you are."

Bucky's eyes darted to the door, then back to Danny.

"Yeah." Danny nodded like this was a real conversation. "The water can go as hot as you want, and my parents got a nice new water heater a few years ago. So you can be in there for days instead of three minutes, unlike some people I could mention. And the entire front of it is a big door that opens and closes really easily, so you can get out whenever you feel like it. All we want to do is help you get clean, Jay. Nothing else, I swear. You can hear my heartbeat, right?" He didn't wait for an answer to that either. "So you know I'm not lying. I am worried that you're gonna spend the whole night under that sink, however, which is both cold and unsanitary. And since I am morally obliged as a Guide to keep you company, I'd have to spend the night down here too. And honestly, Babe? If we're going to do that, I'd appreciate it if you could at least get clean first. The Potomac smells exactly as historic as it is, you know what I mean?"

"You're safe, sweetheart," Clara said to Bucky's deep, abiding silence. "Danny's right. All we want is to help you. Right now we'd like to help you get clean. That's what the shower is for, nothing else." She got up carefully, edging closer to Bucky before sitting down again. She extended her hand the way she had in the living room. "Will you please let us help you, Jay?"

Bucky looked down and away from her, but he extended his hand to her again. It reminded Danny of the scene in *How To Train Your Dragon*, where the kid touched the dragon's snout without getting his arm ripped off. Only Bucky was definitely the dragon.

"Thank you, Jay," Clara said. She stood, still holding Bucky's hand. He somehow managed to un-squish himself from behind the sink and stand one-handed.

He looked like he was still sure the shower was actually an upright coffin, but he let Clara lead him back to the bathroom anyway.

Naturally Danny ended up washing Bucky, because that was his life.

It wasn't that Clara didn't intend to do it. She'd washed plenty of adult Sentinels as part of her job, and was more than prepared to do it now. Hell, she was the one who even managed to get Bucky out of his clothes, albeit mostly by asking him and Bucky doing it. He barely even hesitated with the gloves and shirt, even though it meant revealing his left arm. Maybe that was because Danny had mentioned the helicarriers and Bucky knew the jig was up. Or maybe it was because by that point he was just too overwhelmed and bewildered to care.

They left the shower on the whole time, turning the room into a nice urban rainforest. Danny didn't want to think about the water bill, but he figured it was worth it. Bucky was obviously so awed by the room actually being *warm*, and whatever hellbox he'd assumed the shower to be actually being *full of warm water*, that he relaxed. If by 'relaxed' Danny meant, 'became marginally less tense, as evidenced by a slight drop in the height of his shoulders.' Which he did.

Bucky even seemed to enjoy being able to change the water's temperature. Or at least he turned the tap from hot to cold about eight billion times before finally settling on something just shy of scalding. And he walked in with no hesitation whatsoever. Score one for Danny.

Only it was immediately, painfully obvious that Bucky had no fucking idea what he should be doing,
other than standing there under the spray. Danny tried to explain the body wash, but all Bucky did with it was let the dollop on his palm rinse away. At least he didn't try to eat it, which put him ahead of Charlie. Who was three.

Clara dashed upstairs to get into a bathing suit and gather one of Bucky's new sets of clothing, before she used her mad Guide Counselor skills to introduce him to the wonders of apple-scented body wash. Of course, that left Danny standing there leaning on the wet sink, with his nice funeral-appropriate pants, socks and dress shirt soaked with humidity and spray from the open shower door. It was uncomfortable, unpleasant and hot. So he figured what the hell: he might as well commit to the dampness and misery and give Clara a head start.

"How 'bout I wash your hair for you, and then you'll know how to do it, okay?" he asked, carefully keeping his eyes on Bucky's face. Bucky didn't seem to care about his body being on display, which was likely because he was feral, though probably also due to more things Danny didn't want to think about. At the very least he wanted consent before he put his hands all over Bucky's body.

Bucky turned his whole head to look at him, which was an awesome departure from the terrible vacancy in the laundry room. But he didn't blink or nod.

"I won't do it without you telling me if it's okay, Babe," Danny said. "Can you do the blinking thing for me again? One for yes, two for no?"

It took a moment, like Bucky was trying to remember what Danny meant. But he finally blinked once.

"Thank you," Danny said, relieved. "So, was that a 'yes' for, can you do the blinking? Or 'yes' for, can I wash your hair?"

Bucky stared at him.

"Yeah, you're right. That was stupid. Okay. May I wash your hair?"

One blink.

"Fantastic." Danny yanked off his wet socks, then gave up on his shirt and his dignity entirely and just stripped to the waist, dropping the clothes on the floor behind him. He reached into the shower and grabbed the bottle of body wash. "I need you to move this way a little, so I can reach you." Bucky obediently stepped closer. "Great. Thanks." He was about to ask Bucky to tilt his head back, then remembered the horrific display upstairs and mentally ran screaming. "Can you bend your head forward, please? Thanks," he repeated when Bucky did.

It was pretty much exactly like washing a larger, quieter and far less squirmy version of Charlie. That was good, because it made it nicely clinical, and bad, because with so much of his frontal lobe on vacation, Bucky was uncomfortably like a very young child. Walking the line between Bucky's autonomy and Danny's parental instincts was difficult, especially when Danny was painfully sure Bucky didn't really understand that he could say 'no'.

Charlie, for example, would start screaming and flailing if he didn't get to wash his own face (he did it by nodding vigorously into his soapy hands; it was adorable). But every time Danny asked Bucky if it was okay to continue, Bucky stared at him uncomprehendingly before he blinked. Danny wanting Bucky's permission was obviously confusing the fuck out of him.

At least it was clear Bucky liked having his hair washed, considering he all but doubled himself over to make it easier for Danny to reach. Danny ended up washing Bucky's hair three times: the first two
to make sure it was clean, and the third just for the hell of it.

Clara slipped in during the last hair rinse. She beamed at Danny, then put what she'd brought with her inside the towel cupboard. "I'll go help Steve make sandwiches," she said right in Danny's ear, then disappeared out the door again. She'd brought Danny his dad's old bathrobe, and she hadn't changed into a bathing suit, which meant Steve had told her what Danny was doing. Danny couldn't blame her for wanting to avoid the vaguely-pedophilic awkwardness and Amazon-level humidity. But he was totally going to blame Steve for ratting him out.

Washing Bucky's left arm was less freaky than Danny had expected. It was kind of like washing a very large piece of cutlery. He'd been concerned that Bucky would mind Danny touching it, but he didn't seem to care. He did like how it shone when it was clean, though. He kept turning his hand in the light, watching the metal gleam.

Danny spent a bit less time on the other Bucky parts—especially certain Bucky parts—than he had on Bucky's hair, arms and hands. But Danny made sure Bucky was still squeaky clean by the time he'd finished rinsing his toes.

His blank stare was decidedly reluctant when Danny told him they were finished, so Danny dripped quietly for another ten minutes while Bucky stood under the spray with his eyes closed. Bucky still wasn't thrilled about getting out after that, but he let Danny comb his hair (Danny was awesome at it, thanks to Grace), and dress him with considerably less fuss than Charlie. Danny had to show Bucky how to brush his teeth, so they were both minty fresh and damp with humidity when they finally left the bathroom.

Bucky looked a hell of a lot better, all clean and wearing thick socks, dorm pants, a tee-shirt and hoodie in a Navy-approved shade of boring. Danny wouldn't say Bucky was happy, though. He had to be present for that, and Bucky was still deeply feral. But he was full, warm and comfortable, and definitely happier than he'd been. It wasn't much, maybe, but Danny would take it.

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Chapter End Notes

#ThisChapterIsSoCanadian, because it's nearly 7,000 words and nothing happens.

(It's not really Canadian, though, because it doesn't end badly and no one dies.)
Like Blowing a Kiss

Chapter Summary

Steve McGarrett is a Good Bro, Bucky learns some words and regains some things he lost, and Danny encounters a few subjects he'd rather not think about.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to darkmoore for reading this chapter over and declaring it good. I also want to thank everyone who has been willing to read this even though it's a WIP. Your comments make me so happy. ♥

I promise this will be finished! In...six chapters! Yeah! Six! Probably!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Whoa."

"Cleans up well, doesn't he?" Danny replied to Steve's wide-eyed and obviously appreciative shock. Danny knew there was no reason for him to sound so proud about it. He'd helped Bucky get clean; he hadn't invented him. But he couldn't help it. He got proud whenever people complimented his kids, too. Or Steve.

Not that he was Bucky's father or his actual Guide, or anything. But at some point between finding a feral, hobo goth ninja Sentinel in his car and telling Bucky about Grace and Charlie while detangling his wet hair, Danny had started caring about him. And he was always proud of the people he cared about.

He was also clearly a giant sap, if Steve's slow, knowing grin was anything to go on. Danny gave him his best unimpressed glare over Bucky's shoulder. Steve just blinked innocently at him and kept grinning, the asshole.

"You do look very nice, Jay." Clara smiled at Bucky. 'Nice' was a titanic understatement, considering that even scruffy, feral, and looking like he'd stumbled out of the world's politest frat party, Bucky was just about jaw-droppingly beautiful. He must've had to beat his admirers off with a stick, back in the day. If he were present in his head right now he'd be devastating.

Bucky didn't respond to her. Danny had no idea if he was even remotely aware he was being admired. He just stood with his hands stuffed in the front pouch of his hoodie and his eyes pretty much fixed on his socks. They darted to whoever was speaking, though, which was light years better than when he'd first met Steve, or had been convinced the shower would eat him.

Danny did notice that Bucky's eyes darted the most to the food Clara and Steve had put out on the kitchen counter. She and Steve had made sandwiches: ham and cheese slices on white bread, and peanut butter and jelly. Sad reminders of all the tragically unappetizing lunches of Danny's youth. His mom had even included a bowl of sliced apples and another of carrot sticks. The déjà vu was
unnerving.

The grape tomatoes and cucumber slices had to be because of Steve, who got twitchy if every meal
didn’t include the exactly correct percentage from each recommended food group.

Danny would have preferred many, many other things, possibly even up to and including pizza with
pineapple on it. But he’d missed lunch and it was nearly dinnertime, and Danny wasn’t picky enough
to turn down food just because he could imagine it squished at the bottom of an A-Team lunch box.

Clara had also made coffee. Danny loved his mom.

"Come have a seat." Clara said to both of them. "Steve and I made sandwiches. Please join us. I'm
sure you're both hungry."

Danny definitely was. He was surprised that Bucky would be, though, because even with the
laundry room escapade it’d barely been an hour and a half since he’d eaten. But Bucky was definitely
interested in the food, and he barely hesitated when Clara took his hand and had him sit at the table.

The little table only had two chairs. Danny assumed he and Steve would eat at the breakfast bar. But
Steve loaded up a plate for both of them, gave Danny his, then took his own and sat on the floor. He
leaned nonchalantly against the cupboard as if that was a thing he did during meals.

That was not a thing Steve did during meals. Which was why Danny just stood there for a second,
trying to figure out what the hell his crazy SEAL-Sentinel was doing. "That's the floor, Steve," he
pointed out helpfully. "Why are you on the floor?"

"Steve is keeping out of the way, honey," Clara said casually as she put copious amounts of
everything on Bucky's plate. "This is peanut butter and strawberry jam," she explained to him. "It's
sweet. Danny loved it when he was a child."

"Clara thought it'd be…easier," Steve said. The way his mouth twitched at the end of his smile made
it obvious he thought 'easier' could go fuck itself and the expediency it rode in on. But he’d given in
anyway, because accommodating a feral Sentinel's instincts was preferable to becoming a jam-like
smear on the linoleum.

Or, more likely, it was preferable to watching Bucky drop to his knees again. Danny knew Steve, of
all people, would take floorspace over anything that might rub Bucky's nose in that debasement.

"Well, you do take up a lot of space," Danny said. He took his plate and sat next to Steve on the
floor, hip to hip. Danny's frequently abused joints and spine did not love it, but Steve's grin made it
worthwhile.

Clara sent them both her sunshiny smile and brought Bucky the plate. Bucky kept glancing back and
forth between Danny and Steve and Clara at the counter, but he took the plate from her readily
enough.

He put it down in front of him so carefully it didn't make a sound, then looked at Clara again.
Bucky's lips moved like he was trying to say something, but couldn't form the word. He gave up,
dropping his head with a blush of embarrassment reddening his cheeks.

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Clara said. She touched Bucky's shoulder gently. "It's all right. Look
at me, please, Jay. I want to show you something."

Bucky lifted his head, as eerily obedient as always.
"That's better." Clara beamed at him. "This is another way to say 'thank you'." She touched her fingertips to her lips, then straightened her arm. "See? It's like blowing a kiss. Now you try it."

Bucky copied the word exactly, which was also eerie as fuck. Danny told himself it was a Super Soldier thing rather than a Hydra thing, because the former wouldn't kill his appetite.

"Perfect!" Clara beamed at him again, then repeated the sign. "Thank you for letting me teach you that, Jay. Now you know two words."

Jay made the sign for the letter 'J', and then for thank you. He looked very serious, like he wanted to make absolutely certain he got it right.

"That's lovely," Clara said. "Let's eat now, and I can teach you more words later." She went to the counter and took a normal human amount for herself. "You can start if you want," she said to Bucky, because he hadn't, since he'd gone back to staring at Danny and Steve.

Bucky stood up and picked up his plate, then went to the cupboards where Danny and Steve were. He moved slowly the whole time, freezing every few seconds with his gaze bouncing between the three of them, like he was sure he'd be smacked down any moment.

"Are you all right, J?" Clara asked him, just as Danny said, "What's up, Babe?"

Naturally Bucky didn't respond to either of them, but he did finish his laborious trek across the room. Danny watched in awed silence as Bucky slowly lowered himself to the floor an arm's length away from him. He looked at Danny and Steve fearfully with his plate still gripped between his hands, as if he was expecting to have to bolt.

Steve just flashed him a quick smile and started eating, making sure not to meet Bucky's eyes.

"Hello. Yes, the floor is surprisingly comfortable. We're having a floor party," Danny said. He started eating one of the Sandwiches of Childhood Sadness, then slowly reached out with his free hand to pat Bucky's leg a couple times, all casual.

Clara heaved a put-upon sigh, then brought her plate and sat near Bucky on the floor. "I'm too old for this."

"It's not so bad. It's like a picnic," Steve said. Which of course he would, since he was a SEAL and had likely eaten grubs out of the dirt in the rain. He bumped Danny's knee with his own. When Danny looked at him, Steve's smile had so much love in it that Danny's insides went as warm and gooey as a squished peanut butter sandwich.

"You're ridiculous," Danny said to him. Steve just laughed. Warmth, love and happiness flowed along their bond.

Bucky picked up the peanut butter sandwich and took a tentative bite. His eyes shot wide and he snapped his focus to Clara, staring at her like he couldn't believe something that delicious could come from mere human hands.

Thank you, Bucky signed to her. Danny could practically feel the stunned reverence in it.

"You're welcome," Clara said. "Try the ham and cheese too. I think you'll like it."

Bucky tried it, and clearly decided that was also good, though perhaps not as good as the peanut butter or grilled cheese. Then again, what would he have to compare it to?
On the other hand, they said ignorance was bliss for a reason. The same sandwiches Danny would've rather not eaten were making Bucky about as happy as was possible for him. Danny kept watching Bucky out of the corner of his eye as he ate, so he saw how Bucky's expression brightened a tiny bit, settling somewhere just under a smile.

Maybe eating on the floor wasn't such a bad thing after all.

Bucky ate two platefuls of sandwiches and Steve-approved plant products and drank two glasses of milk. Danny had his much more reasonable portion and then finished his coffee, trying not to be amused by Bucky's valiant but failing attempts to stay awake.

After the third time he nearly nodded off in as many minutes, Clara tisked at Danny's smirk, then stood up with a groan. "I think you could use a bed, sweetheart," she said to Bucky. She held out her hand for him. "Come with me and we'll find you a good place to sleep."

Obviously the way to a feral Sentinel's heart was through his stomach, because Bucky took her hand with no hesitation at all.

This time Danny went with Clara and her very large duckling, figuring he should be on hand in case his old bedroom was inexplicably terrifying. But Bucky baulked at the stairs. He looked at Clara and did another tentative, angry-kitten growl.

"Here. Let me show you how to say 'Steve's name," Clara said.

"I think the growl's very apt, actually," Danny said.

"I heard that!" Steve called from the kitchen.

"We start with the letter 'M'," Clara said to Bucky, completely ignoring her child. She made a fist with her thumb poking out between the ring and pinky fingers. "This is for 'McGarrett', Steve's last name, because the sign I use for him already looks like it has 'S' in it. This is the rest." She crossed her hands at the wrist like an 'X', with her fists facing out and the thumb folded across her fingers. Then she pulled the X apart. "This means 'safe'," she explained. "Steve keeps us safe, so I chose that for him. But I do it with the M for his last name." She made the sign again, only with the thumb poking out like a tiny pink gopher. "Now you try it."

Bucky did it perfectly.

"Wonderful! You have a talent for this," Clara said. "Do you want to know how to sign Danny's name?"

"No he doesn't," Danny said.

"Yes he does!" Steve called gleefully from the kitchen.

Clara chuckled, then gave Danny a kiss on the cheek. "I love you."

"I know," Danny sighed. "Go ahead, then. Seal my fate."

"It really does suit you, you know. This is 'D', for 'Danny'." She showed Bucky a loose fist with the index finger sticking up like she was making a point. "And this is 'stubborn', because Danny is." She touched the thumb of her open hand to her forehead, then flapped her fingers down like a closing
hatch. The symbolism was obvious.

"That is slanderous and cruel," Danny said primly. "I am completely flexible and easy-going. It's Steve who's like a brick wall made of Adamantium."

"So this is 'Danny',' Clara said, ignoring him again. She made a D and put it to her forehead, then flapped her fingers down.

Bucky copied it exactly again. He did the J for his name, then repeated Danny's and Steve's again, then touched Clara on the shoulder.

"Oh, my name? That's very sweet of you to ask. I got mine in school, when I was learning how to be a Guide Counselor. It's very simple." She curved her fingers in a 'C', then pretended to pinch a lock of her hair and pulled down to past her chest. She made it look very elegant. "The 'C' is for 'Clara', and the rest uses the sign for 'braid, because I always had my hair in a braid when I was in class." She shrugged. "I know it's not very interesting, but I've used it for too many years now to change."

Bucky signed her name as exactly as he had all the others. Then he made the sign for Steve's name and shook his head. Danny had figured that was what the problem with the stairs was, but it was nice to have it confirmed.

"I see," Clara said. "Well, do you remember that this house is my territory, not either of yours?"

Bucky nodded.

"That's good. I'm glad you remember. So, this is my territory, and that means you are free to go anywhere in the house you want to, unless I tell you 'no'. Do you understand?"

Bucky nodded again, though he clearly wasn't happy about it. He glanced back at the kitchen, as if he was waiting for Steve to come charging out and launch himself at him.

Instead, Steve came padding out softly, still using a dish towel to dry his hands. "I know you're having a hard time sharing space right now, but it's okay. This is Clara's territory, and I'm not gonna hurt you if you go upstairs."

Danny poked him in the nearest kidney, just hard enough to make Steve jump. "He means he's not going to hurt you at all."

Steve gave Danny a mild glare before turning back to Bucky. "Yeah. I'm not going to hurt you, Jay. You're safe. You can go upstairs." He gave Bucky one of his warmest, friendliest grins, the kind he used to impress people and endear him to children.

It seemed to work on feral Sentinels as well, because Bucky nodded. He lowered his eyes, but he reached out and tentatively touched Steve on the arm before yanking his hand away.

Steve's grin went practically incandescent. "It's good to meet you too."

The bedroom his sisters had shared was being used for storage, but the room Danny shared with Matthew once upon a time was a second guest room now. All their furniture had been cleared out and replaced by a queen sized bed and a couple night tables. The alarmingly cheerful zoo animal wallpaper was still there, though. It gave Danny a pang looking at it. Matthew had made some monumentally fucked up decisions, but Danny would never stop missing him.

Bucky was fascinated by the wallpaper, so much so that he almost tripped over his own feet getting
to the bed. Danny did not laugh, since he was a good person. But it was a near thing.

However, Bucky baulked again when it came to actually getting on the bed. He shook his head, then signed Steve's name.

"He said it was all good, babe, remember?" Danny said. He kept his voice even and calm, because he was absolutely not exasperated with Bucky's all-too-familiar brand of stubbornness.

Seriously, it was so unfair that Danny got 'stubborn' as his name. Steve was so much worse.

Bucky shook his head again, then repeated the sign for Steve.

"Do you want to talk to Steve?" Clara asked him.

Danny would have used 'see', because Bucky's current vocabulary consisted of seven words, four of which were names. But Bucky nodded.

Danny called for Steve nice and indoor-voiced this time, and a couple minutes later Steve came tromping up the stairs.

"What's the problem?" he asked as he came into the room. He leaned against the farthest wall from the doorway, giving Bucky as much space as possible.

"No idea," Danny said. "He hasn't exactly been forthcoming."

"Danny," Clara said admonishingly. She put her hand on Bucky's arm. "Steve's here. What's the matter, honey? Can you let us know?"

Bucky swallowed, then gathered his courage and crossed the room to stand in front of Steve. He deliberately made the signs for Danny's and Clara's names, then used his index finger to carefully poke Steve in the chest.

"Holy fuck," Danny muttered, because that was basically an entire sentence. Clara shushed him.

"You want me to guard them? Is that it?" Steve asked him.

Bucky nodded. He signed their names and touched Steve's chest again, then nodded a second time. His meaning was remarkably clear.

Steve squared his shoulders, pulling himself to his full height. It suddenly occurred to Danny that these were both military men, and Steve outranked Bucky. Hell, Steve outranked Steve Rogers. It was a strange epiphany to have, especially in his childhood bedroom surrounded by improbably-colored exotic animals. But despite his bearing and slightly greater height, Steve was standing tall to be respectful, not looming. Recognizing a fellow Sentinel on shared ground. "I swear, I will keep them safe while you sleep."

Bucky signed thank you, then patted Steve's chest. He came sort of close to vaguely smiling again. It was awesome.

"Thanks," Danny said softly to Steve as he left, no doubt to secure the perimeter.

Steve tossed Danny a smile on the way out, but he was obviously a Sentinel on a mission. He had that particular look of determination that made Danny almost feel badly for all the hypothetical intruders.

Clara finally got Bucky sitting on the bed. She asked if he wanted his hoodie off (headshake) or his
socks (nod, but Bucky fumbled them off himself), then wished him a good sleep and tried to leave.

That apparently had not been part of the plan. He didn't make a sound, but he grabbed Clara's wrist as she turned away.

Clara was startled, but Bucky actually gasped, as if he had only just realized what he'd done. He let go of her immediately, yanking his hand to his chest and clutching it there as if it'd acted on its own. He was shaking, staring up at Clara with an expression of remorse and fear. Then he looked wildly around the room, like he was about to bolt.

"It's all right, sweetheart. You didn't hurt me,\" Clara said quickly, before Danny could do something stupid like grab him. She sounded remarkably calm, considering how worried Danny was that Bucky would dive out the window. He had to send Steve tons of reassurances that nothing bad had actually happened. "Do you want me to stay?" 

Danny thought Bucky would be too paralyzed with fear to answer, but he managed a single blink. Funny how something so tiny could be so incredibly brave.

"Thank you for telling me what you want,\" Clara said. "Of course I'll stay."

Bucky relaxed incrementally, the fear trickling out of his expression like milk down a drain. Slowly and oh, so cautiously, Bucky reached out for her again, but when she stepped closer, instead of taking her hand Bucky pulled her into a hug. He was sitting so it was kind of awkward, but he had his arms wrapped around her and he didn't look inclined to let go anytime soon. He was still shaking and his eyes were squeezed shut, and Clara couldn't hug him back very well because of the angle. But Bucky Barnes the feral Sentinel was hugging Danny's mom like his life depended on it.

Ferals didn't normally do that. Then again, feral Sentinels didn't normally crawl into random Guides' cars. They either protected their—or any—Guide with a ferocity bordering on rabid, got alarmingly territorial, or went to ground like an injured cat. But Bucky's Guide had been forcibly separated from him for decades. And then, when they were finally reunited, instead of reaffirming their bond Bucky had been compelled to hurt him.

God, he must have been so lonely. And Danny wasn't going to think about that anymore, thank you very much.

Clara hugged Bucky back as best she could, and stroked her fingers through his hair, murmuring things like how he was safe now, or how happy she was that he was here, or how strong he was, and how proud she was of him. Danny crept closer and stayed quiet and did his best not to imagine Steve like this: so desperate for contact that he would clutch at a Guide he barely knew. Or dwell too much on the tragedy that was Bucky Barnes, because Danny didn't want to fall apart.

It felt like a very long time before Bucky pulled back, and even then it was with reluctance. He signed *Thank you*, with his head down and face pink with shame.

"You're very welcome,\" Clara said. She was still stroking his hair. "Anytime you need a hug, you just ask, all right? There's nothing wrong with wanting contact. We all need it. It's what makes us human. So you just ask, sweetheart. I want you to. Anytime you feel like it. Do you understand?"

Bucky didn't raise his head, but he nodded.

"Wonderful. Thank you. Now, how about you lay down so you can sleep? I promise I'm not going anywhere."

Bucky did, though he looked tense as a plank until Clara was settled on the other side of the bed with
her back against the headboard. He finally relaxed a little, even closing his eyes. Awesome.

Clara started carding her fingers through his hair again. "Danny, could you fetch my eReader from the living room, please?"

Bucky was already asleep when Danny came back.

Danny had not actually intended to fall asleep himself.

Granted staying awake might have been easier if he hadn't changed into a tee-shirt and dorm pants and gotten into bed. But in his defense, he was a bit chilly after the shower escapade and the bed was nice and warm. Danny had been planning all the filthy, filthy things he was going to do (very quietly) to Steve once he got back from his patrol. But it'd been a long, kind of harrowing day, and apparently Danny had blinked and then Maya was shaking him awake.

"Wha? Whussizit?" Danny sat up, muzzily rubbing his eyes. Maya was his spirit animal and a gorilla. A very smart, very gentle gorilla, and screw anyone who assumed she'd chosen him because he might, very occasionally, have anger issues. His job was stressful, okay? And so was Steve. Danny tended to have a lot of things to be angry about.

Danny wasn't angry right now, though; he was worried. A quick glance told him Steve hadn't come to bed, and Maya had just shaken him awake. "Everybody okay?"

_Fine. Good. You see Tigger sad dog._

That…didn't make much sense, even if Danny had just woken up. Maya wasn't putting out fear or distressed vibes, though. She actually seemed…excited? And, okay, a little concerned. But mostly excited.

_You see_, she signed at him. _See Tigger sad dog._

'Tigger' was the name of Steve's spirit animal, which was a white tiger. Steve thought the name was hilarious. Danny thought it was stupid, but he was too polite to say anything. In front of the tiger. He gave Steve grief about it all the time. Maya's name for Tigger was the same sign for 'bounce': she made one hand into a big 'C' shape like a ball, and then rebounded it off the back of her other one. But Tigger was a tiger, not a dog.

"Tigger's not a dog," Danny said.

Maya made the little grunt noise that was her equivalent of an eyeroll, then took Danny's wrist and hauled him off the bed. She ignored his yelp of protest, though she didn't actually drag him down the corridor. She even let him look in on Bucky and Clara in his old bedroom. Clara had fallen asleep with her eReader in her lap. Bucky was nowhere to be seen.

And now Danny was really worried. "Oh my God. Where's Bucky?" he whispered to Maya.

_Jay good fine_, she signed. Then, _you see_ again, and tugged at his arm.

"If he's good fine, why isn't he sleeping?"

All that got was another of Maya's exasperated grunts as she pulled him along to the stairs. She vanished and reappeared in the living room, then motioned for Danny to follow her, as well as shushing him with her finger on her lips.
Danny obediently crept down the stairs, then got halfway and stopped dead. Because now he had a good view of the living room, and even in the semi-dark of an urban New Jersey night, he could tell that the big, long lump on the couch was Steve, dead to the world. And that the other big, long lump was Bucky, practically sprawled on top of him like the world's angriest blanket.

Steve was generally a light sleeper, especially if he wasn't sure of the territory. Danny wasn't that surprised Steve felt comfortable enough to sleep deeply in his Guide's childhood home. Definitely happy about it, but not that surprised. He was extremely surprised that Steve would still feel sufficiently comfortable to sleep that deeply with Bucky lying on him, though. Maybe it was a Sentinel thing. A Sentinel puppy-pile.

And on the floor was Tigger, with one of his massive forelimbs across the back of what was not, actually, a dog. It was an enormous, scrappy white wolf. Tigger was licking the wolf's fur and chuffing happily like a stuttering car engine.

"Oh," Danny said softly.

"You see," Maya said, looking smug. Then she knuckle-walked over to the two quadrupeds, plonked herself down on her butt and started grooming behind the wolf's ears.

The wolf, who was as white as Tigger but without the stripes, looked up at Danny by just lifting her (his? It looked like a 'her') eyes, which reminded Danny eerily of Bucky. Danny couldn't tell their color in the low light, but they radiated sadness like reflective beacons. This was Bucky's spirit animal, and she was just as broken.

But they were fixing him, Danny reminded himself fiercely. Bucky was already less broken than he'd been when Danny found him. And the wolf had to know it. Danny was sure that was why she was here.

"Hey, beautiful," Danny whispered. He went closer and crouched next to Tigger, which gave him just enough space to reach the wolf's chin. He scratched her around her jaw, the way Tigger liked. The wolf seemed to like it too, since she cautiously tilted her head to make it easier for him. "My name's Danny. This is Tigger and Maya. We're really glad to meet you. Maya is my spirit animal."

He turned to nod at the couch and the sleeping Steve. "Tigger belongs to that guy—"

Bucky was looking right back at him.

Danny didn't startle quite badly enough to launch himself into orbit, though it was a near thing. Bucky, however, leapt to his feet so fast he managed to shove the couch with his foot, which woke Steve up too.

Steve bolted upright, obviously prepared for a fight, then saw Danny and the three spirit animals and blinked. "Oh, hey," he said, smiling in happy surprise. "Jay, is that your wolf?"

Bucky didn't nod or blink, or so much as glance in Steve's direction. He was stalk-still with his fists clenched and his chest heaving, trembling in what could only be shock. And staring at the wolf like, well, exactly like he hadn't seen his spirit animal in decades. Which he most likely hadn't.

Maya had stayed away from Danny for 20 years, because she was pissed at him for giving up being a Guide. Danny had made that choice himself. He'd accepted the consequences. And he'd still missed his spirit animal like missing a fucking limb.

How much worse would it have been for Bucky, who'd never had a choice about his wolf being taken from him?
The wolf rolled onto her stomach and then heaved herself to her feet. She gave herself a quick shake, then turned towards Bucky and crouched down on her forearms. She whined quietly, inching towards him in the most unthreatening way possible, considering her size and the whole wolf-thing. A spirit animal wouldn't hurt her Sentinel any more than a Sentinel was capable of hurting a Guide, but Bucky was so overwhelmed it was overlapping with terrified. Like a Venn diagram from hell.

Bucky watched the wolf edging closer to him. His hands jerked forward like he couldn't help himself, but he yanked them back. Tears welled in his eyes, then ran down his cheeks when he blinked.

Danny stood up, heart pounding and barely daring to breathe. He realized he was leaning forward, as if that would somehow make the wolf go faster. Maya's long arm went around his waist and Danny leaned into her, grateful for her presence. Tigger was on his feet, pacing with agitation. Steve was just as still as Bucky, and just as tense as Danny felt. The bond they shared thrummed with concerned anticipation and hope.

The wolf stopped just in front of Bucky, then very, very slowly raised up to her feet. She sat on her haunches, which put her eyes just about level with Bucky's nose. She whined again, then leaned her massive head forward just a little and gave Bucky a single lick on his already wet face.

Bucky's breath hitched, and then whatever misguided will he'd been using to hold himself back snapped like a too-taut wire. He threw himself to his knees, hugging the wolf around her withers and burying his face in her fur. He sobbed like a child, so wracked with it that Danny was sure only the wolf was keeping him upright. It was the most noise Danny had heard Bucky make.

Steve padded over and put his arm across Danny's shoulders. Tigger thudded up to them and Steve wrapped his free hand around the tiger's scruff.

"You think he's going to be okay?" Steve said.

The honest answer to that was, 'I have no fucking clue'. Bucky was still feral, still unnaturally submissive and horribly afraid. He'd fled to New Jersey instead of going to his Guide, and didn't seem to know Steve Rogers was his Guide at all. He'd recoiled at the sound of his own name.

But he was brave enough to go to a stranger Guide for comfort, and could still trust enough to let people help him. And he'd eaten, and slept, and got clean and he'd even almost smiled a few times. And now his wolf spirit animal was on the floor with Bucky lying on her the way he'd lain on Steve, and she was whining and barking and getting happy wolf goob all over his face. And it was nearly dawn of a new day, where anything could happen.

So, "I have no fucking clue," Danny said. "But, yeah. Maybe. I think maybe he'll be all right."

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Chapter End Notes

Actual stuff will happen in the next chapter. I'm almost sure of it. xD
Chapter Summary

Things do not go according to plan.

Chapter Notes

With thanks again to darkmoore for reading this over for me and making sure my headcanon works with hers. Thanks also to Shazrolane for general awesomeness, and Squeaky, just 'cause. ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky was not all right.

Admittedly that was not exactly new news. After all, if Bucky had been all right he wouldn't've hobo goth ninjaed his way into Danny's car. Danny was aware Bucky was fucked up. Hell, that was why Danny had brought Bucky home when he'd thought he was just a random, feral casualty of the destruction of S.H.I.E.L.D..

So, yeah. Bucky's lack of all-rightness wasn't particularly surprising. It was the extent of the fucked uped-ness; the breadth and depth of the horror behind those pretty blue eyes. That was shocking as hell.

Of course, it took a while before Danny got to experience it.

See, the dawn of a new day arrived and nice, ordinary things happened like Bucky dripping with spectral wolf goob so therefore taking another shower. Bucky even understood the purpose of the body wash and toothpaste this time, so Danny was able to leave him in the downstairs bathroom with his wolf and second set of fresh clothing, then flee upstairs and take a shower of his own.

Bucky was clean and drool free when he and his wolf returned from the basement. Unfortunately, so was the wolf. The wolf, who was made of psionic energy and therefore had not, actually, needed a shower. Danny had no idea why the wolf had indulged Bucky by letting him wash her. Maybe he'd forgotten that she couldn't really get dirty. Maybe it was a spirit animal/Sentinel bonding thing. Or maybe it was just that she was a canine and therefore liked to be wet.

Whatever the reason, she now was very wet and definitely should have been towel-dried. Which she was not. Danny wasn't sure how Bucky had gotten her in the shower stall in the first place. In fact, Danny was fairly certain Bucky had only managed to wash half of her at a time. He wasn't looking forward to finding out how badly they'd flooded the bathroom.

The wolf, who hadn't needed a shower, decided she did desperately need to shake the water off in the living room. Now, spirit animals had human-level intelligence. They could also choose to be corporeal or not, which meant Bucky's wolf was a colossal shit with a terrible sense of humor. And since she'd chosen Bucky, he was obviously one too.
At least he had been, once. But if his spirit animal hadn't lost her personality, maybe Bucky hadn't either.

"We need to get you back into your own skull, Babe," Danny told him after breakfast (oatmeal with eggs, milk, butter and a gallon of honey in it, which Danny actually liked, along with enough apple slices to choke a horse. Because Steve). "Seriously. Your wolf has a better sense of humor than you. You are being upstaged by an astral-projected, albino canine."

"Daniel Williams! It's Jay's choice, if he comes back or not. I won't have you pressuring him. Clara had slept sitting up, woken two hours early to an empty bed, then had a minor panic attack assuming Bucky had slunk away in the night. She was not in the best mood.

She'd eaten at the table instead of the floor like the men this morning, so right now she was looming over Danny with her hands on her hips and an expression like every single time Danny had been in trouble. He was 38 and that face could still make him feel like melding with the wall.

"I'm not pressuring him!" Danny protested. "I'm expressing concern!" He looked at Bucky beseechingly. "No pressure, okay? I just...I don't think you're happy, like that. Maybe you are," he added quickly, though he was absolutely certain Bucky wasn't. "But, it's gotta be rough, right? I mean, you can't talk. And it's harder to think, and—"

"There's a curtain between you and the world," Clara interrupted, eloquently saying everything Danny was fumbling with in one sentence. "It's quiet and safe behind it, I know. But it's also dark, and lonely." She lowered herself creakily to the floor, sitting across from Bucky with her hands in her lap. "I won't lie to you. We all want you back with us. You should be fully present. Life can't be lived only partially aware."

"And, uh. I've only been feral once, and I don't really remember it, but I'm pretty sure your Guide can't feel you like this," Steve said. He was on Bucky's far side, with the wolf flopped on the floor between them. He'd been petting her while he ate. "That's right, isn't it?" he asked Clara.

She nodded. "Unfortunately, yes."

Bucky had one hand buried in his wolf's scruff, so Clara took his left hand in both of hers. Bucky looked at his metal fingers anxiously but didn't try to pull away.

"Your Guide is looking for you," she said. "But he can't feel you. He doesn't know if you're safe, or even where you are. I've never bonded, so I can only imagine how terrible that would be. But from what I understand, a closed bond is like having your soul at the bottom of the ocean: You know it's there, somewhere, but you can't get near it. He's lost the most precious thing he's ever had. And so have you."

Bucky's gaze stayed on his hand, gleaming silver between Clara's soft, whorled knuckles. He shook his head.

"Um, not sure what you're saying 'no' to there, Babe," Danny said. "No, your Guide hasn't lost anything precious? Or, no, you haven't?"

"How is he supposed to answer that, Danny?" Steve said.

"Steve Rogers is your Guide, Jay," Clara said. "Do you know that?"

Bucky stayed unmoving with his head down for so long that Danny was sure he somehow hadn't heard her. "Jay? You in there, Buddy?"
He was reaching to poke Bucky in the side when Bucky finally blinked three times, the code he'd made for 'I don't know'.

"He really is your Guide. It's on official record. You were both registered with the Wartime Sentinel/Guide Office in 1943," Steve said, because of course he'd know that.

Bucky blinked three times again.

"Okay," Danny said on a breath. "That might be a bit of a problem, seeing as he totally is your Guide. And he's very much alive and is probably freaking out trying to find you."

"It's all right if you're not sure, Jay," Clara said, ever the voice of conciliation. "But, do you think you could take our word for it? If you improve your hearing a bit you'll know we're not lying. Can you trust us that Steve Rogers is your Guide?"

It took another minute before Bucky nodded. His wolf whined and shoved her nose under his bent knee.

"Thank you," Clara said. "Now, I'm sure this must be difficult, but I'm asking you to trust us again. Danny and I can help you come back to us, out of the dark place you're in. I'm sure that once you do, you'll know that Steve Rogers is your Guide. You'll be able to feel him again, and he'll be able to feel you. I can promise you that you'll feel better."

"You can go home," Steve said, with a fervency that came from his own, miserable experience. Steve knew better than most people what it was like having nowhere and no one; the anguish tinging his voice broke Danny's heart.

Bucky didn't move, but he seemed to pull into himself, retreating the way he had in the laundry room. He shook his head again. A couple tears spilled down his face like an afterthought.

"You can't go home?" Steve said.

Bucky swallowed, then nodded. He finally raised his head, using his right hand to wipe his eyes. He touched his chest and blinked, then touched Danny's wrist. It took a moment for Danny to recognize it as the same sequence of gestures Bucky had used in the car.

"You're saying you'll hurt him, if you go home," Danny said. "You'll hurt your Guide."

Bucky nodded.

"No you won't," Steve said immediately. He sounded offended. "Hydra's not controlling you anymore. Are they?"

Bucky shook his head.

"Yeah. And they forced you to hurt Rogers. You didn't want to, did you? Would you have hurt him if you'd had a choice?"

Bucky shook his head again, vehemently.

"See?" Steve said, satisfied. "So, you have nothing to be worried about. You can go home."

But Bucky shook his head 'no' a third time, just as vehemently. He barred his teeth, then thumped the cupboard next to him with his fist. The wood didn't crack, but it was loud enough to make Clara and Danny flinch.
Bucky sucked in a breath, expression collapsing in remorse and horror. He gently tugged his left hand out of Clara's grip, then turned immediately towards his wolf and kind of scrunched himself up in contrition.

"It's all right, Jay. You just startled us. No harm done," Clara said. "Here. Let me show you the sign for 'Sorry', for when you want to apologize." She waited until Bucky reluctantly looked at her, then she made a fist and drew a circle with it over her chest. "That's how you say you're sorry."

Bucky copied the motion, then did it again and again. Clara finally put her hand over his to make him stop.

"You don't have to keep apologizing, sweetheart," she said. "It's over. You're forgiven." There was nothing to forgive, as far as Danny was concerned—God knew he'd done worse than that when he was frustrated—but the way Bucky visibly relaxed showed how much he'd needed to hear it.

"I'm not trying to upset you," Steve said, contrite himself. "I just don't understand why you wouldn't want to be with your Guide. Do you want to be with him?" He'd lowered his voice again, like he could barely make himself suggest that Bucky might not.

Bucky nodded, but he wouldn't meet Steve's eyes. He made the sign for 'Sorry'.

"So, you're saying you want to be with your Guide, but you don't want to be with your Guide, because you're scared you'll hurt him," Danny said.

Bucky nodded.

"But, you won't hurt him," Steve said plaintively. "You can't. What Hydra did...that was unnatural. Like, completely against a Sentinel's instinct. There's no way you'd hurt Rogers now. Just like you wouldn't hurt Danny or Clara."

Bucky was shaking his head so hard his hair flopped against his face. Steve looked like he wanted to shake some sense into him (payback was a bitch, Steve), but Bucky's wolf rolled onto her belly, looked at Steve and pulled her lips back in a silent not-quite snarl. The "please shut the fuck up now," was pretty clear.

"Better quit while you're behind, Babe. You are failing to make friends or influence Sentinels." Danny said to him.

"But—!"

"Steven, that's enough," Clara said brusquely. Steve stopped talking like he'd been smacked with a brick. "It makes a lot of sense that you're worried about hurting your Guide again, Jay," she said to Bucky, back to her usual sweetness and light. "Hydra stole who you are for so long that it's completely understandable how you'd think you were still dangerous to him. I know you're afraid, but I'm asking you to trust us with this too. And I swear to you, Steve is right. You've treated Danny and me with such gentleness and care, it's impossible to imagine that you could be capable of hurting any Guide again, let alone your own."

Bucky growled, but when he blinked for 'no' more tears ran down his face. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes and shook his head again, over and over. His entire body radiated frustration and despair.

His wolf went to her haunches to lick his face, and he flung one arm around her neck like a life-preserver, burying his face in her fur. He clenched his free hand so hard it trembled.
"I'm sorry," Steve said.

Predictably, Bucky ignored him. But he took a deep breath and drew back from his wolf, wiping his eyes on his sleeves. He swallowed, sniffed, then repeated the touch-blink-touch sequence from the car. His mouth twitched in a tiny grimace, as if that wasn't right.

"Would you like me to teach you the sign for 'Hurt', Jay?" Clara asked him.

Jay nodded.

"It looks like this." She pointed her index fingers at each other, then jabbed them towards each other twice.

Bucky copied it, signed thank you, then went still, his eyes fixed on the middle distance as he worked out how to explain what he meant. Only right now sorting his thoughts into language would be like trying to climb a ladder using only one arm. It was possible—Hell, Danny was almost sure Steve had done it at some point—but Christ, it would be difficult.

Bucky took another breath, obviously steeling himself. He tapped his forehead, then made the sign for 'Hurt'. Then he made the sign for Steve's name, then touched his chest.

"Wait, you mean your Steve, right?" Steve asked him.

Bucky nodded.

"All right," Clara said slowly. "If I'm understanding you correctly, you're saying that what's in your head will hurt your Guide? Your thoughts will hurt him?"

Bucky nodded so fervently he probably gave himself vertigo.

"This is an easy sign for 'Captain America', so we know which Steve we're talking about." Clara made her hand into a fist with her thumb at the side, then put it to her forehead with the fingers facing out. "That's for the 'A' on his helmet." She smiled when Bucky did the sign perfectly. "Excellent. But…You're wrong, Jay. About what you said, I mean. Your thoughts can't hurt him. They can hurt. Of course they can hurt. They can be terrible. But they won't damage him. Sharing your thoughts and emotions, easing the burden of them, that's what a Guide is for."

"Yeah," Danny said. "Just like what I told you in the car, remember? You didn't hurt me. What you were feeling was fucking awful, but that wasn't your fault. At all. And, the worst part was knowing that was what you were feeling. That you were in that kind of pain all the time, and I just got a tiny taste of it. I completely got why you'd gone feral, to try and escape," he said, as gently as he could. "But, it's still all in there. And, you kind of trapped yourself with it, Babe. You've got that curtain blocking you in. There's nowhere to go."

"It's very hard, not being able to communicate," Clara said. "Most of the Sentinels I used to work with at the Wellness Center were feral. I can remember their frustration."

Bucky just shook his head again, squeezing his eyes shut.

Clara took his nearer hand. He had both of his rolled into tight fists now, but he let her pry it open. "Nobody's going to force you to come back, Jay," she said. "It has to be your choice. We won't do anything you don't want." She paused, licking her lips. "Do you want to come back, Jay?"

Bucky shook his head.
Danny managed not to swear out loud. He tried not to grimace too obviously either. His mom was right, but Bucky needed to get present again so, so badly. It was like watching someone bleeding out on the pavement insist they were fine.

Worse was how Danny knew he could punch right through Bucky's shields and drag him out into the light like a recalcitrant toddler from a playdate. It would be the epitome of 'cruel to be kind', but it would be kind. Ultimately, anyway. Clara and Bucky might never forgive him, but at least Bucky would be alive, instead of just existing.

And maybe Danny would've done it, even: risked betraying Bucky and earning the wrath of his mom. He could handle the short-term pain for the long gain. He'd done it before, after all. He could take a lot.

Except this wasn't like taking Charlie to the dentist. This wasn't even like dropping everything and moving to Hawaii to be with Grace. Forcing Bucky to come back would be like what Hydra did to him. Maybe less painfully, and maybe for better reasons, but that wouldn't make it any less of a violation.

But Bucky couldn't stay like this either. Just the idea of it, Bucky purposely locking himself away from the world, was awful enough. But Bucky purposely cutting himself off from his Guide, was so anathema to everything Danny had ever learned, to every one of Danny's instincts as a Guide and as someone deeply in love with his Sentinel, that he felt physically ill just thinking about it.

"But, your Guide needs you," Steve said, small-voiced and sad in a way Danny had almost never heard him.

Bucky made an awful, choked-off sound like a sob, but he shook his head again.

"It's okay," Clara said, though her voice sounded like Danny felt. "Like I said, it's your choice, and we'll respect it."

Danny hated how Bucky sagged in relief, then hated that he hated Bucky being relieved.

Clara squeezed Bucky's hand. She smiled at him, but couldn't hide the disappointment in her eyes. "There's something else we need to talk about, though. Your Guide is looking for you, and I don't need to be one myself to know he's very worried about you and missing you a lot. Will you let me call Steve Rogers and tell him you're here?"

Bucky recoiled from her so quickly that the cupboard door cracked when his back hit it. For a second he looked like she'd stabbed him, wide-eyed with shock and pain. He shook his head, then hesitated. He nodded, then shook his head again. Finally he gave up and just hugged his wolf, hiding his face against her fur.

"Well, that was a definite 'I have no fucking idea','" Danny said.

"You don't have to decide now, Jay," Clara said. "Take all the time you need."

Bucky moved his head enough so he could sign thank you. Then he pointed to himself, then to the back door.

Danny's heart sank.

"Do you want to leave?" Clara asked him. She shot a quick, quelling look at Steve, who already had Aneurism Face and looked like he was about to launch himself over the wolf to tackle Bucky to the floor.
Bucky shook his head. The collective sighs of relief could have given life to a bouquet of balloon animals. But then he pointed at himself and the door again.

"Oh!" Danny said, getting it. "No, Babe. You don't have to leave. Nobody wants you to leave. That's not why my mom was talking about contacting your Guide."

"Of course not. Not at all," Clara said. "I'm glad you're here, Jay. You're welcome to stay in my house as long as you want."

She meant it too, which was one of the many reasons Danny's mom was awesome.

Less awesome was how in two days Danny and Steve were supposed to be flying back to Hawaii. Danny had, perhaps foolishly, assumed that Bucky would be present and back with his Guide by then. Instead, Bucky had decided to stay feral for the foreseeable future, and Steve Rogers wasn't going to be collecting his errant Sentinel anytime soon.

So Clara Williams, who was an exceptional Guide but not an Alpha, might end up stuck by herself with a feral Alpha Sentinel. And while Danny knew Bucky would keep her safe (probably safer than Danny could, if he was being honest), and despite how Bucky was remarkably sweet, attentive and charming considering he was stuck in his head, if things went sideways, Clara couldn't help him.

Until yesterday, the closest Alpha Guide Danny knew of who wasn't him was a pediatrician in Seattle. Not exactly next door. Of course, that still left Bucky's actual Guide Steve Rogers, but Danny didn't think calling him in for a Bucky-shaped disaster would go over well. At least not with Bucky.

Which left Danny with the much less than awesome choice of extending his vacation indefinitely—which meant basically abandoning his job and his kids—or seeing if he could somehow convince Bucky to come back to Hawaii with them. And even if Bucky was totally down with leaving Clara and her mom-hugs to go with Danny to a pineapple-infested heatsink, Bucky was a feral, Alpha Sentinel former P.O.W. with no I.D.. There was no way Danny and Steve could get him to Hawaii without getting the blessing of an official Sentinel and Guide Center first. And considering how Bucky panicked the first time Danny even floated the idea, he really wasn't interested in actually dragging Bucky to one.

The glance Danny shared with Steve told him his Sentinel had been thinking the same thing, and probably come to the same conclusion. Either way they were both fucked, because whatever Danny did, Steve would of course do it too. And if Steve stayed in New Jersey, he wouldn't just be abandoning a job that meant everything to him, and two kids he loved almost as much as Danny did, but he'd also be abandoning his territory.

Really, Danny should just rip Steve's arm off and beat him to death with it. It'd be kinder.

The only viable option was Steve Rogers coming for his Sentinel. And right now Bucky couldn't handle it.

"You know Steve and I have to leave in a couple days," Danny said quietly to his mom. "I mean, we could probably stay a few days longer, but..." But eventually they'd have to decide to stay a lot longer, or haul a traumatized Sentinel to a place that terrified him, and then onto an airplane. For 11 hours. Hooyah.

"I know, sweetheart," Clara answered just as quietly. She took Danny's hand, and the look on her face said she knew exactly what Danny meant. "But things have a way of working themselves out. I'm sure we'll manage."
Manage what? The inevitable flaming car wreck? Danny wanted to ask her. But he loved his mom, so he didn't.

The rest of the day passed far less eventfully than the impromptu breakfast conference fail, but after the day before that was a wonderful, wonderful thing. Danny and Steve went grocery shopping, since Bucky ate enough for four people. Steve bought him another set of clothes, which was very cute and very, very Steve. Looked like Bucky had acquired a Big Brother Sentinel, whether he wanted one or not.

(Danny may have accidentally bought Bucky a pair of boots that didn't smell like stale Potomac or require a PhD in BDSM to put on. He'd just wandered into the shoe department completely randomly and the perfect pair was suddenly right in front of him. They were at Walmart; these things could happen.)

Clara taught Bucky more signs. She was clearly thrilled to have a student who was actually eager to learn, which made Danny feel a bit guilty. Since he hadn't wanted to be a Guide when he was a teen, let alone a Guide Counselor, he hadn't been very nice to her when she'd tried to teach him back in the day. He'd learned a lot on his own because of Maya, but he probably owed his mom an apology for giving her such a hard time.

Bucky thanked him and Steve for the clothes and boots, but didn't seem all that enthusiastic about them. Danny wasn't sure if that was because Steve had picked more cargo pants and another sweatshirt in the least interesting colors on Earth, or because the concept of a gift was beyond Bucky right then. But Bucky did put his new boots by the door, and take his clothes to the guest room. So, tentative score. At least his feet would smell better.

Clara had the brilliant idea of ordering pizza for dinner, and Danny was pleased enough with life right then to let Steve have his with pineapple on it. Without even hassling him about it. Much.

Bucky tried a piece of each pie before choosing the all-meat one as his favorite. He wrinkled his nose at the pineapple, because he was a good Brooklyn boy. He seemed iffy about the soda too (Danny got that; Grace always complained about the 'bubbles going up her nose'). But he thanked Clara for the food with the same awe as with the PB&J. It was kind of nice, being with someone so easy to please.

Danny was going to miss him. He really hated the idea of leaving without knowing if Bucky would be okay.

He asked Bucky after dinner if he'd let them call his Steve, but Bucky still didn't know what he wanted. So much for that.

There was, generally speaking, no good reason ever to be woken up by a loud *thud* in the middle of the night. The only thing worse than being woken up by a loud *thud* was when it was followed by a loud cry.

The absolute worst was when the loud cry came from you mom.

Danny was off the bed and in his old room so fast he would've made his own head swim if he was paying attention. Steve was right behind him, only a heartbeat slower because he'd been on the side of the bed farther from the door.

Danny slapped on the light as he skidded into the room. He couldn't even see his mom, at first. He
found her because of her spirit animal. The little bluebird was flapping frantically around the space between the far side of the bed and the wall, chirping like a tiny blue beacon.

Bucky was curled in the opposite corner with his knees drawn up. He was clutching his right forearm with his left hand, and his eyes were blank as dead screens. His wolf was whining, licking his face and pulling his hair with her teeth.

"I'm all right! I'm all right! It was an accident!" Clara said, but she sounded exactly like she'd been shoved off the bed by a Super Soldier, then hit the wall on the way down.

Danny ignored Bucky, flying over the bed like it was a car hood. He crouched, reaching for Clara. "Mom! What happened? Are you okay? What'd he do?"

"I'm fine. He startled me more than anything. He didn't push me that hard." Clara batted softly at the bird, still fluttering and chirping his little blue head off. "For goodness' sake, Seymour, stop panicking. I'm fine."

"Bucky pushed you? What the fuck? You're a Guide!" Danny checked Clara over while he ranted, making sure she was as all right as she claimed. "Why would he do that? What the hell is wrong with him? Jesus Christ, he could've killed you!" And wasn't that a kick in the lungs, right there. At least Steve had a hope in hell if Bucky went for him; there was no way Clara could even defend herself against the Goddamn juggernaut that was the Winter Soldier. "Were you even awake when he attacked you?"

"Yes I was! I was trying to wake him!" Clara grabbed her son's wrists, forcing him to look at her. "It was an accident, Danny. If anything, it was my fault. He had a nightmare. I should have known better than to be that near to him when I tried to wake him up." She twisted on the bed, looking for Bucky. "Where is he? Is he… Oh, no."

"No shit, 'oh, no'," Danny muttered, but he looked back at Bucky as well. "Oh, shit."

Steve was kneeling in front of Bucky, trying to pry his metal fingers off his right forearm. "He's crushing his arm. I think he's zoning. I can't snap him out of it."

"Oh, no, no, no." Danny moved automatically to go help the downed Sentinel, then stopped and turned back to Clara. "Are you sure you're okay?"

She nodded quickly. "I'm fine, I'm fine. Go help him."

Danny scrambled back over the bed and knelt next to Steve. Bucky's wolf whined at him, begging for help.

"Yeah, that's a zone," Danny said grimly. He tried to help Steve move Bucky's fingers, but Bucky was too strong and they wouldn't budge. This close, Danny could see that his right wrist was bent at a small but distinctly wrong angle, where it wasn't hidden under the metal fingers. The flesh was steadily purpling. "What is he zoning on?" Danny waved his palm in front of Bucky's eyes, then glanced over his shoulder, trying to see what Bucky might be looking at. But Bucky's eyes weren't actually focused on anything. "Fuck. Fucking hell," Danny said in realization. "His arm is broken. He's zoning on the pain."

"What?" Steve gaped at him, then redoubled his efforts, groaning as he tried to get Bucky to let go. "Why the hell would he do that?"

"He might be punishing himself. Or disassociating," Clara said. "He may have hurt himself on purpose but zoned on the pain by accident. Or vice-versa." She came around the bed and moved
between Danny and Steve. Steve shifted aside to give her room to kneel. Clara moved a bit stiffly, but otherwise seemed okay.

Danny planned on taking her to a walk-in clinic in the morning anyway, unless he had to haul Bucky's unresponsive ass to a Wellness Center first.

The thing was, zones were bad. Very, very bad. Clara had called them 'trancelike', and they were. In the same way that being in a coma could be called 'like sleeping'. It happened when a Sentinel focused too intently on a stimulus. Newbie Sentinels were the most vulnerable to it of course, though all Sentinels were at risk.

Steve had zoned once. Something flashing in the distance caught his eye and that was it. God only know how long he'd been standing at the back door when Danny finally found him, utterly unresponsive and staring out to sea. Steve would have stayed like that for hours, if Danny hadn't been there. At least until the sun went down, maybe longer than that. Zones could last for days or weeks. Some zones never ended. Unlucky Sentinels had been killed because they'd become overly focused on the wrong thing at the wrong time. Some died of privation or exposure before they could get help. Others just fell down the rabbit hole and never came back.

Zones were terrifying, because there was always the possibility that the Sentinel wouldn't snap out of it. Bucky unconsciously maiming himself made the urgency of breaking his focus that much worse.

Clara gently tugged Steve's hands away from Bucky's, then replaced them with her own. "Jay, sweetheart," she said. "What happened was an accident. You did nothing wrong. I know you weren't trying to hurt me. And I'm fine. I'm really, truly fine. You don't have to do this. You can come back to us. Please, Jay. Can you focus on me instead of the pain?"

Bucky didn't respond.

"I can hear his bones grinding together," Steve said, voice tight. Bucky's right hand was swollen, dark with bruising and God knew what else. If they let him keep squeezing his arm like that, one of his fractured bones might slice an artery. Danny didn't want to find out if a Super Soldier could bleed out.

"Damn it," Clara said. She took a couple centering breaths, then closed her eyes. "I'm trying…." She grimaced. "His shields are too powerful. I can't do anything." She looked at Steve. "There's an 800 number on a sticky note on the fridge door. It's for the Avengers. Please call them. Hopefully your credentials as Hawaii's Alpha Sentinel will get you to Captain Rogers. I know Bucky's not ready," she added before Danny could voice his protest. "Right now his survival is more important."

"Yes, Ma'am," Steve said. He got to his feet and bolted from the room.

"All right," Clara said to Danny. "It's up to you. I'll help you as much as I can, but we need to hurry. The longer he's like this, the harder it'll be to get him out."

"I am extremely aware of that, thank you," Danny gritted. He pushed the wolf out of the way, then took Bucky's face in his hands, turning his head so he was looking into Bucky's empty eyes. "Jay. Jay, c'mon, Babe. You're squeezing your arm to a pulp and I really don't think you want to be doing that." He purposely made his tone light, used his abilities as a Guide to just brush against Bucky's shields like tapping his shoulder. He was trying to come across as safe and welcoming, like a warm light to guide Bucky back. "Trust me, those fiberglass casts might look cool, but they're really annoying. You ever dropped a pencil down one? Believe me, Babe, you don't want to do that. So how about you relax your metal hand and focus on me instead? Jay? Jay, please. Look at me. I need you to let your arm go and focus on me now."
"Try his name. His real name," Clara said.

Danny winced, thinking of what happened in the car, but maybe it would work. "James, that's enough. You're hurting yourself. You need to stop it. Focus on me instead." This time he tried the same voice he did when his kids were acting up. He hadn't wanted to haul out the Dad Voice; Bucky was so skittish, Danny was concerned any harshness would drive Bucky further into his head. "James Buchanan Barnes, it's time to come back. Let go of your arm and look at me. Focus on me, right now."

Still nothing.

"Bucky," Danny snarled, going for broke, "Let go of your arm. Now."

Bucky twitched, but his gaze stayed vacant and he didn't relax his hand.

"Fuck." Danny pushed a little harder at Bucky's shields. It was like trying to push a stone wall.

When he'd brought Steve out of his zone, it'd been easy to push through Steve's mental shields and break his focus. But Steve had trusted Danny long before he knew he was a Sentinel, and he'd been completely receptive to him the instant he'd come online. Every time Danny psychically connected with him, Steve had always met him with open arms.

Bucky…not so much.

Bucky hadn't been able to build his own shields, but he sure as hell knew what to do with them. He'd kept the ones Danny had made for him as solid and strong as iron. "I'm trying to see if I can get his shields down," Danny said. He went from pushing to shoving, but it made no difference. "It's like I made him a fucking bunker and he went and sealed himself in." He looked helplessly at his mom. "I don't know what to do. What do I do?"

"Break through," Clara said with terrible determination. "If that's the only way, then do it. I'm right here if you need help."

"Oh, fuck me to hell," Danny murmured. "Bucky, please," he tried one last time. "I don't want to break your shields. I don't want to force you to do anything. But you gotta stop zoning, Babe. You're hurting yourself. Bucky, come on! Focus on me."

Nothing and nothing and nothing.

"Fuck," Danny said. "All right. I'm going to have to go through your shields, Bucky. I'm sorry."

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and smashed Bucky's shields like kicking in a door.

Chapter End Notes

I should probably apologize for the pain, angst and cliffhanger, but I am sadly unrepentant. I promise this will get better, though! Eventually!

(And you might as well stop taking my chapter numbers seriously. I clearly have no idea what I'm doing.)
When You Were a Can Opener

Chapter Summary

Danny discovers more things he’d rather not think about.

Chapter Notes

PLEASE NOTE THE NEW TAGS. There are possible trigger warnings for this chapter. PLEASE HOVER OVER THIS SENTENCE, OR JUMP TO THE END NOTES TO READ THEM.

There may be further warnings in subsequent chapters, but I plan to make any references to awful stuff only subtext if possible, and/or as vague as I can. That is why I'm not currently changing the warnings for the whole story. Hopefully I won't have to.

If I write or have written anything that you feel should be warned for more explicitly than in the Chapter Notes, please let me know. Thank you. ♥

On a much happier (chapter) note, I want to give more thanks to darkmoore, for wracking her beautiful brain to help me make sure this AU followed its own logic. Wrangling feral Sentinels is rewarding, but not easy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It hurt. Fucking hell, it hurt.

Danny had kicked thorough Bucky's shields; he could feel exactly what Bucky felt. And Bucky was squeezing his broken bones and zoning on it. The pain was excruciating. Danny had been shot and stabbed and impaled; this was worse. This was so much worse. It wasn't just in Bucky's arm, it was everywhere. Everything. The only thing in the universe that existed was pain.

Danny reacted instinctively. His Guide training, his acumen as a cop, his caution, composure, his hard-won wisdom and patience…all of it was blown to hell by the desperate, animal need to just stop it hurting.

He blasted the source of the pain as hard as he could.

The pain didn't stop, but it diminished enough for Danny to be aware of where he was, and what he'd actually done.

Clara was rocking him in her arms like a child, tears in her voice as she repeated his name. Steve—Oh, God, Steve—was on his ass on the kitchen floor, reeling from the wake of the explosion Danny had set off in Bucky's mind.

Bucky was slumped in the corner, unconscious. Grey and still as death.
"Oh, no," Danny breathed. "Oh no, no, no." He lurched back upright, throwing love, apology and reassurance at Steve.

"Thank God," Clara said, wiping her eyes. "You and Steve were screaming, and I couldn't reach you. What happened?" She looked at Bucky, then gasped. "Oh, no!"

"I fucked up beyond all redemption. That's what happened," Danny said. "I blasted him. Like he wasn't already messed up enough, right?" He checked Bucky's pulse—fast and thready now, fucking A, Danny—then had Clara help him lay Bucky down as gently as possible. Not that bouncing Bucky's head off the hardwood floor could possibly do him more harm than Danny already had. He grabbed the pillows off the bed to elevate Bucky's feet, then got the blanket as well and lay it over him. Danny felt along his bond with Steve, terrified that he'd gone shocky too, or passed out or worse. Steve was still conscious, but dazed. All Danny could get from him was muddy confusion, and the panting aftermath of sharing Bucky's agony.

"I'm taking them both to the spirit plane," he said to Clara. He lay down next to Bucky, worming his hand under the blanket to take Bucky's lax, metal one. It might not be skin-to-skin contact, but the arm was part of Bucky's body, and therefore part of his spiritual energy as well. Whatever spiritual energy he had left after Danny had basically tossed a grenade into his head.

He had fucked up so badly. Danny didn't give a shit if Bucky forgave him or not for having done this to him. Right then he wasn't even sure if Bucky would survive.

Clara nodded and took his free hand. "You can do this, sweetheart. Go help them."

"Thanks," Danny said. He closed his eyes, felt his mom's reassuring squeeze. Then he took a few deep breaths, gathered up the injured, aching spirits of the two Sentinels, and carried them somewhere safe.

Danny was standing in the back yard of the home he shared with Steve. They were surrounded by warm sand and clear blue water, with the cool, welcoming house behind them. This was the version of the spirit plane he and Steve normally shared, now that they'd bonded.

Maya wasn't nearby, but Danny wasn't surprised. This was the domain of spirit animals; if she felt like finding Danny, she would. He was pretty sure she was too pissed at him to appear. He couldn't blame her.

Steve was stretched out on one of the lounge chairs in the sun, Tigger lying beside him. Steve's hand was gripped loosely in the tiger's scruff.

Danny couldn't see Bucky, but the sand bled into something dark and cold on the left side of the house. That was Bucky's part of the spirit plane. It didn't look safe. Then again, Bucky had constructed it himself, so maybe it was safe for him. At least he would be resting and healing there. He would keep.

Danny didn't have to worry about Bucky right then, so he went immediately to Steve, kneeling in the soft sand. "Hey, Babe." He ran his fingers through Steve's hair. "You in there, sweetheart?"

Steve cracked his eyes open and turned his head to look at Danny, then his eyes shot wide and he bolted upright, gripping Danny's shoulders. Tigger lifted his head and chuffed at him. "Danny! Are you okay?"

"Am I okay?" Danny parroted incredulously, "Jesus Christ, Steven! I almost killed you and Bucky, and you're asking if I'm okay? I'm fine! Are you all right?"
Steve nodded. "Yeah. I feel a lot better. What the hell happened, anyway? Some British guy had just put me on hold and then all of a sudden I'm on the floor, holding my arm and screaming. And then….kablooey."

"It's my fault. I did it. I was the kablooey," Danny said miserably. He caressed Steve's arms with his thumbs. "I was so concerned with getting Bucky to stop zoning that I didn't think about what he was zoning on. I mean, he was squeezing his broken bones together and completely focused on the pain. I didn't…." He winced. "I was a fucking idiot and I didn't think about what that meant. How the pain was going to be cranked up to eleven and I was just bashing my way in there, you know? I thought I could handle it, but I couldn't. So I panicked. And I…." He swallowed. "Fuck, Steve. I hit him with everything I had. I never even considered with it would do to either of you." He let go of Steve to scrub his face with both hands. "I busted the shields of a guy who'd been tortured for decades, and then dropped a bomb in his head. Jesus Christ. How could I do that? How the fuck could I have done that to either of you?"

Steve hugged him. "You did the best you could, Danny," he said, as if that completely mitigated him screaming on the kitchen floor. "Yeah, you didn't expect he was going to be in that much pain, but who would've? You ever dealt with any Sentinels zoning on pain before?"

Danny shook his head. "My mom never mentioned it, either. I didn't even think it could happen."

"Yeah. I mean, people recoil from pain, most of the time," Steve said. "They try not to focus on it. And even the ones who like it, there're limits, you know? I figured if anything, Bucky should've been trying so hard to avoid the pain that he zoned on something else."

"Doesn't excuse what I did," Danny said.

"Maybe not," Steve said bluntly. "But it was an accident, Danny. You were trying to help. And I'm okay, so he probably will be too."

Danny leaned his forehead against Steve's chest. "What if he's not? What if I gave him brain damage or killed him?"

Steve kneaded the back of Danny's neck. "Only one way to find out."

"Yeah," Danny said on a breath, then straightened and stood up. It was the spirit plane so his knees didn't creak, but his heart was still heavy with guilt and dread. "Naturally his safe place looks like a fucking cave. Hey, what are you doing?"

Steve stood up from the chair. "What does it look like? I'm going with you."

"No, you're not!" Danny said immediately. "You're sitting your butt right back down in that chair and letting your tiger take care of you, got it? You need to rest and recuperate, Steve. That does not include traipsing around caves!"

"Come on, Danny. I'm fine!" Steve insisted. "What about your claustrophobia, huh? I don't want you going in there alone!"

"Steve. Please," Danny said, not angry now but imploring. "I hurt you really, really badly today. And I need to know you're safe and resting so I can concentrate on just how much I fucked up Bucky Barnes. This isn't the real world. My claustrophobia isn't going to bother me. But you not resting? That really, really will."

Steve stared at him for a moment, jaw working and that one vein thumping in his temple. Then he sighed and sat back on the lounge chair. He crossed his arms, glaring. Tigger put his head in Steve's
lap. "Fine. Go without me. I just hope you know what you're doing."

Danny kissed his temple right over the vein. "Me too," he said.

The first time Danny got a taste of the mental agony beating at Bucky like big, angry guys with sledgehammers, he'd likened Bucky's going feral with digging a very deep hole in his head and jumping in. It'd been a good analogy. Very apt, considering how going feral was considered a psychological retreat in order for the psyche to protect itself. Like disassociating.

It wasn't an analogy for Bucky. It was literal.

Well, fine, maybe it wasn't exactly a hole Bucky had dumped himself into. Because if this were the bottom of a hole, Danny would be able to see the sky. Or at least light. Something. But Bucky's version of the spirit plane was nothing but deep, cold dark. There was no light. The air smelled stale and tasted of rust.

So, worse than a hole, actually. And maybe Danny had lied a teeny bit when he'd said his claustrophobia wouldn't bother him. Because this was dark, okay? Like pitch-black, 'can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face-oh-God-where-the-fuck-are-the-walls?' dark. And it wasn't just cold, it was freezing. Like Bucky had distilled Siberia and brought it all here with him.

How could Bucky feel safe here? This was Danny's version of hell.

If it'd been the real world, Danny would've been on the floor having the great grandmother of all panic attacks. As it was, he had to force himself to take slow, deep breaths, and remind himself that he was an Alpha Guide, and he'd brought the Sentinels here. He was in control of this place; He could leave anytime he wanted; He could also alter it with a thought, turn it into anything. A wide, open field under blazing sunlight, for example. That'd be nice.

He wasn't going to do that, because he'd already violated Bucky's mind and he wouldn't take whatever safety Bucky had constructed for himself from him too. But that didn't mean Danny had to fumble around freezing in the dark. He concentrated, and a heartbeat later he was dressed for the depths of a New Jersey winter and carrying a very large Mag light. The kind that could double as a lethal weapon, at least if you were Steve.

It helped. Not as much as Danny had hoped, but it helped. It was still as cold as a Siberian walk-in freezer, and it was so fucking dark the flashlight beam disappeared just a few feet in front of him. But Danny could see now, and be reasonably sure there was enough air to breathe. Lousy air, but enough of it.

He found Bucky by following the distinct rattling of chains.

The fathomless cold and dark finally ended, which Danny could only tell because there was finally something to see. Not that what he saw made any sense. First the flashlight beam would illuminate crumbling brick and glass cases full of jars and medical instruments, only to show a cracked cement wall when he passed the light over the same place again. The next time it would be cinderblock and a cot dangling leather straps and stained with effluvia. Or steel and a chair-like thing that radiated menace. Or wet, cracked tile running with diluted blood. The setting changed randomly with every pass of the light, like a grotesque screensaver.

"Bucky, I don't think 'spirit plane' means what you think it means," Danny said as he swung the flashlight, trying to find him. "Also, you might want to pick a theme and go with it, you know? Maybe something with—just spitballing here—actual light and warmth. Maybe a nice couch…."

"But..." Bucky asked, and then his voice was cut off by a low growl. Danny froze, his breath catching in his throat. He was going feral again, and this time he was here in his spirit plane, and no one was there to help him. He was about to scream, but then he realized what was coming out of his mouth.

"...I don't think I am," he said, but his voice was weak and barely audible. "I... I... I don't know what I am anymore..."

Danny wanted to cry. He wanted to hug Bucky and tell him it was going to be okay, but he couldn't. He couldn't because Bucky was here in his spirit plane, and no one else could see him. It was just the two of them, and Danny didn't know what to do.

"Bucky, I... I... I don't know what to say," he managed to say, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I... I... I don't know what to do..."

But Bucky didn't say anything. He just reached out and touched Danny's hand, and the ice melted away, leaving behind a warmth that was so intense it was almost painful. Danny closed his eyes, letting the warmth wash over him, and when he opened them again, Bucky was gone. But the warmth remained, and Danny knew that he was safe. That he was not going to die. That he was not alone.

He smiled, and then he turned around, ready to face whatever Bucky had put him in. And as he did, he realized that he didn't mind. He didn't mind at all.
The beam caught the wolf's nose.

"Yes! There you are!" Danny jogged towards her, moving the beam to illuminate her whole giant body. She was on her side on the floor: skinny, panting and grey with dirt. Her ribs were streaked with blood like she'd been whipped. That wasn't supposed to happen in the spirit plane, either.

Maya was grooming her and running her fingers through the wolf's fur, but Danny didn't know if it was penetrating the spirit animal's misery. This was wrong. This was all so wrong Danny couldn't even begin to understand it. Like his mind kept taking it in, going 'nope', and spitting it right back out.

Bucky was huddled shivering in the corner, with his head hanging and his filthy hair hiding his face. Danny couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like the chain he'd heard was attached to Bucky's neck. He was wearing the outfit Danny vaguely remembered from the video of the Winter Soldier attacking Captain America on the news. It was as filthy as his hair, torn and stained with blood. Bucky didn't lift his head when he heard Danny, but shifted farther away. The chain rattled as it scraped against the wall. He was still gripping his right arm, as if he didn't know he'd stopped zoning.

This close, Danny could hear that Bucky was muttering to himself. It was nearly inaudible, as if the words were being muffled.

The muzzle, Danny remembered. Fucking hell, he was wearing that too?

"Bucky?" Danny tried. Then, "Jay?" when the nickname got no answer. Danny came closer, aiming the light away from Bucky's face. He signed thank you to Maya, grateful to see her, then sat cross-legged on the ground. It was like what he'd done in the laundry room, if the laundry room had been a dark, constantly-shifting hellscape. "Jay? Can you hear me? It's Danny. I need to know if you're all right."

Bucky shook his head and tucked himself up farther into the corner, still murmuring.

"What are you saying, Babe? Can you tell me?" Danny leaned closer. He closed his eyes—not fun in this miserable cave—and concentrated until he could make out the words.

"You did it again. You did it again, you useless piece of shit. You're a monster. You hurt them all the time. Can't even lock yourself away deep enough. Can't even fugue right, you stupid fuck. Can't make it hurt enough. Not for you. Just them. Always just them. Stupid, worthless Sentinel. Too weak to fight, weren't you? Too weak to just not listen. Did whatever they said and now you can't even fix it. Can't keep anyone safe. Why did you have to get your senses back? Don't deserve to be a Sentinel. Don't deserve a Guide. Don't deserve a spirit animal. Don't deserve anything. Why can't you just go away, you fucking meathead? What's wrong with you, can't even do that? You were fugued. Why did you have to come out…?"

"Oh, no, Babe. No." Danny reached for him instinctively, desperate to offer some comfort, break the litany of self-loathing spewing from Bucky's mouth.

Bucky shifted back from him so violently he hit his temple on the wall. He didn't let go of his right arm, but at least he raised his head. He was wearing the mask that Danny's whole H-50 team had called a muzzle, covering the entire lower half of his face. Even on the spirit plane, Danny had no idea how Bucky could breathe through the fucking thing. "Don't touch me!" Bucky snarled, but the command was given in fear, not anger. "Don't touch me," he repeated more quietly. "I'll hurt you. I hurt Guides."

Danny pulled his hands back. He gripped his own legs so he wouldn't try to hug Bucky without
"You won't. You won't do that, Babe. You haven't done anything to hurt me."

"Yes I did!" Bucky spat through the muzzle. "I hurt you! I hurt Clara! That's all I do!"

"First of all, remember how I said you didn't hurt me? Like, several times? Including a couple seconds ago? Well, maybe this will surprise you, but it's because you didn't hurt me."

"You were in my head!" Bucky shouted. "I know I hurt you! I had to have hurt you! I hurt Guides!"

"No I—wait. You mean, just now? When I knocked you into next week?" Danny stared at him. "You were completely zoned—fugued. In a fugue state. How on Earth do you think you were responsible for what happened to me? Plus, what about how I knocked you into next week? I brought you here because I psychically clobbered you! I hit you so hard you were barely breathing!"

Bucky looked startled, then confused and angry, though it was hard to tell with the fucking muzzle. "Why did you stop me from zoning? I was safe!"

Danny gaped at him. "Are you fucking kidding me? You were turning your arm to paste and going into shock! You were dying! How the hell is that 'safe'? That is about as unsafe as you can get! Of course I stopped you!"

"I know what I was doing!" Bucky shot back. "I wanted it! I was fugued. I was safe!" He made an awful, miserable noise and whacked his head against the wall. "I was safe," he repeated plaintively. "I was safe. Why didn't you let me stay like that?"

"Wait," Danny said, his heart suddenly racing bile up his throat. "Just, hold up a second. You're telling me that you did that on purpose. You actually broke your own arm to fugue on the pain."

Bucky nodded.

"Oh, my God," Danny breathed. He'd felt that pain, it'd turned him into an animal, he'd been so desperate to get away from it. He'd thought it'd been at least partially accidental. No, he'd been certain of it. Maybe Bucky had broken his arm on purpose, to punish himself like Clara said. Or maybe he'd intended to zone, to disassociate. One or the other, not both.

It couldn't be both. Because, who would do that? How could anyone purposely seek out that much pain? How could anyone think they deserved it?

"Oh, Bucky," Danny whispered. "Why would you do that? How could you hurt yourself like that?"

"It made me safe," Bucky said, quiet and sad. "I was safe and you pulled me out."

Bucky's big, puppy-eyes were so incongruous with how he was basically pining for death that for a second Danny was too astonished to speak. "Okay," he said, hanging on to what was left of his cool by the skin of his teeth. Maya came up and slid her arm across his shoulders. That helped. "First of all, no. Just, no. Not ever, okay? We are not going to let you get hurt, and that includes you hurting yourself."

He ignored the angry little voice at the back of his head reminding him of the knocked into next week thing. "Second, you would have died. You were already circling the drain, okay? And you sure as hell don't deserve to die for things you can't control. Or for anything. Got it?" He was sure Bucky would say no, he hadn't gotten it, so Danny barreled on anyway. "Thirdly, you were having a nightmare when you pushed my mom, right? Did you even know she was there?"

Bucky shook his head miserably. "It doesn't matter. They…." He took a breath. "They made me hurt Guides. I can't stop doing it. I hurt Steve." His voice sounded like quiet gravel.
"Did you want to?" Danny asked him. "No, of course you didn't," he added when Bucky shook his head. "I bet you never wanted to hurt any of those Guides either. Or anyone at all."

"No," Bucky rasped. "I never wanted to hurt anyone." His voice was so soft Danny had to strain to hear him.

"Right. So, it wasn't you who hurt them. It was Hydra," Danny said. "Hydra hurt them. Not you. You didn't have a choice."

"I know," Bucky said, just as softly. "But I did it."

"Oh, Babe." Danny gave in and pulled Bucky into his arms. He couldn't not. Not with Bucky right in front of him and so obviously in pain. Bucky barely even protested, though he didn't let go of his right arm. He did lean his head on Danny's shoulder, though. His muzzle made scraping noises on Danny's winter jacket. Maya hugged Bucky too, and his wolf came up and licked his neck. "Hydra did it," Danny said. "Not you. They used you. Like...like a can opener. Like, a miserable, tortured Sentinel can opener. Can openers have no say at all about what they open, right?"

"No," Bucky whispered.

"That's right. They don't," Danny said. "You were a can opener to them. Or a knife, or a gun. Whatever metaphor you want. But you weren't a person. You weren't you. And you can't go around blaming yourself for what you did when you were a can opener. You sure as hell shouldn't be punishing yourself for it. You don't deserve it. You didn't deserve what they did to you, and you don't deserve what you're doing to yourself."

"But I let them," Bucky said. "I let them turn me into a can opener. I didn't stop it."

Danny closed his eyes and heaved an exasperated breath that chilled his lungs. "Oh, boy, do you remind me of someone I know. I swear you and my Steve are soulmates."

"He smells kind of like me," Bucky said.

"While that is both fascinating and probably a Sentinel thing I do not wish to know about, don't derail me here. Look," Danny said on another icy, musty breath, "I'm not gonna pretend I have the first clue about what you went through. 'Cause I don't. What I'm certain of, though, is that everyone breaks under torture at some point. Sooner, later, it doesn't matter. Eventually you'll reach the limit of what you can take. Hydra knew that when they captured you. And I think we can safely assume they were playing the long game here, considering they were still going strong until a couple weeks ago." He put his hand over the cold metal of Bucky's left one, gently trying to pry up his fingers. "What I'm saying is, they had time. They had all the time in the fucking world to hurt you until you couldn't take it anymore. And that is nowhere near your fault."

"They tried to reactivate me," Bucky said.

"Reactivate? You mean, your were offline? Your abilities were dormant," Danny clarified when Bucky's forehead creased in confusion.

"Yeah," Bucky said. "They figured...My Guide was dead, so they figured they could reactivate me. Since I went inactive 'stead of dying."

"But he was still alive, so they couldn't?" Danny asked.

Bucky nodded. "I can't remember most of what they did." The *but everything I do remember was a hellish nightmare beyond imagining* was implicit. "But they still treated me like a Sentinel. That...
"It's okay," Danny said quickly. He knew exactly what Bucky meant, considering the image of him kneeling was burned like acid into his brain. Just like Bucky meekly offering Danny his head. "You don't have to do any of that anymore. You know that, right? You never have to do that again."

Bucky nodded again. His muzzle scraped over Danny's jacket. The noise was really unpleasant. The near constant clink of the chain wasn't so fantastic either. "Thank you." He let Danny pull his left hand away from his arm.

"You're welcome." Danny threaded their fingers together, even though it was like plunging his hand in ice water. Bucky's right arm was nearly black with bruising in the flashlight beam. Danny really hoped that was Bucky's imagination. "What you lived through fucking sucked. I wish to hell it'd never happened. I wish there'd been some way I could've helped you. But Hydra did it to you. You need to remember that. They did it to you. None of that was your fault."

Bucky turned his head away. His muzzle scraped on Danny's jacket again.

"That thing on your face has got to go," Danny said. He reached for it, then remembered how badly he'd literally crashed through Bucky's autonomy. "Can I take off that muzzle? In fact, can I just get us the hell out of here? There's no reason for you to be chained up and freezing in the dark."

"I'm safe here," Bucky said.

"This is not a safe place," Danny said. "In fact, I'd say this was the complete opposite of safe. This is a terrible, terrible place and you shouldn't be here."

"I'm safe from hurting anyone," Bucky said.

Oh. Oh. "You mean, everyone's safe from you," Danny gritted.

"Yeah."

Danny closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "And what were we just talking about? Is this a Sentinel thing? Seriously, you and my Steve are both Goddamn brick walls. You didn't hurt anyone, Bucky. Okay? Hydra did. Everything you've done since we met that you think hurt us was either actually my fault or an accident. Yes, it was a lousy way for my mom to wake up, but she's fine. She's completely fine." That might not have been entirely true, but it was true enough for Danny to go with it. "She doesn't blame you for what happened, and neither does anyone else. So, can we please cut the Martyr Sentinel Bullshit and go somewhere warm?"

Bucky didn't answer.

Danny sighed. "You're still on the spirit plane. You can't hurt anyone here. You'll just be warm and out of this fucking dungeon, okay?"

He could hear Bucky swallow in the ensuing silence. "Okay."

"Thank you." Danny concentrated, and they were on the couch in his house in New Jersey, with Maya in the armchair and the wolf on the floor. Bucky was in the softest, coziest dorm pants, long-sleeved shirt and hoodie ensemble Danny could think up. It was a nice light blue, because adult clothing could include actual colors, thanks.

Bucky and his wolf were clean, the fucking muzzle was gone, and there was a big, warm fire in the hearth and sunlight pouring through the windows. Danny even conjured them both a mug of hot
chocolate, plus one for Maya and a bowl for the wolf. Because why the fuck not? Spirit animals could eat or drink anything, and they weren't really consuming it anyway. It was just warm and tasted good.

"What do you think? Better, right?" Danny threw his arm around Bucky, then took a big slug of the hot chocolate. "See, this is what the spirit plane is all about. Safety and comfort, where you and your wolf can hang out and rest."

Steve came in through the back door, tracking in sand. Tigger strolled in after him. Steve grinned when he saw Bucky. "Hey. Good to see you. How are you feeling?"

Bucky had his mug in his good hand, staring down at the steam while his wolf lapped her drink noisily from the floor. "I don't know," he said. He looked at Danny. "Where's my body?"

"Haven't you been in the spirit plane before?" Steve asked him. He conjured himself a bottle of beer, then sprawled on the loveseat.

"I don't remember," Bucky said.

"Oh." Steve grimaced.

"Right now your body is on the floor of your bedroom," Danny said. "Hopefully no longer going into shock since you're here. You really fucked up your arm."

"Am I still in the kitchen?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Danny said. "Sorry."

Steve grimaced again. "Am I still sitting up?"

"No idea, Babe," Danny said, mirroring Steve's unhappy expression. "I didn't have time to check. I'm sorry. At least, if you fell over you'll be on your side, instead of your face?"

"Great," Steve said. Tigger bunted his leg in sympathy.

"Will I still be feral, if I go back?" Bucky asked.

Danny exchanged a look with Steve. That 'if' wasn't good. He didn't like that 'if' one bit. "I'm not one hundred percent sure, but I don't think so," he answered honestly. "As far as I know, being knocked out will get a Sentinel present again. Like a reset."

Steve nodded. "That sounds right."

Bucky's jaw worked as he considered that. "I don't want to go back."

"I know you don't," Danny said, just as Steve exclaimed, "Of course you do!" at the same time.

"What my partner means is, while we both understand why you'd want to stay here,"—Danny shot Steve a glare before he opened his mouth—"you can't. Your body is fine right now, but it's pretty much an empty shell. Without your sprit, eventually your body will die."

"Okay," Bucky said.

"You mean, you're okay with dying?" Steve asked, stricken. "Why?"

"Because I won't hurt anyone anymore," Bucky said.
"Uh, no. No, not okay. That is very much not okay," Danny said. He put his mug down so he could hold Bucky in both arms. Bucky's mug sloshed, so Danny just got rid of it. Bucky didn't hug him back, but he leaned into him like he had in the cave. "I know you think you hurt Guides, and that you're not safe for people out there in the world. I know you probably think you...that if you weren't here it'd be better for everybody. But it's not true. Leaving aside how you didn't hurt me or my mom on purpose—if you could please get that through your thick Sentinel skull—there are people right here who care about you a lot and want you around."

Maya came over and whacked Bucky softly a few times on his shoulder. Tigger was so huge all he had to do was stand to paw carefully at Bucky's leg. The wolf sat up and shoved her nose in Bucky's ear.

"See? We all love you," Danny said.

"What about your Guide?" Steve asked. "It wouldn't be better for him. You'll destroy him if you...if you don't go back. You can't do that."

"He doesn't need me," Bucky said. He half-heartedly pushed his wolf's muzzle away, but then let her lick his face.

"Of course he does! How could you say that?" Steve demanded, horrified. "Do you remember what Clara said, about you being the most precious thing to him? That's true. It's completely true. I know that because that's how Danny feels about me, and the way I feel about him. This knowing you're alive, but not knowing if you're okay or even where you are? It's killing him. I know it's killing him." He looked at Danny, his expression taut with guilt. "I closed my bond with Danny, back when we'd just started working together as a Sentinel and Guide. I thought I was doing the right thing. Keeping him safe. But I wasn't. I was hurting him. I was hurting him the way you're hurting Steve."

"It's okay, Babe," Danny said. "You stopped, and we bonded for real and we're good now, right? You don't have to beat yourself up over it."

"I never should've done it in the first place," Steve said, because beating himself up was his favorite pastime. "What I did was terrible. I mean, how would you feel, if you were trying to find your Steve and he wouldn't let you? If there was just this...dark place in your head where he was supposed to be?" Steve leaned forward in his chair, as if his proximity would make Bucky accept his words. "And what you're talking about, not going back to your body.... How would you feel if he was gone? Really gone?"

Bucky made a tiny, pained noise, then shook his head like he couldn't even bear to think about it.

"You don't want to hurt him, right?" Danny asked.

"I already did."

"Hydra did, not you," Danny said. Again, Christ. "But, if you don't go back...that will hurt him. That's going to hurt your Guide a lot. And me, too. And my mom. And the animals. We all want you here. You're very important to us. And I promise you, if you stay here and let your body waste away, that is going to hurt us more than you can imagine. That's going to hurt way worse than me accidentally sharing your emotions, or you having a nightmare and unknowingly pushing my mom into a wall."

"It'll hurt me too," Steve said. "That's a lot of people who are going to be hurt if something happens to you. Is that what you really want?"
"No," Bucky whispered.

"Then don't hurt us," Danny said. "Come home."

"I don't know where my home is," Bucky said.

"That's all right," Danny said. "We'll help you figure that out too."

They stayed in the spirit plane for what felt like a long while, though time didn't mean very much there. Bucky and Steve fell asleep, which was Awesome. That was the ultimate kind of rejuvenation, and hopefully meant Bucky wouldn't be ringing Death's doorbell when they went back. Danny conjured Steve and Bucky blankets and left the men flopped on their respective couches like kittens.

Then he went outside and walked along the beach until he could pretend he had a clue what to do next.

He and Steve were supposed to leave for Hawaii tomorrow, though Danny was already planning to arrange a couple more days as soon as he was corporeal enough to do so. Bucky would, most likely, be present when they left the spirit plane, so at least he wouldn't have to worry about that. It was just every fucking thing else.

Bucky was a mess. That had been painfully clear from the moment Danny had discovered him in the car, and had just become more and more obvious. Bucky's adamancy about staying feral, and his fear about being with his Guide was already pretty fucked up. And then Danny had discovered that Bucky's happy place was a Goddamn freezing cave where he was chained to a fucking wall.

Danny didn't know—Danny did not even want to fathom—what Hydra had done to Bucky to turn his part of the spirit plane into a nightmare like that. Or to make Bucky so certain he was irredeemably dangerous that he'd voluntarily go into a zone.

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Danny remembered exactly what it had felt like, when Steve purposely closed their bond at night. He'd done it so Danny wouldn't accidentally feel Steve's love for him while Steve was unguarded in sleep. The closed bond hadn't been so bad for Steve, but for Danny it had been awful; exactly like Clara had described it. It had felt like grieving for someone who wasn't dead.

Danny had dreaded the nights because of that, but at least Steve hadn't expressed his idiocy for more than eight hours at a time. Bucky had already been feral for a couple weeks before Danny found him. Right now, Steve Rogers would be grieving for the living, after three years of grieving for the dead.

The sky darkened to deep grey-green, thick with a coming storm. It was the psychic embodiment of Danny's anger. And he was furious. He was fucking enraged. Not at Bucky…well, yeah, okay. He was pissed at Bucky too. But the rage was all directed at Hydra.

Danny kicked viciously at the sand, and a lightning bolt smashed into the water far out to sea. How could an organization, how could anyone, be so evil that they could wreck a Sentinel's spirit plane? Danny wanted to find each and every one of the assholes who did that to Bucky, strap them to his car hood and take them for a ride. And then find a nice, secluded place where he could hide the bodies.

Unfortunately, most of the assholes who had hurt Bucky like that were already dead; either when S.H.I.E.L.D. collapsed, or from natural causes decades before. And the ones who were left were
being rounded up or—hopefully—running for their misbegotten lives. Revenge was out, and Danny
couldn't do much else. Except kick sand and make lightning, which was cathartic but ultimately
useless.

He had to convince Bucky to go to his Guide, that was all. Even if Steve Rogers couldn't fix his
Sentinel, he sure as hell would be able to do more than Danny could. Clara would be able to help
too, since she'd dedicated her life to that. But the crux was Bucky’s Steve.

At least Bucky understood that not being with Steve was hurting him emotionally. Hopefully that'd
be enough incentive to take his Guide back. Danny hadn't specifically asked if Bucky was okay with
it, but…hopefully.

Then again, if that British guy who took Steve's call could trace the number, Bucky being okay or
not with seeing his Guide again might be moot anyway. Another choice ripped from him. Awesome.

Danny kicked more sand and seared the sky with more lightning. It didn't help much.

Chapter End Notes

This is my #ILoveItalics chapter. This also my favorite chapter title so far. Possibly of all
time.

Possible Trigger Warning: While not actively suicidal, Bucky is upset that he wasn't
allowed to die.
Chapter Summary

Bad decisions and worse discoveries.

Chapter Notes

PLEASE HOVER OVER THIS SENTENCE (OR JUMP TO THE END NOTES) FOR WARNINGS OF POTENTIAL TRIGGERS IN THIS CHAPTER.

Once again, big, big (really big) thanks to darkmoore for helping me with the rules of her AU. And to Shazrolane for reading this chapter over and telling me it made sense. :D

Danny settled into his body like shrugging on an old, comfy coat. Presumably Steve did too, but Danny didn't know because Steve was still in the kitchen. Their bond felt fine, though. Steve was a little stiff after spending…Danny had no idea how long, actually…on the floor, and dismayed and annoyed about something Danny strongly suspected was the unfortunate fate of his phone. But he was fine.

Danny allowed himself a very, very brief moment of relief and gratitude that he hadn't badly hurt his Sentinel with his idiocy, then turned his attention to the Sentinel who would need him.

He'd expected Bucky to crash back into his body kicking and screaming.

Danny had been forced to rip apart Bucky's shields to stop him zoning, which meant Bucky now had nothing between himself and all the sensory input of the world. Sentinels were surprisingly delicate creatures, despite their general lack of interest in self-preservation. They could control how keen their senses were, but only if they had help. Without a Guide, an online Sentinel would eventually end up zoning constantly, suffering overwhelming spikes of one or two senses, or end up in full sensory overload.

Basically dead. Just slowly and really, really painfully.

A sensory overload was like zoning, only with every sense at once. Danny had been unfortunate enough to experience it secondhand, when he'd had to rescue Steve from one. Steve had tried to explain it to Kono and Chin Ho one time, when they'd been dumb enough to want to ask what it was like. The best Steve could come up with was standing in a wind tunnel full of shards of glass, while having lasers shined in your eyes and sonic booms going off in your ears, and while breathing the air from rotting corpses. Only worse.

Bucky had been wandering around like that for nearly two weeks, when he'd crawled into Danny's car. Because he couldn't possibly miss a ticky box on his bucket list of pain and suffering. Danny
had no idea if being a Super Soldier had mitigated the agony, but staying feral had probably saved Bucky's life.

Sure, he'd actually managed to zone while feral—which was incredibly difficult and therefore really fucking impressive. If 'impressive' could be used in the context of trying to kill yourself without the mess—but he'd been highly motivated at the time.

Sensory overload, however, was a whole other level. If Bucky hadn't stayed feral during those two weeks, if he'd had actually gotten present without a Guide there to help him get his shields back.…

Well, Bucky might not have been all that keen on living right then, but there were definitely better ways to die.

What all that meant was Danny expected to open his eyes to Bucky writhing on the floor in a full blown sensory overload. He'd even warned Bucky about it while they were in the spirit plane; done his best to prepare him for the corporeal onslaught he'd return to, until they could rebuild his shields.

"I know," Bucky had told him, resigned in a way that made Danny want to kick more sand, or preferably Hydra teeth. "I've experienced it before. Couple times," he'd added, with a pained smile like he was apologizing for it.

Bucky had known what he was in for, at least. Not that it was going to make a damn bit of difference, and they both knew it. Getting shot once did not make the second time any less painful or frightening; It just reinforced how very, very much it sucked.

Or, Danny could've just remembered his mom.

Because Bucky wasn't writhing, screaming, dead or unconscious when Danny bolted up to all fours to help him. Nope. He was curled around the blanket like he was about to be kicked to death, granted, but it was Bucky so that was kind of par for the course. But he was all right. Clara was protecting him.

She was on her knees with her hand on his head and her eyes closed in concentration, her face scrunched up in effort. "He's fighting me, pushing at my shields from the inside," she ground out.

"Wait, what?" Danny gaped between the two of them. "He's what?"

He was still trying to process that level of mind-boggling stupidity when Clara barked, "Help me! I can't keep them—"

She broke off with a cry, and then Bucky actually was writhing and screaming, clawing at the sweatshirt he'd slept in and then his skin, as if he could rip himself out of the pain. Clara's job had included medical training, and she'd splinted Bucky's arm while his spirit was absent, but it wasn't like they had thermoplastic cast bandages lying around. He was wearing a brace meant for sprains. It wasn't going to do much if Bucky whacked his arm on the floor.

"Shit!" Danny took a heartbeat to make shields to protect Steve from the avalanche Danny knew was coming. Then he smacked his hand down on the nearest portion of Bucky's anatomy, which was his right ribcage. Skin-to-skin was best, but any port in a storm. Danny clutched a remaining handful of Bucky's sweatshirt to keep his grip, and opened his shields to him.

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He immediately felt everything that Bucky did, which amounted to a fuckton of sourceless pain. This time Danny was prepared for it, though. He'd felt an overload before, when it'd happened to Steve. And Bucky wasn't zoning—thank heaven for small mercies—which helped a lot.
Luckily mind-boggling levels of stupidity weren't painful, or Danny would have probably died instantly.

Not that Danny was okay with sharing what Bucky was experiencing. Because no, he was not. It was a fuckton of sourceless pain. But he was able to grit his teeth and push it back, as opposed to hollering his head off and blowing Bucky's stupid, self-destructive head into smithereens.

When he'd done this with Steve, his touch alone had made his Sentinel feel a bit better immediately. But this wasn't skin-to-skin contact and Danny wasn't Bucky's Guide. It was harder to push Bucky's pain back, and it really didn't help that Bucky wasn't doing anything to make it easier for him. He had no shields now to keep Danny out, but his complete lack of welcome made it feel like Danny was trying to shove back a pile of wet snow.

But Danny was an Alpha Guide, and he was from New Jersey. He'd shoveled plenty of snow. He kept shoving Bucky's pain back until it was manageable, and he could replace Clara's shields with his own.

That was a lot better.

Bucky stopped screaming. He stared up at Danny, gulping air. His eyes were wild, his hands still fisted around the tears in his sweatshirt.

"You're welcome, dumbass," Danny said to him. "I got this," he told Clara. "Please go check on Steve."

She nodded and stood, blinking her red-rimmed eyes. Clara had shared a lot of Sentinels' pain, physical and emotional, but Bucky was kind of beyond the pale. "Good luck."

"Yeah, thanks," Danny muttered as she left. He sat cross-legged, keeping his hand on Bucky's chest. And then, sonofabitch, he could feel Bucky pushing against his shields from the inside: not aggressively, just steady pressure that was intended to tire Danny out, make him break concentration and let the shields drop.

Bucky was trying to put himself into sensory overload. Again. Right after he'd just experienced it. Maybe he was hoping it'd make him go feral (unlikely to happen), or keep him 'safe' for everyone else, the way he'd decided zoning did. Or maybe he was hoping it'd just plain kill him.

It was so ridiculously self-destructive that Danny might've laughed, except for how Bucky was being so ridiculously self-destructive. "Really?" he demanded. "Really? We're still doing this, you stubborn, sense-addled idiot? Once wasn't enough for you? Well, fuck you, Buddy. Not on my watch." He focused that much harder, reinforcing the shields he'd made.

Bucky made a small sound of desperate frustration, then groaned through his teeth, shoving back. Danny clenched his jaw, keeping the shields thick and firm. "What the fuck are you trying to do here, anyway? You really think you're going to be able to break my shields at all, let alone enough times that I, what? Give up? End up too exhausted to fight you? Well I got news for you," Danny snarled. "That is never going to happen. I can do this all day. And I promise you, Super Soldier or not, you are going to pass out long before I have to give up."

"Please, let me go," Bucky panted. "Please. I'll hurt you."

"Oh my God." Danny threw up one hand, keeping the other one firmly gripping Bucky's shirt. "What were we just talking about? You didn't hurt us. You. Did not. Hurt. Us. But you will if you don't stop this bullshit. You think we were kidding, when we were telling you how we'd feel if you
took yourself out? We were just talking to hear own voices, or something? Guess what, asshole, it wasn't a joke."

Danny was peripherally aware of Clara creeping back into the room, and Steve behind her hovering in the doorway. Danny sent a burst of warmth to Steve, let him feel Danny's gratitude at seeing his beloved Sentinel on his feet. Then Danny made sure Steve could feel his apology, just before he closed his side of their bond.

He heard Steve's dismayed cry, but couldn't feel anything from him. It was terrible, like he'd blocked off part of his own soul. But it'd only be for a couple minutes. Less. "This is what it would be like for us, if I let you go, and you didn't come back."

It was easy to summon the grief he still felt for Matt and always would, then just as easy to open the shields he'd made for Bucky. Just a little bit. Not enough for Bucky to experience sensory overload, but enough to let a fraction of Danny's grief through. Then he thickened the shields again and reopened his bond with Steve. He could hear Steve's exhale of relief from across the room.

Bucky gasped, his body going stiff with shock. He stared up at Danny, his eyes enormous with complete, utter incomprehension.

"It's true," Danny said. "I know we just met you. Doesn't matter. You're part of our lives now, and there would be a big fucking Bucky-shaped hole if you were gone. Like…remember what you felt without your wolf?" Danny glanced around for her—not that she was hard to miss—but the giant, goofy spectral lupine wasn't there. Maybe she was hanging with the other animals, since they weren't there either. Maybe she'd thrown up her paws in exasperation and gone to take a nap. Danny wouldn't have minded doing that himself.

"Celeste," Bucky whispered. His left hand twitched, like he was remembering the feel of her fur. "Yeah."

"Her name's Celeste? I like it. Very classical," Danny said. "I know how that felt, when your spirit animal was gone," he continued, somber now with remembered pain. "Because I lost Maya for 20 years."

"I'm sorry," Bucky rasped.

"Thanks, but it's okay now. I got her back. But, yeah. It hurts, doesn't it? You remember how much it hurt. Well, that's what it would feel like for us, if you off yourself or go hide forever in your head."

"Take that and multiply it by a thousand, and that's what your Guide will feel," Steve said from the doorway. "That kind of grief, forever. It would never go away. Do you really want to do that to him?"

"No. Never." Bucky shook his head. There were tears in his eyes. "But, I'll hurt him. I know I will. I can't…." Bucky swallowed. "He's better off without me."

"I can understand how you could feel like that, after everything you've been through," Clara said. She came over and sat near Danny. "Can you sit up?" she asked Bucky with one of her warm smiles. "I'd really like to look you in the face."

Bucky levered himself upright with trepidation, as if his inherent threat level rose with the angle of his body. Danny made sure not to let go of him, just in case.

Clara's smile widened. "That's better. And I am so happy to be able to speak to you, Bucky. You have a nice voice." It was almost funny, how obvious it was that Bucky had no idea what to do with
the compliment. Clara took his left hand and held it between her own. "Hydra already used you to hurt your Guide. And I know you think that what's in your head will hurt him as well. It makes sense that you'd believe he's better off without you. I also know that I won't be able to convince you that's not true. I'm hoping you'll be willing to see him, so he can prove it himself. But until then…your Steve doesn't think that he's better off without you. Even if he somehow could be, it doesn't change how he feels about you now, and how he'd feel if you were gone."

Bucky looked away, dropping his gaze to their clasped hands.

"This isn't to make you guilty," Danny said. "God knows you're already like, the world champion of guilt. We're not trying to give you a reason to feel more guilt. We're trying to give you a reason to stay."

Clara nodded. "If you can't do it for yourself, do it for us. Do it for your Steve. Stay because you don't want to hurt anyone, or make anyone's life sadder or more difficult."

"Stay because you love him," Steve said, rough. "Because you love him and he loves you."

When Bucky lifted his head his cheeks were wet. "Okay," he said. The word barely drifted out with his breath, but Danny could still hear the despair in it.

Clara closed her eyes, let out a near-silent sigh. "Thank you," she said, heartfelt. "Thank you, Bucky. Does that mean you'll work with Danny to strengthen your shields, instead of trying to push them down?"

"Yeah," Bucky said, almost as softly.

The steady pressure against the shields Danny had wrapped around Bucky's mind eased.

Danny hadn't been kidding about how long he could resist Bucky's psychic pushing, but that didn't make him any less happy not to have to do it. "Thank you. Way not to be a martyring idiot. Now I need you to promise that you're not going to tear those exceptionally fine shields I made down the second I let go of them."

Bucky's mouth twitched in some kind of mixture of annoyance and shame. "I promise."

"I am holding you to that." Danny risked letting go of Bucky's shirt. When nothing bad happened he held up his fist with his little finger crooked. "Pinky swear that you're not going to do that. Or pull any other dumbass stunt to take yourself out of the picture."

Bucky stared at Danny's pinky, baffled.

Danny blinked. "Right. Steve, come here and help me demonstrate a pinky swear."

"Danny…"

"Steve…"

The wave of minor exasperation over the bond was absolutely fantastic after the complete absence of anything from him, no matter how brief it'd been. But Steve clomped over, just like Danny knew he would. He had a red pattern on his cheek, from the decorative border of the cupboard he'd been slumped against. The contrast with his irritated expression was adorable.

Steve bent enough so their hands would meet when Danny reached up to him. He crooked his pinky the way Danny had. "Here," he said grumpily. "This is for kids."
"Sacred vows have no age limit, Steven," Danny said primly. He hooked their pinkies together, then tilted his head to look his Sentinel in the eyes. "I swear I won't close my side of the bond with you again."

Steve's expression sobered. "I swear I won't close my side of the bond with you either."

"Thank you," Danny said. Steve's answering smile, soft and sweet, made it clear he knew how much Danny meant it. Love and contentment surged along their bond.

Danny released Steve's hand, then turned to Bucky. He cleared his throat. "So. Now that you know how to do it, it's your turn." He held his hand out to him. "Pinky swear that you're not going to do anything stupid."

Bucky solemnly bent his little finger around Danny's. "I swear I won't...take myself out of the picture," he said.

"Awesome." Danny pulled back from Bucky's mind, going slowly just in case Bucky didn't consider a pinky swear as abiding as Danny's kids did.

It was a relief, to have a barrier between him and Bucky's constant emotional turmoil. But for a moment Danny felt bereft, like he had when Steve had been closing their bond at night. He liked Bucky, uselessly self-sacrificing bonehead that he was. He'd liked Bucky's presence in his mind, even if it was fraught and hurting. He didn't enjoy it being gone.

But then the space Bucky had taken while Danny was linked to him was replaced by the true, deep bond he had with Steve. And that was good and right and perfect in a way Bucky's presence could never be. Bucky belonged with Steve Rogers; Danny belonged with Steve McGarrett like the sky belonged to the sea.

And Bucky was keeping his promise. His shields stayed solid and strong. But he wouldn't look at Danny. He just held his right arm against his chest, gaze on the floor.

"It's going to be okay, Bucky," Clara said. "I promise. Even if it doesn't feel like it right now, it will. You've already come so far. You've been so brave." She moved closer to him. "May I hug you? I'd really like to hug you."

Bucky hesitated, but no one on Earth could refuse a hug from Danny's mom. It was her special gift as a Guide. He slowly eased closer, until he was enveloped in her arms.

"I am so proud of you, Bucky," she said. "I am so, so proud of you. Welcome back, sweetheart. I'm so happy you're here."

Danny really loved his mom.

Danny got up, making a face as blood trickled back into his kneecaps. Steve met him halfway. Danny grinned at him, then pulled Steve's head down so he could kiss him for all he was worth. Steve kissed back until they were both out of breath, and Danny's neck was sore from the angle.

"I love you so much," Danny said.

"I know," Steve said, then gave him one of his blindingly beautiful smiles.

Clara gave Bucky one more mom-squeeze, then got to her feet, moving almost normally now. She held out her hand. "Come have breakfast, sweetheart. I promise, everything is going to be all right."
Bucky's face was suffused with sadness, and he still couldn't make himself meet anyone's eyes. But he took her hand.

Steve Rogers woke up crying.

He didn't remember falling asleep. He hadn't slept well since he came out of the ice, but recently sleeping had become almost impossible.

It wasn't just the nightmares, though those were bad enough: He couldn't find Bucky at Azzano, but knew he was burning alive. Or where Steve killed him in Washington and only discovered his identity afterwards. Or Steve watching Bucky screaming in sensory overload but unable to reach him. Or Bucky falling, over and over and over again.

The nightmares were bad, but not nearly as bad as lying awake in the dark, wondering where Bucky was, if he was even safe, or if he was going to become present and crash into sensory overload any moment.

Steve would spend hours trying to pry open Bucky's part of their bond. It was like pulling out his fingernails, but it never worked.

Alexander Pierce must have been trying to reactivate Bucky. (It was called 'being online' now, which Steve understood but didn't think made sense. He kept wanting to ask, 'what line'?) That was the only reason he could come up with to explain why they'd sent Steve's own Sentinel after him, otherwise. Because Pierce had to have known what would happen, unless he'd been counting on Bucky just killing Steve first.

Maybe he hadn't cared about the results, since either way he would have won.

Sometimes what kept Steve awake was the visceral memory of their bond suddenly opening. He couldn't forget anything anymore, not even pain. And it had hurt. Not physically, but the rush of Bucky's emotions, his sudden presence in Steve's mind after an absence so profound Steve had assumed he was dead….

It had hurt. Like warm blood through cold veins, like rebreaking a badly-healed bone.

And Bucky. God, Bucky. Bucky had experienced the same psychic pain as Steve, echoing and doubling along their bond. And then there was Bucky's overwhelming confusion and fear on top of it. Bucky didn't know what was happening; he didn't even know Steve's name. To him it was just another kind of attack, but one he didn't know how to fight.

Bucky had no shields, either. Steve could feel all of his senses spiking at once, as the reformed bond triggered Bucky's abilities into sudden, violent activation. Bucky was on the brink of a sensory overload.

This time, Steve caught him before he fell. He pushed aside his shock and his own anguish, and made Bucky shields. Steve wrapped Bucky's mind in walls as thick and strong as he could make them, then held them in place until Bucky instinctively began to sustain them on his own.

Steve's focus had been so exclusively on his Sentinel that he hadn't even noticed Brock and the other Hydra agents swarming until they were right on top of him. The second Steve had been forced to let go of him, Bucky ran. He'd fled back to his tormentors, desperate for something familiar, even if it only meant more pain. Steve had felt Bucky's sick relief; the comfort of the fear he knew.

Steve had closed his side of the bond with him. It had been…awful didn't begin to describe what the
loss had felt like after regaining that connection, no matter how briefly. But Steve and his friends had been captured, and he couldn't think clearly with the hell flowing to him from Bucky's mind.

And Bucky had been so overwhelmed and afraid. That was the only way Steve could help him.

He'd thought it would go better on the helicarrier. It hadn't been that unreasonable an assumption. It was just the two of them, and this time Steve was prepared. And he was sure that Bucky would remember him, recognize his Guide, welcome the bond the way he'd always done.

But the moment he'd eased the bond back open, Bucky had gone berserk.

His reaction had been the same as before. *Exactly the same as before,* and it had taken Steve far too long to understand that it was because *Bucky didn't remember.* Bucky still had his shields, thank God, but that was automatic, like muscle memory. Bucky didn't even know he was doing it, or what he needed shields for, or even that he had them at all. Hydra had ripped all of it right out of him.

Steve had closed the bond again, so Bucky wouldn't have to feel his anguish or rage.

And they'd fought. Because Steve had to, because there'd been too much at stake. But even with the bond between them cold and dark, each blow Steve gave Bucky felt like he was tearing out a piece of his own soul. Steve would have rather died than hurt his Sentinel, but there'd been no other choice.

The second the helicarriers were no longer a threat, Steve had thrown their bond open. He'd flooded it with his love, his amazement and gratitude that his Sentinel was alive, and his forgiveness, because he knew his beautiful, sweet Sentinel would have never chosen to hurt him.

He felt it when Bucky remembered him: the shock, horror and grief, and then the fathomless, rending guilt. The shields Steve had so carefully constructed exploded, destroyed by the trauma of being forced to act against a protective instinct coded in Bucky's genes.

Steve felt Bucky going feral then, but the deck had given way before he could even try to help. And when he woke up in hospital, the bond was closed again.

"It's 'cause he's feral," Sam had told him, then grinned widely and patted Steve on his uninjured shoulder. "Give him a couple days, three at most, and he'll come back. Ferals always do. He knows you now, just like you said he would. And you'll get him present, and then you can make him better and have your bond again. You're his Guide, Steve. He'll come back."

Sam had finally been able to bond with Natasha, after days of brief touches and pining, so for him the world was a rosy, happy place. Steve hadn't ever seen Natasha smiling so much either. And he was happy for them. He really was.

But he hadn't been able to share Sam's optimism. Sam hadn't been in Bucky's head. He hadn't felt the depths of Bucky's fear, his lack of context that turned the world into a bewildering quagmire. Steve didn't know if just getting Bucky present would bring his memories back. He'd been present before, after all, with their bond open. And Steve had almost died.

But he'd smiled and thanked Sam anyway. He even managed to keep the smile when Natasha came back into the room and immediately hugged Sam and buried her face in the crook of his neck. She sniffled loudly, scenting him but also playing. Sam laughed as he hugged her back, and God they were so happy.

"Your Sentinel will come back, Steve," she'd told him, because she'd been patrolling the hallway; there was no way she could have missed their conversation. "You're his Guide. He loves you. You
practically share souls. He'll come back.”

But Bucky hadn't.

Bucky hadn't come back, and Steve had gone from fear to outright terror, imagining Bucky sliding back into his head and falling into full sensory overload with no Guide there to help him. He could barely sleep, knowing the inevitable was coming, thinking of Bucky alone in his agony, how Bucky might die before Steve could find him. That maybe the only way Steve would even know was when Bucky died and the bond finally opened again.

That was what he had dreamed about tonight: finding Bucky dead, knowing he died in terrible pain.

Steve sat up, putting his feet on the floor and his elbows on his legs, wiping his eyes with the heels of his hands. It didn't matter that he knew the dream wasn't real, the grief and the sense of failure were real enough. It was what Steve felt all the time.

Guides were supposed to protect their Sentinels. All Steve had ever done was get Bucky hurt.

He cleared away the last of his tears, then sat with his forearms on his thighs, just staring at the coffee table. He was exhausted, physically and mentally. He'd searched Washington D.C. and the surrounding states so many times in the last couple weeks he could draw every single street, highway or dirt road. Tony, maybe not so surprisingly, had thrown his considerable resources into finding Bucky too. And they'd found plenty of evidence of what Hydra had done to him, but not Bucky himself.

Even feral, even with his Guide waiting for him, it was looking increasingly like Bucky didn't want to be found.

If he was findable at all. And not, say, recaptured by Hydra. Or dead.

Steve scrubbed his face with his hand. He couldn't think like that. He'd drive himself crazy. Bucky couldn't be dead. Steve would know, wouldn't he? He hadn't sensed if Bucky was alive or dead when he fell (and he would never forgive himself for that), but…this was different. Wasn't it?

"I don't know," Steve said out loud. "Fuck, I don't know. Bucky, where are you?" Maybe Steve should take the search international, the way Natasha had suggested. But what if Bucky came looking for him and Steve wasn't here? He couldn't leave. He would never abandon Bucky again.

(Bucky had abandoned Steve this time. He supposed it was only fair.)

Steve got off the couch and went to look out the windows. Dawn was spreading across the sky, banishing another night's shadows. It was going to be a beautiful Spring day.

"Bucky, please. Where are you?" Steve asked quietly. He tried to open the bond again; pulling fingernails.

Nothing.

Tony strode into the common room kitchen while Steve was getting coffee, looking preoccupied. "Oh, great, you’re here," he said, as if J.A.R.V.I.S. hadn't assuredly told him as much. "I need to—Are you all right?"

Steve blinked, taking inventory. He'd been staring blankly at the coffee machine, but he'd looked at Tony when he came in. Maybe his smile was off. He'd been using the big, bright, war bond-shilling
grin from his USO days, but he'd never quite managed to make it seem genuine.

For a moment he debated between just saying he was fine or telling the truth. Neither option felt particularly appealing. "What do you need, Tony?" he asked instead. He dropped the smile since Tony wasn't buying it anyway.

Tony frowned at Steve's non-answer, then gave his head a quick shake. "I need to tell you something important. It's possible that we have a lead on Bucky."

If Steve had been holding a coffee mug, it would be in pieces on the floor. "Oh my God. You do?"
He crossed the small space to Tony, as if sheer proximity would deliver more information. "What is it? Wait, what do you mean 'possible'? Is it a lead or not?"

"Hey, hey, relax, big guy." Tony took a step back, hands raised. "What I mean is, it's a possible lead on Bucky. J.A.R.V.I.S., please explain before Cap has an aneurism?"

"I received a phone call at 4:16 this morning—"

"4:16 this morning?" Steve interjected. "It's nearly Seven! Why the hell didn't you wake me up?"

"For a good reason that J.A.R.V.I.S. will get to if you actually let him," Tony said mildly. "A little patience, Cap. I promise we're not being coy, here. It's just complicated."

"Fine." Steve nodded, swallowing. He clenched his fists, ordering himself to just listen. "I apologize. Please continue."

"Thank you, Captain," J.A.R.V.I.S. said, with clear sympathy in his mechanical voice. "As I was saying, the caller claimed to be Commander Steven McGarrett, leader of the Hawaii Five-0 Task Force and Alpha Sentinel of Hawaii. I put him on hold to verify his identity, per Sir's instructions, but when I returned to the call there was no answer. I attempted to dial the mobile phone from which the call was placed several times, but was consistently directed to voice mail. I believe his phone is offline."

"Weird, huh?" Tony agreed with Steve's bafflement. "Wait, there's more. J?"

"Given the suspicious circumstances, I delved further into Commander McGarrett's history. That was why I didn't wake you earlier, Captain. I wished to have as much information as possible first."

"Oh," Steve said. He supposed he should appreciate that, except for how any information at all would have been preferable to more miserable ignorance. "Thank you," he said anyway, because he knew the A.I. had done the best his programming had allowed. He clenched his fists harder. "What did you find?"

"Commander McGarrett has had an exceptional career, both with the United States Navy and as leader of the Hawaii Five-0 Task Force," J.A.R.V.I.S. sounded like he was reading in introduction at an award ceremony. "He has received numerous citations for extraordinary heroism in the line of duty, as well as disciplinary reprimands for much the same reasons."

"Sounds like you," Tony said.

"Commander McGarrett is also somewhat unusual for a Sentinel," J.A.R.V.I.S. went on over Tony, "in that he was classified as only a Carrier of the Sentinel genetic code until earlier this year, when his abilities manifested suddenly after he experienced a serious trauma."

Steve's eyes widened. "What trauma?"
"Parking garage blew up and fell on him," Tony said. "Yeah." He nodded at Steve's dumbfounded expression. "This guy really doesn't do things by halves."

"Bucky manifested late too," Steve said. "He came online at the Azzano labor camp."

"Awesome thing to have in common," Tony said absently. "And here comes the complicated part. J?"

"Commander McGarrett's father, John McGarrett, is deceased, but his mother was among the Hydra operatives listed in the documents released by Agent Romanov. Commander McGarrett's mother, Doris McGarrett, is alive. She is an active Hydra operative, codename 'Shelbourne', who is currently being pursued by the FBI. She was undercover as a Hydra mole in the CIA until 1991. She was pulled out in 1992, which was facilitated by faking her death."

"Gotta love the early nineties," Tony muttered. "That's not all of it, either."

"There's more?"

"Oh, yeah." Tony nodded, then took over the explanation. "Doris' Hydra buddies arranged for the fake car bombing that supposedly killed her. That's like, yeah, Hydra. No kidding. But in the internal-circulating memo about it—Yes, Hydra has internally-circulating memos, because Nazis—someone had added, 'Attempt unsuccessful. Subject 15 still inactive.'"

"'Still inactive'?" Steve parroted, "what the hell does that mean? And who the hell is 'Subject 15'?"

"John McGarrett," Tony said.

"What?" Steve stared at Tony in blank astonishment. "You're saying, McGarrett's father was the result of a Hydra experiment?" Like Bucky. But there was no point in saying it.

Tony nodded grimly. "That's exactly what we're saying. And get this: Doris is classified as a Carrier too."

"What?"

"Yeah, no shit." Tony nodded again, mouth quirked in sympathy. "So, let's recap. Other Steve's parents both had major ties to Hydra, both were Sentinel and/or Guide gene Carriers, and apparently the ersatz car bomb was also intended to bring John McGarrett—AKA, Subject 15, because that's not ominous as fuck—online as a Sentinel."

"Why did Hydra even think that would work?" Steve said.

Tony shrugged. "Well, the easiest answer is that some Carriers end up going online after a severe trauma, like our buddy McGarrett Junior. John McGarrett was 45 in 1992. Hydra probably staged the bombing as a last resort."

"And the difficult answer?" Steve asked, though he had the horrifying certainty that he already knew.

"That McGarrett's Grandpappy is Bucky Barnes," Tony said.

Steve staggered, grabbed the counter before his knees gave out. He'd known this, from what Tony had already told him. He'd been sure this was what Tony would say, but it still hit him like a hammer to the chest. "D-does...How..." Steve shook his head mutely, just trying to breathe.
"Whoa! Easy now, Cap. You're okay. You just need to keep breathing, all right?" Tony had his arms, steering him to one of the kitchen chairs. Steve collapsed into it, still wheezing. It was like having an asthma attack. "Come on, head between the knees. That's right, you know the drill."

Steve let Tony steer him so that he was staring numbly at the floor. Tony rubbed his back, trying to talk him through breathing exercises ('In…out…in…. You can do this, Cap. You got this) while it was all Steve could do not to shatter completely. His shields were flickering like badly-projected film and he kept picking up Tony's concern for him. That wasn't too bad—it was a respite from his own emotions, which were terrible—but if Steve let his shields slip entirely he'd get the emotions of everyone in the entire building. He'd fall into an empathic overload until he could get himself together. Steve couldn't afford to do that.

He refused to let that happen. Bucky needed him.

Bucky, who'd been…who Hydra had…They….

"Steve." Tony was kneeling on the floor, hunched to put his head at the same level as Steve's. He was still rubbing his back. "Steve, you are okay. I know this sucks. This sucks beyond the telling. This sucks like a fucking black hole. But you are okay. You're safe—"

"Bucky's not!" Steve panted.

"I know," Tony said gravely. "But you really are, and you need to focus on that. We're going to help him. We're going to sort this fucking thing with Other Steve out. But none of that can happen if you end up in a heap on the floor. So how about you use some of that Captain America strength, courage, etc. and breathe with me now?"

Steve did, forcing himself to follow Tony's lead, pulling air into his lungs until he finally felt steady enough to sit up. There was sweat in his hair. He pushed it away from his forehead with a shaking hand.

"That's it. That's better. Great job, Cap. Way to not pass out." Tony patted him on the back then stood. He went to the fridge and got a bottle of orange juice, opened it then handed it to Steve.

Steve took a long drink, then put the bottle on the table. He nearly knocked it over when he let go. "Does McGarrett know?" he rasped.

"No idea." Tony went to the counter and poured himself a mug of the coffee Steve had made but hadn't drunk. "But if I had to guess, I'd say probably not. I mean, the Winter Soldier was so secret squirrel that it's pretty certain most of Hydra didn't even know about him. And none of the files J.A.R.V.I.S. has found so far about the 'Maintenance and Deployment of Sergeant James Barnes'"—He made finger quotes, sneering—"mention anything about…." He winced. "That."

"His parents could've told him," Steve said.

Tony shrugged as he sipped his coffee. "They could've, yeah. But that would depend on their darling first born child even knowing they were Hydra in the first place. And J couldn't find anything that has McGarrett in cahoots with Mommy and Daddy Nazi. Actually, it's possible that Other Steve's dad didn't know about his 'Yay, Let's Kill Everyone' heritage either. He's only mentioned as 'Subject 15' or in association with Shelbourne. And, McGarrett the Younger spent the last week and a half merrily hunting down Hawaiian Hydra operatives with his task force buddies. So unless he's the moleist mole who ever moled, he's probably legit."

"And you think he called about Bucky," Steve said. It made sense. Why else would McGarrett have
contacted them? Steve blinked, then his head snapped up in concern. "Do you think Hydra got him? That's why J.A.R.V.I.S. couldn't connect?"

"That is the million dollar question," Tony said. "It's possible, and God knows they might want to nab him as a replacement for their missing Winter Soldier. Except, J.A.R.V.I.S. was able to triangulate the area where the call came from. And it's an unassuming house in an unassuming suburb in New Jersey. Which is currently owned by Clara Williams, divorced mother of Detective Danny Williams, second in command of Hawaii Five-0, and Steve McGarrett's Guide."

Steve gasped. "They're in New Jersey? They're here?"

"Yup." Tony sipped his coffee. "J.A.R.V.I.S. took the liberty of going through their recent online accounts and phone records—Yes, I know it's invasive and illegal, but we're talking Hydra here—"

"I don't care," Steve said.

Tony blinked. "Oh. Cool. Anyway, turns out they were here for the funeral of the brother of one of Danny's former work colleagues. Jack Rollins, you might know him."

Of course Steve knew him. Rollins' Guide had been Brock Rumlow. Steve's jaw twitched. "Is Williams Hydra?"

"Not unless he's as moley as his Sentinel. So to speak," Tony said. "But the point is, Williams and McGarrett aren't Hydra, and Danny's mom's house hasn't lost electricity, phone lines or wi-fi access. It also hasn't burst into flames, or had anything happen to the residents to incite the neighbors to call 911. So, either the Hydra leftovers are just that good, which I doubt, or Other Steve dropped his phone in the toilet or something and everything is fine."

"Do they have a landline?" Steve asked.

"Amazingly, my exceptionally intelligent, neural-networked, deep-learning A.I. did think of that," Tony said dryly. "And, yes. Yes they do. But we wanted to get you up to speed before we called, let you decide on the next move."

"Oh," Steve said softly. His heart leapt up to his throat, banging so hard he felt ill. "Call them. Please."

"You got it, Spangles," Tony said.

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Chapter End Notes

I love Danny and Tony so very, very much.

I know right now it says 'chapter 6/9', but it's just a cruel placeholder, mocking me with sweet, sultry promises. ::Puts on a trench coat, lights a cigarette, and goes walking in the rain. Music swells.::

Possible Trigger Warnings: Attempted and briefly successful self-harm. Discussion of suicide and grief. Implication of Bucky being used to impregnate Guides.
Up and Away

Chapter Summary

Steve Rogers calls back.

Chapter Notes

No extra warnings this time! Yay!

As usual, thanks to darkmoore for logistics help. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Danny, Steve and Clara had all finished breakfast, and Bucky had almost demolished his fourth portion of astonishingly high-calorie oatmeal, when the wall phone next to the refrigerator rang like a harbinger of doom.

Steve and Bucky both cringed, because it was loud and no one was expecting it. Then everyone looked at the phone.

"We all know that's Steve Rogers, don't we?" Danny asked no one in particular after the second ring. He knew his mom hadn't given out her landline number in over ten years. And even the most dedicated cold caller rarely started at 6:56 on a Sunday morning.

That made everyone look at Bucky, who was staring at the phone like it was going to leap off the wall and eat him. The spoon in his fist was beginning to resemble a wad of plasticine. "I…" was all he managed before the phone rang a third time.

Clara hurried to it and slapped dibs on the handset before Steve and his Aneurism Face got across the room. "I don't have to answer, Bucky," she said. "It's your choice." The phone rang again.

Steve and Danny exchanged equal 'oh, fuck' expressions.

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"We did talk about rescheduling the flights," Steve said uncertainly. Danny didn't need the bond to know he and Steve were on the exact same page here, with how very, very much they wanted Bucky to let Clara answer the phone.

The phone rang a fifth time, mocking them.

Bucky swallowed, but he nodded. "Answer it. Please."

Clara gave him one of her usual big, warm smiles, then took a breath and lifted the handset off the cradle. "Hello?"

Danny didn't have super hearing, but he could guess by Steve's and especially Bucky's faces that yes, it was indeed Captain America at the end of the line. Bucky had gone even paler than usual, and was basically turning the spoon to paste in his white-knuckled grip. He looked like it was a tossup
between throwing himself at the phone or out the back door.

"Yes, he's here," Clara said, turning so she could see Bucky. "He came to my son Daniel for help a few days ago." Her mouth twitched unhappily at whatever Steve Rogers said. "Physically, he's fine, though he's underweight and broke his forearm last night." She shook her head, as if Rogers could see her. "I'm afraid that's up to him, if he chooses to tell you or not. But I can assure you that it's healing." She paused, listening, then took a breath. "Yes, just a moment." She put her palm over the mouthpiece, as if that could actually prevent a Super Soldier from hearing anything. "He'd like to speak to you," she said to Bucky.

"You don't have to," Danny said, albeit reluctantly. But at least it prevented his Steve from grabbing the handset and shoving it into Bucky's ear. "You should maybe say 'hi', or something, though. So he at least knows we're not punking him. Playing a prank," he amended, because it was clear Bucky had no idea what 'punking' meant.

Bucky shifted hues from white to pale green, but then he let the mangled spoon drop into his empty bowl and stood up.

Danny and Steve got up too, a little concerned that their semi-invulnerable Super Soldier was going to pass out. Bucky made it to the phone, though, and Clara gave the handset to him.

"Good choice, sweetheart," she said, then smiled warmly and caressed his cheek.

Bucky cradled the handset in both hands. He swallowed. "Hey, Stevie," he said softly.

Even Danny could hear the gut-wrenching sob that was Steve Rogers' answer.

Clara snapped her fingers at him and his Steve, then pointed sharply in the direction of the living room.

"Right," Danny whispered. He grabbed Steve's wrist and pulled him out of the kitchen. "We're going upstairs and I am going to take a long, environmentally hateful shower. You can join me or mope in our bedroom. But either way, you're giving our guest privacy by lowering your hearing to baseline like the courteous, decent human you are. Right?" Danny was using his 'I-will-strap-you-to-the-hood-of-my-car' face, so he wasn't surprised when Steve nodded instead of arguing.

Danny could still hear the thump as Bucky slid down the counter to the kitchen floor. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Steve," he said. There were tears in his voice too.

Danny liked being in the shower a lot. Not just because it was nice and hot and Steve had, indeed, made an excellent choice and elected to join him. The hiss of the water meant Danny couldn't hear Bucky's side of the conversation anymore. It'd been a pretty fucked-up week already, and there was only so much Danny could take.

Unfortunately, the shower couldn't be as long as Danny wanted, because Steve was unreasonably concerned about the extremely remote chance he and Steve would still be wet and naked when Captain America rang the doorbell. They weren't all that far from Manhattan, he insisted, especially if Rogers came in one of their Quinjets.

"Captain America is not going to park a space jet in our back yard, Steven."

"You don't know that for sure, Danny."

"I really, really do, Steve."
But Steve would not be persuaded. So roughly a half hour later, he and Steve were clean, dressed, and mentally prepared to meet a national icon.

Only to find out that Rogers had agreed to wait a half-hour—ha!—on top of the forty-something minute drive, so Bucky could get himself and his single duffel’s worth of belongings in gear.

Danny didn’t know if Bucky had asked Rogers for that, or if Clara had taken the phone back and told Rogers that was what would happen. Either way, Bucky was currently in the downstairs bathroom, adding to the indoor swimming pool and/or quietly freaking the fuck out.

"Is he quietly freaking the fuck out?" Danny asked Steve.

Steve arched an eyebrow at him. "Now you want me to eavesdrop?"

"Yes, Steven. Because this is health and safety, not a touching reunion with his Guide," Danny said. "I need to know if I have to grab my hip waders and go after him."

"Fine," Steve huffed, then went silent for a few seconds, dialing up his hearing. "It sounds like he's just getting clean. Celeste is with him, by the way."

"Oh, God." Danny pinched the bridge of his nose. "Please tell me he's not washing her again."

"I think she's just hanging out." Steve frowned. "And lapping water off the floor."

"Great," Danny said.

Bucky trudged upstairs and into the living room twenty minutes later, with his damp hair combed and wearing one of his new sets of clothes. He had trouble meeting any of their eyes. "I'm...gonna get my stuff upstairs," he said, then hesitated. "I mean, if it's okay? You said...Is it okay if I have them? I can—"

"They're yours," Steve interrupted. His smile was a little off, no doubt because of how anxious and miserable Bucky was. "We got the clothes for you."

"You can keep the duffel as well," Clara said. "I don't need it."

"Thank you," Bucky said softly.

They watched him plod up to the second floor and disappear down the hall, Celeste padding after him.

"Is it just me, or are we doing the wrong thing?" Danny said.

"You know he can hear you," Steve said. "You know he can hear you,"

"I'm assuming he's too polite to eavesdrop. Unlike you."

Steve gaped at him. "You told me to do that just a minute ago—!"

"Stop, both of you," Clara said, and Danny and Steve shut up. "We are doing the right thing," she told Danny with gratifying conviction. "Bucky's fears, while very real to him, aren't rational. We all know he won't hurt his Guide. Unfortunately, Bucky isn't going to believe that until he's with him. I'm sure reaffirming his bond with Steve Rogers will help a great deal, but Bucky can't do that without physical contact."

"And he needs his Guide, Danny. You know that," Steve said. "He's only had you and Clara to
ground himself on. That's only going to work for so long, now that he's not feral anymore."

"Yeah. Fuck." Danny sighed, then rubbed the back of his neck. "I just wish he didn't look like we were going to drive him into the woods and leave him there like an unwanted kitten."

"First of all, we're not abandoning him, Danny. Steve Rogers is coming here to get him," Steve said, as if Danny didn't know that. "Secondly," he added, "if he was an unwanted kitten, we'd surrender him at the local animal shelter."

"Bucky's not a kitten," Clara nipped Danny's gentle reminder of what the hell a metaphor was in the bud. "He's a grown man who has been incredibly traumatized but is nonetheless capable of making his own decisions. And he agreed to let his Guide bring him home."

"Why did he agree if he looks like his Guide is bringing him to his execution, then?" Danny said.

"Because it's his Guide, Danny," Steve said, as there was no need for any other explanation. "He's a Sentinel. He's always going to choose his Guide." Steve grinned at him. "Just like I'd always choose you."

Danny grinned back. "You are such a romantic goofball."

Steve just laughed and kissed his forehead.

But inwardly, Danny couldn't help thinking how Bucky had spent nearly two weeks feral and in desperate need of his Guide. He should have chosen Steve Rogers then. But he hadn't.

And then Danny couldn't help wondering what Bucky was really going to choose, when Steve Rogers took him home.

Bucky didn't come back down for nearly an hour, still looking like he was waiting for the end of the world. He set the duffel bag Clara gave him neatly by the door, then methodically put on his new boots and came back to sit on the couch. Celeste followed him like a very large, furry shadow, then climbed on the couch and lay down with so much of her body over his thighs that Danny figured his legs went numb instantly.

The duffel was mostly empty. It looked strangely forlorn, set so perfectly next to the front door like that. It wasn't right, that Bucky had so few things. It made Danny feel badly that he'd only bought Bucky the one pair of boots. He reminded himself fiercely that in a few minutes Bucky wouldn't be Danny's responsibility anymore; Bucky's Guide would supply him with anything he needed.

Danny couldn't make it sit well, no matter how often he repeated it to himself.

It wasn't that Danny felt the need for a second Sentinel, even if it were possible to have two, which it wasn't. Of course, Danny would have tried it anyway if, say, Steve Rogers were actually dead.

Danny was very, very glad that Rogers was still alive and able to come back to his Sentinel, but there was part of him that wished he could just say, 'fuck it' and take Bucky home with him instead. Bucky and Danny's Steve were already getting along like a house on fire, and Bucky had been…not happy, okay? But, better. Getting to happy, maybe. And now he looked nearly as sad and scared as when Danny had met him.

Danny forced himself to remember what his mom had said: that Bucky's fears weren't rational. This was good, what was happening. More than that, it was necessary. Cruel to be kind.

"Do you want your old jacket?" Clara asked Bucky. She was sitting in one of the armchairs with her
eReader, but she hadn't taken it out of her lap. "I washed it for you. I went through the pockets first, but I couldn't find anything."

Danny was impressed his mom had searched the jacket's pockets with her bare hands, but Bucky shook his head. "Thank you. But, I like my new one." He looked up long enough to smile at Steve, before going back to watching his fingers move through Celeste's fur. "Could I…" His voice was barely at a whisper before he trailed off, as if he didn't even dare finish the idea.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Clara said. "You can ask me anything, it's all right. If it's not possible, I'll tell you."

Bucky licked his lips. He didn't raise his head. "Could I…stay?"

"Do you mean, would I allow you to stay here, with me in this house?" Clara asked, while Danny bravely resisted smacking his hands over his face and lamenting his terrible luck to the heavens.

Of course. Of fucking course Bucky would decide to do the exact opposite of what he'd agreed to not two hours earlier. Because Danny had been assuming the problem was solved and he Steve could go back to Hawaii and their life tomorrow. So what else could possibly happen except everything being reset to now what the fuck are we going to do? Because that was Danny's life.

He could practically hear Steve groaning in frustration over their bond. Steve pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, likely to ask Chin Ho to get them the Governor's blessing for a couple more days on the Mainland. He saw the black, shattered screen, scowled and slid it right back.

"Of course you can, sweetheart," Clara said, as if that didn't open an entire oil's barrel worth of worms and dump it right there in the living room. "Do you remember me telling you that yesterday? You were still feral, so maybe you don't. But, my answer's the same as it was then: You can stay as long as you need to. And you can come back here too, if that's what you want."


"No it doesn't," Clara said easily. "What happened was an accident. Nobody blames you. You will always be welcome here, Bucky. You know that, right? You're part of my family now. You'll always be welcome."

Bucky jerked his head up, eyes wide. "Really?" His voice was so tiny a mouse could've held it in its paws.

"Really," Clara said seriously. She put the reader aside, then got up and came over to the couch. She cupped Bucky's face in her hands, looking him in his big, uncertain eyes. "You're part of my family, James. This is your home now too." She kissed his forehead like a benediction.

Clara went back to her chair while everyone ignored Bucky's quiet snuffling. Danny casually slid the tissue box across the coffee table to him.

"Do you want to stay here, instead of going with your Guide?" Clara asked.

Bucky bit his lip, crumpling the damp tissue in his hand.

Danny was mentally preparing himself for the answer when Bucky's head shot up, Celeste's following a beat later. She rolled onto her paws and Bucky leapt to his feet, staring at the doorway.
The rest of them stood as well. Steve Rogers had to be relatively close, if Bucky could hear him.

Danny glanced questioningly at his Steve, who shrugged. "His hearing's better than mine."

At least another minute passed before Steve heard Captain Rogers coming, which was still long before Danny heard his car pull into their driveway. This meant that by the time Captain America rang the doorbell, Bucky was so worked up Danny was a little concerned he was going to faint. Bucky was trembling, with his right fist buried in his wolf's scruff. His left hand was in such a tight fist Danny hoped it wouldn't end up damaged.

Clara had quietly inserted herself next to Bucky and put her hand on his shoulder. Danny was sure it was as much to keep him from running as to offer comfort.

Danny answered the door.

"Hi," Rogers said. He looked remarkably unassuming for a national icon, standing shyly on the porch with his hands clasped like he was trying not to wring them. "I'm Steve Rogers," he added, as if there was any possible way in the entire world that Danny could somehow not recognize him. "Is Mrs.—"

That was as far as he got, because that was when he saw Bucky.

"Hi, Stevie," Bucky said. Celeste yipped happily.

"Bucky!" Rogers ducked around Danny and sprinted to his Sentinel, engulfing him in his arms.

Celeste bounced and barked happily, but Bucky gasped. Then he broke Rogers' hold and stepped away.

"What the fuck?" Danny's Steve said. Danny was too stunned to even be that coherent. His mom was standing as well now, and Danny saw her slap her palm over her mouth, eyes enormous like she'd just witnessed a murder.

Rogers definitely looked as confused and wounded as a murder victim. "Bucky? What is it? What's wrong?" He stepped towards Bucky, reaching for him.

Bucky took another step back. He looked absolutely anguished, but he shook his head. "I'm sorry."

"Bucky, I don't understand." Rogers tried to go closer again, but Bucky moved back immediately. At this rate Rogers would steer him into a wall. "What's going on? Why are you doing this?"

"I have to. I'm sorry," Bucky said.

"No, you don't!" Danny's Steve burst out. He ignored Clara when she tried to shush him. "We talked about this! You said you wouldn't do it! I thought you weren't going to hurt your Guide!"

"I'm trying!" Bucky shook his head vehemently, looking stricken. He was trembling again. "I'm sorry."

"Bucky?" Clara smiled warmly at him when he snapped his attention to her. "I think you and I should go for a walk. Please get your jacket, and make sure your arm is covered. I think it would be best if Celeste stay here as well."

Bucky glanced at Rogers. He looked like he wanted to say something, but then just turned away and went to put on his jacket. He left his arm brace on the counter, flexing his fingers. It looked better
Danny wanted to tell Bucky to put the brace back on, but didn't say anything. They'd just lost a war; a battle like that didn't feel worth it.

"Captain?" Clara's eyes were full of sympathy when Rogers shifted his miserable, uncomprehending gaze from Bucky to her. "You, my son and his Sentinel have some things you need to talk about."

Rogers nodded absently as he watched Bucky pull on a pair of gloves Danny's father left behind. Bucky leaned over to pet Celeste behind her ears, murmuring softly to her.

"Bucky." Rogers didn't try to go nearer this time, but there was still a flash of fear in Bucky's eyes when he looked at him. "Bucky, please. I'm your Guide. Let me help."

Bucky just shook his head again, before he meekly followed Clara out the door.

The longing on Rogers' face was heartbreaking.

Celeste came up to him and sat, then whined and nosed his hand. Rogers dropped to his knees, hugging her around her withers. He held her desperately, gripping handfuls of her fur. A bumblebee crawled over the collar of his jacket and down onto his shoulder, then began the laborious journey to his hand.

Rogers' arm twitched, then he pulled away from Celeste, wiping his eyes. He saw the bee and gasped.

"Abigail!" Rogers cupped his hands and Abigail flew into them. "Abigail." He brought his hands together like a clamshell, leaving plenty of room for the bee inside, then held his hands tight to his heart and bowed over them; as close to a hug as he could give. "I really missed you."

Danny and his Steve looked at each other. Steve rubbed the back of his neck. Danny didn't want to disturb the reunion either, especially since Rogers hadn't gotten one with Bucky. Hell, it wasn't like he wanted this conversation at all.

Then again, it hadn't been much of a week for things Danny wanted. And Steve Rogers' week had been a fuckton of a lot worse. "Captain?"

Rogers' head jerked up immediately, his body following so smoothly and quickly that Danny didn't see him stand. His bee flew out of his hands and landed on his shoulder. "Why is Bucky like this? What did you do to him Sentinel?"

"We didn't do anything to him!" Steve said. Of course, that was only true as long as nobody counted the accidental murder attempt. "Don't talk to my Guide like that!" Steve stalked a couple steps closer to Rogers, jaw set like he was completely prepared to take on Captain America.

Rogers stalked closer as well. "Just tell me what you did to him!"

"We saved his life!" Steve retorted, "which is a hell of better than you managed—!"

"Whoa! Hey!" Danny slid in between them, arms out and hands up. "How 'bout we take it down a thousand, huh? Especially since there's an extremely skittish Sentinel still within hearing distance?" Danny had no doubt that if Bucky hadn't closed his side of his bond he'd have smashed through the front door already, ready to start busting heads to protect his Guide. As it was, Danny half expected him to come hurtling back any second from the raised voices alone. "I know you're confused and scared right now," he said to Rogers, doing his best to remember all the times Clara had talked
Bucky down over the past couple days. "But taking it out on us isn't going to help."

"Then tell me what happened to him!" Rogers snapped. "Why is he doing this? What is he talking about, not hurting me? Why is he even here? And why the hell didn't you call the Jersey Alphas when you found him?"

"Because he freaked out so badly at the suggestion of a Wellness Center that I took a wild guess that maybe dragging him to a goddamn Sentinel-Guide Center was probably a bad idea!" Danny said, loudly. "And we are, believe it or not, actually trying to answer your questions. But it's a little difficult with you two up in each other's face!" He looked over his shoulder at Steve. "And, seriously, Steve? You're going to take on Captain America? Who happens to be a Guide? In what reality do you envision this happening?" He looked back at Rogers. "And you, Buddy, need to remember that we're all on the same side, here. Which is Bucky's. So how 'bout both of you step the fuck off so we can actually help him?"

Rogers' mouth twitched, then he dropped his head to rub the back of his neck. "You're right," he said. "I'm sorry. It's been a long couple weeks."

"I get that," Danny said. "It's been a long couple days." He stayed where he was for another few seconds just in case, but Rogers and his Steve both relaxed and backed up a couple steps. Awesome.

Danny got Steve's self-righteous repentance, which was so Steve that Danny could only send loving exasperation in return. "All right," he said on a breath. He turned to face Rogers completely and held out his hand. "Let's try this again. Hi. I'm Danny Williams. You were talking to my mom on the phone."

"Commander Steven McGarrett, United States Navy," Steve said, naturally. Because why not one-up Captain America.

Rogers just smiled. "I'm pleased to meet you." He held Steve's gaze a beat longer than strictly necessary, Danny thought, but he let Steve's hand go and stepped back before it got awkward. "This is Abigail, my spirit animal." He held up his hand and she buzzed over and landed in his palm.

"Nice to meet you, Abby," Danny said. He gave her a little wave, then grinned at Rogers. "Is that why you named her Abigail? Because of 'A Bee'? That's cute."

Rogers' smile crashed and burned, and the one he pulled back looked like it hurt him. "It's actually a traditional Irish name. But, Bucky thought that was funny too."

"I'm sure he'll like remembering that," Danny said, because it was the least miserable answer he could come up with on the fly. He gestured at the nearest chair before he said anything else inadvertently tragic. "Like I said, we'll tell you everything. But, you're going to want to be sitting down for this."

Danny's Steve would've rolled his eyes and said something snarky but hilarious about the drama. Bucky's Steve just nodded and sat down.

Celeste came over and lay down beside the chair, so Rogers could put a hand in her fur. Abigail flew
to the wolf and landed on her muzzle.

Danny patted Steve's chest, grabbed his shirt and tugged him over to the couch. Danny didn't quite shove his Sentinel onto it, then sat down practically in his lap, letting Steve wrap him in his arms. Steve slipped his hand under Danny's shirt and rested his palm on Danny's stomach, grounding himself on his Guide. Danny put his hand on Steve's arm, exhaling in relief as the remaining tension eased out of their bond.

Rogers watched them with such blatant longing that Danny immediately felt like a jerk for not thinking of him. He sat up straighter and moved so he was next to Steve, rather than wrapped in his arms. He pulled Steve's hand away from his stomach and instead held it between both of his.

Steve was definitely not thrilled, but he'd seen Rogers' face too. He didn't complain.

"Danny found Bucky when your Sentinel broke into Danny's car," Steve began. "We don't know why he was in New Jersey. Danny didn't know who he was at the time, and honestly, we never thought to ask him the reason."

"He was curled up in the backseat," Danny continued the story. "I still have no idea how he managed to get in without setting off the car alarm, especially since he was feral, with no shields."

"Deeply feral," Steve added. "Non-verbal. Clara taught him some signs, but initially he communicated via blinking for yes or no."

Rogers' looked kind of gut-punched, but he nodded. "I felt it happening. I just…I didn't know it was that bad."

"It was that bad," Steve said.

"At first I thought he'd gone feral because his Guide was dead," Danny said, before Rogers could spiral himself into McGarrett levels of self-recrimination. "I figured it'd happened during that massive FUBAR in Washington, when—stuff happened that you already know about, because you were there. Anyway, yeah. I thought he'd gone feral because he'd lost his Guide." Danny's voice dropped, he couldn't help it: just thinking about it was so fucking sad. "Which meant he was probably dying too." He shook his head, mentally throwing the thought away. Both he and Rogers were healthy and alive, and that wasn't changing anytime soon. Their Sentinels were okay; everything was going to be fine. "And, okay, I am not equipped to deal with deeply feral, grieving Sentinels. Like, at all. But when I offered to bring him to the local Sentinel Wellness Center he…. Well, let's say for not speaking, his 'hell no' was pretty fucking eloquent."

"Yeah, you said." Roger's voice was rough and he cleared his throat. "Is that why you brought him here?"

"Yeah," Steve answered. "Clara Williams used to run a Wellness Center, so when Bucky refused to go to one, Danny offered to bring him here, so Clara could help him. He accepted."

"I was kind of surprised myself, considering he didn't know me from Adam," Danny said when Rogers blinked in surprise. "I mean, it wasn't easy. At first he was so uncertain I figured he was going to say 'no'. I mean, blink twice, but you get the idea. So I called my mom to talk to him, because she is amazing with feral Sentinels. And she was able to convince him to let us help."

"Danny had the phone on video, so Clara could see Bucky and she recognized him. So we knew that his Guide was alive," Steve added. "Which at least meant he wasn't going to die."

"I think—I'm pretty sure he wanted it, deep down. Wanted help," Danny said, thinking out loud as
he spoke. "I don't know if he was even conscious of it at the time, but I think he found my scent, recognized me as an Alpha, and came to me so I'd help him."

"They why didn't he try to find me?" Rogers asked plaintively. "And you still haven't explained why you didn't contact me either, or let anyone know he was here. Or what happened to his arm. I know Mrs. Williams said that was up to Bucky, but...I don't think he's going to tell me. And it looks really bad. And..." Rogers heaved out a breath that could've carried every single day of the nearly 100 years he'd managed to live. He rubbed his forehead. "Why did he stay feral? What does he mean by not hurting me? This is hurting me. Doesn't he know that? Why is he doing this?" He leaned his elbows on his thighs and shoved his fingers through his hair, then left his hands linked on the back of his head. "Why is he doing this to me? To both of us?"

"We didn't contact you because he didn't want us to," Steve said.

He'd made his voice as gentle as possible, but Rogers' head shot up and he looked like Steve had just gutted him anyway. "What?"

"I think it might be easiest just to show you," Danny said. He glanced up at his Steve, who looked surprised but nodded, then back at Steve Rogers. "When's the last time you went to the spirit plane?"

Rogers blinked, then frowned. "I've only been there once, with Bucky. After we got back to camp with the rest of the 107th. They said it was the best way to help him, after..." He swallowed. "He'd only just come online, at the Azzano labor camp. I'd only come online recently myself. A more experienced Sentinel-Guide pair had to help us get there, because neither of us knew what we were doing. But Bucky and I never tried it on our own, and we never really had time to, other than the once."

"Hey, your boy was a late bloomer too?" Danny asked, fascinated. He gestured at Steve over his shoulder. "This goofball needed a building to fall on him." Danny smiled up at him. "I knew you and Bucky were soulmates. The first night he was here, Bucky ended up sleeping on this couch, sprawled over Steve like a two-Sentinel puppy pile," he said to Rogers. "And Steve's tiger was tongue-bathing Celeste like she was a giant, ugly kitten."

"I didn't mind," Steve said when Rogers all but gaped at him. "Bucky obviously needed the contact, and Danny's right. I mean, it feels like I already know him."

"Don't get me wrong, Steve had worked very, very hard to be as unthreatening as possible when he and Bucky met," Danny said proudly. "I've never seen him that submissive, ever. It was scary. But even then, they're still both Sentinels, right? And one was feral, even. And yet, puppy pile. Which was adorable, by the way. I should've taken pictures." He grinned at Steve's extremely unimpressed look. "But, yeah," he said more soberly, "I didn't know Sentinels could get that comfortable with each other that quickly. It makes sense, if they've got so much in common. Even their animals are both white."

"Thank you, for giving him somewhere he could feel safe," Steve said. For a second he looked like he wanted to say more, but then didn't. "You said you wanted to show me something about him on the spirit plane?"

"Yeah," Danny said on a sigh. "Okay, as you obviously guessed, I asked about the spirit plane because I'd like to take you there. It'd just be for a few minutes," he added quickly, "but I think if you see what he showed me...it'll help you understand." He grimaced. "I gotta warn you, though. It's bad. Like, really bad. Like I'm regretting making the offer now that I'm actually thinking about it, bad."
Rogers swallowed, but he set his jaw and rolled back his shoulders. Abigail flew off Celeste's nose and landed on his arm again. Christ, he was still wearing his jacket and boots; Danny hadn't even thought about it. "If it will help me understand, I want to see it."

"Yeah, okay. Of course you were going to say that." Danny licked his lips, then rubbed his hands together, psyching himself up. "Uh, you might want to take your jacket and boots off. Get more comfortable."

"That's a great idea, getting comfortable," Steve said. "Wish I'd thought of it."

"That was an accident, Steven," Danny said. "I'll explain later," he said to Rogers, because there was no way out of telling him about what he did to Bucky now. Danny had known he'd have to anyway, since his knee-jerk idiocy might've left poor Bucky with long-term damage they didn't know about. Most likely not, but still. His Guide had to know. He'd just been hoping he could put it off for a bit longer. Ease into it, like a pool. Filled with sharks.

"I'm fine," Rogers said, exactly like Danny knew he would. Maybe his Steve was soulmates with Captain America too. "How are we doing this?"

"It's actually pretty easy. Just make sure your body is comfortable and stable, since it'll be pretty much just a dead weight while you're gone," Danny said. He moved away from Steve so he could look at him properly. "I need you to stay here and keep watch, because if Bucky and Clara come back before we do, he'll need to know his Guide is being protected. Can you do that for me, please?"

Steve looked surprised, but he just said, "Yes, of course," which was one of the many, many reasons Danny adored him. Steve stood up and went to put his boots on, getting combat ready.

Danny let his Sentinel feel his admiration, and how it warmed his heart to know Steve took his role so seriously. "Thank you," he said out loud to him. "Are you good?" he asked Rogers.

"Yes." Rogers hadn't done much other than make sure his massive body wouldn't tip forward out of the chair. "What else should I do? The other Guide had us breathe in a certain way…." 

"You can do that if you want. But honestly, all you need to do is let it happen," Danny said. "Picture what the spirit plane looked like for you when you went there. Or if you can't, the safest place you remember being in, then just…go there."

"You make it sound so simple," Rogers said. He closed his eyes.

"That's 'cause it is simple," Danny said. He closed his eyes too, found Rogers' spirit, and gently tugged him up and away.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 8 is already half finished. Don't hate me.

The chapter numbers are meaningless. Like existence. Just ignore them. xD
Love Him Until He Lets You

Chapter Summary

Steve Rogers sees things he can't un-see. Danny makes a confession and Bucky makes a choice.

Chapter Notes

HOVER OVER THIS SENTENCE FOR WARNINGS FOR POSSIBLE TRIGGERS. (Warnings are also in end notes.)

My usual thanks to darkmoore for going over this chapter for me. :D She is also working on another fic in this series that ties directly into this one. It'll be very painful; I'm looking forward to it. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Danny was standing on the beach outside his and Steve's house, which faded into the scuffed wood floor and worn rug of what could only be the apartment Steve Rogers grew up in. It was tiny, with only two rooms separated by a wall with—bizarrely—a couple windows. They were in the living area part, which was also the kitchen. The bathtub near the stove had a big wooden board over it, doubling as the kitchen table. It was cramped and a bit shabby around the edges, but it looked warm and welcoming. Safe.

"Was this where you and Bucky came, that time?" he asked Rogers.

Rogers nodded. "This was the tenement I shared with my ma," he said. He was looking around with a thin, tentative smile on his face. "Bucky's dad was…well, he was an angry, violent drunk. And he was drunk a lot. Bucky got the brunt of it, so he spent as much time here as he could."

Danny winced. "He can't catch a fucking break, can he?"

"No," Rogers said. "Sometimes it feels like he really can't."

"At least he had you and your mom," Danny said, which was lame but the only nice thing he could come up with.

"Yeah. Ma thought of him as her second child." Rogers stopped looking around so he could face Danny. "What did you need to show me?"

"Yeah. Fuck." Danny sighed. "Okay. Just…remember that I said this was a bad idea, okay?"

"I remember. Just show me," Rogers said.

"I will. Let me brace myself first, alright?" He took a moment, preparing himself to only see that shit again, but to concentrate on it. "Okay, here we go. This is what Bucky's spirit plane looks like."
Danny closed his eyes, picturing the shifting nightmare Bucky had made for himself. Then he pulled up the memory of Celeste, filthy and bleeding, and then Bucky: with his damaged Winter Soldier gear and black-and-blue arm and the fucking muzzle and the chains. When he had every last terrible bit of Bucky's completely not-safe place as solidly as he could remember, Danny formed it around them. The last thing he did was make them both flashlights, so he and Rogers could see it.

When Rogers gasped Danny opened his eyes.

"Oh, No. No." Rogers shone his flashlight around, illuminating bits and pieces of the prison Bucky had made for himself. "What is this?"

"It gets worse." Danny shone his beam at the corner, showing Bucky.

"Bucky!" Rogers banished the darkness and the flashlights, lighting up the cave like day. He ran to the image of Bucky and dropped to his knees, but of course his hands passed through when he reached for him. He looked over his shoulder at Danny, stricken. "This can't be it. This isn't right. His safe place was our home. It was with me!" He stood up, looking around wildly. "Oh my God. I know this room." He froze the setting, then expanded it, adding a bunch more glass shelves of instruments and grotesqueries, as well as a desk along one wall.

Rogers had replaced the cot Danny had constructed with something more solid and far more menacing. Bucky was strapped down on it, bathed under sickly green light. He was repeating his name, rank and service number over and over again. His eyes were open but dull as sea glass, focused on nothing.

"I found him like that," Rogers said. "He was zoning on his own voice. God knows how long they'd left him there." He shook his head, eyes glistening. "I have a photographic memory. I can't forget anything anymore. God, I wish I could forget this place." He swallowed. "I recognized another one, too."

The scene changed to the room with all the metal. Now that Danny could see all of it, it was obviously a repurposed bank vault. There were two screens attached to the wall, one on either side of the chair thing Danny had glimpsed before. They seemed to be connected to it, and each showed the figure of a male body. Next to the chair was an instrument tray and a rolling stand to hang I.V. bags.

"What was this for?"

In answer, Bucky appeared in the chair, shirtless and almost as scruffy as when Danny found him. He had a rubber mouthguard clamped between his teeth, and both his arms were secured to the chair with what looked like manacles. He was hyperventilating with fear.

"What the hell are they doing?" Danny demanded.

Rogers just shook his head, but as if in answer the…apparatus hanging over the chair lowered, and then the center ring flipped over and settled around Bucky's head. Two pieces of curved metal clamped to him, and then—holy fuck—shot electricity into his brain. Bucky shook under the onslaught, screaming around the guard in his mouth.

"Oh my God! Turn it off! Turn it off! I don't want to see this!" Danny turned his back and covered his ears, but he could still hear the awful electric hum and Bucky's contorted screaming. "For fuck's sake turn it off!"

The noise stopped. Danny slowly turned back around, but the vault was empty again.

"Sorry," Rogers rasped. He wiped his eyes. "There was video. Of what they did to him. That was
"Jesus Christ," Danny stared at the chair thing. "How the fuck could they do that to another person?"

"Because they're evil," Rogers said. And really, what other answer could there be? He swallowed again. "Why did Bucky make this? Why would he do this to himself?"

"Because this is what 'safe' means to him now," Danny said.

"That makes no sense!"

"It does to him," Danny said. "See, he didn't make this as a safe place for himself. He made it to keep everyone safe from him. He can't hurt anybody here. That's what he told me, anyway."

Rogers stared at him. "You can't be serious."

"I am." Danny nodded miserably. "He's convinced—like, completely, utterly, totally convinced—that he will hurt Guides if he's let loose around them. Especially you. And he would rather die than do that. So, this is safety for him."

"But, he won't hurt me," Rogers said. "He never hurt me. It was Hydra."

"You know that, and I know that, and all ye gods and little fishes know that, but Bucky doesn't know it." Danny moved them both back to the back yard of his house. Now they were under an azure sky, barefoot in warm sand that sparkled in the sunlight. "And, uh…" He rubbed the back of his neck. "Did he ever tell you why he was zoning when you found him?"

Rogers shook his head. "Not specifically, no. But, it was obvious. He'd only been online for a couple of weeks at most, and he didn't have any shields. He told me he'd already been through a sensory overload twice, and he'd zoned so often Zola brought in a Guide just to keep pulling him back. He might've fallen into overload more than twice, actually, but he couldn't remember. They had a prototype electroshock machine that they used on him," Rogers explained. "There's no way he could've had control of his senses in circumstances like that."

"Actually, I'm pretty sure he did it on purpose. To escape," Danny said.

Rogers faced Danny so fast an ordinary person would've probably gotten vertigo. "That's bullshit. No Sentinel would zone on purpose. It's practically a death sentence!"

"Yeah. About that." Danny grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck. He forced himself to lift his gaze back to Rogers' face. "He zoned on purpose early this morning."

"No," Rogers snarled. Behind them, the sky Danny had made darkened with an oncoming storm. "No. You're wrong. He wouldn't do that."

"He did," Danny said simply. He gave his board shorts pockets so he could shove his hands into them. "He had a nightmare and pushed my mom away hard when she tried to wake him. She's fine. She wasn't angry at him or anything. She sure as hell didn't blame him. Steve and I heard the crash and rushed in. When we got there Bucky had wedged himself into the corner, with his left hand clamped around his right arm." Danny demonstrated, squeezing his right arm until it hurt. "He'd broken it on purpose to zone on the pain."

"He wouldn't do that!" Rogers shouted. The wind picked up, throwing sand at them. It stung Danny's exposed skin.
"He told me he did!" Danny shouted back. "He told me right there in that fucking dungeon when I goddamn brought him here! So, yeah, he would do that." Danny went on, relentlessly ignoring the lightning in the distance and the dawning horror on Rogers' face. "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to lie to you. And he did. He was even pissed at me because I pulled him out of it, okay? Bucky is so sure he's dangerous that he zoned on purpose while he was feral. Do you have any idea how hard that is? How much fucking dedication you need to do that to yourself? Your Sentinel wants to keep everyone safe, even if it literally kills him. And he's more than willing to zone for it!"

"No! He wouldn't do that! Bucky would never do that!"

For an instant Danny was falling, nothing around him but snow and freezing air. He heard the scream of a train, felt the rush of wind and a punch of fear like a knife in his guts. And then Rogers grabbed his hand and they were back in the Brooklyn tenement. Snowflakes were melting in Danny's hair.

"I'm sorry," Rogers said. His voice sounded like creaking winter ice. "But... You're wrong. You have to be wrong. He... he couldn't.... Oh, God." Rogers dropped to his knees on the threadbare rug, hunched over and sobbing with his hands covering his eyes. "Oh, God, Bucky. What did they do to you? What did they do to you? What did they do?"

Danny knelt next to Rogers and pulled him into his arms. Rogers hugged him back, holding on for dear life as he wept.

"I wish I was wrong, Babe," Danny said. "I can't even tell you how much I wish I was wrong. But I'm not. He told me. And... he tried to put himself into a sensory overload just a couple hours ago."

Rogers made a horrible sound like his heart shattering. "Is that why he stayed feral? To... to be safe? Did he think he was safe?"

"Yeah," Danny said softly. "He didn't want to go back to his body, when I told him he'd be present again once we left the spirit plane. He said he was safe like that. Just like when he was zoning, or in the dungeon he made for himself here. All your poor Sentinel wants in the entire fucking world is to lock himself so deep in his head he can't even think anymore."

"Even if it kills him," Rogers said.

"Yeah," Danny sighed. "Even if it kills him."

Rogers took a few shuddering breaths, then pulled back, snuffling and wiping his eyes.

Danny conjured an old-fashioned handkerchief and gave it to him.

"Thanks." Rogers wiped his eyes again, blew his nose then flicked the wadded cloth out of existence. "So you're saying that everything Bucky's done since the helicarrier... that's him trying to not hurt me."

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Danny sat back on his haunches, crossing his legs. "You or any other Guide. I had to make him swear to me that he wouldn't try to zone or put himself in sensory overload again. He'd make himself feral if he could, but at least that's beyond his control."

"I can't believe this." Rogers rubbed his forehead. "Why did he even agree to let Commander McGarrett call me, then? If he's... this determined to avoid me?"

Danny grimaced. "He didn't agree. He was completely zoned at the time. He didn't know Steve was doing it. We had no choice. He was zoned, and feral, and he'd made his shields so strong I couldn't
get to him short of breaking them completely. We'd actually agreed not to call you just that morning. Because he got so upset when Clara even mentioned it he broke a cupboard door."

"I see." Rogers looked away, mouth tight. "How did you get him to the spirit plane if you couldn't get through his shields?"

And there it was: the one question Danny had been kind of hoping he wouldn't have to answer. "I did break through his shields. I didn't want to. Hell, the absolute last thing I wanted to do was break through a traumatized Sentinel's shields. But he was going into shock, and we didn't have time to wait for you."

"I would've done the same thing," Rogers said. "I'm glad you didn't wait to help him."

That actually made Danny feel a bit better. Then again, there was still what happened next. "Thanks. But, like I said, I had to break his shields down." He hesitated. "Have you ever felt a Sentinel zoning on pain before?"

"No. Never." Rogers shook his head. "I didn't even think it was possible."

"Join the club," Danny said wearily. "Well, I can tell you what it feels like. It feels like your entire body—no, not just your body. Your entire being, everything—got turned into one, single, giant nerve and God is grinding it into the dirt. It feels like being dropped into the center of the sun, only instead of vaporizing you just keep burning. I mean, I've been shot, you know? I've been beat up, had bones broken…. This was so much worse than that. Like, so much worse. It was worse than anything I'd ever experienced. Ever. I didn't know it was possible to feel that kind of pain."

Roger's jaw worked. "He really did that to himself?"

"Yeah, he did," Danny said. He took a breath. "Okay. So. Worse pain than I'd ever imagined. Like, so bad I couldn't think. I just reacted, like an animal. And…I blasted him with everything I had."

Rogers stared at Danny, dumbfounded with shock. "You blasted him? You mean, psychically?"

"Yes, I blasted him." Danny nodded miserably. "Hard enough that my Steve caught it and got knocked on his ass too. So once I realized what the fuck I even did, I scooped them both up and brought them here."

Rogers closed his eyes and took a few breaths, obviously working to keep himself under control. "Is he okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, he really is." Danny nodded vehemently. "I mean, yeah, I hurt him pretty fucking badly. But we were here for at least a couple hours, and Steve and Bucky slept. I wanted to let you know what happened, just in case. But as far as anyone can tell, he's fine."

"Thank God," Rogers said. He scrubbed his face. "This isn't…." He made a slightly hysterical noise almost nothing like a laugh. "I didn't expect anything like this. I thought…" He swallowed. "I thought I'd find him and our bond would open again. We could be like we were. And instead he won't touch me, and his mind is a nightmare. And you're telling me he was willing to…to kill himself…." Rogers stopped to take a few harsh breaths through his teeth. "I don't understand. He was never that hopeless. Even after Azzano. Never."

"He's not hopeless," Danny said. "If he was hopeless he would've found some way to check himself out for real before he wandered into New Jersey. But he didn't do that. He tried to get help. That's hope, right there. What he is, is a good man and a good Sentinel, who's trying to protect us the only way he thinks he can. He's wrong, but he doesn't know that yet. We have to get him there."
"How?" Rogers demanded. "How do I do that when he won't even open the bond? He won't even touch me! What am I supposed to do?"

"The thing is, he wants to touch you," Danny said. "He's just scared. If he didn't want you he wouldn't've talked to you on the phone, right?"

"I don't know what he wants! I can't feel him!" Rogers hit the floor with his fist. The thud reverberated through the entire tiny apartment. "You're telling me he could've killed himself and I didn't even know! I wouldn't have known! I almost lost him and—!" He stopped again, looked away as he fought to keep his composure. "I don't know what to do, Danny," he said with forced calm. "I don't know how to fix this. I don't know what to do."

"Hey, hey. It's all right. It's going to be all right," Danny said. "I know it doesn't feel like it—"

"You have no idea what this feels like!"

"Actually I do," Danny said. "Yeah, really." He nodded when Rogers looked at him in something too awful to be wonder. "After we bonded, Steve kept his side closed every single night for weeks. And I kept part of myself locked away too. Made sure he could never know everything."

"Why would you do that?" Rogers asked, appalled. "Why would you want an incomplete bond?"

"I didn't want an incomplete bond," Danny said. "But I was more worried about Steve knowing I was crazy in love with him. Which, by hilarious coincidence, was what he'd been closing his side of the bond to hide from me." Danny nodded at Rogers' incredulous expression. "I wish I was kidding. I am not. We fucked up our bond because we're crazy about each other and fucking idiots. And it was terrible, cutting ourselves off like that. Absolute hell. I hated it. I regret every minute. But the thing is, we still got to the right place, you know? We got our heads out of our asses and admitted how we felt. And we bonded for real and we've been good ever since."

"Bucky and I were bonded 'for real'!" Rogers snapped.

"I know," Danny said quickly. "I know. I'm not trying to trivialize it. I'm trying to tell you is that you're not alone. I've been through this too. So has my Sentinel. And the point is, we did get through it. And that's how I know you and Bucky will."

"What if we can't?"

"You will," Danny said, because the two of them going on forever with a closed bond was unthinkable. "You have to. I mean, you already loved each other before you even came online, right?"

Rogers nodded. "Of course we did. We grew up together. I was in love with him for years before either of us even knew he was a Sentinel. But, being bonded is different. You know that. You can't compare it."

"I'm not comparing it," Danny said. "I'm saying the bond isn't the only thing you have. He still loves you. He wouldn't be this scared otherwise. And you still love him. So, do that. Love him."

"He won't let me," Rogers said.

Danny smiled. "Then love him until he does."

When Steve opened his eyes, there was a gorilla peering at him. He didn't yelp or flail because he
had super human reflexes, but it was close.

The gorilla made a panting noise uncannily like a laugh, then pushed away from the armchair and knucklewalked over to Danny, who was just sitting up.

"Maya! That was very mean, startling Bucky's Guide like that," Danny scolded. "You should apologize."

The way he was trying very hard not to grin spoiled the admonishment, but Maya dutifully turned to Steve and rubbed her fist in a circle on her chest.

"She's saying sorry," Danny explained. "This is Maya, by the way. She's my spirit animal, as you probably guessed. That's Tigger, currently blocking the way into the kitchen. He belongs to my Steve. My mom's bluebird might be around here somewhere, but he's shy and doesn't show up much. His name's Seymour."

"Thank you," Steve said, standing. Tigger was a tiger, which certainly fit with his name. He was on his side on the floor at the end of the breakfast bar, with one paw slung over Celeste's back. He was lazily grooming her, occasionally making happy-sounding chuffing noises. Abigail was on his ear, apparently fascinated by him. Steve wondered if she could feel a connection to McGarrett and his tiger, the way McGarrett and Bucky felt connected to each other.

Tigger and Celeste were definitely the same shade of white. It was uncanny. Steve wondered if John McGarrett's spirit animal would have been white, if he'd ever come online.

Not for the first time he thought about telling them, and not for the first time he decided against it. It wouldn't help either of them to know. And if anything, it'd make Bucky feel even worse. The truth sat painfully in Steve's chest, but Bucky had been hurt so much already. Steve would do anything not to add to that pain.

He didn't want to add to McGarrett's pain either, and telling him about Bucky meant telling him about his parents. McGarrett didn't need to know his mother was Hydra and his dad was an experiment. Let him and Bucky think that their affinity was just a coincidence; It was kinder for everyone.

Bucky and Clara came though the kitchen door that led to the basement. Clara had a couple packages of cookies. She held the door for Bucky, who was carrying four six packs of soda, two balanced easily on each hand. Bucky's pleased smile was small but genuine, and it hit Steve that this might have been the first time that Bucky had used his skills just for fun, instead of for Hydra or survival. It wasn't a very pleasant thought.

"Welcome back, boys," Clara said. "I hope things went well."

"Me too," Danny said, stretching as if he'd been asleep. "How long were we gone for?" He looked around the living room, craning his neck. "Where's my Steve?"

"He's patrolling the neighborhood, since I'm in the house," Bucky said. "He just told me he's on his way back."

"You guys are way more fun than cellphones," Danny said.

Bucky ducked his head, smiling to himself like the joking praise pleased him.

Abigail flew off Tigger's ear, circled Bucky's head then landed on his nose.
"Abby!" Bucky all but threw the cans on the counter, then put his left hand next to the bee. She stepped delicately onto his palm, her wings vibrating. Bucky held her right under his eyes, petting her back with the tip of his index finger. He looked so happy Steve's heart ached.

Steve couldn't forget anything, and everything Danny had told and shown him was fresh and terrible in his mind. Steve wanted to rush to Bucky, haul him into his arms and tear down his shields. He wanted to rip their bond open, then use their connection to make sure Bucky never harmed himself again. And God help him, but a sick, miserable, desperately lonely part of him wanted to.

He would never do it, though. Hydra had tried for decades to get Bucky's senses back online, so they could bond him to a Guide of their choosing. They could have controlled him utterly, like that. Even the strongest-willed Alpha Sentinel was no match for a talented Alpha Guide. He would have never broken free of them.

Steve was appalled at himself, that he could even be tempted to use his gifts like that. But he wouldn't do it. Even if it meant losing Bucky forever, Steve would never do that to him.

But watching him with Abigail, smiling at her with such unguarded love when he could barely look Steve in the face…. It hurt. It hurt like hell.

"Steve?"

Steve snapped his attention back to Bucky instantly, schooling his face into something he hoped passed for a smile. "Yeah, Buck?"

Bucky's smile was gone. He stopped petting Abigail, then blew a gentle puff of air at her to make her fly away. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't hurt her. I just wanted to pet her." He swallowed. "I forgot her for a long time."

"I don't think your Steve was upset about you petting Abigail, Bucky," Clara said. She was stirring a large pot of vegetable soup on the stove. The oven was on low, probably keeping more food warm. It smelled like melted cheese. She left the wooden spoon in the pot and went to Bucky, taking his nearer hand. "I'm pretty sure he's happy you remembered her."

"I am, Bucky," Steve said, nodding. He did his best to ignore how easily Bucky let Clara hold his hand. Or how sweet his smile was when she gave it a squeeze before going back to the stove. Steve went into the kitchen, stepping carefully over the tiger and wolf. "I'm really happy you remembered her. And you can pet her or hold her any time you want, as long as she doesn't mind." He reached for Bucky, instinctively wanting to ground and comfort him.

Bucky angled his body away. "Okay," he said softly. "Thank you."

Steve pulled back his hand. "You don't have to thank me. We always thought of the animals as belonging to both of us. Do you remember that?" He finally found a smile that felt real. "Abigail liked riding on your shoulder, because she could crawl under your sweater to keep warm. And Celeste kept watch with both of us."

Bucky started peeling the soda cans out of their plastic rings. He smiled again, though it was uncertain. "Monty had…a duck, right? And Celeste kept chasin' it?"

"Yes!" Steve beamed at him, thrilled. Especially because that was a good memory. "It took us forever to figure out that Basil was the one who initiated it. He'd run after Celeste and peck at her legs until she got fed up and went after him."

"Sounds like my kind of duck," Danny said, wandering into the kitchen. He stepped easily over
Celeste and Tigger, obviously very used to navigating spirit animals that size. Maya lumbered after him, then sat next to Celeste and started to groom behind her ears. The wolf sighed and closed her eyes.

"Basil was an idiot," Bucky said with authority. His smiled widened. "His favorite thing was running around quacking and flapping his wings in the middle of the night," he told Danny and Clara. "We'd all come scrambling outta our tents, sure Red Skull's entire army was attacking. Then the stupid duck would walk into the nearest tent and nest in an open sleeping bag."

Danny laughed. "Definitely my kind of duck."

Steve laughed too. "Monty was the epitome of a proper, upper-class Brit. The last person you'd ever expect to be a Guide, let alone to have such a pain in the ass for a spirit animal. His Sentinel made a lot more sense."

Bucky's grin faded again. "I don't remember who his Sentinel was."

"Gabriel Jones," Steve said. He kept smiling, hoping Bucky wouldn't get discouraged. "You probably don't remember because Gabe and Monty weren't all that powerful, so Gabe didn't end up using his senses much. And we only saw his spirit animal a couple times."

"That's right. Yeah," Bucky said, nodding. "She was a snake, so she really hated the cold." He bit his lip. "What was her name? Per…Pre…""

"Persephone," Steve said. "She was a kingsnake, black with white bands."

Steve could tell by the way that Bucky's eyes shifted that he was trying to remember but couldn't. "I have…there's this picture in my head. Celeste carrying around this snake in her mouth." He blinked a couple times, then frowned at Steve. "Was that her?"

"Yeah, Buck. That was Persephone," Steve said.

"Oh." Bucky grimaced. "Thought she was green."

"I think you're doing really well," Clara said to him. She put her hand on Bucky's arm, and he didn't pull back from that touch either. Steve gritted his teeth. "You were feral until just this morning, Bucky. And when we first met I was concerned you might not get back any memories at all."

"I think you're doing amazing, Bucky," Steve said. "The way you looked when you came up the stairs just now…you looked like you did before the war. Like almost nothing had changed."

Steve had meant it as a compliment, something hopeful and encouraging. But any happiness left in Bucky's face bled away completely. "Everything's changed, Stevie," he said. He collected the four, empty six pack rings and threw them out, keeping his eyes on anything except his Guide.

"You're still you, Bucky," Steve said. "You're still my Sentinel. I still love you."

"I know," Bucky said, but he sounded sad. And he didn't say, I love you too.

Love him, Danny had told Steve. Love him until he lets you."

"I'm glad you know," Steve said. "'Cause it's never going to change. I'm so happy you're here, Buck. I missed you more than anything."

"I'm sorry," Bucky said.
Without the bond, Steve didn't even know why.

The kitchen table was too small, so they ate soup and grilled cheese in the living room. It wasn't actually lunchtime, but nobody complained. Steve was almost always hungry anyway.

McGarrett came back from his patrol in time to grab a portion for himself but too late to help; something Danny happily gave him grief about and McGarrett happily ignored.

"I made the sandwiches," Bucky said. His smile was both proud and a little shy. "Clara showed me how, but...I think I remembered. After. These taste different, though." He frowned. "I think."

"You were always really good at cooking," Steve said. "And, yeah. They're a little different. A lot of food is different from what we're used to, now."

"You did remember, Bucky," Clara said, smiling at him. "I think all you needed was some good food and rest, and everything's starting to come back to you."

"What other stuff do you remember?" Danny asked, licking his fingers. "I want embarrassing Captain America stories."

Bucky smirked, then squinted, thinking. He brightened. "Wasn't there one interview where you ended up calling the reporter a Nazi?"

"Oh, God." Steve groaned and laughed at the same time. "Well, he was a Nazi. But he was also well known and really popular. I got in a lot of trouble with the brass over that."

"I'm highly in favor of calling out Nazis," Danny said.

"I'd rather just punch them in the face," McGarrett said, then accepted Clara's high five.

Bucky laughed. It was only a shadow of the way Steve remembered him laughing, even during the war, but it was real.

Bucky was comfortable here, with a brotherlike Sentinel and two Guides who weren't Steve. He was content, maybe even happy. Steve hadn't missed any of Clara's casual touches, or Danny's fond smiles, or how Celeste and Tigger got along as well as Celeste and Abigail ever did.

Bucky belonged here, Steve thought. More than he did with Steve, who he could barely stand to look at.

He should stay here. The idea cut like a blade, but Steve couldn't shake or ignore it. Bucky hadn't had a place he felt comfortable or belonged in over 70 years. Who was Steve Rogers to take that away from him?

I'm his Guide. But Bucky didn't want Steve as his Guide; he'd made that much very clear. And maybe it was because Bucky was afraid of hurting him, just like Danny said. Or maybe he was just afraid of Steve, who was the one Guide truly capable of controlling him.

Steve wouldn't do that. He would never. But, how could Bucky be sure of that, anymore? How could Bucky trust a Guide who had that much power over him?

Love him until he lets you. But Bucky didn't want Steve to love him. And didn't loving someone mean doing what was best for them, anyway? No matter what it cost you?

"You don't have to come back with me, Bucky," Steve said, before he could change his mind.
Everyone looked at him. Then Danny smacked his face with his palm.

"You know you can stay here," Clara said. She curled her hand around Bucky's, though she was eyeing Steve as she spoke. "But I'm sure Steve is hoping you'll choose to go with him."

Steve swallowed, but he nodded. "I am hoping for that," he said honestly. "But, I'm not going to force you to do anything. You say the word and I'm out that door. And I promise..." He could barely make himself say it. "I promise, you'll never hear from me again. If that's what you want."


"What Danny means is that we need to go back to Hawaii tomorrow," McGarrett said. "You'd be here with Clara, but no one else, Bucky. Unless you came with us. But, we'd have to make arrangements for that, which would require you to go to a Sentinel-Guide Center."

"Eleven hours in a plane, Babe," Danny said on a sigh. "Not to mention airport security. You'd kind of be back on the radar. Big time."

Steve was absolutely certain Tony could get Bucky to Hawaii in fewer than eleven hours, without anyone having to know. And he would if Steve asked him to.

He didn't mention it. Steve wasn't quite altruistic enough to make it that easy for Bucky to leave him. Maybe he was more than just an occasional asshole. He still couldn't make himself say anything.

"We could do it," McGarrett said. "It wouldn't be easy, but we could. I'd be happy to have you stay with us for a while. But it's up to you. What do you want?"

"I want to go with my Guide," Bucky said.

Steve gasped. "You do?"

Bucky nodded. "You're my Guide." He blinked, distressed and unsure. "I thought you wanted me. I thought that was why you came here."

"Of course I want you!" Steve managed to keep his voice below a shout. "God, Bucky, you have no idea how much I want you back! I love you. I thought you didn't want me."

"I do want you." Bucky looked astonished that Steve could've thought anything else. "You're my Guide. I'll always want you."

"But, you closed our bond," Steve said. "And you won't even touch me."

"I'm sorry," Bucky said. "I really am. But if I...if I do what you want, I'll hurt you."

"You saved me!"

"My thoughts will hurt you!" Bucky insisted. "My mind will hurt you! I mean it! You don't know —!"

"Shh. It's okay, sweetheart," Clara said. "It's okay. We know you're trying to protect your Guide. Do you remember what we said, though? That your thoughts and emotions can't hurt him? How he wants to take some of your burden?"

"I do, Buck," Steve said. "I want to help." He leaned forward, unable to keep himself from reaching...
for him. "Will you let me help you? Please?"

Bucky pulled back from him, like always. "I can't. If I do I'll hurt you. I'm sorry."

"But you're already hurting me," Steve said. "Keeping the bond closed is hurting me."

"I know," Bucky rasped. "But opening it would be worse."

So, that was how a feral Sentinel more-or-less followed Danny home, but Danny didn't get to keep him.

He didn't bother telling himself he was happy about it, because he wasn't. Relieved, absolutely. Fuck yeah, he was relieved. Bucky was going home with his Guide, so Danny could go home with his Sentinel. He and his Steve could get back to their lives, and Steve Rogers and his Bucky could finally have a life together too.

It was awesome, and a huge relief. But Danny wasn't happy about it.

It wasn't just that he'd miss the world's youngest octogenarian, because of course he would. Bucky was remarkably endearing. It also wasn't that Danny was dreading his Steve stoically moping around the house because he missed Bucky too.

No, the real lack of happiness came from how Bucky wasn't happy either, even though he was going home with his Guide.

Right then, as a perfect example, Bucky was standing on their front porch with his hands in the pockets of his new jacket. He looked haunted and miserable and at anything at all that wasn't his Steve. His duffel was at his feet, looking just as crushed and sad as Bucky did.

Danny didn't tell Bucky that he didn't have to go with his Guide, because Bucky already knew that. And, well, it made things a hell of a lot easier if he did. But none of that changed how awful Danny felt watching him: like this really was the wrong thing to do, no matter what Clara and Danny's Sentinel said.

Steve Rogers had insisted on warming up the car even though it really wasn't cold. Danny was sure it had been a ploy for Rogers to give himself a couple minutes for a quickie breakdown, and to give Bucky time to change his mind. He even looked a little surprised when he got out of the car and saw Bucky was still on the porch with Clara, Danny and Steve. "We can go whenever you're ready, Buck," he said gently.

Clara bustled into the driveway and gave Rogers a big hug. "It was so good to meet you, Steve. Please take care of yourself and our Bucky."

"I promise," Rogers said, with the air of a solemn vow. "I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for him."

"It was all Danny and his Steve," Clara said, as if that were remotely true. "But I'm just glad we were able to help. He's a lovely man."

"Yeah. He is." Rogers' voice sounded a little tight.

"Be well." Clara gave him one more squeeze, then went on her tiptoes to kiss Rogers' cheek. Then she turned to face the porch with her arms open. "Come down here so I can say goodbye properly," she said to Bucky.
Bucky did, carrying his duffel with him. Clara engulfed him in an embrace before he could even put it down. Danny could tell by the way Bucky closed his eyes and bent his head that he was dialing up his senses to imprint on her. She’d told Danny the Guides were taught to discourage it, back when she worked at the Wellness Center. It fostered an unprofessional dependence, not unlike a hospital patient falling in love with their doctor or nurse. But now Clara gave Bucky as long as he needed to lock her into his sense memory. She even tilted her head to make it easier for him to give her cheek a quick dab with his tongue.

She gave him one of her big, sunshiny smiles when he stepped back, even if her eyes were a little wet. "You'll email me so I know how you're doing, right? And I hope you'll come back and visit. I'm going to miss you."

"Thank you," Bucky said softly. He hesitated, eyes flicking away and back. "I can't remember my mom. But I hope she was like you."

Clara actually squeaked in surprise. "That's one of the nicest things anyone's ever told me," she said. "Goodbye, Bucky." She caressed his cheek, then strode briskly inside, blinking back tears.

Rogers shook Steve's and Danny's hand, thanking them for helping his Sentinel. "If you or Mrs. Williams need anything, anything at all, use the number I gave you," he said gravely to both of them. "You saved Bucky's life. I owe you all more than I can ever repay."

Danny shrugged. "It really wasn't a big deal. Okay, yes. It was," he amended at Rogers' look. "But, I would've helped any Sentinel in the shape Bucky was in. We're Guides, right? That's what we do."

"I think you're selling your and your family's kindness short," Rogers said. "I'm just grateful that Bucky found you. I don't know what...." He swallowed, then smiled. "Thank you. Thank you both."

"You're welcome," Danny said. It felt weird to be thanked for such a no-brainer, but he would've probably kissed the ground Rogers' walked on, if Steve had been lost and feral and Rogers had taken him home.

Rogers smiled at Bucky and said 'take your time' on his way back to the nicely warmed-up car. He didn't try to touch Bucky as he passed him, but his hand moved like he wanted to.

Steve hugged Bucky just as tightly as Clara had. "You'd better keep in touch," he said, making it sound like an actual threat.

"I will, I promise," Bucky said. And then Danny watched the two of them imprint on each other, up to and including the licking. Which was adorable and hilarious.

Steve kept his hands on Bucky's arms when they broke apart. "Please open your bond with him, Bucky," he said, soft but fervent. "Your Guide needs you." But he just sighed when Bucky shook his head.

"Bye, Steve," Bucky said, and then it was Danny's turn.

"Come here." Danny walked the couple steps to him, already spreading his arms. Bucky smiled and hugged him too. The kid gave nice hugs, even if it was a little strange having a Sentinel who wasn't his imprinting on him. Danny checked his bond with Steve, to make sure he wasn't suddenly overcome with murderous jealousy. Steve was fine, though. Danny could feel his fond indulgence, and the sadness at saying goodbye to a friend.

"Next time you feel the need to ditch your Guide and go wandering around New Jersey cemeteries,
just call us first, okay?" Danny said. "You can come to Hawaii instead. It's warmer."

"I'd like that," Bucky said seriously. Then, "Thank you, Danny."

"You don't have to thank me, Babe," Danny said, wiping his cheek where Bucky licked him. "I'm just glad you ninjaed your way into my car."

"Me too," Bucky said. He gave Danny and Steve a last, small smile, then picked up his bag and went to Rogers' car. He looked back once, like he was making sure he remembered them.

Steve slid his arm around Danny's shoulders as they watched the car drive away.

"You really think they'll be okay?" Danny asked.

"Yes I do," Steve said. "Bucky's not feral anymore, and he's with his Guide. He'll be fine."

"Yeah, of course he'll be fine," Danny said, wishing he really believed it.

Chapter End Notes

**Warnings:** Frank discussion of self harm that could become fatal; Frank discussion of Bucky's willingness to die.

**Grilled cheese sandwiches are apparently older than dirt, at least in the U.S.** Bucky and Steve might've been more used to 'Cheese Dreams', though, which were open-faced sandwiches made by toasting cheese on bread in the oven. They were popular during the Depression.

My alternate universes with spirit animals and impossible superpowers are completely historically accurate.

I have petted a bumblebee before, according to my mother. I was too young to remember it, but she said that the bee didn't mind.

I also need to thank **Shazrolane**, for helping me decide how to write this chapter. When I presented her with three different ways for Danny to tell Steve about Bucky, she told me to go with the one that hurt the most. You're welcome. :)

This is chapter 8 of 12. That's my story and I'm sticking to it.
A Deep, Cold Ache

Chapter Summary

Tony might have missed a seminar.

Chapter Notes

HOVER OVER THIS SENTENCE OR JUMP TO THE END NOTES FOR POSSIBLE TRIGGER WARNINGS.

Please let me know if I missed any. I want you all to feel safe. ♥

My usual thanks to darkmoore for once again reading this chapter over and helping me with the rules of this 'verse. She also found a good German word for 'Guide' that works in the context of this AU, which was apparently quite difficult.

'Wegbegleiter' (ETA: I've changed it to 'Wegbegleiterin' in the text, which is the feminine form) doesn't really mean 'Guide'. It translates to: 'Companion; someone who accompanies you on your path through life', which is much better than the German word for 'Guide', which translates loosely as, 'A map or guidebook'. Wegbegleiter(in) is a perfect word for this AU, but sadly looks absolutely terrible when reading it in English. However, the German pronunciation is much more cool. Click to hear it.

Please hover over the German words or jump to the end notes for the translations.

I am horrible at responding to comments. Praise intimidates me (yes, I know), so sometimes I have a hard time finding the right way to say 'thank you'. But please, please rest absolutely certain that every one of your comments makes me happier than I can honestly express. Thank you all so, so much for your kindness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was the fourth night in a row where Steve had woken up to Bucky moaning and thrashing in the dark.

Bucky was in the guest room, where he'd all but quarantined himself since allowing Steve to bring him to Avengers Tower. He rarely came out, other than to go to the tower's gym or their kitchen. Otherwise he stayed in his room, obsessively learning about everything he missed or just staring out the window. He hadn't opened his side of the bond.

He didn't smile much, didn't laugh at all, dodged around questions or conversations like he was being interrogated. It was as if he'd just traded Hydra's imprisonment for one of his own choosing. And every time Bucky slept, there were nightmares.
He wasn't sleeping much.

"Bucky. Bucky, you're having a nightmare. Wake up." Steve stood in the doorway, as close as he was allowed. The first night he'd gone to Bucky's bedside then made the mistake of reaching for him when Bucky opened his eyes. Steve never wanted to put that look of panic on Bucky's face again. "Wake up! Wake up!"

The previous nights, Bucky had woken almost immediately at the sound of Steve's voice. Tonight it wasn't working. Bucky was murmuring in German: "Bitte tun Sie ihr nicht weh. Es tut mir leid. Nein. Bitte. Sie ist ein Kind! Sie ist nur ein Kind!"

Steve had never had Bucky's facility for languages, but Gabe was a good teacher and Steve had an excellent memory. He knew enough to know 'I'm sorry', 'please', 'no', and 'she's a child.' And the cadence of begging in any language was the same.

What in God's name was Bucky remembering?

"Bucky! Bucky! Wake up!" Now Steve's breath fluttered with the stirrings of panic. He couldn't let Bucky stay in this nightmare; it was like abandoning him in Hell.

Bucky tossed his head, lifting his hands like he was trying to reach for someone. He was crying, trapped in the memory. "Bitte zwingen Sie mich nicht dazu. Sie ist ein Wegbegleiterin!"

Wegbegleiter was the German word for Guide.

Steve gasped, then sprinted the few feet to the bed. He grabbed Bucky's shoulders and shook him; Bucky's hatred of Steve touching him was the far lesser evil than leaving him in this nightmare. "Bucky, Bucky please! Wake up!"

Bucky woke up gasping. His eyes were luminous with tears, still wide and focused somewhere terrible. His control of their bond wavered and suddenly Steve could feel Bucky again, feel what he felt. All the emotions that had been sealed up deep inside him for years.

It dropped Steve to the floor.

The remorse, guilt and rage were bad enough—God, it felt like anvils, he couldn't breathe—and the sorrow, like a pit he'd never escape from. But the disgust, the self-directed revulsion so thick and deep it permeated his entire being…That was what made Steve's legs give out, put him on his knees fighting down the acid in his throat. That was what had his shaking fist ripping a chunk from the mattress.

She'd been a Guide. The girl Bucky had been pleading so desperately to save had been a Guide, and Hydra had forced Bucky to do something terrible to her.

He's convinced that he will hurt Guides if he's let loose around them.

My thoughts will hurt you! My mind will hurt you!

This was what Danny and Bucky had meant. And they were right.

It hurt. God in Heaven, it hurt. Seventy years of terror, sorrow, remorse, fear and pain. Seventy years of Bucky looking at himself and only seeing a monster. Seven decades of nothing and no one to mitigate it, to offer comfort or help. Seventy years with no Guide, where the only succor was ice or oblivion.
Of course it hurt. It was agony. But it wasn't Bucky. This was what had been done to him. It wasn't his fault. And Steve was already regaining his equilibrium, channeling the emotions through his own mind instead of being flooded by them. He was in control, he was fine—

The bond shut down with such decisive, brutal finality that it was like getting shot in the head.

Steve cried out, ended up on his forearms and knees with a chunk of cloth, foam and wire clenched in his hand. "Bucky," he choked out, heartsick and shaken to his bones. "Bucky, no. Please. Don't. Don't do that." He shoved himself upright, gripped the mattress again to fend off a hit of vertigo.

"Bucky?"

Bucky wasn't in the room.

Steve rocketed to his feet. "J.A.R.V.I.S., where's Bucky?"

"Sergeant Barnes is currently in the stairwell, Captain," the A.I. responded immediately, "descending rapidly. I believe he is heading to the garage."

The garage. Jesus Christ. "Don't let him leave!" Steve sprinted for the stairs. "Keep him in the building!"

"Commencing lockdown," J.A.R.V.I.S. said. "Sergeant Barnes will be unable to leave."

"Thank you." It was a short, bitter relief. All it meant was that Steve would hopefully get to him before Bucky found a way to smash his way out. And it didn't change how Bucky was running, fleeing from his own Guide. Again.

Somehow it didn't matter how many times Steve repeated to himself that it was because Bucky was afraid of hurting him, not afraid of him. He couldn't make himself believe it.

It wasn't as if fear—any kind of fear—had to be the only reason, either. God knew Bucky had enough other reasons to run. Starting with how Steve had never even considered looking for him after he fell. Steve would never forgive himself for that; how could he expect Bucky to?

Bucky had chosen to come to the tower. He'd said he wanted to be with his Guide. But maybe he'd only thought he meant it. Or maybe, despite what Danny, Clara and McGarrett had told him, Bucky had been too afraid to say anything else.

The idea lodged itself like a knife in his throat, but Steve couldn't get rid of it. What other reason could there be for Bucky to be so content with Danny's family, and so miserable and on-edge with Steve? If Bucky was truly so afraid of being around Guides, why not them?

_It's not him, it's me._ The words were a ridiculous cliché, except if they were true.

Maybe Steve shouldn't stop Bucky from leaving.

**NO!** He couldn't even imagine it. But he had to. It was for Bucky; Steve had to.

Steve kept running down the stairs. He could at least make sure his Sentinel was all right before he told J.A.R.V.I.S. to let him go.

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Bucky was trying to smash the emergency exit door with his left fist when Steve found him in the garage.

He'd tried to take Steve's motorcycle, which meant nothing. It wasn't that it was Steve's; it was the
only motorcycle there.

Steve stopped running immediately, shelving his instinct to go to him and pull his distressed Sentinel into his arms. "Bucky?"

Bucky stopped and whirled. Guilt and shame swept over his features, followed by fear. He backed up to the wall, chest heaving and hands raised as if Steve would try to hit him.

"Don't touch me!" He looked at Steve, then looked at his right arm. Then he wrapped his left hand around it.

"No!" Steve grabbed for him, but Bucky slid out of the way along the wall. Steve raised his palms instead. "Don't. Don't do that. Please don't break your arm again."

Bucky stared at him, eyes wide. His hand was closed but didn't tighten. Yet. Was that a threat, like a criminal putting a gun to his head? Anger flooded like mercury up Steve's spine. What did Bucky think Steve was going to do to him?

"You're not going to make me leave, by doing that," Steve said, voice tight with the fury he couldn't entirely contain. "And if you purposely go fugue"—he used the older term he was sure Bucky would understand—"I will do whatever I have to as your Guide to save you." That wasn't a threat at all; it was the truth. "I love you, and I'm your Guide, and I'm not going to let you harm yourself."

Bucky dropped his arm. "I'm sorry," he said, soft with shame. He ran his fingers through his hair, gaze fastened on his bare feet. They were both in dorm pants and tee-shirts. There was nothing covering Bucky's arm. Steve didn't know if he was so frantic to escape he'd forgotten that or just didn't care. "I wasn't…. That wasn't a threat. I just…The doors're all locked. I can't get out. I can't leave. What else was I supposed to do?"

"Talk to me?" Steve said, incredulous and desperate. "Open the bond? Let me ground you? Anything? Anything at all? I'm your Guide, Bucky! I'm right here!"

"I know what you are!" Bucky said. Steve told himself it wasn't an insult. "You don't know me! You think I'm Bucky! You think I'm good! You don't know what I've done!"

"No, I don't," Steve said evenly. "I know what Hydra's done. I know they used your body and your mind without your consent. I know they tortured and brainwashed you for decades. But I don't know what you've done, because you didn't do anything."

"Yes I did!"

"No, you didn't," Steve said with the same calm conviction, never mind that his hands were in fists to stop their trembling. Adrenaline had always felt like ice water pooling in his stomach. "You didn't, because you are Bucky Barnes. And the man—the Sentinel—I've known and loved my whole life would never willingly do anything Hydra wanted him to."

Bucky laughed. It was one of the worst sounds Steve had ever heard: dark and angry and ugly, and like the joke was entirely on Steve for having faith in him. "Oh, Stevie," he said, low with a menace Steve didn't understand. "You think I didn't do anything? You think I wasn't there when they…." He swallowed, looked away. "I was there. Not…not for the killing. Or, not always. Sometimes I was. I just…couldn't remember why it was bad, I guess. I was more worried about not being punished." He shrugged, as if the reason for his compliance wasn't important. "But, I was there, Steve. I know what I did."

"I know you…were aware of what you were doing, for some of it," Steve said, thinking of Bucky
begging in his sleep. "That still doesn't make it your fault."

"Yes it does." Bucky just sounded tired now. He rubbed his eyes. "Like you said. It was my hands. My body. I did it. No one else. Me."

"You know I didn't mean it like that." Steve crossed his arms. "Could you have said 'no'?" It sounded like a challenge, not as gentle as he'd wanted. Then again, he never could run away from a fight.

Bucky's jaw worked. "I could've always said 'no'."

"Really?" Yeah, this was a fight. "And what would they have done if you had?"

Bucky shrugged. "Nothing I wasn't used to."

_Nothing I wasn't used to._ Steve had seen a fraction of what Bucky had been used to. And Bucky thought that was somehow supposed to _condemn_ him? "No one should ever need to get used to that much pain."

"I still could've refused," Bucky said. "But I didn't."

"And what about the girl?" Steve snapped. "Could she have refused?"

Bucky gasped, eyes locking on Steve's. He went still. "You know?" The question was so soft Steve could've petted it, held it like a mouse in his hand. "You know what I did?" Bucky pressed himself back against the wall, metal fingers digging into the concrete like anchors. "Oh, God, you know." The blood drained from his face so fast he swayed on his feet, but made a sound somewhere between a cry and a warning when Steve tried to help him. "Did you see it?" he asked it like whatever answer Steve gave would be unbearable. "There was film. Did…did you see what I did?"

Steve's anger vaporized. "No, Buck." He shook his head vehemently. "No, I didn't see anything. I don't even know what you're talking about. It was during your nightmare. You were talking about a girl in your sleep, in German. Trying to save her."

The relief hit Bucky so hard that his knees buckled. Steve grabbed for him again automatically but Bucky shoved him away. He ended up on the concrete, kneeling the way Steve had in Bucky's room. He bowed his head, breathing raggedly. His left hand was gouging out a chunk of the wall.

"Bucky?" Steve knelt as well, offering his proximity since his Sentinel would take nothing else.

"I didn't save her," Bucky said. "I didn't save any of them. I hurt them. I hurt them so badly, Steve." He swallowed, and when he looked up at Steve he looked so lost. "It doesn't matter if I wanted to or not. I'm a monster. I don't deserve you. I don't deserve any Guide at all."

"Of course you do." Steve almost reached for him yet again, then clenched his hands at his sides. "If you were really a monster you wouldn't be on your knees telling me you don't deserve a Guide. Please, let me in, Buck. Let me help you remember who you really are."

"This is who I really am," Bucky said. He used his makeshift handhold in the wall to pull himself to his feet, moving with a listlessness that made Steve's heart ache.

Steve stood as well, reminding himself fiercely not to touch him. "Do you…." He gritted his teeth; forced himself to finish saying it. "Would you rather be with Danny?" It hurt like hell to even offer, but Steve had years to become familiar with this kind of pain. It was nothing he wasn't used to.

"Tony can get you there without alerting anyone at the S-G Centers."
Bucky's eyes widened in surprise, then he dropped his gaze back to the floor. "Yeah. Sure. If that's what you want."

"It's not what I want!" Steve burst out. "It's nothing close to what I want! But, I want you to be happy. And to feel safe." He took a breath. "And to know you're not a monster. You seemed…more like that, when you were with them. So, if you want to go to them, or Clara, we can arrange that. It'll be all right."

He wondered if Bucky could even guess how much of a lie that was. It wouldn't be all right. Steve hadn't been all right since he'd watched Bucky fall. If Bucky left him—really, truly left him—he didn't think he'd be all right ever again.

Steve had felt like part of him never escaped the ice for almost three years. For a little while, when Bucky was finally present in his head and safe with his Guide, Steve had almost been able to breathe again. Now he felt like he was back in the Valkyrie, about to push the yoke. But this time he knew how much pain he'd be in when he hit the ground.

Bucky was worth it. But dear God, it was going to hurt.

"I want to stay with you," Bucky said.

"You do?" Steve didn't mean to sound so incredulous, especially with his heart lifting in careful, tentative hope.


"But, you don't want me," Steve said.

"I want you more than anything." The conviction in Bucky's voice was absolute. "I can't have you. There's a difference."

"I'm right here." Steve stepped closer, and for once Bucky didn't shy back. "All you have to do is open the bond."

"I did," Bucky said. He sounded exhausted. "I did open the bond, just a few minutes ago, remember? And I hurt you, exactly like I said I would. Exactly like I did to Danny." He winced. "Worse, 'cause you're my Guide. I'm not going to do that again."

"That wasn't your fault! Bucky, it was seventy goddamn years worth of shit you'd been forced to repress, coming out all at once. I wasn't expecting it, that was all. But I just needed a minute to get my bearings, and then I was okay. But you closed the bond and ran before I could tell you." Steve risked lifting his hand to Bucky's shoulder, giving him plenty of time to move away.

Bucky did.

Steve dropped his hand again. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply like he'd just been hit. "I want to share your pain, Bucky. Give me the dignity of my choice."

"No," Bucky said. He was glaring when Steve opened his eyes. "It ain't your fucking choice. I'm a monster, Steve. You never chose that!"

"Neither did you!"
"I know!" Bucky shouted. "I know I never chose this! Hydra did this to me and I was too fucking weak to stop it from happening!"—He completely ignored Steve's vehement denial—"But I can keep that fucking pit that's left of my soul to myself, okay? I can't go feral, can't fucking zone, can't...can't do anything else, but I can keep you safe from me, all right? That's the one goddamn thing I can do!"

"I don't want to be safe!" Steve shouted back. "I want the bond! I want my Sentinel! I want you!"

"You have me," Bucky gritted. "You have me 'til the end of the line. But not like that. I'm sorry."

He meant it; Steve could tell. It just made him more angry. "If you were really sorry you wouldn't do this to me. You wouldn't let Clara and Danny and McGarrett hug you and use their gifts with you and then avoid me like the plague. You're not with me 'til the end of the line. You're not not with me at all."

"I am, Steve," Bucky said, stricken. "I'm with you. For always, just like I said."

"You say a lot of things," Steve said. "But our bond is closed, so I don't know if you mean any of them."

Bucky blinked, then had the audacity to look hurt. "Of course I mean them!"

"Then open the bond!"

"I can't!"

"But you're hurting me, by doing this!" Steve slapped his chest. "It's like there's a pit inside me too!"

"I'm sorry," Bucky said. "I never wanted to hurt you."

"Then stop."

"I can't."

Steve clenched his jaw. This was going nowhere. Steve didn't need the bond to know Bucky was in as much pain as he was. But Bucky had never put himself ahead of Steve. He'd convinced himself this was the only way to protect his Guide. There was no way Steve could change his mind. Not here. Not like this.

_Love him until he lets you._ God, he was trying.

"We should go back to bed," Steve said. "It's still pretty early."

"Yeah." Bucky cleared his throat. "Good idea."

They walked to the elevators side by side, but a careful arm's length apart.


Steve startled when Tony snapped his fingers in front of his face, but at least he pulled back on the thousand yard stare. He blinked at Tony, looking dazed like he'd just been jostled out of sleep.

"What is it?"

"I don't remember. Something," Tony lied easily. He'd been looking for Steve to discuss his latest inspiration for another uniform upgrade. But it could wait. "Definitely not as interesting as how I had
to practically holler in your ear to get you to respond. You okay?"

"Oh. Yeah, sure." Steve gave Tony one of his winning, not-quite USO smiles and tapped the sketchpad on his lap with the end of the pencil he'd been holding. "I was thinking about what to draw."

"Thinking kind of freakishly hard there, Ice Pop." Tony peered at the few lines Steve had already set on the paper. "That's Bucky, right? The no-show Sentinel?"

Steve shrugged. His smile turned self-conscious, but at least it was completely real. "I draw Bucky a lot. I was just…remembering stuff."

"Yeah?" Tony flopped next to Steve on the couch, casual as you please. Just like he casually put his arm around Steve's shoulders. If anyone in the world needed a hug, it was Captain Abnegation. "What stuff?"

"Just one of the Howling Commandos' missions." Steve shrugged. "It wasn't important."

"It seemed pretty important," Tony said. "I mean, you were drilling a hole with your eyeballs."

Steve smirked a little, then scrubbed his face. "I'm just tired. I haven't been sleeping well."

Right. Steve didn't need to sleep as much as mere mortals, but he still needed it. "Let me guess: Tall, Dark and Absent?"

"Yeah." Steve nodded. He smiled again, but it tilted and then slid right off his face. "He still won't let me in, Tony. Or touch me. He keeps saying he wants this, wants us, but…." He trailed off, looking away. "I've been trying to give him time. Just…love him. But, it's been six days now. Six days that he's been here, but it's more like he's not. And it hurts. Like a deep, cold ache. All the time."

"You mean, like, real, actual hurt?" Tony frowned. "Guides can get bond-related headaches? I didn't know about that. Did I miss a seminar?"

He wasn't really trying to be funny, but it was nice when it wrung a reluctant chuckle out of Steve anyway. "No, don't worry. It's not real, actual hurt. It's more like…." He rubbed his chin, thinking. "Have you ever had pneumonia?"

"Yes," Tony said, blinking. "Especially after the reactor. But, you know that hurts for real, right? Pneumonia really, actually fucking hurts."

"I remember." Steve nodded. His smile came back, which was nice, even if it was wry. "I got it at least once a year, every year before the serum. I definitely remember how much it hurts. But I was thinking of how your lungs feel cold, too." He looked at Tony. "Did you ever get that? The cold feeling?"

"Yeah, I did. I hadn't thought about it, but it did feel cold." Tony patted his chest, below where the reactor used to be. "Like, right in the bottom. Wait." He arched his eyebrows. "You're saying your head feels like that?"

Steve nodded again. "Yeah, pretty much. But there's also this empty feeling as well, where Bucky should be. My sense of him, I mean. There's just nothing."

"I'm sorry," Tony said. "Was that what it was like? When he was gone?" He only realized after he asked the question that curiosity was a terrible reason to reopen that wound.
Steve didn't look upset, though. Just thoughtful. "It was worse. More...pronounced. But I think that was because Bucky was offline."

"Makes sense." Tony patted Steve's shoulder. "At least you know your Sentinel is alive and...Okay, not 'well'. But not, you know, gone. Or dead. Or, shit. I'm really fucking this comfort thing up, aren't I?"

Steve actually laughed though, so maybe Tony wasn't. "You're not fucking up, Tony." He smiled warmly at him, no USO in it at all. "I appreciate you listening." He looked at his sketchbook, tracing the rough drawing of Bucky with his eyes. The figure had no real features, but the left arm was obviously his. Steve had drawn him with his shoulders hunched, facing away. Not much trouble getting the symbolism. "I love him so much. And I need him so badly. Sometimes it feels like this is killing me. This emptiness where he should be. I can't stand it."

Tony pulled Steve more tightly against him. "You are standing it, though. And it's not going to kill you. It's going to be all right. You'll win your Sentinel back. I promise."

Steve looked at him tiredly. "Do you even believe that?"

"I want to believe it," Tony said.

"Me too," Steve said. "But I don't think it's going to happen."

Ouch, Tony thought. "Maybe you should have more faith in him," he said, trying to sound reasonable instead of accusing. "After all, he escaped Hydra's control, right? And, he's got to be at least as stubborn as you. I mean, I know that's a pretty high bar, but...." He stopped, hoping that might pull up another of Steve's smiles.

Steve didn't smile. "That's actually the problem," he said. "He's sure he's too dangerous to open our bond. And too stubborn about it to change his mind." He turned his sad eyes back to his sketch, flipped his pencil around in his hand but didn't actually bring the point to the paper. Instead he tucked it through the ring binding, then dropped the sketchpad onto the coffee table. He sat back, ran his fingers through his hair, then sighed. "I don't know what to do."

"Well," Tony said on a fortifying breath, "there's still that big, Sentinel-shaped elephant in the room we're not talking about. Which is how Bucky should be in therapy. Like, up to his emo hair. And probably on meds. But he isn't."

"He's not ready," Steve said with distressing immediacy. "The one time I even suggested talking to someone, he ended up in the bathroom puking so badly I thought he was going to vomit blood."

"Literally spilling his huts, huh? Gross." Tony grimaced. "Yeah, I guess 'not ready' is a nice way of putting it."

"Antidepressants wouldn't work on him either," Steve added, salting the wound. "At least, not the normal ones that you swallow. And I don't think he'd agree to anything else."

"So, we're kind of fucked, huh?" Tony said. "Well, other than giving him more time. Which you're already doing. And which is making you both miserable."

"Yeah," Steve said softly. "You know what the worst part is?"

"There's a worse part?"

Steve nodded. "The worst part is, if he'd open his side of our bond, I could help him. Even just
sharing what he's feeling would help all on its own, make it easier for him to cope. But it's not just that. I know how to help him. I trained my whole life to be a Guide. My mother taught me everything she could, even when nobody thought I'd ever be strong enough to come online. So I already knew how to meditate, and how to return a Sentinel to balance with just my voice. What they call 'baseline' now. I even knew how to make shields, at least in theory. That was why I wasn't overwhelmed when I suddenly came online after I got the serum."

"Wow." Tony blinked. "My dad always said it was because of the serum. You just did it instinctively." Which, of course, was another stick for Tony to be measured against and come up short: Not only was Captain America an Alpha Guide, but he knew how to use his gifts automatically. Wasn't that neat? Unlike Howard's own stupid kid, who barely qualified as 'Sensitive' when he got tested at the Center.

Yeah, Tony was still a little bitter about that. But now was not the time. "So you're not perfect after all, huh? I'm horribly disappointed."

Steve smirked, and God, how could laughter sound so sad? "I'm definitely not perfect. I'd had years of training already. I just never had to use it." He looked back at his sketchpad, gracing the picture of Bucky with a tiny, tragic smile. "And of course, Bucky and I got specialized, intense training after he came online and we bonded during the War. So, I could help him, if the bond were open. It would actually be easier than conventional therapy."

"But he won't open the bond," Tony said.

"No," Steve said. "He won't."

"Do you think..." Tony licked his lips, wondering if he was overstepping his bounds, and if so by how much and if he could scramble back behind them. "Do you think he might be willing to have another Guide help him? I mean, Sam's got Natasha now, but what about Clint? He's not her temp Guide anymore. And they'll be back from their Hydra hunting field trip in L.A. next week, So... maybe he could help? Not instead of you!" he blurted at the blankness stealing across Steve's face. "I didn't mean he'd be Bucky's Guide instead. Just, he's an Alpha too, right? And he's had the same training. So, maybe he could help?"

"Clint's a much lower-level Alpha," Steve said with an equanimity that was absolutely terrifying. "He's not as powerful as Bucky or I am."

"I know," Tony said quickly. "But, that doesn't matter if the Sentinel's willing to...have the Guide in their head or whatever it's called, right? I really don't mean instead of you," he said again, because Steve looked like he might start crying or flipping tables, and Tony had no idea what would be worse.

"I already made that offer," Steve said. "I asked Bucky if he'd rather go to Hawaii, to be with Danny Williams and Steve McGarrett. He said he wanted to stay with me."

"Oh. Well, that's good, isn't it?" Tony said. Then, "Isn't it?" Because Steve looked like it actually wasn't. "Isn't it good that he wants to stay?"

"I don't know anymore," Steve said, voice going rough. "I want him with me like a drowning man wants air. I never want to be away from him again. But, there's this...hole in my head where he used to be. And it hurts. And my heart hurts, because he won't even touch me. I miss him so much, Tony. I miss him all the time. And I don't know how to help him when he won't let me."

"I'm sorry," Tony said, hating the inadequacy of it. "I wish I could help." He straightened so it'd be
easier to see Steve's face. "Do you want me to talk to him? I know Bucky barely knows me from Adam, but I could tell him what you told me. Maybe it'd made a difference, coming from someone else?"

"No, thank you." Steve shook his head. "I appreciate it. But, I know he won't listen to you any more than he listened to me." He rubbed his forehead. "At least, I don't think he will. I'm not sure I know him anymore."

"Of course you do!" Tony said immediately, shocked. "He's Bucky! He's your Sentinel. It doesn't matter what Hydra did to him. He's the same person, or you wouldn't be bonded to him anymore. I may not be anywhere near a Guide, but I know that much."

"I'm thinking of offering to sever it," Steve said.

"What?" Tony gaped at him. "You want to sever your bond? Are you fucking kidding me? What the hell, Steve? Are you seriously thinking that?"

"Yes, I'm seriously thinking that," Steve replied, far too easily. "He doesn't want me, Tony. He doesn't want the bond, he doesn't want to be my Sentinel, he's suffering just as much as I am—what else am I supposed to do? Force him?"

"Jesus Christ, of course not!" Tony said, still gaping. "But—just throwing this out there—I think maybe there's a solution that doesn't involve either violating his mind or causing psychic trauma. For fuck's sake, Steve, you just said he wouldn't accept I.V. meds and puked his guts out at the idea of talking to someone. Now you're telling me he'd be down with psychotropic drugs and years of therapy?"

"No. No, I'm really not," Steve said on a sigh like a hopeless gust of misery. "I wouldn't force him to do anything. I just don't want to keep feeling like this. And I don't know what else to do."

"I know." Tony thought what the hell, and put his arm around Steve's shoulders again. "And, believe me, I wish I could tell you. But, I don't think severing your bond is the answer. You said he doesn't want that. And even if you were willing to put him through it anyway, it's pretty obvious you don't want it either."

"No, I wouldn't put him through it unless he wanted it too. I'd never force him to do anything," Steve said softly. "All I want is for Bucky to be all right." He sniffed, then blinked tears out of his eyes. "I think…I could even deal with a severed bond. If it came to that. As long as I knew he'd be all right. But, he's not. And he won't let me help him. And it hurts all the time and I don't know what to do." He wiped his eyes, but the tears kept falling. "I just want to know what to do." His breath hitched into an actual sob. He started crying in earnest.

"I know, I know." Tony wrapped both his arms around Steve, maneuvered them so that it was more-or-less an actual hug. "I don't know what to do either. I really wish I did, but I got nothing." Well, the shoulder of his tee-shirt was getting wet where Steve's head was leaning on it, but that wasn't going to do much.

He didn't notice the very quiet stairwell door opening until movement caught his eye and suddenly there was Bucky Barnes, hovering in the doorway. He saw Steve was crying, and the sadness and anxiety on his face morphed into alarm. His eyes darted to Tony, then back to Steve, as if he was trying to decide what to do.

Come here, come here, come here, Tony chanted in his head. Come take care of your Guide. You know you want to. Just come here, Bucky. That's it. That's all you have to do.
He didn't actually cheer out loud when Bucky took two whole steps into the room. "Stevie?" He spoke as softly as if they were in a library run by particularly high-strung bat nuns. He was wringing his hands. "Stevie? You okay?"

Steve jerked his head up. "Bucky?" He swiped at his eyes, as if that could somehow hide the evidence of his minor breakdown. "Are you all right?"

Their mutual, automatic concern was adorable, but Tony was too busy holding his breath to crack a smile. He had no idea what he was waiting for, exactly, but that didn't lessen the suspense.

Bucky nodded. "I was gonna ask if you wanted to come running with me. In the gym," he added, as if his tee-shirt, running shorts and sneaker didn't make that obvious. "I heard you crying."

"You did?" Tony blinked. "Like, from your floor?"

"Yeah," Bucky said like it was obvious. "I imprinted on him 70 years ago. I can always hear him."

Well, that was romantic, except for how Bucky was still in front of the door, prepared to flee.

"I'm fine, Buck," Steve said. If he wasn't still wiping his eyes his big smile might've totally sold that. "I'd love to go running with you. Just give me five minutes to change clothes, all right?" He sprang up before Bucky could respond, jogging towards the stairwell. "Do you want to wait here, or meet me in the gym?"

"You're welcome to chill here, Buckaroo," Tony said. "We can share embarrassing anecdotes about Steve. It'll be great."

"Why does everyone only want the embarrassing stuff?" Steve asked. He grinned at Bucky, like everything was copacetic and they were all sharing a joke.

Tony shrugged, going with it. "Cause they're funny?"

Bucky looked at Steve. "You were crying. I know something's wrong. What is it?"

Steve blinked. He opened his mouth, closed it, then put his hands on his hips. He looked out the window instead of at Bucky's face. "I was talking to Tony about how you still haven't opened the bond. I didn't think there was any point in mentioning it."

Bucky's expression collapsed into miserable remorse. "I'm sorry. I'm trying to protect you. You know that. You don't want any part of what's in my head."

"Yes, I do." Tony could tell how hard Steve was working to keep his voice kind. "I want to share everything with you. You in my head and me in yours, just like it used to be. I can handle it. Whatever darkness you have in you. Whatever you think you've done. I can handle it. I can help you carry that burden. All you have to do is let me in."

"I can't. I'm not going to hurt you," Bucky said, with the resigned despair of someone who'd repeated it far too many times.

"You're already hurting me," Steve said, and he sounded the exact same way.

Chapter End Notes
**Warnings:** Strongly implied harm to a minor which occurred in the past; Bucky considers harming himself (but doesn’t).

**Translations:**

Please don't hurt her. I'm sorry. No. Please. She's a child! She's just a child!

Please don't force me. She's a Guide!

You may have noticed I haven't changed the final chapter count. I'm gonna finish this mofo in 12. You'll see. It'll be awesome.

::Chapter 13, off-panel:: - I like your optimism. You keep that up.
Shrapnel Where I Used to Be

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve have difficulties; Tony tries to cope.

Chapter Notes

Hover over the German words or jump to the End Notes for the translation. :) 

'Sputnik' (спутник, for you linguistic purists), means 'travelling companion' or 'companion'. It seemed like the most reasonable equivalent of 'Wegbegleiter', in another language that doesn't have the same metaphorical concept of 'Guide' as in English. If there are any Russian speakers out there who can think of a better word, I'd love to hear it! :D 

Dear Lord, but this is a long chapter. It also took forever to write. Partially that's because I took a week to write Dear Leo for the A Ficathon Goes Into a Bar ficathon. It has Bucky Barnes meeting Napoleon Solo in 1945, in an AU where everything's the same except a lot more people have special abilities. I'm quite proud of it, and I'd love it if you gave the fic a read. ♥

The other reason for the delay is that I've had a very bad couple of weeks, which included less time to write. Hopefully next week will be better. ::Fingers Crossed::

I need to thank Shazrolane for suggesting the elevator. And as always I need to thank Darkmoore, who approves of where this story is going.

I still haven't actually gotten to her idea yet. Let's say it'll be in chapter 11. What the hell.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two days later, Tony went into the kitchen of the common floor at o'Dark-Why-The-Fuck-Are-You-Still-Awake?-thirty for some coffee. And almost walked right into Bucky Barnes.

Bucky was just standing at the counter and staring out the window like he was trying to be his own wax figure in a museum. He didn't even blink when Tony came within a hair's breadth of shoulder-checking him.

"Whoa! Sorry." Tony edged around Bucky on the way to the coffee machine. He was pretty tired, so he didn't twig to how Bucky hadn't so much as twitched, let alone answered, until Tony was idly watching the percolator begin to brew. "Can't sleep either, huh? Well, I probably could sleep, technically, if I tried. It's just, you get in a groove sometimes, you know? And then the next thing.... You're not hearing any of this, are you?"
Tony had switched to watching Bucky by this point, and, no. Bucky definitely hadn’t heard anything Tony just said. Bucky was zoning. His entire attention—hell, his entire being—was focused on a strobing red aircraft warning light on the roof of a nearby building.

"Holy shit," Tony murmured. "Bucky? You in there, Buckaroo?" He waved his hand in front of Bucky's eyes. No reaction. He snapped his fingers, which also didn't do anything. "Hey. Hey, Bucky. Come on. That light really isn't that cool. There are plenty of red lights in the kitchen. Snap out of it, sweatpea." Tony snapped his fingers again. "Bucky! Bucky, come on!"

Still nothing. Now that Tony was actually paying attention, he could see how pale Bucky was, and the fine tremor in his hands. Bucky had a light sheen of sweat on his face as well. Tony was abruptly and unpleasantly reminded of one of his dad's war anecdotes, about how the Nazis would force Sentinel prisoners to zone until they literally dropped dead.

"J.A.R.V.I.S., how long has Bucky been in here?" He'd programmed the computer to not actually Big Brother everyone in the building, but J.A.R.V.I.S. did record comings and goings. He'd know when Bucky came into the kitchen.

"Sergeant Barnes entered the kitchen on the common floor at precisely 7:34 PM, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. said.

That would have been right around dusk, when the warning lights went on. "Oh, fuck," Tony breathed. Bucky had been standing staring out the window for nearly ten hours. The light wouldn't shut off until after seven. Tony doubted Bucky would drop dead if he stood here another two hours, but ten was more than bad enough. "J, get Steve. I think we need him. Bucky. Bucky-boo, you gotta stop staring at that stupid thing. Come on. Look at me instead. I'm way more interesting." Tony put himself directly in Bucky's line of sight, but he was shorter so it didn't work very well. "Okay, now? That's just rude. My eyes are down here." Tony reached for Bucky's head, planning on physically moving him so he'd be looking at Tony's eyes.

He got as far as cupping Bucky's face, and then he was arched backwards over the counter with Bucky's metal hand around his throat.

Bucky snarled something in Russian, lips pulled back from his teeth like an angry dog.

"Bucky. Please," Tony croaked, trying to pry off his fingers. "I'm…friend…." Technically they weren't friends—they'd barely had a conversation since Steve introduced them—but Tony wanted to be Bucky's friend. And he certainly wanted to be Bucky's friend a hell of a lot more than he wanted to die by strangulation at five in the fucking morning. "Your…friend…"

Bucky's expression softened by increments, going from glaring fury to wide-eyed confusion. "Tony." He made the name sound Russian. Then he gasped and dropped Tony like a hot rock, and then retreated so fast he nearly took out the refrigerator. He said something that sounded like 'Prostea', which was probably him apologizing, given Bucky's shattered expression and how many times he repeated the word.

"S'okay. Really. I'm fine," Tony wheezed. The 'I'm fine' probably would've been more convincing if he wasn't doubled over gasping for breath. "Really. I'm great. Promise," he managed, once he could breathe and stand up straight at the same time.

Bucky just shook his head frantically, tears of guilt in his enormous, blue-grey eyes. He said more stuff in Russian that had 'prostea' peppered through it, then pressed his temples with the heels of his hands. He spat something in obvious self-hatred that was clearly nothing a former tortured, P.O.W. deserved to hear, especially from himself.
"It was an accident, Bucky," Tony said. He risked going closer but stopped immediately when Bucky recoiled from him. "You're safe. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just worried," he went on, channeling his inner Pepper Potts for all he was worth. "You were zoning. Do you remember? I found you staring out the window. I'm pretty sure you were doing it for a long time."

Bucky edged towards him, expression full of confusion and fear. He slowly reached out, stopping just short of contact, as if he was sure he'd hurt Tony again. He said something that sounded like: 'Chto…Chto vee takoye?', and then, 'Vee…spootneek?' in a voice that was halting and uncertain.

"Uh, are you asking me if I'm a satellite? 'Cause that's the only word I think I recognize," Tony said. "Otherwise, I have no idea what you're saying. I'm sorry."

Bucky shook his head. He rubbed his forehead, wincing like he was in pain. "Was sind Sie?"


Bucky's lips moved like he was mouthing 'English, English, English' to himself. He looked distressed, then gave his head a quick, sharp shake. He took a few breaths, like he was steeling himself for an ordeal. "What…are you?"

Well at least Tony understood the words, even if he still had no idea what the fuck Bucky was talking about. "Billionaire, genius, philanthropist, Avenger? And I'm Tony Stark. Remember me?"

He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the floor's large, open space. "We were talking about Steve in there a couple days ago?"

"Tony Stark. Tony." The name sounded American this time when Bucky said it. He nodded slowly, then licked his dry, chapped lips. "What are you doing here?" His voice was rasping, now that Tony could really pay attention to it. Exactly like he hadn't had anything to drink for the last ten hours.

"I was getting coffee," Tony said, gesturing at the machine. The pot had filled during the impromptu strangulation-by-polyglot session. "You were staring out the window at a flashing light. Don't look at it!" He jerked up both his hands, trying to block Bucky's line of sight when of course he instantly turned his head. "Don't look at it. I don't want you to fall into a zone again."

Bucky blinked. "I was zoning?"

"Oh yeah." Tony nodded vehemently. "You were zoning like it was your job. And then you tried to strangle me when I pulled you out of it. It's okay!" Tony put up his hands again, this time in an attempt to ward off more Bucky guilt. "I startled the fuck out of you. And you stopped as soon as you realized it was me, anyway. So, it's all good. Except for how you were zoning in the kitchen. That's bad."

Bucky wiped his mouth with the back of his right hand, then ran his fingers through his hair. His left was clenched at his side, as if he were afraid it might act on its own. "I came into the kitchen for some water. And…a light went on." He frowned. "I just glanced at it."

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure that glance lasted about ten hours," Tony said. "Maybe you'd better sit down," he added immediately, because Bucky had gone pale and reeling, like he'd just needed to be told how fucked he was to actually feel it. "Oh, shit. Don't faint. Please don't faint. Steve will have kittens and I'll put my back out trying to keep your head off the floor." Tony instinctively grabbed Bucky on either side of his waist, attempting to hold him up anyway.
Bucky hugged him.

Tony's first reaction was a muffled yelp, because he was sure Bucky had just collapsed on him. Then he realized that Bucky was still conscious, just embracing Tony for all he was worth. Bucky's head wasn't lolling on Tony's shoulder; he was intentionally breathing Tony in.

"Oh," Tony said softly. He hugged Bucky in return, holding him as tightly as he seemed to need. "Are you imprinting on me?" he asked, just as quietly.

Bucky didn't say anything, but he did hug Tony a little tighter.

"Okay. Well, that's...interesting," Tony said. "I mean, it's not a problem. It's just...you have a Guide, right? So, maybe you shouldn't be imprinting on random—okay, not really random or a stranger. But, you have to admit we don't know each other that well. And that's okay! I am totally down with the sniffing and..."—He couldn't help the wince—"the licking or whatever. You be you. Do that Sentinel thing. But, you should be with Steve, Bucky. I'm not a Guide. I can't ground you."

Bucky made a noise like an anxious whimper and held Tony that much more tightly, as if he was worried about Tony pulling away from him.

"I didn't say you couldn't try," Tony said. "I'm not letting go, okay? Hug away."

Bucky relaxed his deathgrip a little, then slid his right hand up into Tony's hair. Innocently memorizing the texture, probably. It still felt weirdly intimate, as if Bucky was about to start kissing him. Not that Tony would have minded, normally. Far from it. Except Bucky was with Steve, and their bond had been anything but platonic.

He figured it was time to disengage when whatever Bucky was doing to his neck felt a little too much like contemplating a hickey. "Bucky." Tony leaned back, then had to get his hand between them when Bucky whined and tried to pull him closer. "Bucky. Stop."

To his credit Bucky let go instantly, giving Tony plenty of space. His cheeks were flushed pink, and his eyes were black disks framed by a circle of grey-blue. He looked exactly like he'd been about to give Tony a hickey, and also like he had no idea what was going on.

Admittedly, that made two of them.

"I'm sorry," Bucky said. "I don't...I don't know why I did that. I just..." He trailed off, then put his palm to his forehead. "I don't feel very well." He swayed.

"Shit!" Tony lunged for him, managing to grab Bucky and get him into a chair before his knees buckled. "Damn it. I'm sorry, I completely forgot you're running on fumes." Tony went to the fridge and got a bottle of orange juice, and then three of the nutrition shakes he'd had R and D create for people with hyped up metabolisms. He put them on the kitchen table within Bucky's reach. "Drink all of that. You'll feel better."

Bucky nodded dully, then dutifully twisted the lid off the juice and downed all of it without breathing. He drank two of the three nutrition shakes marginally more slowly. It wasn't nearly enough liquid or calories considering what Tony knew of Bucky's physiology, but he looked a bit less like death warmed over afterward. Tony took it as a win.

"Okay, great." Reasonably satisfied that Bucky wasn't going to collapse in the next couple minutes, Tony turned his attention to the other, Super Soldier-sized problem. "J.A.R.V.I.S., where the fuck is Steve?" Bucky's Guide should have come skidding out of the elevator right around the time Bucky was squeezing Tony's throat, he figured. But Steve hadn't.
"My apologies, Sir. Captain Rogers' vital signs are normal, but I have been having an unusually difficult time waking him." J.A.R.V.I.S. didn't sound worried, but it still sent ice rattling down Tony's spine.

"Thanks, J," he murmured. "Stay here," he said to Bucky, who looked like he was about to immediately charge upstairs. "I'm sure Steve is fine. I'm a lot more worried about you." That wasn't entirely true, but true enough that Tony hoped he wouldn't smell deceitful or have a lying heartbeat or whatever.

Bucky closed his eyes, hands slowly clenching into fists on the table. "It's true, his heartbeat and breathing are all right," he said, though there were still threads of worry woven through his voice. "But, he should've woken up if someone was calling for him."

"Yeah, well, he hasn't been sleeping a lot lately," Tony said. He knew the implication of why was more than clear enough by how Bucky slowly curled in on himself. "He told me he has a cold spot in his head, where you should be," Tony went on, more gently. "I don't know if you have one too, but...for what it's worth, I think what Steve's going through is worse than anything your bond could do to him."

"You don't know me," Bucky said.

"You're right, I don't," Tony said simply. "But I'm kind of thinking that maybe you don't know Steve either. Finish your drink."

He headed to the elevator, completely unsurprised when Bucky got up and followed him.

Tony didn't enjoy going into people's homes unannounced. He valued his privacy when he could get it, and tried to respect other people's. At least, when he wasn't putting viruses in their computer systems to verify Hydra-inspired shenanigans. But normally he didn't do that. Especially not to friends.

This, however, didn't feel like Tony was violating Steve's privacy so much as he was raiding a well-upholstered tomb.

It wasn't that Steve was a neat freak, because he really, really wasn't. It was a lot more how eerily unlived in his floor felt. Steve hadn't been there that long, granted, but even with the art on the walls and the books on the shelves, it still looked like they were walking through the staging of a skilled real estate agent. Tony wouldn't have been surprised to see plastic wrap still covering the furniture.

There were a couple things lying around—dishes in the sink, a lone sketchbook and some colored pencils on the coffee table—but they seemed like props: house staging. Or maybe effigies for the afterlife.

It was as if Steve had come out of the ice, but he wasn't really alive yet. That was so fucking sad. Tony couldn't see anything that might have been Bucky's at all.

He spent maybe half a second taking all this in, which was more than long enough for Bucky to dodge around him and sprint into Steve's bedroom. "Steve!" he hollered, "Steve! Wake up!"

Tony ran after him, dread curdling in his guts when Steve didn't answer.

Steve was on his side with his back to them, panting harshly. His eyes were moving back and forth beneath his closed eyelids. He seemed to be in the grip of one hell of a nightmare. Bucky was next to
the bed with his hand on Steve's arm, using the blanket as a barrier between them. "Steve! Stevie, c'mon! Please!" He shook him, less gently than Tony would have liked. But Steve was still out. Bucky looked at Tony, stricken. "What's wrong with him?"

"I don't know," Tony said helplessly. "Has he ever done this before?"

"I can't remember!" Bucky shouted. There was a reverb of a growl underneath the words, like nightfall in a werewolf movie.

"Bucky," Tony said, trying to keep very, very calm when every flight instinct he'd ever had was suddenly screaming for him to run like hell. "If you go feral, we can't help him. You need to keep control, okay? I know you're scared. I am too. But losing yourself isn't going to help anyone."

"I am keeping control!" Bucky snapped. But he stepped back, taking a few deep breaths through his teeth. "I can't remember if Steve has ever slept this deeply before," he said tightly. "I can't remember much of anything."

Well, that was terrible. Tony put that unwelcome revelation aside, kept his wince internal. Steve was the priority right now. He took Bucky's place, not that he figured he could do anything Bucky couldn't. They were probably going to have to bring him to the Medical Suite. Tony couldn't imagine that going over very well with Steve's already freaked-out Sentinel. He put his hands on Steve's forehead and the side of his neck, checking his temperature. Steve ran hot, but normally not noticeably so. It seemed normal now. "Come on, Steve. Wakey-wakey. You're scaring your Sen—"

Steve woke up with a gasp. Then he started screaming.

"Oh my God! What is it? What's wrong?" Stupid thing for Tony to ask when it was obvious Steve couldn't answer. He curled up like a child, arms wrapped around his head. He was shaking, and still screaming like a damned soul.

"Steve!" Bucky all but shoved Tony aside and put his hands on Steve's nearer arm, actually touching him this time, skin to skin. "Steve you're okay. It's Bucky. I'm here. You're all right."

Steve was not all right. He started crying: great, gulping sobs like the end of the fucking world. Except he was laughing too. It was like he couldn't decide what the hell he was feeling, other than 'really, really, screamingly bad.'

"What is this?" Tony asked Bucky. "What the fuck's going on? J.A.R.V.I.S., call Medical. Steve's having some kind of breakdown."

"I think he's in empathic overload," Bucky said, stricken. "Stevie, please. I'm right here. Can you hear me?"

"What? Why the hell is he in empathic overload?" Tony demanded. "J, tell Medical that. They might have to sedate him."

"I woke the staff on call. They will be here within twenty minutes," J.A.R.V.I.S. said.

Twenty minutes was too long. It was way too long. Why the hell had Tony been so stupid as to not have Medical staffed 24/7, even when the Avengers weren't there? He was going to change that as soon as Steve's abilities stopped fucking with him. Tony touched Steve as well, trying to ground him. "Bucky, open your bond. That will help." Tony hoped to God it would help.

Bucky looked like he'd been shanked in the heart after watching someone punching kittens. "No! I can't," he said, frantic. "I'll hurt him!"
"He's already hurt!" Tony knew, rationally, that it wasn't fair to yell at the kid like that, but he was Steve's Sentinel and he wasn't doing anything. "He's in fucking agony, you selfish prick! Get over yourself and help him! Open the goddamn bond!"

Now Bucky looked gutted, overwhelmed with guilt and remorse. But he swallowed and shook his head. "I can't. I'll make it worse."

"God damn it, Bucky—!"

Steve gave a full-body shudder, even worse than the tremors already running through him. He made a noise caught between a growl and a whine, like a scared, angry dog.

Tony looked at Bucky. "Shit, is that because of us?"

Bucky gasped and yanked his hands away from Steve, backpedaling frantically until he banged into the wall. "I'm sorry. Oh, God. I'm sorry!" He bolted out of the room.

"Bucky, wait! Bucky!"

Steve whimpered.

"Fuck me," Tony said. He took a few deep breaths, making himself calm down. "I'm sorry. Everything's fine. You're going to be okay."

He had no idea if Steve could even hear him. Steve had curled himself that much more tightly, and he was sobbing now, wracked with it. Tony had no idea how much longer Steve could take this without losing his mind or worse. Even Super Soldiers had limits; there was only so much stress a body could endure.

Still fourteen fucking minutes by the bedside clock until any of the medical personnel might arrive. Maybe that wasn't long enough for Steve's heart to explode or his brain to dribble out his ears, but Tony couldn't just stand there and watch him suffering.

"Okay, okay." He licked his lips, then steeled himself and put his hands back on Steve. He forced himself to keep taking the deep, long breaths, staying calm despite his fear. "You can handle this, Steve. I know it sucks so bad right now you probably want to die. But you can't, okay? We need you. Bucky needs you, even if he's being an asshole about it. So...we're gonna put your shields back, all right?" He couldn't stop the hysterical laugh from bubbling out of his throat. "I should probably admit right now that I have no fucking clue what I'm doing. I mean, I don't even know if you can hear me. But, we're going to do this, okay? You and me. Capsicle and Shellhead."

Steve was still weeping, with the occasional burst of laughter or incoherent noise. It was quieter, though. Less convulsive. Hopefully that meant something good, as opposed to Steve about to go catatonic.

"All right. I build shit and you knock shit down a lot. So...your shield is Lego. As of right now, your brain shield is made of Lego and you're building it up, just like when you were a kid. I have no idea how to build shields, so I'm just handing you the Lego and you're putting it together. Like, a big box. That's simple enough, right? Here're some red pieces. I like the red ones. It's too bad they don't have gold, though. Or purple. But hey, this is your mind-Lego, right? So, what the hell, let's have some purple pieces. And gold ones. How about red, white and blue for your costume? Yeah, let's do that. Any colors you want. Wow!" He made his voice as chipper as possible, figuring Steve might be buoyed by the optimism. "This Lego shield is looking awesome, Cap. I'm giving you green bricks now, and some brown ones for verisimilitude. That's a great word, isn't it? Love that word. Oh, look!
We're almost done here, it's time for the lid. I'm giving you a handful of those long, flat rectangles. Did you have those? Doesn't matter; you have them now. More red white and blue, because that'll look cool, and there's a big white star in the mid—"

Steve flipped over, sat up and hugged Tony so hard he squeaked.

"Shh. You're okay. You're okay, Steve. It's all right." Tony was standing, but Steve was tall. His head was about even with Tony's chest, kind of mashed against his collarbones. It couldn't be comfortable, but Steve held Tony like he was a tree in a flood, like letting go would end him.

Tony hugged Steve back as tightly as he could, thinking about Bucky clinging to him like this just a few minutes before. Bucky had been trying to ground himself on Tony, which couldn't have worked. He didn't know if Steve was looking for that too, or just something solid and real after feeling the emotions of…God, Tony didn't even know. Everyone in the building?

Steve had stopped the heartbreaking sobbing, which was awesome, but he had his eyes tightly shut, and was still shivering like Tony had hauled him out of a freezer. Tony managed to snag the blanket and pull it up around Steve's shoulders. "You're not going into shock, are you? Because I think the medical staff are still about ten minutes out, and I've pretty much exhausted my first aid knowledge by giving you a blanket."

Steve murmured something that was probably negative and he didn't pull back, so Tony just kept on hugging him. He had the brief, strange thought that maybe Steve would end up contemplating a hickey too. Then Tony had the even stranger thought that he wouldn't mind it, being marked by both Bucky and Steve. That was the kind of thought you put down and backed away from with your hands up, though. So he did.

It took five more minutes before Steve was able to pull back finally and lifted his head. "I'm okay now. Thanks," he said quietly, wiping his eyes. That was a complete and utter lie, but Tony was grateful to hear his weak, raspy voice anyway. Steve swallowed, then used the hem of his sweat damp tee-shirt to clean his face. He pulled the blanket back around his shoulders when it slid down. "Where's Bucky? Is he okay?"

"I don't know, and I don't know," Tony said. "J.A.R.V.I.S., where the hell is Bucky?"

"Sergeant Barnes is on the roof of Elevator Car number fourteen, which I have currently stopped between floors 86 and 87," J.A.R.V.I.S. said. "He could, given my knowledge of his physiology, easily climb to the 87th floor and access it via the doors to the elevator shaft. He has not yet attempted to do so, however."

Steve froze. "Is he…Is he trying to hurt himself?"

"I don't believe so, Captain," J.A.R.V.I.S. said immediately, thank God. "So far Sergeant Barnes has shown no interest in moving."

Steve let out a breath of relief. "That's good."

"I, uh, may have yelled at him a bit," Tony said.

"I know. I heard it." Steve scrubbed his face. "That wasn't fair, Tony. He's not being selfish. He's doing exactly what his Sentinel instincts are telling him to. He's protecting his Guide. Right now Bucky thinks his mind is poison, so he's protecting me from him."

"He didn't protect you!" Tony said hotly. "He knew you were in a fucking empathic overload and he didn't help! He rabbited! How the fuck is that protecting you?"
Steve winced and reared back a little bit. "I have a headache. Please don't shout." He put his hand to his forehead, grimacing like every migraine Tony had ever endured. "He thought he would make it worse. And honestly, he probably would have, If I'd gotten his emotions on top of everything else. At least at first." Steve gave Tony a miserable, pained smirk. "Your being angry at him and worried for me was bad enough."

"Sorry," Tony said again. He patted Steve's back, uncharacteristically awkward after Steve's mild admonishment. "I tend to get pissed when people I care about are hurt."

"I know." Steve gave him a real if wan smile. "Thanks, Tony. You're a good friend."

"Oh." Tony blinked. "Well, now I'm really worried."

"It's true, Tony." Steve rolled his eyes, then immediately looked like he regretted it. "Damn. My head hasn't hurt this bad since before I got the serum."

"Okay, now I'm really worried for real," Tony said. "You don't get headaches. J, where are the medical staff?"

"The nurse on call is currently prepping the MRI," J.A.R.V.I.S. said. "Dr. Pierson has just entered the tower. Should I send her to this floor?"

"No, it's okay," Steve said before Tony could tell J.A.R.V.I.S. yes, absolutely send Dr. Pierson to Steve's floor. "I don't normally get headaches, but I don't normally fall into empathic overloads either. The headache's just a reaction to it. I'll be fine. I just need some of your super-duper painkillers." Steve let the blanket fall again, preparing to stand. Except as soon as he moved he stopped and put his hands over his eyes, clearly fighting down a surge of pain.

"Yeah, no. I'm thinking a nice stretcher ride to Medical and an MRI," Tony said. He pushed on Steve's chest a little, encouraging him to lie down. Naturally Captain Antagonizing didn't do it.

"I'm not going to Medical for a lousy headache, Tony!" Steve didn't quite shout in exasperation. "I just need some painkillers and I'll be fine. I'm more worried about Bucky. Is he still on the elevator car, J.A.R.V.I.S.?

"Yes, Captain," the A.I. said. "He seems disinclined to move. He also expressed vehement desire to be left alone when I inquired about his wellbeing."

"I need to talk to him," Steve said, "make sure he's all right."

"You just heard my A.I.. He doesn't want to talk to anyone right now." Tony pushed on Steve's chest a little more. Steve ignored him. "How about you lie here and rest and until the doc pays a house call and makes sure your brain won't explode?"

Naturally Captain Argue didn't want to do that either. "I said I don't need a doctor." Steve pushed Tony aside, this time managing to get all the way to his feet before he wobbled and sat down again. "Damn it!"

"Far be it from me to be the voice of reason here, but I don't think you and vertical are friends right now," Tony said. "Seriously. Winter Solitude is chilling. He's fine. You look like you're about to go Narm any second. At least the very least you need a checkup and to lie the fuck down."

"No, Tony!" Steve winced, rubbing his forehead. "I thought Bucky was dead. I was dreaming that he...that he'd really died. Our bond was broken, so I knew.... I was trying to find his body. At least...at least take him home. But I couldn't. I couldn't remember where he fell." He swallowed. "I
I couldn't keep my shields up. Not with him gone. I guess I dropped them for real."

"I'm sorry," Tony said. "This whole situation sucks. I'm not going to pretend I know what you and Bucky are going through, but I do know what it's like to lose a friend. And I'm worried about you, Steve. I'm really worried about you." Tony didn't like being vulnerable any more than he liked invading his friends' privacy. But this time he did his best to show Steve exactly how he was feeling.

"So could you please at least let Dr. Pierson come up here and check on you? As a favor to a friend? I'll talk Bucky off the elevator. I promise that I'll make sure he's fine. But, I'm worried about you."

Steve stared at him, jaw working, then he deflated. He sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. "All right. You win." He lay down grudgingly, then tugged the blanket over him. "I guess I owe you a favor, anyway, for helping me get my shields back."

"Yes you do," Tony said, seizing on it. "You totally owe me a favor, and I will gladly take you accepting medical help as payment. J? Please let the good doctor know Steve has decided to request her services?"

"Right away, Sir." Even J.A.R.V.I.S. sounded relieved.

"I didn't know you Guide training," Steve said. "I mean, I would never have thought of Lego as an analogy for shields. But it worked. It was easy to picture. Thank you."

Steve's gratitude was so earnest and genuine he was hard to look at. "You're welcome. But, I didn't have Guide training." Tony shrugged when Steve blinked at him. "Genius here, right?" He grinned. "Besides, everyone had Lego as a kid. Hard to go wrong."

"I didn't have Lego as a kid," Steve said. "It didn't exist back then." He smiled. "I guess you're just a natural."

"Oh."

"Dr. Pierson will be here shortly," J.A.R.V.I.S. said, saving Tony from having to actually respond to the compliment.

"Great." Tony rubbed his palms together. "I'll be up eight flights to get Bucky. You enjoy the flashlight in your eyes."

Steve chuckled, even though it made him wince. "You're really something else, Tony."

"Ah, you know you love me," Tony said, heading out of the bedroom.

"I do know that," Steve said, just before Tony closed the door behind him.

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J.A.R.V.I.S. obligingly brought the roof of elevator fourteen level with the 87th floor. He slid the doors open, revealing Bucky crouched miserably on the side of the cables nearer to Tony. Bucky's forearms were resting on his thighs, hands dangling. His eyes were bleak and sad. All Bucky's attention was focused inward, probably on what a terrible person he was. Big surprise there.

"You look like an elevator troll. I'm expecting you to demand money." Tony stepped onto the elevator roof, then nudged Bucky's arm with his leg. "Shove over."

Bucky's head jerked up. He blinked at Tony. "Is Steve Okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine." Tony nodded, then nudged Bucky's arm again. "C'mon, move. Thank you," he
added when Bucky obediently shuffled over. "He's getting checked over by the doctor, though. He asked me to make sure you were okay." Tony sat cross-legged next to Bucky, deciding not to mention the headache Steve shouldn't have. Steve wasn't worried so Tony didn't need to be, and Bucky was already unhappy enough; he didn't need to feel worse.

Tony looked around at the concrete and metal surrounding them. "I don't think I've ever been up here before. It's kind of boring." There was nothing to see except unpainted concrete and the metal ladders and elevator workings. There was a constant, distant hum of the air circulation, but otherwise it was so quiet he could hear Bucky's breathing. He could see the appeal if you wanted solitude, but that was something Tony never did. So, yeah. Boring.

Bucky lifted and dropped one shoulder in a listless shrug. "I've ridden on top of elevator cars a few times. Or hung onto the bottom. It's a good way of getting around undetected."

"Makes sense." Tony could guess why Bucky had needed to get around undetected. He wasn't going to mention that either. He took a breath. "I owe you an apology," he said.

Bucky blinked at him again. "No you don't."

"Yeah, I do," Tony countered. "For shouting at you and calling you a selfish prick. I was scared for Steve, and I all I could see was that you weren't helping him. I didn't understand that you were trying to protect him. So, I'm sorry."

There. Pepper would be so proud of him.

Bucky just dropped his head. "You're right, though. I am selfish. If I wasn't, I wouldn't stick around." He rubbed his temple with the heel of his hand. "I shouldn't be here. He'd be better off without me."

"Yeah, maybe," Tony said. Then, "What? You expected me not to agree with you?" he asked when Bucky looked shocked. "He's miserable. You know that. I've never seen him this sad, and considering when we met he'd lost almost every single thing or person he'd ever cared about—especially you—that's saying a fuck of a lot."

Bucky went from looking distressed to absolutely devastated. "I didn't…I never wanted to do that."

"Hey, I know," Tony said quickly. He put his hand on Bucky's knee, mostly in an attempt to keep him from leaving. "I know. You love him and you'd do anything for him, just like he would for you. You'd rather die than hurt him. I get it. But I'm telling you the truth here, Bucky. I honestly don't think he'd be better off without you. I actually think you leaving would be the straw that broke the camel's back. But you're doing the wrong thing, by shutting off your side of the bond. You're doing it for the right reasons, but it's still the wrong thing."

"I don't know what else to do," Bucky said softly. He wiped his nose, luminous eyes glistening. "What I did because of Hydra…It wrecked me." He shook his head. "Worse than that. It destroyed me. Like, shrapnel. Shrapnel where my soul used to be. Where I used to be. I couldn't keep fighting them anymore. I wanted to. I would've died if I could've. But, I didn't have any strength left. It was like when I got pneumonia at the labor camp." Bucky's mouth pulled on one side in an ugly parody of a smirk. "Didn't matter how hard I tried to keep up, get my fucking quota in for the Nazis. I couldn't. That's why they dragged me off to the Isolation Ward: 'cause I was too sick to keep up." He swallowed, his eyes fixed straight ahead. "It was like that, after. Only worse."

"I am so sorry you had to endure that, Bucky," Tony said. The words were hilariously inadequate, despite how much he meant them.
Bucky gave another tiny shrug. "Thing is, Steve's stronger than I am." He shook his head at Tony's protest. "I know he is. Always has been. But, if he feels what I'm feeling…." Bucky shook his head mutely, then scrubbed his face. "If he gets all if it, it'll destroy him too."

"It didn't destroy you, Bucky. You're still here," Tony said.

Bucky's laugh was a cold, violent bark. "None of the parts that matter."

"Well, that's where you're wrong." Tony scooched closer, wrapping his arm around Bucky's waist. "You're damaged. I know you know that. Hydra did a fucking tap dance number on your head for nearly twice as long as I've been alive. And, sure, maybe they smashed your soul like fine china. But that doesn't mean the pieces are gone, Bucky. Everything's still there. You're still there. You just need to put it back together."

"I can't," Bucky said.

"I think you can," Tony said. "Steve does too. But you don't have to do it alone. You've got your Guide, who wants to help you so bad he's having nightmares about it." Because dreaming about searching for your beloved Sentinel's body definitely counted as wanting to help. "And you've got a friend sitting right next to you."

Bucky stared at him. "You want to be my friend?"

Tony stared evenly back. "Of course I do. You're a good man, Bucky. You wouldn't be up here brooding if you weren't." He ignored Bucky's derisive huff. "Hey, you think I get on the roofs of elevator cars for just anyone?"

"I think you're nuts," Bucky said. It was obvious it was only partially a joke, and had nothing to do with elevators. Of course Bucky would think Tony was crazy for liking him.

Well, Tony was crazy, so the joke was on him. But Tony wasn't crazy about this. He pulled Bucky a little closer, patting his side. "Then we're going to get along just fine."

Chapter End Notes

_Was sind Sie? - What are you?_

Lego only feels like it's been around since the dinosaurs, _but it didn't exist until 1949._

"I'll be up eight flights to get Bucky." and, "You look like you're about to go Narm any second." are my new favorite lines. :D

This chapter is now 10 of 14. Which is probably optimistic. God help me.
Chapter Summary

The breaking point.

Chapter Notes

HERE IT IS, GUYS!

Finally, we're at Mel's idea which inspired me to write this monster in the first place. And it only took 10 chapters! ::falls over::

This is, to possibly no one's surprise but my own, likely going to be my longest fanfic. Currently that honor is held by Crash Down (Break this Heart of Mine), which clocks in at ten chapters and nearly 85k words. But I've still got three more chapters of this baby to go. (At least three. Who am I kidding?)

Crash Down is a really good story, btw. You should check it out. JUST SAYING.

This chapter was especially difficult, though I think I've said that about all of them. Shazrolane went above and beyond, reading the chapter twice and giving me her esteemed opinion. Darkmoore was a great help and wonderful cheerleader as always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A rat was on Tony's bed, standing on his chest.

It was a large rat. Not, say, horror movie sized or anything. More like a well fed, regularly large rat from a decent pet store. Not that Tony had been to any pet stores recently. Or had ever owned a rat. Or had ever been this close to one. There had been rats in the cave in Afghanistan, of course, but Tony hadn't exactly tried to make friends.

Not to mention that the tower's humane-yet-thorough pest deterrent system was extremely effective, which meant it was almost impossible for a rat to have snuck its way into Tony's bedroom. So there was no reason Tony could think of for there to be a big, sleek, charcoal-grey rat on his chest, regarding him with strangely somber, black pearl eyes.

The rat was up on his hind legs with his male rat bits on full display, and his pink paws crossed in front of his fluffy chest. His ears looked like soft, pink flower petals, and his nose was also pink and tiny. His long, white whiskers twitched as he sniffed the air. It was surprisingly adorable, for something normally associated with plagues and Halloween decorations.

It would have seemed reasonable, given the circumstances, for Tony to be freaking the fuck out right about now. He didn't panic easily, especially not anymore, but waking from a sound sleep to find an unsolicited rodent on your chest would probably have been a decent enough cause to panic for anyone. But Tony didn't feel like panicking. He wasn't alarmed, wasn't all that concerned, even.
Which was admittedly weird. Then again, he'd been concerned a hell of a lot recently. Maybe he'd just developed a high threshold.

"How did you get in here?" he asked, more curious than anything. He touched the rat's head with one finger, oddly unsurprised when the rat leaned into it. "You're a long way from home, Tazio," he said, then blinked. He hadn't been planning on giving the rat a name, and if he had it wouldn't've been the one belonging to his mom's father. But the name had rolled off his tongue like he'd always intended to say it.

Tazio grabbed Tony's finger in his little paws and licked it, as if he'd always belonged to Tony. And somehow Tony couldn't shake the feeling it was true.

None of this made any sense. Tony sat up, cupping the rat in his hand, then lifting him so he could look straight into its shining black eyes. Tazio felt exactly like Tony assumed a rat should, when he petted him: soft, smooth fur; flower-petal ears; rougher tail. Tazio calmly allowed the exploration, occasionally licking Tony's fingers in return. When Tony pulled his hand back, Tazio stood on his hind paws again to lick his stomach. And then he vanished.

"Holy fuck!" Tony sat bolt upright, looking around the bedspread as if the rat had just leapt out of his hand. Tazio wasn't there. He wasn't anywhere Tony could see on the floor either. "J.A.R.V.I.S., lights." His home was instantly flooded with illumination, but there was no rat in sight. And not under the bedroom furniture either, when Tony got on his hands and knees to check.

"Okay. Either I'm going blind, crazy, or I was just haunted by the ghost of my Nonno. As a rat." Tony sat on the floor, carding his fingers through his hair. "Yeah. Going crazy then."

He heard a whine in the hallway, like an unhappy dog.

Tony froze, then slowly stood and padded out of the bedroom. There was a Game of Thrones-sized white wolf in the hallway, with its—okay, her—tail tucked between her legs and her big, light blue eyes full of misery. She whined again, then lowered herself onto her elbows, awkwardly crawling nearer as if she were purposely trying to look as harmless as possible.

"J.A.R.V.I.S.? What the fuck is going on?" Tony asked softly as he watched the wolf approaching. He was wearing red plaid dorm pants and a white sleeveless tee-shirt. Practically giftwrapped if the wolf decided to eat him.

"I'm afraid I have no idea, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. said, "though I could offer speculation, if you wish."

Tony didn't answer, entirely focused on the wolf. She didn't seem inclined to eat him. She just crept closer, still whining like a sad puppy. Tony kept watching, fixed there in fascinated dread, until her big, black nose was practically touching Tony's foot. The giant wolf licked his foot a couple times, then rolled onto her back, looking up at him hopefully.

"Uh, okay." Tony crouched, hesitated, then petted her belly, dragging his fingers through her fur. "Are you my mom? Is this like, A Christmas Carol with animals? 'Cause I don't think I'm dreaming and it doesn't feel like I'm losing my mind. Then again, if I were going crazy, maybe I wouldn't notice it happen—Holy fuck!"

Tazio had appeared on the wolf's stomach, out of exactly nowhere.

"Please tell me you saw that, J," Tony said, voice only shaking a little. He scrambled to his feet from where he'd fallen on his butt in surprise. "I really don't need to be hallucinating random Italian animals."
"You aren't hallucinating, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. said. "I believe these to be spirit animals."

"Spirit animals? Seriously?" Tony picked up Tazio and put the rat on his shoulder, as automatically as if he'd been doing it his entire life. Tazio did his standing thing and held on to Tony's ear. "Like, Sentinel and Guide spirit animals?"

"Precisely, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. said. "And since there is only one bonded pair in the tower, they must belong to Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes."

"Holy fuck," Tony said again. "What are they doing here?" He didn't realize until a moment later that he'd put his hand over Tazio, as if he was worried someone might snatch him. Tony's Nonno ghost rat was his. He'd put the suit on before he let anyone even try to take him.

Which…. Okay, maybe the going crazy part wasn't off the table, then. Tony would have to worry about that later.

The wolf rolled onto her feet, shook herself, then loped towards the stairs. She stopped and looked at Tony over her shoulder, obviously wanting him to follow.

"Shit. Please don't tell me one of them's fallen down a well," Tony said. He followed the wolf into the stairwell and down, Tazio riding his shoulder the entire way.

He was dismayed as fuck but also completely unsurprised when the wolf led him to Steve's floor. The place looked almost the same as when he was there less than twenty four hours earlier, maybe slightly more lived in, if you wanted to count the paperback of *I Sing The Body Electric!* on the coffee table. Tony did, since that had been one of his favorites. Bucky had always been the sci-fi buff, according to Howard. It made Tony oddly warm to think of Bucky enjoying something Tony liked.

The warmth was a nice respite from the cold dread he'd been feeling after following the wolf here. Of course, the cold was completely internal, since Steve's home was actually hot as hell. Tony had barely stepped out of the stairwell and already there was sweat prickling the back of his shirt. It had to be over 90 degrees. "J, is the thermostat broken?"

"No, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. responded. "All heating and air conditioning controls are working perfectly."

"Well, that's not at all concerning," Tony murmured. He could hear the shower running, which might not have meant anything, given how little Super Soldiers had to sleep. But considering the wolf was leading him right there, it probably meant a lot. And nothing Tony wanted to know.

Steam billowed out of the bathroom as soon as Tony opened the door, turning the already overheated hallway into a sauna. The bathroom itself was like a tropical rainforest. The air was so humid Tony could practically chew it.

A bee was flying in agitated circles around the bathroom, buzzing so loudly Tony could hear it above the water.

Steve was sitting huddled on the floor of the shower stall. The water was running full blast, the temperature just under scalding. Steve was bright pink from his scalp to his toenails, but he was shivering so violently his teeth chattered.

"Jesus Christ!" Tony put his rat on the counter, then steeled himself and went into the shower stall to turn the water off. He was soaked almost instantly, wincing at the heat.
Steve didn't seem to even notice Tony was there until the water shut off, but then he gasped and lurched to his feet, clearly intending to turn the tap back on. But he staggered, then lost his balance and fell heavily against the glass wall.

Tony caught him around the waist, knees locked and feet planted on the non-slip shower floor. Steve's body was hot, but he was still shaking. "Steve! It's me, it's Tony! What's going on? What's wrong?"

Steve's right arm was like a brand across Tony's back. He kept groping for the tap with his free hand, slapping uselessly at the tile. "T-turn it b-back on. P-please, T-ony. I'm s-so cold." The words juddered out of him through his chattering teeth. "H-help me. M-make it w-warm."

"You're already warm," Tony said. "Are you sick?" Dumb thing to ask; Steve had to be, if he was shivering in this heat. Except he couldn't get sick, so maybe this was some other horrible thing. "I need to get you out of here. Can you walk? I really need you to walk with me, Cap, because if I have to drag you we're both gonna be heaps on the floor."

Steve gave him a shaky nod and they made it out to the lush, beautifully absorbent bathroom rug. Tony wanted to get Steve dry, but it took a couple minutes before Steve stopped hugging him. Maybe it was just for his body heat, but if Steve wanted comfort Tony would do his best to give it.

Tony dripped puddles on the floor and told Steve he'd be fine, Bucky would be fine, they'd fix this, and various iterations thereof until Steve probably got sick of it and pulled away. He tried to smile, but he was trembling too hard to manage it. He hugged himself for warmth as Tony snatched up two of the thickest, fluffiest towels and wrapped him in them. Tazio was gone again. Tony missed him, which was insane.

Steve clutched at the towel Tony put over his shoulders, pulling it around himself like a child after a bath. "I c-can't get warm."

"Don't worry, I'm here. I'm going to help you." Tony rubbed Steve's legs dry, very carefully not looking at anything between his thighs. "We're going to warm you up. It'll be all right." Tony dropped his towel on the floor, leaving Steve wearing his. Then he helped Steve out of the bathroom. Steve whimpered and his shaking got worse as soon as they were in the hallway, even though the air was barely more cool.

Tony pulled Steve into his bedroom, trailing water with the bee buzzing around their heads. It looked like every blanket Steve owned was on the bed, and Tony recognized some from the common floor as well. Tony hated putting Steve into that kind of heat when he was already so warm, but Steve was shivering so badly he could barely stand. He was acting like he had a fever—which, again, impossible—but if he had one, making him hotter might break it. Or it might just kill him.

But even if he wasn't feverish and the cold was all in his head, Steve was suffering. He was also shaking so badly Tony was concerned he'd damage himself, or end up dangerously exhausted.

There was no solution here, just figuring out which evil was the lesser one.

Tony helped Steve onto the bed, threw his wet towel into a corner, and then bundled Steve under the mountain of blankets. He might be plying their way to hell with good intentions, but at least hell was hot; right then Tony figured Steve could use the heat. "Get Medical up here," he instructed J.A.R.V.I.S. He was so, so glad he'd already arranged for the suite to be staffed overnight. "Tell them Steve might have a fever."

"I have taken the liberty of doing so already," J.A.R.V.I.S. said, which was one of the many, many
reasons Tony loved him. "They will be here in five minutes."

Steve had curled up on his side, still shaking. The bee kept trying to land on him, but it was like trying to set a helicopter down in an earthquake. "Y-you n-need to find B-Bucky," Steve said. His breath was as hot as the air in the bathroom. "I-I th-think he's-he's dead."

"What?" It was like someone had shoved the reactor back in his chest. He couldn't breathe. "J," he choked through the terror crushing his lungs, "Where's Bucky?"

"Sergeant Barnes is in your workshop. I have been monitoring his vital sings, and they are all within normal range. He's alive, Captain, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. said, as gently as Tony had ever heard him.

"Oh thank God," Tony sagged. "Hear that, Steve? He's alive. He's okay."

"No." Steve tried to shake his head. "B-Bond's br-brroken. C-can't feel him. Just c-cold."

"Wait." Tony blinked. "The cold. You mean...Pneumonia cold? Like in your lungs but in your head?" He was gaping now. "Do you mean that?"

Steve trembled out a nod. There were tears in his reddened eyes. "B-because he's d-dead."

"Wait. Wait, no." Tony crouched so their faces were almost level, dripping water everywhere, then reached under the blanket and took Steve's hand. The bee flew past his shoulder and managed to catch ahold of Steve's ear. "Steve, I don't understand. The cold you told me about in your head...are you feeling it in your whole body now? Is that why you're shivering?"

"Y-yeah." Steve nodded miserably again. "I c-can't g-get warm. The b-bond is br-brroken. H-he's d-dead."

"He's not dead, Steve," Tony said, putting as much conviction in his voice as humanly possible. "Your bond isn't broken, just shut down on his side. You shouldn't be affected like this. Closed bonds don't do anything." Because of course that would make Steve stop shivering immediately.

But Steve shouldn't have been shivering in the first place. Because closed bonds didn't do anything.

It didn't make sense. None of this made sense. But there was also Steve's thousand-yard stare, and his nightmares and empathic overload. And Bucky's ten-hour zoning and imprinting on Tony, and being so desperate for grounding he'd clutch at anyone.

Tony wasn't called a genius for nothing, and he was a scientist too. He knew what to do with evidence when it was right fucking in front of him.

This closed bond was definitely doing something. It might be killing Steve; it might be killing both of them.

"Fuck," Tony said, quietly but with vehemence. What the hell was he even supposed to do about this? How did you fix something that was never supposed to be a problem?

"T-Tony. P-please. F-find Bucky." Steve worked his other hand out from the pile of blankets and managed to wrap it around Tony's wet arm. Steve's hand was hot, but he shook so badly Tony's arm vibrated with it. "P-please. His body. Y-ou have t-to...." Tears spilled from Steve's eyes. "I-I c-can't find him."

Tony shifted position, tilting his head so he was looking directly at Steve's eyes. He let go Steve's hand to put his palms on either side of Steve's face, making sure Steve could see him. "Steve, you
need to listen to me. Bucky is not dead." Tony might kill the son of a bitch after this, but that was immaterial. "Your bond is closed, not severed, all right? He's fine." He sincerely doubted that, given the discovery he'd just made, but Bucky would keep. Steve was the one who was in danger of freezing to death while spontaneously combusting. "J.A.R.V.I.S. said his vital signs were normal just a minute ago. Do you remember?"

Steve blinked at him with his wet, tragic eyes. "He f-fell."

Tony bit his lip, frantically trying to think what Pepper would do in this situation. She'd be gentle and understanding, he knew that much. "All right," he said, stroking Steve's tears away with his thumb. "There are some doctors coming to help you get warm. I'm going to find Bucky and bring him back here so you can see he's alive, all right?"

"Y-you'll b-bring him h-home?" Steve asked, childlike and vulnerable in a way Tony hoped he would never see again. The bee on his ear buzzed, as if in sympathy.

"I promise," he said seriously. He knew 'bring him home' meant that in the murky, shivering depths of Steve's brain he thought Tony was going to the fucking Alps to find Bucky's body.

Steve blinked again, more tears running over the bridge of his nose. "T-thank you." Then he turned his head and pressed a dry, chaste kiss to Tony's palm.

It was out of friendship and gratitude, nothing more. And it was so brief Tony barely felt it. Except for how it sent an electric bolt of want and longing sizzling through his guts, followed by no small amount of horror.

He shouldn't want Steve like that. He should not want Steve like that. Steve had Bucky, who he was deeply in love with and only recently stopped mourning. And Tony knew how lucky he was that Steve even thought of him as a friend. Tony was an acquired taste, to put it nicely. He'd known that for a long time.

So every single time the...interest had come into his head, Tony had dismissed it immediately. And that'd worked fine. Things had been fine. And then Bucky showed up and it was like all the feelings Tony had kept simmering comfortably beneath the surface were now churning and frothing like an imminent volcano.

Not just for Steve either, which was even worse. If Tony had no right to want Steve, he had absolutely no fucking justification for wanting Bucky. They might be friends, but he barely knew him. And Bucky was in a very bad place right now. And he was also bonded to Steve and equally in love with him.

And Tony wanted him anyway. He wanted them both, and it was never going to happen. He shouldn't even be thinking about it.

"You don't have to thank me," Tony said, because nobody should thank imminent volcanos for anything. "I'll bring your Sentinel back," he added. The reminder that Bucky and Steve belonged together wouldn't hurt either of them.

Tony had plenty of hurt in store anyway.

Steve's floor might've been as hot as a jungle, but Tony was chafing and miserable by the time he got to the elevator, so he had to stop on his floor for dry clothes. He had J.A.R.V.I.S. pass on his hypothesis about Steve's illness to the medical staff, who reacted pretty much exactly the way Tony had.
There was no such thing as a closed Sentinel-Guide bond causing physiological damage. Closed bonds were emotionally traumatic, not physically. They could cause psychological harm, but they couldn't hurt someone's body. It didn't happen. It had never happened.

Except now it was apparently happening.

No one had the first clue what to do about it either, other than reopen the bond. So plan A through Z was Tony crowbarring Bucky Barnes' attractive head out of his ass, and then dragging him to Medical and smushing his and Steve's faces together like an internet meme.

The wolf appeared in his walk-in closet while Tony was hopping his leg into his jeans, as magically as Tazio had appeared on her belly. She sat on the floor, cocked her head and whined. "I'm hurrying!" Tony did up his fly, briefly considered socks then settled on bare feet and yanked the nearest tee-shirt and yanked it on. He jogged towards the elevator, then took a beeline to the fridge. "Jesus Christ, Lassie!" he griped when the wolf whined again. "Timmy can wait a fucking second! I'm getting protein shakes, because Steve's idiot Sentinel boyfriend probably hasn't eaten. Unless you'd rather Bucky starved to death?"

The wolf barked.

"See?" Tony hauled open the fridge. "Of course you wouldn't. So cut me some fucking slack here."

He'd set the third bottle on the counter, trying to remember if he'd kept more on hand in case Steve or Thor dropped by, when he suddenly realized he'd been having an actual, mutually-comprehended argument with a wolf. Because she was a spirit animal. Specifically, the wolf had to be Bucky's spirit animal, since she was here and the bee had stayed with Steve.

Tony probably should've known that, but for the life of him he couldn't remember ever learning about Bucky Barnes' and Captain America's spirit animals. Wasn't that kind of thing considered private anyway, like kink preferences or something? At least it seemed deeply personal to Tony.

And then that thought led to the second, stupefying realization that there was still one spirit animal unaccounted for. Namely a charcoal grey rat—who reappeared on Tony's shoulder like he'd been summoned. What the fuck.

Tony cupped his hand around Tazio, heart hammering. He really, really didn't have time for this now. Whatever this was. Whatever the hell was happening to him.

What are you?

Nope, not going there. Backing the fuck away from there right now.

But he still held Tazio on his shoulder when he grabbed the bag with the drinks in it and followed the wolf.

"What's Bucky doing now, J.A.R.V.I.S.?" Tony asked once he and the wolf were in the elevator, descending to the workshop level. She took up a lot of room. "Is he still in my workshop?"

"Sergeant Barnes is still in your workshop, Sir, but I'm afraid what he's doing is difficult to ascertain. He hasn't changed position for 27.3 minutes."

"Oh, fuck me," Tony groaned. The wolf whined in commiseration.

It was remotely possible that Bucky was meditating or napping or playing solitary freeze tag. But it
was a hell of a lot more likely that Bucky had glanced at something again and would be standing there for the next forever if Tony didn't snap him out of it.

"So, do I kill him first? Or save him first?" he asked the assembled animals. "What do you think, Tazio? Lassie? Cake or death?"

Tazio stuck his muzzle in Tony's ear.

"Rude," Tony said as the elevator doors opened.

Yeah, Bucky was zoning. It was obvious as soon as Tony entered the workshop, carrying Tazio and followed by the wolf. Bucky was in his day clothes, so he hadn't slept. And he was sitting on the ratty but comfortable couch Tony used for napping, back straight and hands folded neatly in his lap like a kid at church. Only his head was turned just a little bit to the side, where a piece of metal Tony had left on the worktable glinted in the overhead light.

Bucky's eyes were fixed on it with his expression utterly focused, like in the kitchen the day before. And, Tony realized, like on the roof of the elevator car, before Tony's nudge had snapped him out of it. Tony had noted the hum of the air circulation at the time. Now he remembered the way Bucky had blinked at him, how startled he'd been that Tony was there.

It hadn't been introspection; Bucky had been fucking zoning. That made three in less than 24 hours. Tony's hypothesis was looking more likely all the time. Fucking hell.

"Move that metal, get rid of it," he said to the wolf. He dropped the bag, went to the couch and put Tazio down. Out of Bucky's reach, just in case. Then he stood in Bucky's line of sight.

He waved his hand in front of Bucky's eyes. "Hey, Bucky. Buckster. Buckapalloza. Come on, eyes on me, handsome. There's nothing over there now." Bucky didn't react, even when Tony snapped his fingers right under his nose. "Come on, Buck. I'd really prefer not getting strangled again." He looked over his shoulder at the wolf, who'd apparently decided to bury the metal scrap in the farthest recesses of the workshop. "Hey, Lassie! Little help?"

The wolf looked at Tony, then loped over and started licking Bucky's face, laving him in great, sopping-wet streaks from his chin to his hairline.

She'd soaked half his head in drool before Bucky suddenly gasped and reared back, life sparking in his eyes. Then he cried out in shock and shoved the wolf away from him so violently she yelped and disappeared.

Bucky scrambled off the far end of the couch and away from Tony, ending up in the corner nearest the doors. He stood there panting, wild-eyed as a trapped animal with half his face shellacked with wolf spit. He stared at Tony, fists clenched like he was expecting a fight.

"Whoa. Okay, yeah. It's just me, Tony. Your satellite friend." Tony approached him slowly, palms raised. "Let me say, while it's fun and exciting never knowing how you're going to come out of a zone, I'm really hoping you're not going to attack me this time. So, if we could stick to English and non-violence, that'd be great."

Bucky's gaze traveled the length of Tony's body, then he came a step closer. He was cautious as a wild rabbit, but thankfully didn't seem to be in strangulation mode. "Tony?"

"Yes!" Tony nodded vigorously. "Yes, that's me. Tony Stark. We hung out on top of an elevator
yesterday, remember? You imprinted on me. This is my workshop," he added, in case Bucky couldn't remember.

That got a couple blinks and a disturbing lack of comprehension. "I…I was looking for you?" Bucky grimaced, then rubbed his forehead like his head hurt. "Nothing's right. It's…it's all dark…." He blinked, looked at Tony with a mixture of uncertainty and hope. "Are you my Guide?"

"No!" The denial was a little too quick and a little too loud, but the question came so very much out of the blue Tony was surprised it hadn't left exit wounds. "No, Bucky." That was at a normal volume, at least. "Steve Rogers is your Guide. Steve, Captain America. The guy who really badly needs your help right now. Which is why I came to get you."

"I don't have a Guide," Bucky said, and Tony was still trying to wrap his mind around that when Bucky's eyes widened with some kind of awful understanding. And then he dropped to his knees. He put his hands behind his back, bent his head and leaned his shoulders forward, like an offering.

"Bucky?" Tony stared at him, dumbfounded. "What are you doing? Why are you on your knees? Bucky?"

"Ready for activation attempt," Bucky said.

"'Activation attempt'?” Tony parroted. "What the hell's an 'Activation—?" He gasped in realization. "No! Get up! Get up now!" He grabbed Bucky's upper arm and heaved, acting on an instinct close to panic.

Sentinels and Guides used to talk about their abilities being 'activated' or 'dormant' until the late 1990s when the internet had become a thing. Bucky must've wandered in here thinking he was offline, and then assumed Tony was there to force his abilities back. And he'd just knelt to give Tony easier access to fuck with his head and that was it: Tony was officially in Hell.

As soon as Bucky was standing Tony yanked his hands away, then backed up a couple steps for good measure. "Bucky, I'm not a Guide! Even if I was, I wouldn't do that! I'm not going to hurt you."

Bucky just watched Tony in wary confusion. "But, you are a Guide. I know...You grounded me, before." He reached out, took a step closer. "Help. Help me, please. It's not...it hurts. I need…."

"Oh, fuck. Come here." Tony pulled Bucky into his arms, let Bucky hold him so tightly it almost hurt. He had no idea what was happening; he just hoped to hell that if Bucky thought he was grounding himself it might derail the burgeoning crazy. "You're okay, Bucky. Everything's going to be fine. We're going to sort this out, I promise. I'm your friend. I'm not going to hurt you. But, I'm not your Guide, Bucky. Your Guide is Steve Rogers."

Tony couldn't be anyone's Guide. He'd known that since he was sixteen. Bucky was confused as fuck right now. He'd probably ask a lamppost if it was his Guide if he was next to one. It didn't mean anything. Tony was just Tony and the rat was probably a ghost. Or a stress-induced hallucination.

It didn't change how badly Tony wanted to be Bucky's Guide, though. Bucky's Guide, and Steve's…. Tony didn't know what. But something more than he could ever hope to be for him. For either of them. But Tony was a past master at ignoring things he didn't like thinking about.

"Stevie," Bucky whispered. He sniffed at the skin of Tony's neck, then pulled back, puzzled. He took Tony's hand that Steve had kissed and brought it to his face. He sniffed Tony's palm, then dabbed it with his tongue.
"Yeah. Yeah, that's Steve. That's your Guide," Tony said eagerly. "I smell like him because I was helping him. Because he's sick. He needs you to open the bond, Bucky."

"Not bonded," Bucky murmured absently. He was still scenting Steve, his nose bouncing along Tony's arm like a cat.

"You are bonded!" Tony said. "You're bonded to Steve. He's your Guide. Bucky!" Tony jerked his arm back and Bucky let go instantly. At least his manners hadn't vacated along with his brain.

Tony put his hands on Bucky's shoulders, resisting the urge to shake him. "You are bonded to your Guide, Steve Rogers. You closed it off and I'm pretty sure it's making you both sick as hell. You need to open the bond, Bucky. That's all you have to do. But you have a Guide and it's not me. Okay? Do you understand?"

Bucky's forehead creased. "...Are you my handler?"

"What?" Tony gaped. He opened his mouth to say, I am not your fucking handler! but then thought about it and took a long, deep breath instead. "I brought some protein shakes for you. Drink them, then come with me upstairs. You'll understand once you're there. No one's going to hurt you," he added, because what Tony was doing was probably terrible enough.

He told himself that it'd be fine once Bucky saw Steve and touched him, and remembered he had a bond and finally opened the fucking thing. Bucky and Steve would both be all right, and Tony would apologize for using Bucky's amnesia against him and hope to God Bucky forgave him for it.

And then life would go on and Tony would do his best to ignore how badly he wanted Steve and Bucky, just like all the other things he didn't like thinking about.

Tazio reappeared in the elevator, while Tony and Bucky were on their way to the Medical Suite; Lassie didn't. Tony told himself the lack of wolf didn't mean anything.

The nurse on duty led them to Steve's room, warning them to be quiet because they'd given Steve a mild sedative and he'd managed to fall asleep. Tazio was on Tony's shoulder the whole time, but it was obvious the nurse couldn't see him. Tony didn't know about ghosts, but Spirit animals were only visible when they wanted to be. Or maybe Tony had really just lost his mind too.

(Except, right before the elevator doors had opened, Bucky petted Tazio once with the tips of his fingers. Then he smiled wistfully, like this was something he'd always wanted but never had.)

The rooms in the Medical Suite were painted in soothing colors, had exceptionally ergonometric furniture, and huge windows to let in daylight. Tony had made sure of it, because he spent a lot of time in hospital rooms.

But the pleasant surroundings couldn't change how unnerving it was to see Steve like this: lax and ashen with the blankets pulled up to his chin. Tony counted four of them, despite how the room was already unpleasantly warm. Steve's left hand was above the blanket, Hep lock stuck in his wrist in anticipation of an I.V.. At least he wasn't shivering, and his skin was warm when Tony touched it.

Steve's bee was doing big, unhappy laps of the room. She flew right up to Bucky and got in his face, buzzing so harshly he flinched. Obviously she wasn't too thrilled with him.

"Hey, leave him alone. He's sick too," Tony said.

The bee just about flew up Tony's nose in retaliation before charging Bucky again. He blew on her,
sending her angrily off course, and finally got a good look at Steve.

Bucky went still, then gave a tiny, choked cry and rushed to the bed. He moved to take Steve in his arms, but then hesitated, like he was suddenly afraid he'd hurt him. "Oh, no," he whispered. "Oh, no. Stevie. He got pneumonia again?" He asked Tony, then put his palm on Steve's forehead, checking for fever. "Or... Oh, God. It's not tuberculosis, is it?" He looked at Tony pleadingly. "Please tell me it's not tuberculosis! His mom died of that."

"It's not tuberculosis or pneumonia," Tony said quickly. He resisted asking Bucky what year he thought it was. "He is sick, though. Really sick, but you can help him. Remember what I told you? About your bond? Steve's your Guide. You're bonded to each other. But you've been keeping your side of the bond closed. It's hurting you both."

"I don't have a bond," Bucky said. He still had his hand on Steve's forehead, and now he started carding his fingers through Steve's hair. Touch was supposed to help with Sentinel-Guide bonding, Tony knew that much, but this didn't seem to be making a difference. Bucky's expression was full of love, and terribly sad. "He gets so sick, and he's such a little guy. Got a heart like a lion, but he'll never be a Guide. Can't hack it," Bucky swallowed. "Don't know if I'm ever gonna be a Sentinel. But, I don't want to be activated, if I can't bond with him."

Tony put his hand on Bucky's back. "You are a Sentinel, Bucky. And he's a Guide. Your Guide. But, you have to open your bond. That's why he's sick, because your bond is closed."


"I know," Tony said, hanging onto his patience by his fingernails. He knew, intellectually, that Bucky hadn't intended any of this. Screaming at him to catch a Goddamn clue already because Tony was scared wouldn't help either of them. "That's your bond, Bucky. It's hurts 'cause you've closed it. Like, a tourniquet that's too tight. Steve's hurting because of it too. That's why he's sick. You need to let the bond open."

"Let the bond open," Bucky repeated. He blinked, eyes shifting away like he was trying to remember what that meant.

"Yeah, that's right. Open it." Tony nodded vigorously. "Like, releasing a tourniquet. Just, untwist the cord. Or, loosen the belt. Whatever."

"Okay," Bucky said softly. He cupped Steve's temple, thumb caressing his Guide's forehead. Bucky closed his eyes and took a breath, then exhaled, long and slow.

Tony stood silently with one fist clenched and his other hand over Tazio, heart pounding as he waited.

Nothing happened.

Bucky opened his eyes again. He concentrated, breath speeding up. Then tried again, gritting his teeth. "I can't," he said. He looked at Tony, distraught. "I can't do it. It's not working!" He took Steve's shoulder, shaking him gently. "Steve, Stevie, wake up. Wake up, please. You gotta help me. I can't open the bond."

Steve didn't wake up.

"Steve?" Bucky shook him harder, then roughly. He was close to panic. "Steve! Steve, wake up!"
"Bucky, Stop!" Tony grabbed Bucky's wrist, before Bucky rattled Steve's brains out his ears. "He was given a sedative, remember?" A mild sedative, that had likely already worn off. "Steve probably just needs some time to wake up. It's okay. It's going to be all right."

"No it's not! I can't feel him!" There was a growl cutting through Bucky's voice. "He has to wake up! Why won't he wake up?"

"I don't know," Tony said. He was still holding Bucky's wrist; the tendons felt like steel cable. "I don't know. J.A.R.V.I.S. is going to get the doctor and we'll sort this out, all right? But you need to stay present, Bucky. You can't go feral now, not when your Guide needs your help."

"This is my fault," Bucky said, like he hadn't heard him. He'd gone white, eyes wild with anguish. The growl was still in his voice: louder; the animal closer to the surface. "I did this. I made him sick. But that's...that's not right! It wasn't...that wasn't supposed to happen. I didn't..." Bucky put both his hands to his head, his face screwing up in pain. "Tony, help. I don't—"

The door swung open with the doctor and nurse rushing in.

Bucky's eyes shot open and he whirled on them, snarling over bared teeth. "Don't touch him!"

"Oh, fuck," Tony breathed. Bucky had just gone feral.

Tony had only witnessed it once. The Avengers had been fighting a rogue Hydra faction, and Clint had gotten shot. Tony had almost felt badly for them, after what Natasha had done. Only almost, but still.

"Bucky, no!" Tony slid in between him and the two very startled medical personnel. He put up his hands, wishing he'd had the foresight to bring a suit; too late now. "Go! Go!" he hissed at the two women over his shoulder. They fled.

Tazio disappeared from Tony's shoulder and reappeared on the bed, probably the safest place in the room. The bee landed on the rat's back. "They're gone, okay?" Tony said to Bucky. "They're gone. It's just you, me, Steve and the animals in here. That's all."

Bucky's attention kept shifting between Tony and the door. He probably knew exactly where the two women were and how fast their hearts were beating. He kept flexing and clenching his fists like he didn't know what to do with his hands. "Tony." His voice rumbled like a gathering storm.

Tony nodded. "That's right. I'm your friend. I'm not going to hurt you or Steve. No one here is. We just want to figure out why Steve won't wake up. That's all. That's why the doctor and nurse came in here, to find out what's wrong with Steve so they can fix it. Steve is safe. He's sick, but he's safe. All we want to do is help him."


"I'm here. I'm right here. It'll be all right." Tony stepped closer, unsurprised when Bucky clutched at him and pressed his face to the curve of Tony's neck and shoulder, gulping in his scent. Tony held Bucky across his shoulders, then used his free hand to cup the back of Bucky's skull. "I know you're scared for Steve. I am too. But you have to come back. You have to be present again, so we can help him. Can you do that? Come back to me? Come back to both of us?" he amended, because he'd meant to say, Come back to Steve, except somehow that hadn't made it out of his mouth.

Bucky lifted his head, but he just shook it 'no'. "I have to protect him."
"I know. I know you have to protect your Guide." Tony took Bucky's face in his hands. "But he needs you present. You have to open your bond with him, remember? You can't do that if you're like this, Bucky. You need to come back."

Bucky looked stricken. "I don't...I don't know how." He stepped back from Tony, looking between him and Steve. "Tony, help."

"I'm trying! I don't know what the fuck I'm doing either!" Tony scraped his fingers through his hair. "J.A.R.V.I.S., how the hell do you un-feral a Sentinel?"

"If a Guide of equivalent ability isn't available, the most expedient way is to render the Sentinel unconscious," J.A.R.V.I.S. said. "I have information on available stun devices and sedatives, as well as the standard protocols employed by the military and first responders."

Bucky backed up a couple steps, until he was right in front of Steve. The look on his face told Tony exactly what Bucky thought about being stunned or sedated.

"Yeah. Not going to do that," Tony said carefully, eyes on Bucky in case he decided to go through Tony to the door. "No one's going to hurt you, Bucky," he reminded him. "But we can't help Steve if you're feral. Which means we're kind of fucked, right now. J, is there an Alpha Guide near enough to help?"


Bucky nodded again. "Get Danny."

Someone knocked, light and tentative. "Mr. Stark? Is everything all right?" It was the nurse, asking as unobtrusively as humanly possible.

Bucky snarled like he wanted to rip her throat out right through the door.

"No!" Tony grabbed Bucky's arms, glaring at him. "That's the nurse! She's trying to help! Look," he said, voice calmer but just as severe, "I know you need to protect your Guide. But no one here is a threat. Do you understand? You are not allowed to hurt anyone unless they threaten you or Steve first. Bucky! Do you understand me?"

Bucky just made a querulous growl; his attention kept getting dragged back to the door.

"No!" Tony shook him a little. He had the absurd vision of grabbing a rolled up newspaper and whacking him on the nose. "Bucky! Bucky! Listen to me!"

Bucky blinked at him. He looked mutinous, but at least Tony had his attention.

"That's better," Tony said. "Okay, here are the rules. One: You are not to hurt anyone unless you or Steve are in danger. Got it?"

Bucky hesitated, eyes darting like he was trying to parse what Tony meant. He nodded uncertainly.

"Good. Great. That's great. Good Sentinel." Tony loosened his grip, petting Bucky's biceps with his thumbs. "Rule two: you need to let the doctors and nurses come in here and look after Steve. That means you need to let them touch him. Understand? They can't help Steve if they can't touch him, and if they can't help him he'll get worse. Maybe a lot worse." Tony wasn't quite able to say Steve is...
"going to fucking die if you don’t let them help. "I know you want to protect Steve. This is protecting him. Letting the medical staff help him is protecting him. Do you understand?"

Bucky nodded again. This time it was a little more definite.

"Awesome." Tony was still petting Bucky's arms, he thought vaguely that maybe he should stop. "You need to let the doctors and nurses help you too. Like, you have to eat. You can't protect Steve if you're starving."

"Okay," Bucky said, but then he frowned. "What...about you?"

Tony blinked at him. "What about me? I'm getting Danny. To help you."

Bucky didn't look any happier. He reached out to touch Tony's face, moving slowly as if he was worried about scaring him. "You're my Guide."

And there went his heart, Tony thought a little hysterically. Because the crumpled mess of denial, want, and sheer fucking terror bouncing around behind his ribs felt a hell of a lot more like crumpled tinfoil than anything to do with blood or the oxygen absolutely not reaching his lungs. "No, Bucky."

He gently pulled Bucky's hand away from his cheek. "I'm not your Guide. Steve is. Steve Rogers. I'm your friend."

Bucky looked doubtful, and then hurt, neither of which Tony understood. But he nodded again. "Okay, Tony." He backed away to crouch against the wall, facing the foot of Steve's bed. He rested his palms on his knees, obviously ready to leap up instantly and defend his Guide to the death.

"Don't hurt anyone unless you or Steve are in danger," Tony reminded him. "Got it?"

Bucky nodded one more time. "Come back?"

Tony's crumpled little tinfoil heart dropped right into the trash. "Yeah, Bucky," he rasped. "Of course I'll come back. I promise. Just, don't hurt anyone."

"Okay, Tony," Bucky said.

"Great." Tony almost managed a smile. He went to the bed and grabbed Tazio, then stayed long enough to card his fingers through Steve's hair. Just once. He didn't dare do anything else, in case it upset Bucky. Just like he didn't dare look at Bucky again before he shut the door behind him.

He didn't want to upset the confused, volatile Sentinel. It had nothing to do with destroying whatever bits were left of Tony's crumpled, trashed, tinfoil heart; Nothing at all. Tony was fine.

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Chapter End Notes

I love rats. I had pet rats when I was a teenager. They're smart and affectionate, and have wonderful silky fur and the sweetest little paws. My first rat loved riding on the back of my neck, nice and warm under my hair.

I went with (I think it is) comics canon that Tony's mother came from an Italian background. Tazio means 'King', which seemed appropriate.
"Danny. Danny, wake up. Your phone is ringing."

Danny woke up, blinking. They'd both been sitting together on the couch, watching some kind of military documentary on the TV. Well, Steve had been watching it. Danny had apparently fallen asleep.

He wouldn't have minded staying asleep. Steve was pretty comfortable to lean against, and it'd been a long week. Danny was tired. He groaned in protest at being woken, then fumbled for Steve's chin and attempted to push him away without opening his eyes. "It's like, midnight. I am not answering my fucking phone at fucking midnight, which is why I put it on 'Do Not Disturb', Steven. They can leave a message." He didn't bother asking how Steve could tell someone was calling if the phone was silenced. Maybe he felt a disturbance in the Force.

"It's not midnight, it's ten after eleven. And this is the third time they've called," Steve said. "I think you should answer it." He'd muted the TV. Grey tanks rolled silently over the monochrome landscape.

"Then why didn't you answer it, if you were so worried?" Danny groused. All the same, he hauled himself upright, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. He gave his head a quick shake then picked up the phone, squinting at the 'missed call' message. "No caller I.D."

"They're calling again," Steve said.

Danny sighed. He was curious now, though, so he opened his settings and turned the Do Not
Disturb function off. Almost instantly, the phone shrilled into ringing. Danny answered it, trying not to yawn. "Williams."

"Yeah, hi," a male voice said. "I'm calling because Steve Rogers is really sick and Bucky's gone feral and I'm pretty sure it's because their bond is still closed. And Bucky asked for you, so I'm hoping that's not just him missing you or something and you can really help."

"Wait. What?" Danny looked at Steve, in case he'd heard something Danny hadn't that would make the monologue comprehensible. Steve just shrugged. "Who is this?"

"What?" the guy asked, sounding equally bewildered. Then, "Oh. Shit. Yeah. Sorry, I haven't really slept in the past couple days." He took a breath. "Let's try this again. My name is Tony Stark. I'm calling from Avengers Tower in New York because Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes are both in really bad shape and it has something to do with their bond and Bucky asked for you specifically. So, I'm hoping you can help."

Danny shared another look with Steve, this one more wide-eyed. "Okay, let me see if I'm getting this," he said. "You're telling me that there's something wrong with Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes, because of their bond?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you," Stark said. And now that Danny was more awake and beyond the initial what-the-fuck of Tony fucking Stark babbling at him, he could hear the stress and weariness in Stark's voice. "Bucky's part of the bond is still closed. Steve went into empathic overload...yesterday. Yeah, it was yesterday, and Bucky's zoned three times since then. And then Steve was shivering like he was freezing to death, and telling me how he was really cold because the bond was broken since Bucky was dead—which he's not, but I guess Steve felt like he was—and now Steve's in a coma and Bucky tried to reopen the bond but it wouldn't work, and he couldn't remember what year it is and he kept asking me if I was his Guide even though I'm not a Guide, believe me, and then he offered me his head, like he was going to just let me fuck with it and...and now he's feral, and he asked for you. So I hope to God you can fix this, because I am so far out of my depth here I can't...." Stark trailed off, breathing harshly.


Danny nodded because yeah, no fucking kidding. Danny didn't need Sentinel hearing to know the man was trying not to lose it completely while talking to a virtual stranger over the phone. "It's going to be all right," he said automatically, then ignored Stark's wet, incredulous snort. "But, I want to make sure we're on the same page, here. You're saying that Rogers is in a coma and Bucky's gone feral because Bucky kept the bond closed? Did I hear that right?"

"Yes, you did," Stark said on a breath. "There's no other explanation."

"There has to be," Danny said. He glanced at Steve again, who looked just as skeptical as Danny felt. "Closed bonds aren't harmful."

"Well apparently they are, because it's fucking happening," Stark snapped. "And now Bucky's feral, so he can't reopen the bond anyway, and he doesn't know how to get present again. And he asked for you. So I'm really kind of hoping we can stop debating about this and you can just get your asses over to New York and fix them!"

"I want to!" Danny exclaimed. "I want to, believe me! But, I'm not a Guide Counselor. And even if I were, this sounds like it's completely out of my league. And Steve and I can't just hop on a plane. We're working on a case right now, and we need to clear any absences with the Governor. Which we can't even do until the morning—"
"I already cleared it with him," Stark said. "He was more than happy to give you and your Sentinel a few more days off to help the Avengers." He made it sound like calling the Governor of Hawaii at home at eleven at night was no big deal. Maybe to people like Tony Stark it wasn't. "And there's a Quinjet with a pilot waiting for you at the Honolulu branch of Stark Industries for whenever you get there. Which I think really, really should be sooner rather than later, so…"

Well, that was helpful. And mindboggling. But it didn't change how far Danny was in over his head. "I still don't know if I can fix this. I mean, I'm a cop. My mom's the Counselor. Whatever I know is what she taught me. I think you should get her instead. She's a lot closer, too. Or the New York Alphas."

"He asked for you," Stark repeated. "And I don't know about you, but I'd prefer to not introduce strange Alphas to the feral, highly agitated Super Soldier. Not to mention that I don't think we should out Bucky's whereabouts and mental state to the entire population of Sentinels and Guides without his permission, do you?"

"Yeah I do, if it means saving his and Steve Rogers' life," Danny didn't quite snap back at him. He scrubbed his face, wondering why he was even bothering to have this argument. He knew he was going to be on that Quinjet as well as his Steve did, considering the Sentinel had quietly gotten up and gone upstairs. He was probably busy packing an Altoids tin with enough clothing and gear for a six-month Arctic expedition. "You really think the closed bond fucked them up like this?"

"I'm sure of it," Stark said simply. "And yes, I know it's supposed to be impossible. Maybe it's because Bucky's probably the only Sentinel in existence stubborn and dumb enough to keep the bond closed for this long. If I had more time I'd do a literature review and a randomized control experiment, but I don't. What I do have is a Sentinel-Guide pair about to make like lemmings in a Disney movie, and the closed bond is the only rational explanation for it. And frankly, awesome though this debate is, it's not hyperbole when I'm telling you that Steve might actually die. And if Steve dies, Bucky will too. So, I really need you to hang up, get on the fucking Quinjet, and come save them."

Steve trotted down the stairs, dressed to travel and carrying a duffel bag. He arched his eyebrows as he passed Danny, wordlessly asking what was going on.

Danny shot him an unimpressed look in return, since he knew damn well Steve had heard everything from the bedroom. "Yeah, all right," he said to Tony. He sighed. "I want to help. Of course I want to help. But, it's also not hyperbole when I say I have no fucking clue what I'm doing. What if I make it worse?"

"Oh believe me," Tony laughed darkly, "you'd have to try pretty damn hard to make it worse."

That was the cheery thought that accompanied Danny all the way to the Honolulu branch of Stark Industries, and that thought which kept him awake in the Quinjet while Steve turned his hearing down to zero and slept like a toddler, stretched out with his head in Danny's lap.

Maybe he'd have to try hard to make the situation worse, but that didn't mean he could make it better. Especially since this was, apparently, a brand new thing previously unrecorded in the Annals of Stuff That Could Fuck Up Sentinels And Guides.

The Sentinel-Guide Center of New York would have to be told about it. Hell, they'd have to contact the Main Sentinel-Guide Center in The Hague and let them know too. Hopefully not because Danny managed to screw this up so badly he needed a pair of fucking Alpha Primes or something.
Yeah. No pressure, Danny.

He wanted his mom. He wanted his mom like a little kid after a nightmare. But Bucky hadn't asked for Clara; he'd asked for him. And it was sadly unlikely that Clara could help Bucky anyway.

Quinjets were like mini Concordes, so at least Danny was miserably awake for only five hours instead of eleven. Steve woke up when the pilot slowed the jet as they approached the tower. He smiled sleepily at Danny, then yawned and stretched as he returned his hearing to normal. "You didn't sleep at all, did you? You smell stale."

"Well, fuck you very much," Danny said entirely without heat. He leaned into Steve when Steve put his arm around him. "I'm too worried."

"You'll be fine," Steve said, then kissed his temple. "I bet they'll be able to reaffirm their bond if you take them to the spirit plane."

Danny patted Steve's nearer leg. "Hypothetically, sure. Or I could, I don't know, strand them there or something. If I can even take Rogers' spirit anywhere when he's in a coma—"

"Pardon the interruption, Detective, Lieutenant Commander," a voice with a ritzy British accent sounded over the jet's comm, "but Master Stark has requested your presence in the Medical Suite posthaste. I have taken the liberty of remotely piloting the Quinjet to expedite your arrival."

Danny sat up straight, exchanging a worried look with Steve. "Jesus Christ. Are they dying? They're not dying, are they?" Danny asked the guy with the accent.

"No, Detective," he said, and both Steve and Danny exhaled in relief. "Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes are not in immediate danger. The situation is urgent, however, and requires your particular expertise."

"That doesn't sound good," Steve said.

"No, it does not." Danny wracked his brain, trying to figure out what the urgent situation might be, if he was apparently the only one who could solve it. It wasn't like Bucky could get more feral—well, okay, he could—but that wouldn't be urgent. Unless he'd made himself zone again….

Oh, God. "Is Bucky zoning?" Danny leaned forward in his chair, as if that could somehow increase their speed. He could see a very tall skyscraper through the windshield with a large, round landing platform on it. That had to be where they were going. It seemed at least a thousand miles away.

"No, Sergeant Barnes is not zoning, nor is he harming himself. But Master Stark requests that I 'stop being coy'—which I assure you I was not—'and tell them that Bucky's going to rip someone's spine out if they don't get here as soon as fucking possible'."

"Oh, is that all?" Danny pinched the bridge of his nose. "How is this my life?"

Steve patted him on the shoulder, then wordlessly grabbed the duffel bag from underneath the bench they were sitting on and put it next to him. He opened it and pulled out the case he used when transporting his Glock.

Danny blinked at him. "Uh, Steve? what the hell are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" Steve removed his handgun from the case, checking it with practiced expertise.
"It looks like you're actually contemplating shooting Bucky Barnes," Danny said. "Are you out of your mind? You don't need that! You know I can drop him like a brick."

"You may not have the opportunity," Steve said. "This is backup." He blinked at the disbelieving horror on Danny's face. "I'm not going to shoot him unless I have to," he explained, as if that was the problem. "And just to slow him down, stop him if possible. It won't be fatal, Danny," he added. He sounded like Danny was the one being unreasonable.

"Oh, I don't know, It might be fatal when Bucky gets pissed off and kills you," Danny said.

"He won't kill me," Steve said with that smug confidence that occasionally reminded Danny of why he'd punched him shortly after they met. "He likes me. We're bros."

"Yeah. 'Cause brothers have never killed each other in the entire history of the world," Danny said.

"Get ready," Steve said as the Quinjet landed.

They left the pilot with their stuff and raced through the sliding doors that led from the landing platform to an open plan penthouse. Danny would've probably found it really nifty if he'd been able to catalogue his surroundings, but he was a little too worried for that.

The British guy—who apparently lived in the ceiling—directed them to the nearest elevator, but Steve slowed to a trot, scenting the air. "A Sentinel came through here a few minutes ago," he said, then frowned. "It's weird. He smells familiar, like Bucky. But he's not Bucky."

"Must be a Sentinel thing," Danny said. "You obviously need to commune with your people more."

"No I don't," Steve said absently, taking a few more deep breaths. "He's hurt. And the guy he was with is hurt too. I can smell blood and broken bones."

Danny winced. "Great. And thus we have the West Side Story reenactment in the infirmary." He yanked Steve with him into the elevator. As soon as the car doors closed, it dropped so fast Danny's stomach practically hit his sinuses. "Fucking fantastic. Is our mystery Sentinel feral too?"

Steve sniffed the air in the elevator car, then made a face. "Half. Maybe. He's putting out a lot of stress and fear."

"Of course he is," Danny sighed. "You know, when I got up yesterday morning, the first thing I said was, 'Gee. I really hope I can attempt to stop a fucking brawl between two hurt, feral Sentinels tomorrow. Because my own Sentinel doesn't make my life nearly difficult enough'."

"I thought the first thing you said was, 'God, yes. Don't stop'," Steve said.

"I hate you."

"You love me," Steve said. And then the elevator opened.

The joking ceased immediately. Steve sprinted off through the Medical Suite's waiting room, Danny at his heels. There were two women milling anxiously by the sliding doors to the actual hospital, obviously doctor and nurse by the scrubs and white coat.

The doctor tried to insert herself between Steve and the doors. "You really shouldn't go in there!"

Steve dodged neatly around her without answering or breaking stride.
"We know!" Danny said helpfully as he ran after him.

The doors opened to a remarkably large and welcome space. There was a workstation in the center, a few exam rooms, and several private patient rooms along the walls. Like a nicer version of every hospital Danny had ever been in. It made it very easy to find Bucky and the wounded Sentinel who'd been unfortunate enough to get near him.

Danny and Steve slowed to practically creeping, not that they weren't perfectly visible in the wide, brightly-lit corridor. But slow was always better when the alternative was getting your head ripped off. Possibly literally. Steve had his gun out. It was pointed at the floor for now, though Danny knew how fast that would change if Steve got concerned enough.

It was almost...well, funny wasn't the right word, since Bucky Barnes could absolutely rip the other Sentinel's head off without breaking a sweat, and looked alarmingly eager to do so. But there was definitely something tragicomic about how a guy who had to be Tony Stark was trying really, really hard to hold Bucky back by his metal arm, while Bucky was pretty much ignoring him completely, other than keeping Stark behind him.

Bucky and Stark were in front of a closed door that Danny would bet anything had Steve Rogers on the other side. Bucky had his teeth bared at a sturdy, kind of goofy-looking blond guy with a big nose, who was himself being more-or-less held against the opposite wall by another, shorter blond who was also goofy looking, but not quite as much.

Less Goofy was the goofier blond's Guide. Danny could sense it easily, since Less Goofy wasn't trying to hide his nature. There was also the particular psychic tang of a recent bond. Danny could never describe it, other than 'smooth and shiny'. Though it would've been obvious anyway by Goofier's territorial growling.

Goofi Blond was dressed like a cop, except he was missing his Kevlar. He was scraped and banged up, bruises on his face and the visible parts of his arms. His left arm was splinted and in a sling, which was clearly no deterrent whatsoever, given how hard the less goofy blond was working to keep him from charging to his death.

Less Goofy had a large bandage at his temple, and the squinty eyes of someone pretending they didn't have a concussion. Not that Danny had ever seen that before. A few hundred times. With Steve. The concussed Guide was trying to soothe his Sentinel, but he looked like he could barely stay upright, let alone harness his abilities to talk Goofier down.

"It's like the fucking Call Of The Wild in here," Danny murmured, purposely foreshortening the inevitable.

Bucky's head whipped to Danny and Steve, and Bucky's eyes widened. "Danny! Steve!" There was something heartbreaking in the depth of his relief, but at least he was verbal, thank God. Danny had assumed he wouldn't be, like before. But if Bucky could talk, it meant he was that much closer to the surface and it'd be easier to pull him out of his head.

Bucky glanced at Goofy and Less Goofy, and then backed a couple steps closer to the closed door behind him, firmly shoving Stark behind the wall of his body. "Help," he said. "Steve, Danny, help."

Goofier saw them too, of course. His attention focused on Steve, and he growled that much louder, nostrils flaring. "Get out!" Danny could hear the pre-feral rumble in his voice. He wasn't over the edge yet, but he was stressed, in pain and newly bonded, and he was definitely tipping.

Danny and Steve had fucked up. They'd been worrying about what Bucky might do, because he was
the most dangerous of all of them. They hadn't even considered the other Sentinel. They especially hadn't thought about how Goofier wouldn't see Steve as a peacemaker, but another threat.

In retrospect, thinking about that would probably have been a good idea.

"S'okay, Jimmy. He's a Sentinel. Not gonna hurt me," Less Goofy said. Normally, Danny knew from experience, Less Goofy would be able to use his bond with Goofier—Jimmy—to get him to step off. But the Guide was so out of it he was barely keeping his own shields intact, and he didn't even register when Danny brushed over his mind to check on him. He needed a CAT scan yesterday; he really didn't need to be trying to keep his Sentinel from going ballistic. If anything, Less Goofy's pain was riling his Sentinel up that much further. Jimmy was barely even listening to him.

"Hey, Bucky," Steve said, voice just a little tight. "It's good to see you. We're going to help you, I promise. But you need to stand down." He looked at the angry blond. "Both of you."

"No," Jimmy snarled at Steve. "Get out." He pushed his Guide, nearly sending the poor man careening off balance. The fact that Jimmy righted him immediately was the only reason Bucky didn't go for him. "I'm sorry!" Jimmy said, clearly stricken. He pulled his Guide to him, wrapping him in his good arm and glaring at Bucky and Steve as if they'd try to separate them.

"Steve," Danny said, measured, "maybe you should go check on the ladies outside. I'll be fine," he added, because he could feel Steve's screaming denial through their bond.

Steve's instinct as a Sentinel would be to protect his Guide and the Sentinel he imprinted on. Steve's instinct as a cop would be to protect Stark, the vulnerable civilian. But Steve was completely present in his head, and he also knew intellectually that as a Guide, Danny was safe. Steve was also definitely wise enough to realize his being there was making things worse.

Steve looked between Bucky and Jimmy, then gave Danny a single, stoic nod. He backed away until he was far enough to turn without risking Jimmy coming after him, then jogged back to the entrance.

"Hi, guys. I'm Tony. Welcome to the fucking disaster," Tony Stark said, peeking around Bucky's side. "You've met Bucky. Those two are Jim Street, currently being held back by Clint Barton. Who should have gone to the Facility like the other newly-bonded pair did. Just saying." It sounded like something he'd already brought up a couple times.

"We were trying to avoid them, Tony," Barton said tightly. "Maybe if you'd said there was another fucking Sentinel-Guide pair—!" He clenched his teeth in clear pain, leaning heavily against Street.

"You shouldn't be here!" Street gritted at Bucky. He was even more agitated now, snarling like a wolf.

Danny cursed himself for a fucking idiot for bringing Steve into this, then stepped in between Bucky and Street with his arms out, before Street actually rushed the other Sentinel. "This isn't your territory. Not either of yours," he said to them, remembering what his mom had told Bucky. He hoped talking would work; he didn't want to force his way into either Sentinel's mind if he didn't have to. "This is Tony Stark's territory. No one has a right to it except him, got it? You hear me?" Danny said more loudly. "This is not your territory. You both need to back the fuck down. Now."

Danny's attention was focused on Street, since he was the unknown quantity in this showdown, but he could see Bucky infinitesimally relaxing out of the corner of his eye. "That's it. Good job. We're all safe here. Nobody needs to get hurt."
"It's not safe," Street rumbled. "I don't want you here!" he yelled at Bucky. "Get away from my Guide!"

Bucky tensed up again.

"He's not interested in your Guide, Jimmy," Tony piped up, still mostly behind Bucky. "If he kills anyone it'll be you. But you're not going to do that, are you, Bucky?" he added quickly.

Bucky growled a little bit.

"Is that a 'yes', or 'no'?"

"Shh," Danny said to Tony, then took a breath. Yeah, it was going to be the hard way. "Jimmy, listen to me," he said, turning to face him completely. "Your Guide is safe. Bucky's a Sentinel. Sentinels don't hurt Guides, remember?" He heard Bucky's small, pained breath behind him and winced inwardly. He hadn't forgotten that the whole reason they were here was because a Sentinel had hurt Guides. But what Hydra had done to Bucky didn't make Danny's words less true. "This isn't your territory, Jimmy." He took a step closer, nudging at Street's shields. Since they were intact, it was easy to tell Street was another Alpha—it was like they’d started coming out of the woodwork—but not quite as powerful as Bucky or Steve. Worming his way through Street's shields into his mind wouldn't be impossible, but it wasn't exactly going to be easy, either. Danny wished he'd had more sleep.

He also wished to hell he wasn't going to have to do it. This wasn't his Sentinel, and it felt creepy as fuck going into someone else's mind without permission. Street's own Guide being right there made it worse. But Barton was just about incapacitated, and Street was trembling with adrenaline, on the verge of going for Bucky's throat. Danny was pretty sure they were out of other options.

"This isn't your territory, Jimmy," Danny repeated. He kept nudging, turned it into a push, like boring a whole with an awl. It didn't help that he had to do it as softly and gently as possible. But he didn't want to just smash Street's shields the way he had with Bucky, and he didn't want Street to realize what he was doing and start fighting him. It'd be great if Barton didn't notice either. Barton obviously didn't want Bucky and Street to fight, but that didn't mean he'd be thrilled about a strange Guide in his Sentinel's head.

Unfortunately, breaking through someone's mental shields as softly and gently as possible was a fucking bitch. It was also taking longer than Danny wanted.

He stepped closer to Street, making sure to keep eye contact and exuding whatever 'Listen To The Guide' authority he hoped he possessed. "Tony Stark owns the building, and he's not going to hurt you. Bucky's not going to hurt you either, as long you stop with this bullshit posturing." He kept burrowing, reminding himself that he needed a rapier here, not one of his own Sentinel's fucking grenades. And then he felt….

Yeah. There was somebody helping him. What the fuck.

It wasn't Barton. Barton was having enough trouble staying upright. He also wasn't as strong as Street, borderline Alpha at best. An uneven Sentinel-Guide pair wasn't a problem as long as the stronger one gave access. Street wasn't blocking his Guide at all—good on you, buddy—but Barton was too fucked up to use their bond. And if Barton tried to bust Street's shields right now, he'd probably pass out.

Which meant Danny had no idea who the fuck was helping him.
He was not, however, going to look a gift Guide in the psyche. Or whatever. He was more than happy to have someone chip carefully at Street's shields alongside him, especially when he could feel a tiny breech forming, like a mousehole in a wall. He pushed at it, still talking. "Look at your Guide, Jimmy. You see how much pain he's in? You gotta smell that, right? Feel it over your bond? You're hurting him, babe. I know how badly you want to protect him, but you're hurting him. He needs medical help, but he's not getting it because you're trying to pick a fight with the other Sentinel." Danny took a step closer, pushing with the other Guide against the break in Street's shields. They were making it larger, that much easier to exert his will through.

It was working: Street's attention was entirely on Danny now, as if there was no one else in the room.

"I know you don't want your Guide to be in pain, or keep him from getting help, Jimmy," Danny went on, speaking as calmly and deliberately as he could. At the same time, he used the hole in Street's shields to drive calm, calm, calm into his mind, like a benevolent railroad spike. "I know you love your Guide. You'd never hurt him. So you're going to calm down now. You're going to relax and stand down. Because everybody's safe in Tony Stark's territory. And all you really want to do is take care of your Guide."

Street relaxed, blinking slowly like he was thinking about going to sleep. He seemed faintly surprised, but too mellow to worry about it. "Clint?" he blinked at his Guide, as if he'd only really noticed him. "Are you okay?" His voice sounded normal, if a little rough.

"Yeah. I'm okay." Barton threw Danny a bleary look that lodged somewhere between gratitude and anger, then let Street pull him into a one-armed hug. He leaned his forehead on Street's shoulder as the Sentinel grounded himself on him. "Can we not do that again, please? You tried to take on the fucking Winter Soldier and my head is killing me."

"Sorry," Street said. He cupped the back of Barton's head, threading his fingers through the Guide's hair. He looked at Bucky, then his mouth twitched like he wanted to say something but didn't know what.

Danny's Steve came back in, Glock in its holster but with his hand over it. The doctor and nurse were behind him, which Danny knew Steve had done on purpose, in case Bucky or Street decided they weren't ready to throw in the towel. The two women immediately went to Street and Barton, leading them into an exam room and shutting the door.

"Everyone okay?" Steve asked, already using his senses to catalogue all of them.

"I'm fine," Tony said. "Though I'd appreciate it if you would let me go now," he added to Bucky. "Much as I've been enjoying the view, we need to help your Guide."

Bucky stepped aside, letting Tony out from behind him. He put his hand behind Tony's neck, then leaned in to take a few deep breaths of the skin just under Tony's ear. Tony put his arm around Bucky's back, murmuring softly to him. It was a lot like what a Guide would do.

Like...helping another Guide calm down a semi-feral Sentinel. But Tony Stark wasn't a Guide.

Steve gave Danny a curious glance, obviously feeling his confusion. Danny shrugged.

Tony patted Bucky's back and then pulled away, smiling up at him. He patted Bucky's cheek as well. "There you go. It's going to be fine."

Bucky didn't smile, but Danny remembered that softening in his eyes.
"Okay," Tony said, turning to Danny and Steve. "It was a long flight and I'm sure you're both tired, especially after that." He gestured vaguely at the place Barton and Street had been standing.

"Normally I'd show you to a guest suite and do the whole 'mi casa es su casa' thing. But I don't think Steve Rogers or Bucky can wait."

"No, that's fine," Danny said. He put his hand on Steve's arm, wanting the tactile comfort. "We came here to help. Let's do it."

Bucky nodded. He put his hand on the side of Danny's face, then Steve's, thanking them in a way that was easier than speaking.

Bucky reached for the door handle, but some animal scratched on the other side of the door before he could open it.

Bucky looked confused, but he dutifully pulled the door open. Danny was expecting Celeste or even Tigger—Maya would've knocked—but what came out was a remarkably ugly yellow dog, and an incongruously pretty white dove, head bobbing as he walked alongside him.

The four humans watched in mild shock as the dove and dog went to the room Street and Barton had gone into. The dog used his paw to scratch at that door too. Someone opened it, and they disappeared inside.

"So, that just happened," Tony said.

They went into Rogers' room. He was lying on the bed, completely still except for his breathing. If it wasn't for his ashen, drawn features, he could've been a male version of Aurora from *Sleeping Beauty*.

Celeste was lying on the floor with Abigail on her shoulder, and something dark between her front legs that vanished when she climbed to her feet.

The wolf went to Bucky, then sat on her haunches and cocked her head, letting her tongue loll.

Bucky's eyes widened, then he dropped to his knees and hugged her, whispering, "Sorry, sorry, sorry." The bee landed on his cheek and stayed for a couple seconds, as if she'd forgiven him for something too.

"He was zoning, and he shoved Lass—his wolf—when he came out of it," Tony explained. He looked relieved. "I wasn't sure she was coming back." He rubbed his forehead, grimacing a little.

"You all right?" Steve asked him.

Tony's head snapped up, but then he grinned. "Always." He looked at Rogers and his smile faded. "We should do this."

Bucky stood up immediately, and Celeste went to the far wall, giving the humans plenty of room.

A dark grey rat appeared on the bed and Tony immediately scooped him up and put him on his shoulder, like it was something he did all the time. "So, you guys were having a party in here while we were trying to prevent a war, huh?" he said to the animals, rat included. "I'd like to go on record as not approving of your priorities."

Celeste yawned.

Chapter End Notes

Jim Street as played by Alex Russell is, in my humble opinion, extremely goofy looking. Though he does have nice cheekbones and pretty brown eyes. He's from the TV show S.W.A.T., and included here because I am writing this for Darkmoore and I love her dearly. :D

Jim Street, aside from also being a James, is a sweet, well-intentioned, heroic dork with a tragic background and terrible self-preservation instincts. Which definitely puts him in good company.
"Tony," Danny said slowly, "everyone keeps saying you're a Guide 'cause you are one." He went closer, automatically going for proximity because it made his own abilities easier to use. "I can feel it." He could, now that he was nearer and paying attention. "The rat's your spirit animal. And you were helping me, weren't you? When I was calming the goofy-looking Sentinel down."

"Helping you?" Tony took a step back, clutching his rat. His eyes widened like Danny was going to take a swing at him. "I-I wasn't. I'm not a Guide," he said, sounding a little frantic. "I just…I wanted him to relax. That's all. I didn't do anything!"

Bucky slid in front of him.

"Whoops. Yeah, okay. Backing right up." Danny retreated, grabbing Steve's wrist and pulling him along with him. He sent him soothing thoughts before his Sentinel tried to fight Bucky and died.


"Oh, God." Tony stepped to Bucky's side so he could look at him. He clutched his rat to his chest with both hands, his face white. "Bucky, no. I'm not your Guide. Steve Rogers is your Guide." He looked helplessly at Danny. "What's going on? I don't understand." He cupped his rat in one hand and rubbed his forehead again, like he was in pain.

"Me neither." Danny looked at Bucky, who was giving off every protective vibe a Sentinel could, looking after his Guide. Only it was the wrong Guide. Danny carefully, gently nudged against Bucky's mind.

The bond with Steve was still there, still locked tight. Except it wasn't as strong as it used to be. It felt…less substantial, somehow. Eroding like rust.
But it hadn't broken, hadn't vanished. They could still fix this, Danny told himself fiercely, make it whole. Steve and Bucky would be all right.

There was something else, too, though. Not a bond yet but, the potential. Like an unlit match or a plant ready to surge from the ground. It was aimed at Tony like a magnet, and felt the same as what Danny remembered with Steve, after his Sentinel came online: when he hadn't bonded with him yet, but knew he could.

"You are Bucky's Guide," Danny said, soft with his abject astonishment. "Both you and Rogers."

Bucky nodded.

"That's impossible," Tony said. He tried to back up again, but there was nothing behind him except the wall. He winced and put his free hand to his head, then both hands when his rat vanished and reappeared on Rogers' bed. "What are you doing to me?" he said to Danny. "Stop. Stop it. It hurts. Cut it out!"

"I'm not doing anything," Danny said. "Tony, what's wrong?"

"Overload," Steve said, clipped, just as Tony started screaming.

Steve tried instinctively to grab Tony before he fell, but Bucky had superhuman reflexes and caught Tony first. Steve only managed to brush Tony's arm before Bucky roared and shoved him away. Steve hit the wall with an audible grunt then sat hard on the floor.

"Steve!" Tony was in clear, terrible distress, but Danny's Sentinel would always be his priority. He bolted to him, skidding the last bit of distance on his knees. "Steve! Are you okay?"

Steve looked a little dazed, but he nodded. His bond was spiky with pain, but God knew Danny had felt far worse from him and watched him get up right afterwards.

He patted Danny's arm clumsily. "Help him."

Danny nodded jerkily, already moving. He wanted to stay with his Sentinel, but poor Tony was still screaming in Bucky's arms.

Bucky was kneeling on the floor, clutching Tony to him, whispering 'Shh, shh," and rocking him like a child. His gaze snapped to Danny the second he moved, pleadingly wordlessly for help.

"Yeah, I got it. It's okay." Danny put his hands on Tony's head, shoved his way into his mind, and slammed shields around it like a vault made of Russian stacking dolls.

Tony gasped, then wrenched his head out of Danny's hands. He wrapped his arms around Bucky, clutching him and sobbing into his chest. "What's happening? I don't know what's happening."

Bucky bent close, holding Tony securely in his arms. He looked at Danny, deep gratitude clear in his eyes. Then he nuzzled Tony's hair, making a noise that reminded Danny of Celeste's whines.

"Everything's fine," Steve said behind him, speaking quietly. He sounded a little off, still. Then again the Winter Soldier had just shoved him into a wall. At least their bond felt fine. "Stark's a Guide. He had an empathic overload, but Danny shielded him. Everybody's okay." He was obviously talking to Street, explaining what just happened.

Danny rubbed Tony's back, using his bond at the same time to make sure his Sentinel was genuinely okay. Steve was bruised, but climbing to his feet. Thank God for that thick skull of his. "You had an
empathic overload," Danny said to Tony. "Like what you said happened to Rogers. I'm pretty sure your Guide abilities finished manifesting, but you didn't have shields. So you got the emotions of every unshielded person around you."

Tony sniffled, gulped, then pulled back enough to wipe his eyes. "Felt like the entire city."

"It was at least the building, most likely. Maybe some of the surrounding blocks," Danny said seriously. "You're an Alpha." Another fucking Alpha. What the hell. "You have to be, if you can do shit like breaking through a Sentinel's shields instinctively."

Tony's laugh was incredulous and more than a little crazy. "I don't know what I am. They told me I was barely Sensitive."

"I have to admit I don't know what the hell you are either," Danny said. He reached for Steve's hand and let his Sentinel haul him to his feet. Steve wrapped his arm around him and Danny leaned into him, his body and their bond at once. Bucky and Tony stayed on the floor, but neither of them seemed inclined to move.

Rogers hadn't moved either. Then again he was the one person in the room with no choice about it. Danny skimmed gently over Rogers' mind, trying to feel out what was happening in there, to hopefully know what to do about it. He felt guilty that Rogers was still waiting for help, but Tony would've gone into empathic overload either way. Better it happened now, in a way, than when Danny was trying to help Bucky.

As far as Danny could tell Rogers was all right—for a value of 'all right' that equaled 'being in a coma'. But Rogers' shields were solid and strong, and he wasn't circling the drain.

Still. He was in a coma, which wasn't good by any stretch of the imagination. They to get on with this, which meant Tony needed to be safe.

"Can you take over those shields I made, Tony?" Danny asked him. "It should be instinctive, just like I'm handing you something."

"I don't like being handed things," Tony said.

Danny would have rolled his eyes, expect for how he could tell Tony was telling the truth. Not to mention Tony was on the quivering edge of a breakdown. "Can you take them from me, then?" Danny asked as gently as he could. "Like, taking a ball. Just cup it in your hands."

Tony nodded. He closed his eyes and pulled in a breath, and then Danny could feel the control of the shields shift. They were Tony's now; Danny could let go and nothing bad would happen. "Is that… Did I do it?"

"Yeah, yeah, you did great." Danny nodded. "You can reinforce them, too. Or make them thinner, which I don't recommend right now. I imagine it like Silly Putty sometimes."

"Lego," Tony said distantly, eyes still closed. He concentrated, and suddenly his shields weren't just strong, it was like Tony had buried himself under a mountain.

"What the fuck do you think Lego is made of?" Danny demanded, gaping at him. "You're, like, NORAD in there. What did you even do?"

Tony blinked at him. "You said reinforce them."

"If that's 'reinforcing' …" Danny didn't even know how to finish that thought. "Never mind. You
okay? 'Cause Rogers still needs help."

Tony nodded quickly. "Yeah, sure. I'm fine."

He didn't look 'fine', but he did look better. That would have to be good enough.

"Great," Danny said on a sigh that felt like it deflated him entirely. "Let's do this."

Steve let go of him, backed up a step. "I'll guard the door."

"Yeah, sure. Of course." A Sentinel guarding his Guide while the Guide did stuff was such a given it was used as a plot device, like cellphones never working in the woods. Steve had done it so many times Danny barely noticed him wandering off anymore. He still thought it was really cute, though. Not that he would ever tell Steve that.

"I'll be right outside." Steve kissed Danny's temple, then left.

Danny sat back on the floor because Bucky and Tony were already there. Also it was nice not to be standing. Christ on a crutch, he was tired. He had a brief, idle fantasy about just keeling over and taking a nap. "Bucky, you need to be present, if we're going to help your Guide. Will you let me pull you back?"

Bucky nodded, but he bit his lip, looking concerned. Hurt? he signed.

Danny blinked very slowly instead of smacking his palm over his face. It was, indeed, possible for a feral Sentinel to go more deeply feral, if they continued to be terribly stressed. Case in fucking point. Thank God Bucky hadn't dropped too deep to use language at all. Clara had worked with Sentinels so feral they had global aphasia. None of her stories about that were good.

"No, I won't hurt you," Danny said, repeating Bucky's word so Tony could follow. Danny shook his head. "Believe me, I never wanted to hurt you. What happened before was an accident. And I'm really sorry. I promise, I won't ever do that again."

Bucky looked unsure, but he nodded. He shifted Tony out of his arms, placing him gently on the floor. He looked at Danny again. What? he signed.

"What do you need to do?" Danny asked.

Bucky nodded. What?

"Nothing," Danny said. "You don't have to do anything. Just relax and let me in. Don't fight it. I know it's easier, being down deep where you are. But Steve needs you. You have to be present again."

Bucky nodded. He went from kneeling to sitting cross-legged on the floor and put his hands on his knees. He breathed deeply and closed his eyes.

Danny scooched closer, then put his hand on Bucky's nape. The contact always made it easier. "Relax, babe. I swear this won't hurt. I'm just going to pull you back, that's all. Get you present again so you can help your Steve." He closed his eyes as well, breathing deeply and steadily until he was as centered as he was going to get. He brushed over Bucky's shields, which were as strong as ever, then carefully pushed, like rapping lightly on a door.

Nothing happened.
Danny cracked one eye open. Bucky definitely *seemed* like he was trying to make this work. He was calm and still, taking long, deep breaths. The only sign of potential struggle was the hint of tension around his eyes.

"Uh, Bucky?" Danny opened both his eyes, then nudged him gently with his foot. "You okay there? 'Cause you're still locked down tight."

Bucky opened his eyes, looking at both of them in helpless confusion. *Trying*, he signed. He swallowed, then closed his eyes again, clenching his fists as he went back to the deep, even breathing.

"What's he saying?" Tony asked. "Why isn't it working?"

"I don't know why it's not," Danny replied tersely. "Shh."

Celeste came over, then ducked her head so it was even with Bucky's, offering support. He found her ruff without opening his eyes, then gripped it with one hand.

"All right, we're gonna do this now, okay?" Danny licked his lips, then concentrated and pushed harder at Bucky's shields. But it was like using a teaspoon to dig through a solid concrete wall. "You gotta work with me, here. You're still fighting. You need to stop."

Bucky shook his head in vehement denial. He gritted his teeth, made a noise of effort and frustration, then looked at Danny in fear. He let go of Celeste. *Help*, he signed. *Can't. Won't work. Trying, trying, trying.*

"What's he *saying*?" Tony said again.

"He's trying. It won't work," Danny translated. "It's like he's stuck or something. I don't get it."

Bucky made another frustrated noise, only louder. He put his hands on his head, fingers curved like claws. It looked as if he was prepared to pry his skull off to get inside.

"Whoa!" Tony grabbed Bucky's wrists, pulling Bucky's hands away from his head. "Okay, that's a bad idea. How 'bout we skip the home surgery, all right? You can do this, Bucky. I know you can."

He slid his grip from Bucky's wrists to his hands, then held them in his own.

Celeste gave a tiny yip, like she agreed, but Bucky shook his head. His eyes were big and liquid, and he yanked his hands out of Tony's. *Broken*, he signed. *Broken Steve. Broken me.* He swallowed, then turned his head to look up at Rogers' face. Abigail was perched on Rogers' forehead, like the world's tiniest sentry. *Steve needs new Sentinel. Not me. Hurt Steve. Not safe. Broken.*

"He's saying he's broken, and he broke Rogers too," Danny said to Tony, wincing. "Rogers needs a new Sentinel. Bucky's broken and will hurt him."

Bucky nodded.

"That's bullshit," Tony said.

"He's right. You're not broken," Danny said. Even though yes, he had used the exact term for the poor fucked-up Sentinel himself. That was different, though. Danny had meant the kind of broken that could be fixed; Bucky didn't. "You got fucked up by Hydra, but you're not broken. You're getting better, even. But, you gotta drop your shields. We can't help Steve if you don't."

*I know! I know! I know!* Bucky signed, still uncannily crisp despite his fury. *Help, Danny!*
"I am!" Danny said. "I don't want to smash your shields again, okay? And I don't know what...." He stopped, then looked at Tony. "Actually, yeah. I do. What if we do it together?" he asked him. "The way you helped me with Street before?"

Bucky's eyes widened, then he nodded eagerly. He took Tony's closer hand. Please, Tony, he signed, finger spelling his name.

"Please, Tony," Danny translated.

Celeste elbowed her way past Danny and licked Tony's cheek.

"Thanks," Tony said to her, wiping his face. He looked back at Danny, then at Bucky. "I don't know how. I don't know what I did before. I didn't even know that I'd done anything."

"That's okay," Danny said. "You did it instinctively, before. Just do that again."

Tony drummed his fingers on his chest as he thought about it, broadcasting his agitation. Danny didn't speak, kept his face neutral despite his concern, letting Tony work through his obvious fear.

"Okay," Tony said finally, the way Danny knew he would. If he was really Bucky's Guide there had never been another choice. "But you have to promise me that you won't let me hurt him."

No hurt, Bucky signed. My Guide. He pushed at Celeste's chest, nodding his thanks as she retreated to sit by the wall. Then he took Tony's hand again.

"He said you're his Guide, you won't hurt him," Danny said.

Tony gave a wan, bloodless smirk. "Famous last words." But he let Danny take his free hand, and gripped it tight.

"Just close your eyes and breathe," Danny said. "You want to help Bucky. Just think about that."

Tony nodded, and closed his eyes.

Just a few days ago, Danny had boasted to himself that, if necessary, he could force Bucky to be present like dragging a toddler from a playdate. He was so glad he hadn't said that out loud.

Because, sure, he could do that. He could do that right now. He could also break his word and end up with Bucky screaming on the floor again. No, thanks.

So back to the rapier it was. Or more like a teaspoon. Maybe a spork. Scrapping away at shields thick as the Great Wall of China, with Bucky on the other side trying to remember where the fuck he put the door.

"You with me, Tony? You okay?" Danny murmured. He could feel Tony's hand in his, warm and calloused and slightly damp. And his presence as a Guide, like the psychic equivalent of a symphony with canon accompaniment and full fireworks display. But no scraping alongside his own.

Tony grunted something affirmative and his grip on Danny's hand tightened a little. And then there it was: Tony's rapier teaspork finally coming to help him.

Well, okay, no. Tony didn't help Danny. Because as soon as he psychically touched Bucky's shields, they opened for him. Easy as a sliding door. Tony glided through.

Tony; not Danny. When Danny tried to follow it was like a bird hitting a window.
"Ow! Fuck!" Danny jerked back in real life, despite how the pain was all in his head. Then he sent a ton of reassurance to Steve before his Sentinel kicked the door down. Danny gave his head a quick shake, resettling his brains. He'd managed to rebound out of Bucky's mind entirely. Oops. "Tony, you okay?"

"No idea," Tony said, tension squeezing his voice. He tightened his grip on Danny's hand again. "It's dark in here. I mean, my eyes are closed, but...it's like, extra dark. What do I do?"

"Everything's fine," Danny soothed. "That's just 'cause he's feral, Tony. It's all right. You're doing great." He pulled Bucky's and Tony's hands together, then wormed out of their grip, linking their fingers instead. "You got this, Tony, just like you did before with Street. Bucky's waiting for you. Just find him and bring him home."

Tony swallowed. "Yeah, okay. Never done this before, but it's fine. No problem." There was a line of nervous sweat running down his temple, but his breathing was still steady, if a little fast. "Don't let me hurt you, Bucky," he said to him.

Bucky couldn't answer, but he gently squeezed Tony's hands.

"You say that now...." Tony muttered, but then fell silent. Danny could practically feel him concentrating, like a palpable force in the room. And then Tony gasped. "Bucky?"

Bucky grunted in confirmation. There was sweat on his forehead too, now, his eyelids screwed up in effort.

"You're okay, Bucky. You don't need to fight. That's your Guide, right? Let him help," Danny said. It felt very strange, calling Tony Bucky's Guide when his Guide was comatose on the bed next to them. But Danny wasn't about to deny reality, no matter how impossible it appeared to be.

"Yeah, that's it. That's it, sweetheart," Tony said, voice tight with exertion. "Come on, we're doing this. This is great—"

Bucky made a sound that hit between triumph and pain, then heaved himself up to his knees and yanked Tony into his arms. He held him tight, trembling and gulping air like he'd just finished a fight.

"Welcome back, honey," Tony said. "You did great. I know how hard that was. But you're here. You made it. I'm so proud of you." He rubbed Bucky's back, petted his hair, tilted his head so Bucky could scent him. It was as if Tony had been Bucky's Guide for years.

"Thank you," Bucky whispered, breath shuddering. "That was...really hard."

"You're welcome," Tony said. "I know it was. But it's okay, now. It's all good. We can fix Steve. Nobody's going to be broken." He looked at Danny over Bucky's shoulder, eyes pleading for that to be true.

Danny nodded, because what the hell else could he do? He patted Bucky on the shoulder. "Glad you're back, babe."

Bucky nodded his thanks, then lolled his forehead onto Tony's shoulder. He took a few long, deep breaths. Danny thought he was just centering himself, until he raised his head and shoved his hair out of his eyes. "I still...can't open the bond," he said. His words were slow and halting, a legacy of having retreated so far into his mind. Danny wished they had time to take him to the spirit plane again, let him rest.
"How can I help him?" Tony asked Danny.

Danny bit back the immediate I have no fucking clue, despite its accuracy. "I'm not sure," he said. "But I think if you do what you did before, wanting it to work... That's been enough so far, right? No reason to think it won't be again."

Other than the very large difference between going through someone's shields and fucking around with a bond. But, whatever. It'd be fine.

"I can think of a few reasons," Tony said dryly. He was still hugging Bucky, and he slid his fingers into the hair at the back of Bucky's head. "Are we, like, prying this thing open? Or unsticking it? Or is it more like a kinked hose?"

Danny blinked, but Bucky grimaced.

"Maybe... all of that?" he said.

Tony frowned. "Does it hurt? That sounds like it should hurt."

"Not me," Bucky said softly. Because clearly zoning every two minutes wasn't at all problematic. "Just Steve."

"Right," Tony said unhappily. "Let's do something about that." He squared his shoulders. "You ready?"

Bucky nodded.

"Okay. Just... do what I did before. Whatever that was. No problem." Tony closed his eyes again.

Danny waited, sitting near them on the floor like an unpopular kid at kindergarten. His Steve was plucking at their bond: anxious, curious and a little bored. Danny sent back more reassurance, which at least seemed to help.

From the outside, it looked like Tony and Bucky weren't doing anything at all, other than holding each other like long-lost boyfriends. The only evidence of a struggle was in their breathing. But whatever they were doing, it wasn't working. Danny had experienced closed bonds before; he could tell. It shouldn't have taken even this long to open it again.

"How's it going?" Danny asked.

They pulled back from each other. Tony was panting. Bucky winced and shook his head.

"It's not." Tony huffed in weary frustration. He scrubbed his face. "It's all..." He looked at Bucky helplessly. "I can't describe it. It's just—"

"Dying," Bucky said.

"It's not dying!" Tony exclaimed. "It's not," he said to Danny, more than a little desperately. "Steve's... The bond's there. It is. I know it is. I didn't break it. I didn't do that." He looked terrified that he somehow had. "I lo--Steve's my friend. I wouldn't've done that."

Bucky cupped Tony's face in his hands. "You didn't. You didn't hurt him, Tony. That was me," he said, grief in his voice. "It's... The bond's sick. It's coming apart. I can barely feel it anymore." He turned to Danny, stricken. "I want it back. Help me get it back. Please!"

Danny nodded quickly. "Yeah, yeah, of course. We're doing that. We're doing that right now," he
said, shoving aside how scared he was, how he was so out of his fucking depth here he needed a submarine. He was in the Mariana Trench of out of his depth-ness. "You two do your thing. I'm coming to help."

Tony held Bucky's hands again, then took a breath. "Ready?" he asked Bucky, who nodded.

Danny waited until they closed their eyes again, then took a moment to center himself and psychically eased his way in alongside them.

It'd only been a few minutes since Danny had last checked Roger's and Bucky's bond, but it was still a tremendous relief to find it. It was getting weaker, though. Dying, just like Bucky had said. Danny had the horrific certainty that Bucky and Rogers had days left, at best, before their bond deteriorated completely. He had no idea what would happen after that, but he really didn't want to find out.

But Bucky's bond with Rogers was only one of two.

The second bond, the one that held Tony as its North Star, was still just a potential, but so, so close to realization. It felt inevitable, inexorable, like it would happen regardless of whether Bucky aided it or not. But bonding with Tony would destroy Bucky's bond with Rogers. At least, Danny couldn't imagine any other outcome.

…Except one: The outcome that depended on the tendril forking from Bucky's almost-bond with Tony, that was reaching towards Rogers like a new branch of a tree.

Danny sat there for a beat, because what the hell? But the fork in the bond was there, nascent but undeniable. His bond with Rogers was eroding because this one was waiting to replace it.

What the hell, seriously.

Danny expanded his awareness until he could feel Tony's mind along with Bucky's. Tony had tunneled out of his mountain fortress of shielding, so Danny could get in and look around.

And Tony had a potential bond too. It was just as near to completion, and straining towards Bucky like the tides to the moon. And part of it was reaching for Rogers.

"I know what's wrong!" Danny exclaimed in realization. "I know how to fix it. You need to touch Steve Rogers too."

Tony blinked his eyes open, staring at Danny. "What?"

But Bucky immediately flipped back the covers, exposing Rogers' arm. Bucky let go of one of Tony's hands so he could take Rogers' instead, making a chain.

He gasped like he'd just been stabbed. "Tony…!"

Tony smacked his free hand over Rogers' wrist. "Oh my God," he breathed, eyes wild, "Bucky, what—"

That was as far as he got before Bucky dropped Tony's hand, wrapped his fingers around the base of Tony's skull, and kissed him.

Tony made a startled squeak that reminded Danny of his spirit rat. Then he clutched Bucky's shoulder and kissed him back just as fervently, both of them still holding Rogers.

The potential bond flared into new, brilliant existence, like a tree bursting from the earth or a match
exploding into flame. Bucky's original bond with Steve, closed and eroding, was obliterated and replaced in the same moment, just as strong and solid as it had been. A sea change to something new and perfect, connecting all three of them.

Bucky's bonds with Tony and Rogers were both the same now: like the sturdy, splitting trunk of a giant, ancient tree. It felt exactly right, smooth and shining like glass in the sun.

Tony's bond with Bucky was just as sound and pure, but his bond with Rogers was weaker, more ethereal. It reminded Danny of what his bond had been like with Steve, before they'd finally committed fully to each other. And there was that same sense of inevitability there, as if all Tony and Rogers needed was time.

But they were both Guides. It should have been impossible. It was impossible. Except for how it'd just happened in front of him.

Danny was still reeling from that, so he kind of missed it when the initial euphoria of Tony, Bucky's—and Rogers', holy fuck—new bond faded and the empathic sharing truly began. Which meant he was caught completely off guard when every reason Bucky had shut down his bond with Rogers in the first place hit Tony like an avalanche.

Tony jerked back from Bucky, then clapped his hands to his head. His eyes filled with tears. "Oh my God," he moaned. "Oh, my God. Bucky…!"

Bucky yanked his hands away, his expression slack with horror. Then Danny felt him reaching for his new bond, knew exactly what he was planning. Danny gritted his teeth, prepared to fight Bucky tooth and nail to keep the bond open—

And then Tony shouted, "NO!" and threw himself at Bucky with such desperation that only Bucky's strength kept him from being tackled to the floor.

Tony engulfed him in his arms, holding him so tight it looked painful. "No, no, no, no. Don't do that. Don't leave. Don't leave again." Tony had his eyes squeezed shut, though Danny didn't know if it was from Bucky's pain or Tony's fear of Bucky retreating; Danny could feel both like a maelstrom.

Danny channeled Bucky's emotions like diverting a river. They were still there, but no longer overpowering. Tony copied Danny instinctively, protecting himself.

"Stay here. Please," Tony said. "Stay with us. It's all right. It's all right. You're not hurting us. We're okay. It's okay. See?" he rasped, as his anguish faded. "It's okay. We're okay. You don't have to leave."

"Bucky?"

Danny, Tony and Bucky snapped their heads up like startled meerkats. Celeste rocketed to her four paws, barking. Abigail started a wide, joyous loop of the room.

Rogers was slowly sitting up, one hand on his head, staring at all of them. "Tony?" He blinked at him. "I can…. You…"

"Steve!" Bucky pulled away from Tony, then scrambled up and pounced on Rogers, hugging him so fiercely he nearly toppled them both off the far side of the bed. He clutched Rogers as tightly as Tony had him, shaking with relief and remorse. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he said, over and over again.

Danny and Tony climbed to their feet. Tony looked like all he wanted in the world was to go to his
bond partners, but he hung back instead. He shoved his hands in his pockets, keeping his gaze on the
floor.

Bucky was crying, still apologizing brokenly. Rogers kept telling him it was all right; he understood;
he forgave him. Danny didn't think Bucky could even hear it though his self-blame.

Rogers seemed to get that too, because he stopped talking and kissed Bucky instead, trying to show
him instead of make him listen. He flooded their bond with forgiveness like a tidal wave.
Forgiveness and acceptance, and so much love Danny could feel the resonance of it in his own heart.
He only hoped Bucky would believe it.

It wasn't just Rogers. Tony was sending the same emotions too. Only more subdued, like an echo.
Tentative, as if he wasn't sure it would be welcome.

Tony didn't think he'd be welcome at all. Danny didn't need his abilities to know that: It was clear in
the thin, wistful smile on Tony's face. Like he was looking at something he wanted more than
anything, but knew he could never have.

Bucky and Rogers must have felt it, because they broke their kiss then turned to look at Tony.

Rogers held out his hand. "Come here," he said quietly. Bucky was wiping his eyes, but he nodded.

Tony went to the bed, his mind full of uncertainty, longing and hope. Bucky shifted enough to give
him room, never letting go of Rogers. Rogers kept a hand on the back of Bucky's neck, but he was
the one who pulled Tony close and kissed him.

Tony held himself back for an instant, as if wasn't sure this was real. Then he melted into the kiss,
humming in cautious joy at the back of his throat. Tony's bond with Rogers solidified, becoming as
strong and true as his bond with Bucky, and Bucky's bond with both of them. An equilateral triangle,
bright and pure and shining.

Danny eased his way out of Bucky's and Tony's minds when he started feeling like a voyeur. They
still had things to work out, he was sure—not the least of which was what the fuck had even
happened. But Rogers was still kissing Tony, and Bucky was hugging Tony and nuzzling behind
Rogers' ear, and Danny was comfortably sure they didn't need him.

The last thing Danny heard was Rogers saying, "Tony, is that your rat?" right before he shut the
door.

Chapter End Notes

Things are probably going to get a bit dark in the next chapter or two. But everything
will end well, I promise. And the darkness is all in Bucky's past. His future is full of
love and healing, promise. ♥
Danny woke to the smell of pizza and Steve caressing the back of his neck. He rubbed his face, blinking groggily up at his Sentinel. He remembered collapsing on the couch after the British ceiling guy directed them to the guest suite, but not closing his eyes.

Then again, he'd been pretty wiped after helping Tony and the Super Soldiers—which sounded like a really stupid band name—and that was on top of not sleeping during the overnight flight to the Mainland. "What time is it?" he asked.

It sounded more like Watimzit?, but Steve understood him anyway. "Nearly two PM," he said. He'd crouched so they were face-to-face. Danny would never get tired of that big, beautiful smile. "I didn't want to wake you, but I wanted to make sure you'd be able to sleep tonight. And you should eat anyway."

Danny nodded. He wanted to just go back to sleep, but Steve was right. And he was starving. "Is that pizza?"

"Yeah. J.A.R.V.I.S. had it delivered." Steve took Danny's hand and pulled him to his feet. "He's the British guy who's been talking to us. He's an artificial intelligence. Stark built him."

"Really?" Danny stared at him. "That guy's a robot?" he asked as he followed Steve into the full-
sized kitchen. "I feel like we're in a science-fiction movie."

"I know what you mean." Steve handed him an open bottle of some New York craft brewery Danny had never heard of, then went to the counter and dragged a big, Jersey-style pizza slice onto a plate. "Go ahead and sit. You're way more tired than I am."

"Thanks." Danny wasn't going to argue, especially since Steve could actually sense his exhaustion. He grinned in happy surprise when Steve slid the plate in front of him. "Mozz and sauce?"

"The only way you like it." Steve grinned back.

"I like plenty of kinds of pizza," Danny protested. "Just because pineapple is an abomination to all pizzakind…." He rolled his eyes when Steve smirked, very aware his lover was riling him up. "You're an idiot."

Steve just grinned wider. "You love me."

"Yes. Yes I do." Danny took a drink of his beer. It was good. Then he rolled his eyes again when Steve plunked a fork and a bowl of salad next to his plate. "One day without something green really won't kill me."

"You don't know that for sure, Danny," Steve said, with enough earnestness that Danny had no idea if he meant it or was just being an asshole or not. "Besides, the salad's good."

"Salad is never good," Danny said, just to be an asshole too. He ate it anyway, because he loved his Sentinel and did, actually, want to be healthy. It wasn't half bad. "So, since I know you were listening, how's the new Guide-Sentinel-Guide-What the fuck trio doing?"

"Fine," Steve said, not even trying to deny it. "Rogers was released from medical and the three of them went to Stark's penthouse. I stopped listening when they started having bonding sex."

"And thank you so much for sharing that information," Danny said dryly.

"You're welcome." Steve brought his own pizza and salad to the table, then got himself a beer and sat down. "We should call your mom."

Danny nodded. It'd be great to see her again, but he knew that wasn't what Steve meant. "Yeah. If anyone will know what the hell happened with Bucky getting two Guides, it'll be her."

"Yeah," Steve agreed. "I tried looking it up while you were sleeping, but there wasn't much. There was a lot of hokey, new-agey stuff, and a couple sites that mentioned it but said it was a myth. I did find three journal articles about it, but you needed a subscription to read them."

"At least that means it's a thing, though," Danny said. He'd dutifully finished his salad and started on his pizza slice. "Wow, this is really great."

"Thank J.A.R.V.I.S., he recommended it," Steve said.


"You are welcome, Detective," the A.I. responded, startling the crap out of him. "My apologies. I didn't intend to scare you."

"No problem," Danny said, because J.A.R.V.I.S. sounded sincere. Which was wild. "I feel bad that Chin Ho and Kono don't get to see this place."
"I'm sure Stark will let them stay here when they next get time off," Steve said easily. "He owes you."

Danny wasn't sure how true that was, considering in the end Danny hadn't really done all that much. Then again, he supposed running interference on Street and Bucky's standoff was worth a couple days in this kind of luxury. He'd have to ask. "Hey," he said, after his last mouthful of the remarkably good pizza, "how long do you think we can milk this, before we have to go back? I was thinking we could get some tickets—"

Steve put up a hand to stop him, then grimaced. "Street's coming here."

"What? Why?" Danny stood up, worried. "He's not interested in starting round two, is he?"

Steve shook his head. "He's agitated, but he's present. And this isn't about territory."

"Thank God." Danny took his empty dishes to the sink, then washed his hands. He stretched out his awareness, but while it was easy to find the other Sentinel's mind, with his shields up Danny couldn't tell what he was feeling. Steve hadn't mentioned Clint, but if his Guide had gone South then Street would be with him, not wandering around the building. "What's he want, then?"

Steve shrugged, then gathered his own dishes. "I'll ask him when he gets here." He brought them to the sink, washed his hands, and then opened the door in time for Danny to hear the excited ding! of the elevator at the end of the hall.

Street was still in the clothes he'd been wearing in the infirmary, though now he had some kind of high-tech cast thing stretching from his elbow to the base of his knuckles. He was definitely present, just like Steve had said, but he looked anxious and exhausted. He had shadows like wounds under his soft brown eyes, and his bruises everywhere else stood out like stains.

His mouth twitched in a shy smile when he saw Steve, then he nodded his thanks when Steve stood aside to let him in.

"How's Clint?" Steve asked, closing the door. "Go ahead and sit down. Do you want something to drink? I know you can't have alcohol with the painkillers, but we've got milk and juice, or I can make coffee. We have pizza too, if you're hungry."

"Just some water, thanks," Street said. He looked at the food, nostrils flaring. "And a slice, if that's okay?"

"Sure." Danny went to get it, cutting the pizza into smaller pieces, so it'd be easy to eat with one hand.

Street sat, leg jiggling a little bit while he waited for Steve to bring him the water. He seemed unbearably young like this, without the armor of aggression he'd had earlier. Young and confused, like a fledgling newly boot ed out of the nest. It made Danny suddenly certain that the dove was Street's spirit animal, instead of the ugly dog. Doves were supposed to be gentle and cuddly, and of course they were associated with peace. All of which Danny figured would suit Street perfectly when he wasn't out of his mind.

Also, the way the bird's head bobbed when it walked was goofy as hell.

"Clint's sleeping," Street said, then thanked Steve for the water. "They're keeping him overnight, but the docs said he'll be fine." He grimaced a little. "He feels…muddy though. Is that normal?"

"Yes," Danny said simply, putting the plate in front of him. "That'll clear up as he heals. Just, try not
to purposely use your bond too much. Other than the regular flow stuff, I mean. Like, the emotions
going back and forth," he added, because Street looked confused and scared, like he'd been giving
his Guide brain damage just by existing. "Clint will be fine." Danny gestured at Steve with his
thumb. "This guy gets concussions like it's a hobby, so I know whereof I speak."

"Like you've never gotten knocked out," Steve said to him.

"Not talking about me," Danny said cheerily. "So, Jimmy. What's on your mind?" he asked, because
Street had downed the water like he was dying of thirst, but he was just poking at the pizza, looking
guilty and miserable.

"Most people call me 'Street'," he said, mostly speaking to his plate.

"Are you informing us of that? Or do you want us to call you that?" Danny asked him.

Street opened his mouth then closed it again. "Whatever you want, I guess."

"What's wrong, James?" Steve asked, not unkindly. He was leaning against the counter with his
hands resting on the edge on either side of him. Over their bond he felt curious and a little concerned,
but there was no hostility, despite his proximity to a near-stranger Sentinel. It reminded Danny of
how calm and gracious Steve had been with Bucky.

"I wanted to apologize for threatening you," Street said. He lifted his head like it took an effort,
giving Danny and Steve his wide, doe-eyes. "I know it was...I know it's natural." He grimaced
again, like he figured it was anything but. "But, this isn't my territory, like you said. And, you were
just trying to help. I shouldn't've turned on you too."

"Thanks," Steve said, a little surprised. "But, it's fine. You and your Guide were both injured, and
you were just acting on instinct. Any Sentinel in your position would've done the same."

"Hell, if anything we should apologize to you," Danny said. "We were dumb enough to bring a third
Sentinel in to an already volatile situation." He bit back the urge to apologize for going into Street's
mind, because if he hadn't the kid would likely be a bloody smear on the infirmary floor. Bucky had
unbelievable restraint, considering he was fully feral at the time. Some of that came from Hydra,
Danny was miserably certain, but he was sure most of it was just Bucky's nature. He was a good,
gentle man who tried never to hurt anyone. Not even snot-nosed, newly-hatched Sentinels, flapping
around like angry baby birds.

Street shrugged. "I started it." He looked miserable, then put his elbows on the table and his face in
his hands. "I don't know what I'm doing," he said. It sounded like a terrible confession. "I wasn't
even a Sentinel 'til a couple weeks ago. I thought..." He made an awful non-laugh that reminded
Danny of Rogers on the spirit plane, after Danny had shown him Bucky's mind. "I couldn't bond
with anyone. LAPD was trying to find me a temp Guide, but none of 'em were compatible. They
were bringing in someone from Las Vegas. But it was like, a last resort, you know? I met Clint by
accident, 'cause we were called in to the hostage situation right before the Avengers showed up." He
smirked that awful non-laugh again. "I was about to be put on Administrative Leave. That's how
fucked up I was. I was probably a few days away from a Sentinel mental hospital."

"Wellness Center," Danny filled in for him.

"Wellness Center," Street parroted dutifully. He took a breath. "Clint was...It was like a miracle, you
know? It was right. It just felt right. And, he's amazing. I'm so lucky he found me. But, I'm just a
cop. I can't... Clint and I haven't even finished bonding yet. And I got him hurt. My Guide. I
couldn't protect him." Street dropped his hands, but only to lift his head enough to scrub his face.
"Something's wrong with me. I know that. I mean, who the hell only comes online at 27?"

Steve and Danny looked at each other.

"Bucky Barnes," Danny said. "Well, I don't know if he was 27," he amended when Street's head snapped up. "But he was late too."

"You mean, the Winter Soldier?" Street asked. "The guy I wanted to fight?"

"Yeah, that's him," Danny said. "But that was the codename Hydra gave him. He doesn't go by that anymore."

"Oh. Right." Street nodded unhappily. "Sorry."

"I just came online a few weeks ago too," Steve said. "And I'd only been classified as a Carrier. First one in my family."

"Really? Wow." Street looked more curious than hopeless now, which was nice. "I was classified as Latent. I didn't know anyone came online that late."

Danny shrugged. "It's rare, but it happens. Steve didn't know what he was doing either, you know," he went on gently. "No one expected him to be a Sentinel, so he was never trained. He had to learn everything all at once. It wasn't easy."

"If it wasn't for Danny I'd probably be crazy or dead," Steve said, then moved closer to Danny and put his arm around him, feeling Danny's distress at the idea. "I don't know if I would've had trouble finding a temporary Guide the way you did, but the first person who even knew I was a Sentinel was Danny, when he pulled me out of a sensory overload."

"And, you know, your Guide's an Avenger," Danny added. "It's his job to be in danger, just like a cop. You can't expect to protect him from everything. Hell, he wouldn't want you to."

"Believe me, I know how much you want to keep him safe all the time," Steve said. "Danny's a cop too. The one time I went feral was when he got injured. But it's his choice, to be out there with me. It's been hard, but I've accepted that I can't always control what happens. I can just do my best and hope it's enough."

That…was very pretty bullshit, because Danny had seen exactly how well Steve generally 'accepted' that he couldn't just wrap Danny in armored bubble wrap and keep him safe every single bit of forever. And it was 'not at all'. Not even a tiny bit. But it was obvious that Street needed the absolution, because he was hanging on Steve's every word, looking slightly less waxen and squished by guilt.

Danny sent Steve his awareness that what he'd said was bullshit, and his gratitude that he was helping the baby-bird Sentinel, even if it meant lying.

Steve was affronted Danny was doubting his sincerity. Which was hilarious.

There was a reason Danny kept getting stuck on the bird imagery, though. And it wasn't just how easy it was to imagine Street getting booted out of a nest by a giant, goofy-looking dove. It was….

It was the dove. "Your spirit animal's the white dove," Danny said.

Street blinked at him. "…Yeah?" he looked worried. "Is that bad?"
"No," Danny shook his head quickly. "It's not bad. It's just a weird coincidence. Steve's spirit animal is white too."

"So is Bucky's," Steve said. He looked at Danny. "So?"

"So, I have no idea," Danny said. "So, probably nothing." Most likely nothing, but...But he was a detective; he didn't really believe in coincidences. And something kept niggling at him. "Except, white animals in general are pretty rare. Even spirit white animals. And you also said that Street and Bucky both smelled like you, right?" he said to Steve.

Steve nodded. "You figured that was just a Sentinel thing."

"It's not," Street said quietly, shaking his head. "I noticed it too. But...There are a couple Sentinel-Guide pairs, where I—where I used to work. And they don't smell like me at all. I also...." His mouth curved in an uncertain half-smile. "I feel like I know you. You and Bucky. Like...." He put his hand on the back of his neck, looking away. "I don't know. But, it was like...it felt wrong to fight you. Even when I was doing it. I wanted to stop but I couldn't."

"I know what you mean," Steve nodded again. "I don't work with other Sentinels, but the few I've met just get my back up. I can get along with them, but I don't like it. But Bucky I had no problem with. Or you. It felt like I already knew you both."

"That's practically a declaration of love, coming from him," Danny said.

Street grinned, but a moment later it turned shy. "Could...." He hesitated, rubbed his nose. "Would it be okay...."

Steve rolled his eyes, but it was affectionate. He stepped forward and opened his arms. "Come here."

Street stood up and hugged him, and Danny got to watch another Sentinel imprint on his boyfriend.

God, Street was so young. Which was ridiculous to think, because Danny was pretty sure he was almost exactly Bucky's physical age, if far from his chronological one. And it wasn't like Danny and Steve were that much older. But—for example—Street didn't dab his tongue discreetly so much as lick a stripe up Steve's ear like a puppy. And he was really as goofy as a baby bird, and hugging Steve like a brother and....

And.

And Steve said Street and Bucky smelled like him. And Street agreed with that. And Bucky said Danny's Steve smelled like him too.

And Steve, who had a hard time with other humans in general, let alone Sentinels, had no problem letting Bucky sprawl all over him. And Bucky, who was feral and freaked out at the time, still had no problem sprawling all over Steve.

And now there was Street, who Steve would probably let sprawl on him too. And Tigger and Celeste loved each other, and all three spirit animals were white, and....

"Steve," Danny said.

Steve finished politely dabbing Street's jaw and then he and Street looked at Danny at the same time. And, no, there really wasn't much similarity in their faces—except maybe the goofiness—but there was still something there and maybe Danny was just losing his mind. But. "Does Clara smell like me?"
Steve blinked, which of course he would. For him the question would've come out of nowhere. "Yeah, sure. She smells a lot like you. Everyone in your family would smell similar. All families would."


Steve blinked at him for another couple seconds. He and Street were still holding each other, so it gave the distinct, momentary impression of startled kittens. "You're saying we're both related," Steve said.

"Not just you two," Danny said. "You and Bucky Barnes."

Street and Steve looked at each other, then naturally let go like the other one had burst into flame.

"How?" Street said. He kept staring at Steve as if he was expecting him to magically transform or something. Maybe into a bird. "I know my parents. I'm... I'm an only child! I—"

"Hey, hey, shh. Shh. Nothing bad is happening here," Danny said. "This is all just speculation, right? We're just working something out. You're safe. Everything's fine."

"You need to calm down or you'll wake up your Guide," Steve added, which was playing dirty but at least it did the trick. Street nodded jerkily, but he started taking deeper breaths. "There you go. That's better." Then Steve all but whirled on Danny, no chill whatsoever. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I don't know, all right?" Danny ran his fingers through his hair. "Maybe it's nothing. I could just be talking out my ass. But, you, Bucky and Birdie here have all said the three of you smell kind of the same. And you've all got white spirit animals, and this weird connection thing going on. So..." He spread his hands. "It could just be a coincidence, but that's a really fucking big coincidence."

"So, what? We're all cousins? Brothers?" Steve said. He looked and felt angry, like this was somehow a personal affront. "I know who my parents are too. And I sure as hell would've known if I was related to Bucky Barnes."

"It's not even possible," Street said. "He's too young."

"He was frozen for most of seventy years," Danny said. "That's plenty of time."

"Time for what?" Steve snarled. His bond was seething. "Fucking my mom?"

Danny winced. "Seriously, Steven? I've met your mom. And, no. Just, no." Also, Steve's mom was, while a brilliant secret agent, also a self-centered, opportunistic bitch. Steve's dad hadn't been any great shakes either, honestly—not that Danny would ever say so—but at least he abandoned his kids because he'd thought it would protect them, rather than just out of convenience. "Besides, I'm pretty sure it would've been your grandmother."

"I never met my grandmother," Steve spat.

Danny just watched him mildly until he could tell when Steve understood the implication. "No," he said, shaking his head. "No. Come on. That's stupid."

Street had slowly gone white. Danny was fairly sure his Guide was awake by now. "I don't know my grandparents either," he said.

"I'm sorry," Danny said, because they both looked so shaken. "I'm not saying this is what happened,
"Yes, you are!" Steve snapped. "That's exactly what you're saying! You're saying this kid and I are both related to Barnes!"

"All right, yes! Yes, I am." Danny gestured sharply at the two of them. "What the hell other reason could there be?"

"I don't know!" Steve shouted. All Danny was getting from him now was a morass of anger and fear. Steve had never been comfortable with change or surprises, let alone something as earthshattering as this. Danny should have waited, found a gentler way to present his hypothesis. But he'd been kind of caught up in the moment. "But there has to be one! I can't…. It doesn't make sense!"

"Wait," Street said. And there was something so halting and scared in his voice that Danny and Steve instantly switched their focus to him. "My parents were born in the early 60s. Barnes was…he was with Hydra then, wasn't he?"

"Yeah, he was." Danny nodded.

Street was so pale now he looked green. His dark eyes were like black holes. "That means…" He started hyperventilating, trembling hand wrapped around the back of the kitchen chair. "That means my parents were Hydra too, doesn't it? My dad…. Oh my God." He swayed on his feet.

Steve grabbed him before his legs gave out, hauled him close. "You're okay. This is just speculation, right? We're just talking. There's no proof. And…" He took a breath. "Even if they are Hydra, that's not you, okay? That's not you. You aren't your parents. You're a good kid and a good cop, and you'd never be anything like that. It doesn't matter what your parents might've done. You're not them. You're you."

"My mom killed my dad. So he'd stop hurting us," Street said.

"Aw hell." Steve pulled Street into a full-on hug, staring wide-eyed at Danny over the kid's shoulder. His emotions over the bond were awful, and pretty much exactly what Danny was feeling. "I'm sorry. That must've been terrible. But, you're not your dad, are you? You're a cop. You're not Hydra. You're good. Your Guide is an Avenger, right? He's a hero. He wouldn't've been able to bond with you if you weren't one too."

Danny might have known Street for all of thirty minutes, with at least five of them with him semi-feral, but even then Danny wasn't surprised when the concept of being a hero had the injured, exhausted and overwhelmed Sentinel fighting tears.

Steve did his best to calm the fledgling, but Street needed his Guide. And a nap, and some food since he hadn't actually eaten anything. But mostly his Guide. Even if Clint had miraculously slept through his Sentinel's emotional rollercoaster, Street just being near him would help.

"Come on," Steve said to him. He released the hug, but kept is hand on the nape of Street's neck. "Let's get you back to your Guide. It will help, I promise."

Street nodded, then swallowed and wiped his eyes. "He's worried."

"No kidding." Danny patted Street's shoulder. "You've had a hell of a long day. You need to rest. Everything's going to be fine."

"You'll heal faster if you're together too. I'll walk you there." Steve kept his hand on Street as he
steered him out the door of the guest suite, giving Danny a glance over his shoulder that conveyed all of his sympathy for the kid, and commiseration about how young and guileless he seemed.

Steve's bond also implied very strongly that they weren't done talking about his supposed ancestry, and Danny was probably not going to enjoy the conversation very much. Well, whatever. Steve was one of the strongest people Danny knew, but even he couldn't stubborn his way out of reality.

If Danny's hypothesis was reality.

Danny snagged one of the untouched pieces of pizza from Street's plate and ate it. It was cold but still tasted good, and Danny was still hungry. At least, so long as he ignored the epiphany that threatened to churn up his guts like a meat grinder.

Thing was—and maybe Steve hadn't realized it yet, or he was just stubbornly ignoring it—Steve's dad was born in 1950. His mom was born in 1954. Which meant that if Danny was right, Steve's parents were Hydra too.

Danny picked up another piece of the pizza but just dropped it. Now his appetite was definitely gone. He slid the rest into the garbage, then cleaned up and washed his hands. Then he pulled out his cell phone and called his mom.

He had a lot he needed to talk about.

The first time Steve bonded with Bucky was when he pulled him off the exam table in Zola's Kreischberg lab.

He hadn't thought Bucky would ever be a Sentinel. Hell, Steve hadn't been a Guide for more than a few months himself, and only thanks to Howard's Vita Rays and Erskine's serum.

But their bond had flared like a searchlight the instant they'd touched. Bucky had been zoning, blank-eyed and lost so far in his head Steve had been terrified he'd never find him. But the moment Steve put his hands on him, Bucky had said his name and smiled.

Steve couldn't forget anything after the serum, but even if he'd never had it, he'd still always remember how he'd felt at that moment: not just the bone-melting relief that his beloved friend was alive, but the sense of peace, safety and belonging. And above all a sweet, soft warmth in his mind where Bucky suddenly was, like an emptiness finally being filled.

They bonded 'officially' in front of cameras for a propaganda film. It took a while; they had to do parts of the ceremony over and over again because neither of them could keep from laughing. The director allowed Bucky and Steve to actually kiss at the end. Chaste of course, for fear a real kiss would scandalize the folks back home. But it was still their first kiss as a recognized Sentinel and Guide, which made it better than any they'd shared before the war. And God, Bucky had been so happy.

That had been before the nightmares, and the constant pain of his body changing that Bucky couldn't hide from Steve. And the terror that went with it, because Bucky didn't know what was happening to him. Steve had felt his pain and his fear, had sat with him during the long, cold nights and pretended to believe his excuses for why he couldn't sleep.

Steve had never asked what caused the misery he could feel so keenly. Every time he even hinted at it, Bucky's part of the bond went ice cold, practically vibrating with his fear.

Steve would have done anything to keep his Sentinel from feeling like that, so he never asked what
was wrong. He'd just hoped that eventually Bucky would tell him.

Maybe Bucky would have, but he never got the chance.

Steve had watched Bucky fall, heard his scream before it was torn away by the wind. He'd felt it when their bond shattered: the sudden blast of cold and pain so deep and terrible he couldn't think, couldn't feel anything else but the agony of his grief. He had no idea how he got back into the train car; had no idea about anything at all for nearly three days. He'd gone through the motions of existing, but retained none of it. The closest moment he'd had to a full memory was Peggy telling him to give Bucky the dignity of his choice, and Steve screaming at her that they were bonded! Bucky never had a choice about any of it!

He'd apologized later, and so had she, and before he'd climbed into Schmitt's plane Peggy had kissed him goodbye. They'd both known he wasn't coming back. Probably all the Howlies did.

In the end Steve hadn't minded drowning in the arctic water. He'd been freezing cold since the bond broke. A little more was nothing.

Steve had been enraged when he'd woken up. He should have died with his Sentinel, instead of being thrust into a world he could barely understand. If it hadn't been for the Chitauri invasion he probably would've lost his mind. As it was, he kept probing his bond every few minutes, looking for Bucky. But it was always cold, empty and dark.

He'd gotten used to it, because what else could he have done? There were still battles to fight, and still people who needed him. Dying unnecessarily would have let them down.

So he'd gotten used to it. The icy absence had sunk into his bones and he was so cold all the time he barely even felt it anymore. S.H.I.E.L.D. tried to set him up as a Temporarily Assigned Guide, probably hoping he'd be able to bond again, but it hadn't worked. The closest Steve came to even a surface bond was with Natasha Romanov, and she already had Clint Barton.

Steve had been just as glad for it. He hadn't wanted another Sentinel. He hadn't wanted anyone in his mind who wasn't Bucky. He would've rather embraced the freezing dark.

And then Bucky came back.

Steve didn't remember getting sick, or when he fell asleep and then couldn't wake up. But he remembered the new bond. He remembered opening his eyes and feeling warm, peaceful and safe, and like he belonged again for the first time in years. He remembered what it was like to be happy.

The astonishing, glorious joy had bounced among the three of them, until Steve felt as if he was glowing with it. Incandescent, like it was almost too much for his mortal body to bear.

He'd been shocked at first that the bond was with Bucky and Tony, but only at first. Tony's presence had felt right and welcome, in a way that had only belonged to Bucky before. Steve had never felt that something was missing in his and Bucky's bond, but when he'd kissed Tony it'd felt as if he should always have been with them. Like he and Bucky had been waiting for their third their whole lives.

They'd fallen asleep bundled together on Tony's ridiculously expansive bed, with Tony tucked between them and Bucky with his back to the door. Steve had fallen asleep warm and content and safe.

Except now he was none of those things.
The room was whitewashed concrete, dank and cold with condensation shining dully on the walls. There was nothing in it but a bed: a plush four post large enough for two, like some terrible parody of luxury and comfort.

A young woman—barely more than a girl, she couldn't have been older than 14—was lying on her back with her wrists and ankles manacled to the bedposts, nothing protecting her from the damp chill except for a gown like someone might wear in a hospital. She was weeping, speaking brokenly in German between her sobs. Steve didn't know what the words meant, but he knew she was begging.

He didn't know who she was begging until he saw the man at the door. He was short, pudgy, wearing a white coat and spectacles that made him look deceptively harmless and kind. Steve knew how much of a lie that was. Bucky had lived it.

Arnim Zola. Steve snarled and tried to attack him. He knew this was a dream, but twisting the man's head off would have been viciously cathartic. But he couldn't move. He was just an observer here, unable to affect anything.

He thought he could feel Tony there too, beside him. But he couldn't reach out to him or speak. All he could hear was the memory playing around him.

Bucky was led in by a guard, a second following.

He looked awful, for all that he was clean and walking unaided, his metal arm gleaming. His hair had been shaved nearly to the skull, which emphasized the shadowed gauntness of his features. He was horribly thin. Steve could see all of his ribs, the terrible plates of his shoulders. The thin drawstring pants he wore hung like rags off his hips.

He was covered in bruises. One eye was swollen partially shut, his cheek purple beneath it. His chest, stomach and back were mottled with days' worth of beatings, in sickly shades of purple, yellow and green. A single, thick swath of purple covered most of his right side. His ribs had to be cracked or broken, to have bruised like that. He walked like it didn't hurt, but Steve knew how much it must have.

Bucky's eyes were dead, vacant silver, until he came through the door. The second he noticed the girl he threw himself at the nearest of the two guards. Bucky grabbed his neck and slammed his head into the wall before the man realized Bucky was moving.

The second guard caught Bucky's backhand and dropped. That left Zola, but Bucky ignored him. He rushed to the bed and broke the manacles around the girl's wrists, murmuring to her in German and trying to smile. And then the door crashed open and so many guards trooped in there was nowhere to go but the bed.

None of their weapons were pointing at Bucky. They were all aimed at the girl.

Bucky leapt onto the bed, trying to put his body between her and the guns. The poor thing was sitting up as best she could with her ankles still chained, clinging to his back in terror.

The door opened again. Steve didn't recognize the tall, blond woman who came in, but Bucky did. It was clear by the black loathing in his eyes. She dismissed half the men from the room, barely glanced at Zola, cringing in the corner, then walked up to Bucky as if she had absolutely nothing to fear.

Steve didn't know enough German to understand what she said, but the way Bucky paled and the girl cringed against him was unmistakable.
The woman snapped her fingers and pointed at the floor next to her like Bucky was a dog. He looked at her, then at all the guns aimed at the defenseless child, and he climbed off the bed and knelt. He put his arms behind his back, then tilted his head up, exposing his throat.

"No! Bucky!" But Steve couldn't make a sound. The horror just boomed in his chest like explosions. The woman kicked Bucky in his darkly-bruised side. He fell over with a choked-back cry of pain, echoed by the girl gasping in sympathy. Then he pushed himself laboriously back to the same position.

"Schon besser," the woman said. Then she lashed out like a snake, grabbing the girl by her hair to yank her supine. Then she took a knife from her belt and held it over the girl's face, using her hair to wrench her head to the side. "Was meinst du?" she asked Bucky, "Ihre Nase oder ein Auge? Oder vielleicht ein Finger?"

The girl sobbed.

Bucky didn't lower his head, but he reached towards the woman in supplication. "Bitte tun Sie ihr nicht weh. Es tut mir leid. Nein. Bitte. Sie ist ein Kind! Sie ist nur ein Kind!"

Steve remembered those words. This was the same dream Bucky had before Steve got sick. It was worse than he'd imagined.

The woman kicked him again. This time it took him a little longer to get up. He kept his hands behind his back. With broken ribs, kneeling with his head tilted like that must have been excruciating.

"Dann tu deine Pflicht, oder du weißt, was passiert," she said.

"Bitte zwingen Sie mich nicht dazu. Sie ist eine Wegbegleiterin!" Bucky was trembling, tears in his eyes.

"Sie ist eine Wegbegleiterin. Steve remembered that too.

"Ja, das ist sie," the woman said simply. "Und diese Wegbegleiterin kann leben oder sie kann auf schreckliche Weise sterben. Du hast die Wahl."


"Das werde ich nicht. Sie werden dir nicht weh tun," Bucky said. It sounded like each word cost him a piece of his soul.

"Schon besser," the woman said again. She sheathed her knife, then finally let the girl go. She gave Bucky a thin smile that chilled Steve to the bone. "Entspann dich. Sie ist jung, du wirst deine Energie noch brauchen."

She left the room, the guards and Zola following. The door was closed and bolted.

Bucky slowly lowered his head and wiped his eyes, then pulled himself painfully to his feet. He freed the Guide's ankles. "Es tut mir leid," he said softly. I'm sorry. Then he sat at the end of the bed, warming each of her tiny feet in his hands.

The dream mercifully ended when Zola came back in, flanked by two guards and carrying a syringe.
**Warnings:** Very obviously implied 'fuck or die (horribly)' scenario, wherein Bucky is forced to impregnate a teenager to keep her from being tortured to death. PLEASE NOTE THAT THERE IS NO ACTUAL TORTURE, AND NOTHING SEXUAL IS DESCRIBED IN THE CHAPTER. Bucky acquiesces to have sex with the young woman to save her life, but he is in no way a willing participant.

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**Translations:**

*Schon besser.* - Already better.

*Was meinst du? Ihre Nase oder ein Auge? Oder vielleicht ein Finger?* - What do you think? Her nose or an eye? Or maybe a finger?

*Bitte tun Sie ihr nicht weh. Es tut mir leid. Nein. Bitte. Sie ist ein Kind! Sie ist nur ein Kind!* - Please don't hurt her. I'm sorry. No. Please. She's a child! She's just a child!

*Dann tu deine Pflicht, oder du weißt, was passiert.* - Then do your duty, or you know what's going to happen.

*Bitte zwingen Sie mich nicht dazu. Sie ist eine Wegbegleiterin!* - Please don't force me. She's a Guide!

*Ja, das ist sie. Und diese Wegbegleiterin kann leben oder sie kann auf schreckliche Weise sterben. Du hast die Wahl.* - Yes, she is. And this Guide can live, or she can die terribly. It's your choice.

*Bitte. Bitte, Beschützer, lass nicht zu, dass sie mir weh tun.* - Please. Please, Sentinel, don't let them hurt me.

*Das werde ich nicht. Sie werden dir nicht weh tun.* - I won't. They won't hurt you.

*Entspann dich. Sie ist jung, du wirst deine Energie noch brauchen.* - Relax. She's young, you'll need your energy.

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I might be able to finish this story in the next couple of chapters. (Please don't hold your breath.)
The three of them woke up at the same time.

Bucky rocketed bolt upright, wild-eyed and shaking. His part of their bond was thick with guilt, remorse and fear.

Tony was scrambling upright, but Steve had faster reflexes and grabbed Bucky's arm, terrified he was going to run or disappear inside his head. He did his best to keep that anxiety away from Bucky, trying not to make him feel worse. He could feel Tony doing the same, projecting nothing but protectiveness, love and concern. Following Steve's lead with uncanny instinct.

But this time, Bucky didn't run. Instead he collapsed against his two Guides, wrapping his arms around them both the best he could. He let them support him; let them help.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—" Bucky's voice cracked, then shattered. His bond writhed with misery, thick and black as tar, but it was there. He hadn't closed it, he was still with them. It felt like a miracle.

"Shh, it's okay." Steve kissed his temple, his cheek, the corner of his lips, tasting the salt of his tears. "We're here. We've got you. It's all right." He filled their bond with how much he loved Bucky, and how ecstatic he was that Bucky hadn't retreated, how instead he'd granted his Guides the gift of his trust and vulnerability.

Steve also tried to show Bucky that he wasn't angry, or damaged by Bucky's pain; that the remorse
and sadness he felt was for what Bucky had suffered, not for himself. And he gave Bucky his admiration, for how brave he was. And good. So, so good.

He was concentrating on Bucky, but Steve could feel Tony doing the same: how his love, gratitude and acceptance flooded their bond like light. "It wasn't your fault," Tony said. "You have to know that, sweetheart. None of that was your fault."

Bucky leaned that much more into them, wetting Tony's cheek with his tears. "I didn't want to," he choked out. "Oh, God. I didn't want to. She was…she was so scared…"

"I know. We know," Tony said. "That was….I didn't even know what anyone was saying, but…I'm pretty sure I…got the gist." He swallowed, and Steve felt a queasy surge of nausea before Tony controlled it. "Jesus Christ. I knew Hydra bred you like a prize stud, but I had no idea they did it like…like that. That is so fucking evil I can't even find words for it."

Bucky reared back to stare at him. "You knew?" he demanded, breathless with horrified alarm. Steve's heart plummeted. "You knew?" He scrambled off the bed, backpedaled until he hit the wall. "You knew what I did to them?"

Tony looked at Steve. "Didn't you tell him?"

Steve shook his head. "I'm sorry!" he blurted. "You were already so upset," he said to Bucky. "I didn't want to make it worse—"

"Oh, no, no, no." Bucky dropped to his knees, doubled over with his arms wrapped around his stomach. His pain wasn't physical but Steve still felt all of it like blows. The anguished sound Bucky made barely sounded human.

The glare Tony shot Steve burned like his anger over their bond, but that was for Steve alone. Bucky only received Tony's peace and comfort. Tony slid off the bed and knelt next to him on the floor, wrapping him in his arms. "We knew Hydra used you to sire children, Bucky, but that was it. Not that making you a parent without your consent isn't bad enough. Because holy fuck it is. But, we didn't know this, I swear. Steve should've told you. It was shitty that he didn't. But he was trying to protect you. I think you know what that's like."

Bucky clung to him, too distressed to answer, but Steve felt the slow seep of his forgiveness.

"Yeah. I know you know."

"You're definitely two peas in an overprotective Super Soldier pod. How 'bout from here on in we agree to never protect each other from anything?"

"Okay," Steve said. There wasn't enough room for him between the bed and the wall, so he lay on his stomach and reached out to them. He put one arm across Bucky's shoulders and his free hand on Tony's bicep. It wasn't the most comfortable position, but Steve had been in far worse. And for his bond partners he could do this all day. "I really am sorry, Buck. For what it's worth." At least Bucky would know how very much he meant it. "But Tony's right. What we saw in your dream wasn't your fault. They were going to kill her. I understand enough German to know that. You made the only choice you could."

Tony kissed the tense angle of Bucky's jaw, then the plane of his cheek. "What else could you have done? I mean, that blonde bitch really wasn't joking, was she?"

Bucky shook his head. "She wasn't," he said softly. "She, uh. She was asking me what she should cut off first."
"Fucking hell." Tony scrubbed his face. "How could you have said 'no'? Seriously? What the hell other option was there?"

"I tried," Bucky said quietly. "The first time. I did say 'no'. And…and they…." He gritted his teeth, fighting to keep back more tears. He was still trembling. They were all still naked, and Bucky's skin was ice cold under Steve's arm.

Steve sent Bucky as much love, peace and calm as he could. Tony gave him psychic warmth and the confirmation that he wasn't alone.

Maybe it helped, because a minute later Bucky lifted his head. "Thanks." He took a few breaths, wiping his eyes with a shaking hand. "They put her in the Chair, and made me watch. They didn't stop. Even after I begged." He swallowed. "Even when I was begging them to let me do what they wanted."

"Oh my God." Steve had seen the documents, files and videos Natasha had leaked online. Not all of them, but enough. More than enough. He knew exactly what 'the Chair' was. "They did that? But, she wasn't… She didn't have the serum, did she?"

Bucky shook his head. "She died," he said softly. Pain rang in his voice, reverberated through their bond like a scream. "They killed her. Because of me."

"Because of Hydra," Tony said immediately. "Hydra put her in the Chair. Not you. You were trying to keep her safe!"

Bucky shook his head. He wiped his eyes again, childlike swipes with each side of his right hand. "If I'd just said 'yes' when they told me to, she'd still be alive. I hurt her. I hurt a Guide. I hurt so many of them. You don't know….

"It's okay," Steve said again.

"It's not okay!" Bucky shouted. He shoved back from both of them, nearly pitching himself into the nightstand before Steve steadied him. "You don't know! You don't know! You think—you think I'm good! You think I protected them! I didn't! I never protected them! You saw what I did!"

"Hey, whoa. Stop." Tony put his hands up, shifting so he was sitting on the floor instead of kneeling. "You're right. We know what happened. But, Bucky, everything you did was to protect her. I can't speak German, but I know what begging sounds like. I've done enough of it." Steve could feel the truth of that before Tony buried it. "You think I protected them? I didn't! I never protected them! You saw what I did!"

"That or worse, right?" Steve said gently. He still had his hand on Bucky's shoulder, relieved and thankful that Bucky allowed it. "You just told us what they did when you tried to refuse."

"Look," Tony said, scooching closer. He took Bucky's nearer hand, which was his left, and cradled it on his thigh. "A few years ago, I was abducted in Afghanistan by a bunch of terrorists called the Ten Rings. They wanted me to build them a missile. Naturally I told them to go fuck themselves."

"Look," Tony said, scooching closer. He took Bucky's nearer hand, which was his left, and cradled it on his thigh. "A few years ago, I was abducted in Afghanistan by a bunch of terrorists called the Ten Rings. They wanted me to build them a missile. Naturally I told them to go fuck themselves." The small, pained curve of his smile belied the depth of his old, old guilt and anger. "Now, I wasn't the only prisoner. Which was lucky for me, because the guy was a surgeon. He did open-heart surgery on me in a fucking cave, and was good enough that I survived. Wasn't so lucky for him, because, you know, also a prisoner. Not to mention that the Ten Rings used him as leverage against me."

"Did they kill him?" Bucky asked.
Tony shook his head. "Not then." Steve had no idea two words could be laced with such dark, seething rage. "They did kill him—or, rather, he let them kill him as a diversion so I could escape. Which was fucking cheap—but that was later. The time I'm talking about was when they thought I needed an 'incentive' to work faster." He made finger quotes, his expression ugly with hate. "They held my friend down and threatened to drop a burning coal into his mouth."

"Seriously?" Steve gasped.

Bucky's part of their bond shivered like a flinch, but outwardly he didn't react. He was used to that kind of cruelty. God help him.

"Yeah, seriously," Tony said grimly. "Of course I agreed to work faster. I would've fucking begged them to let me build the missile right in front of them, if it'd kept him safe."

"It's not the same," Bucky said. "You saved your friend. You didn't hurt him."

"Well that's debatable, since he died," Tony said. "But, yeah. I won't argue. I was lucky; once I kowtowed they let him alone. The Ten Rings were fucking sadistic sons of bitches, but Hydra's in a whole other league. But if my choice had been to rape him or watch him being tortured to death?" Tony closed his eyes and swallowed, riding out another surge of nausea that Steve could feel. "Just thinking about it makes me want to puke. But, yeah. I would've done anything that kept him alive. I honestly don't know how the hell you survived, having to make that choice over and over again."

Bucky blinked at him, confused. "But, I didn't have to survive anything. I didn't get hurt. I hurt the Guides."

"Of course you got hurt!" It came out more harshly than Steve intended, but the idea Bucky could think he wasn't wounded by this was too terrible for Steve to hear and stay calm. "They forced you to do something unspeakable, that went against everything you are as a Sentinel and as a good, decent man. And you were helpless to stop it. How can you say that didn't hurt you?"

"It did hurt you," Tony said, a lot more gently. "All those terrible things you're feeling, that you worked so hard to keep from Steve…That's because of what Hydra did to you. That's where you got hurt."

Bucky shook his head. Guilt and sick shame filled their bond like clotted blood. "But I did it," he whispered. "I raped them."

"No," Tony said, still gently but unyielding. "Hydra raped them. They used you to do it. Just like they used you to kill. They used you, Bucky. Like a machine. You wouldn't've done a damn thing for those fuckers if they hadn't made you."

"You had no choice," Steve said again. "You were just as helpless as the Guides, Bucky. You didn't want to do it, but you couldn't refuse. That means Hydra raped you too."

Bucky clenched his jaw, breathing harshly through his nose. He shook his head mutely, but his bond was horrifically eloquent: a churning quagmire of self-disgust, self-loathing and despair.

Except, underneath all that suffocating darkness was a thread of hope. Bucky wanted to believe them.

Steve gave Bucky his conviction, with every bit of the strength of his will behind it. Tony's eyes glistened with tears, but his certainty cascaded through their bond, as indomitable as his spirit.

Bucky wiped his eyes. "I tried…I tried so hard not to hurt them. Their bodies, I mean. I couldn't…"
He swallowed, then clenched his jaw again, looking away.

"You're allowed to cry," Steve said. He got up, then climbed off the bed and shoved it further away so he could sit near Bucky on the floor. The night table toppled over with a crash, but none of them cared. He put his arm across Bucky's back, leaned in to kiss his temple. "What happened to you was terrible. You have every reason to cry about it." Steve felt like crying too.

"Kinda' worried that if I start I'll never stop." Bucky rasped.

"That's okay too," Tony said.

Bucky shook his head again, swiping at his wet cheeks. "The ones who volunteered…that wasn't so bad. They, uh. They wanted to get pregnant. And, um. I heard them talking about it—about the sex—maybe reactivating me. So I could bond with them as well. That part didn't work, though."

Steve gaped at him. "They tried to use sex to force a bond?"

"Is that even possible?" Tony asked.

"Dunno. Doesn't matter." Bucky shrugged, like the absolute violation it represented wasn't important. "It didn't work, anyway. Never got my abilities back, and I sure as fuck didn't bond with any of 'em."

"Is that what the syringe was for?" Tony said, then winced. "I mean, I know there was no way in hell that girl was a volunteer. But, were they trying to drug you into bonding or something?"

"No. It was so I could get it up." Bucky's smirk was bitter and ugly. "Wasn't exactly hot for a crying fourteen year-old girl."

"Jesus Christ. Jesus fucking Christ. Bucky, I'm so goddamn sorry." Tony rocked up onto his knees to hug Bucky tight. "I wish so badly I could've saved you."

"Thanks," Bucky said. "I wish you could've too." He hugged Tony back, grounding himself on his scent. Then as soon as Tony let go he pulled Steve into a hug and did the same thing.

"How many Guides were there?" Steve asked quietly.

"I don't remember," Bucky said. "I only really remember the girls who were crying, or scared. And the one I…. The one who died. I'm sorry." His guilt was still heavy as millstones. "I want to remember them. I owe them that. But I can't."

"That's not your fault either," Steve said. "Hydra did that to you too."

"I know," Bucky said. It didn't change how he felt.

"Wait," Tony said, frowning. "There's something I don't get. Well, I don't get any of it, 'cause I'm not a sick, evil fuck. But, you said the Guides would die horribly if you didn't acquiesce, right? But, what about the ones who were into it? What leverage did Hydra use for them? Or was the threat that they'd torture you?" He grimaced. "Torture you more."

"The one they put in the Chair was a volunteer," Bucky said.

"Oh my God," Tony breathed.

"I'm sorry," Bucky said.
"Don't apologize. It was Hydra, not you." Tony took Bucky's hand again, trying to soothe him though his own emotions roiled like waves. "God, Bucky. None of this is because of you."

"Tony's right. Don't take the blame for what Hydra did. You don't deserve it. You didn't do anything wrong," Steve said. He did his best to comfort them both, though he was hardly calm himself. "But, I don't even understand what they did it for. The volunteers...okay. I've met enough Hydra fanatics to understand that kind of thinking. But, with the others...why? Why bother? Why go to that effort?"

"Because they're sick, evil fucks," Tony said.

Bucky shook his head. "I think they did it to break me," He said softly. "Those poor Guides...I was...I wanted to protect them so badly. But I hurt them. All I could do was hurt them. And I just wanted to die, after what I did. I wanted to reactivate so badly, so I could go feral, or zone. Just, escape. But I couldn't. So I stopped fighting. Because I didn't have to...exist anymore, that way. Not as me. Not as Bucky. And that was as close to death as I could get."

"Oh, fuck me," Tony said. "Jesus Christ, Bucky."

Steve couldn't say anything at all. His bond felt like twisted wire. He didn't even realize he'd instinctively reached for his Sentinel and Guide until they were both holding him.

"It's okay, Stevie," Bucky said. "I'm here now. I'm with you."

"Really not okay," Tony rasped. "None of this is okay. Except that you're here."

Steve managed a nod. He knew if he tried to speak he'd start bawling, and he didn't want to make Tony and Bucky deal with that too. But he was sure Bucky could feel everything Steve couldn't say. Just like Steve knew everything Bucky felt.

He was grateful. He would always be grateful. But that didn't make it any easier to bear. Bucky was still in turmoil, so full of pain that his bond was nearly choked with it. But Steve thought the thread of hope was a tiny bit thicker, maybe. At least it was a start.

"I'm sorry," Bucky said. His remorse was cold and aching. "I didn't want you to know this. It...I told Tony it destroyed me. I was so scared it was gonna destroy you too." He looked at Tony. "Both of you."

"I know," Steve said. He sat back enough so he could look Bucky in the face. "All you've ever wanted to do was protect me. But I'm fine, Bucky. Both Tony and I are. What you're feeling is horrible. What happened to you is even worse. I hate that you're in so much pain. I wish I could kill every single one of those bastards who did this you to you. I'd give anything if it could somehow make that it never happened. But it didn't destroy me. Or Tony. We're fine. And I am so, so glad you let me be your Guide again. I can't even tell you—" He smirked, because it might be wet and too close to a sob, but it was a hell of a lot better than breaking down. And he kissed Bucky then, because it was a lot easier than trying to speak, and he didn't have enough words for how much he loved him anyway.

"Ditto," Tony said. "I seriously want to build a time machine, just so I can put every one of those evil fucks who so much as looked at you funny in the Chair. And I want to, like, bury you in kittens or something. But I'm okay. I mean, don't get me wrong; I'm incandescent with fucking rage on your behalf, and so, so sad you had to go through it that if I think about it too long I'll probably burst into tears like Captain Consolable. But I'm okay."

Then Steve had to kiss Tony too, because Tony was ridiculous and Steve couldn't believe how much
he loved him. His presence in their bond might have been new, but it was no less precious or real, and Steve was no less grateful for it.

"Thank you," Bucky said softly. He kissed Tony, then leaned back and rubbed his forehead. "I'm really tired."

"You're also cold," Steve said. "You've been really stressed, and you and Tony have been through a hell of a lot in a very short time. I can feel your exhaustion. I think you should both go back to sleep."

"I think we should get off the floor," Tony said, then gladly let Bucky and Steve lift him when they got to their feet. "Ow. Pins and needles."

Bucky put him on the bed.

"I could get used to this."

"Good." Bucky smiled at him, small but real. "'Cause you're going to have to."

Tony smiled up at him and Steve. "You know, when I said it was okay you were here before, by 'okay' I meant, 'you two are the best thing that ever happened to me'."

Bucky shrugged. "Aw, thanks. And hey, you're kind of alright."

But Steve knew what he really meant.

"Tony?"

"Yes, Buck-of-my-life?" They were both back in his bed. Tony was the very comfortable Little Spoon, and had been the almost-asleep Little Spoon when Bucky spoke. Now he was alert again. The uneasy sadness in Bucky's voice was more than enough to wake him completely, even without the dark emotions accompanying it. He heard Steve padding in from the living room and felt the spike of his concern, echoing Tony's.

"Do I have kids?"

Tony sucked in a breath before he could help himself, then felt Bucky's corresponding tension: in his body and jangling through the bond. "Sorry!" he said immediately. "It's just...."

"Yes, you do," Steve said gently, when it was clear Tony had no idea what was 'just' anything.

Bucky made a tiny, fissured noise that stabbed right to Tony's heart, but what he felt was too complicated to parse over their bond. He held Tony a little more tightly, burying his face against his shoulder.

Steve came and crawled under the covers, holding Bucky so he was secure between them, radiating comfort. Tony followed his lead and tried to send Bucky as much comfort as he could as well. It was difficult, since he wasn't feeling very comforted himself. Maybe it'd be easier when he was used to this, but right now it was a fight not to succumb to Bucky's misery. He didn't though, for Bucky's and Steve's sake.

"I always wanted kids," Bucky whispered after a few moments. He sniffed, kissed back of Tony's shoulder as if in apology. "Never thought I'd have any, though. 'Cause I was with Steve, and then 'cause I didn't think I'd survive the war." His laugh was sharp. "Got that part half right."
"Could you have adopted, after the war?" Tony asked.

"I'm sure we could have," Steve said. "There were thousands of orphans, including potential Sentinels and Guides. But…we never got that chance."

The fact that they had that chance now went unspoken, which Tony was grateful for. He'd never once in all 40+ years of his misbegotten life thought about having kids. Then again, he hadn't thought he'd ever be a Guide, either.

Things changed. Sometimes things changed unbelievably quickly. But that didn't mean they had to talk about it now.

"I'm so sorry Hydra stole that from you too," Tony said. "We should be able to track all or most of them down, if you want. At least to know what happened to them. Most of them will probably have children of their own, too."

"We…do know about one, already," Steve said. "You have a grandson."

Bucky went so still he stopped breathing. "Steve McGarrett," he said, very softly. It was almost but not quite a question.

"Yeah," Tony said, blinking. "How did you know?"

"He smells like me. And, it's like I already knew him," Bucky said. He was trembling now. Tony could feel it like a murmur against his skin. "I…I think Street is too. Jimmy. His scent's kind of the same. And, I didn't want to hurt him."

"You never want to hurt anybody, Buck," Steve said.

"I know." Something about the way Bucky said it, fixed and unquestionable, warmed Tony's heart and broke it at the same time. "But, it was like with McGarrett. I wanted to protect him."

"Okay, then," Tony said. They should probably get up; this felt like a very strange conversation to have snuggling with two of them still naked. But no one else seemed inclined to move, so Tony didn't. "J.A.R.V.I.S., can you find out if James Street has any possible relationship to Hydra, please? And see if you can find any other potential descendants of Bucky Barnes while you're at it?"

"Of course, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. said. "And if I may, Sergeant, everything in your publicly-available history indicates that you would be a wonderful parent."

"Thank you," Bucky said.

"Okay," Tony said on sigh. "That's likely gonna take a few hours. I think we should do what Guide Steve said and sleep. We can worry about Sentinel Steve and Sentinel Street later. What do you think, Bucky?"

"Do you think they'll hate me, when they find out what I did?" Bucky asked softly.

Steve sucked in a breath through his teeth. Their bond clanged like his shield with protectiveness. "I think they'll know it wasn't your choice."

"Their grandmothers might have been volunteers," Tony said. "You said most of them were."

"I don't know for sure, though," Bucky said. His voice dropped like a brick. "What if those women were the ones I—"
"The ones were Hydra forced both of you?" Steve cut in before Bucky could finish. "Then we'll deal with it together. But no one is going to blame you for something that wasn't your choice."

The fact that of course they could went unsaid, though Tony could tell that was exactly what Bucky was thinking. "Steve's right," he said instead. "That'd be like blaming you for everyone Hydra killed. It's not fair."

"Doesn't mean they won't," Bucky said.

"Then we'll deal with that too," Steve said, as if it were just that simple. "You're not alone anymore, Bucky. You've got both of us, and we're not going to let anyone blame you for something you had no control over."

"You broke that Guide's chains. You were trying to escape with her," Tony said. "You warmed her feet. I've never warmed anyone's feet. You were as good and kind as humanly possible in an intolerable situation."

"They already know who you are. They won't forget it because of this," Steve said, as if it were also that simple. Tony envied his conviction.

"You know," he started carefully, "This means you have a family. I know you didn't get it in any way close to how you wanted. But, they're still your family. That's the one good thing to come out of what happened to you."

"I don't know if they'll agree with that," Bucky said.

"Of course they will," Steve said.

"Well, there's one way to find out," Tony said, though it was hard to feign being chipper when his heart was breaking on Bucky's behalf. "We have to tell them anyway. They have a right to know."

The last part was mostly meant for Steve, who knew that because he responded with a small burst of chagrin. "I didn't want to make things worse."

"Well you didn't make things better...."

"Should we tell them now?" Bucky asked, ignoring them both. Tony had a feeling Bucky was going to get good at that. "We shouldn't make them wait for nothing."

"You're right, but they're not waiting for nothing. They're waiting so we can sleep," Tony said, and not just because he could feel Bucky's reluctance. "J.A.R.V.I.S. will have more information when we wake up, and then we can deal with it. Together, like the old man said."

"Great idea," Steve said. Tony couldn't see him, but he felt the bed shift as he moved. "You two sleep. I'll wake you up in a few hours."

"Wait!" Bucky said. Steve stopped moving instantly. "Can you stay?"

Steve barely even hesitated. "Sure. Just let me get more comfortable."

"He means 'naked', in case you were wondering," Tony said, then grinned when he felt their bond shimmer a tiny bit with Bucky's amusement.

It was barely anything at all, but Bucky was feeling more than enough sorrow. Tony was thrilled to take what happiness they could get.
Chapter End Notes

**Warnings:** Frank discussion of rape. Mention of past murder via electrocution. Bucky blames himself despite also being a victim. PLEASE NOTE THAT NOTHING SEXUAL IS DESCRIBED.

According to the *Hawaii 5-0 Wiki*, John McGarrett was born in 1942. I have changed this in the story for obvious timeline reasons.

We are on the way home, folks. NOT ENTIRELY SURE WHEN WE’RE GOING TO GET THERE, BUT my fervent hope guess is this will end up being 17 chapters. Famous last words, I know. xD
Sometimes Tony wondered if maybe the universe in general had it in for him.

Okay, that was too harsh—sorry, universe—considering he was currently in a big, comfy bed and still being his bond partners' littlest spoon. He was too hot, but that was because Bucky still had his arms wrapped around him and his leg between Tony's. The heat was probably why Tony was awake, but he could feel the soft, gentle quiet of Bucky and Steve sleeping over their bond, and hear the even sounds of their breathing. He knew how lucky he was, to somehow have become part of this. And he was grateful for it.

So, fine. The universe didn't have it in for him. But it did have a lousy sense of timing.

Because the instant he began to ponder some really nice ways of waking Steve and Bucky up, J.A.R.V.I.S. said, "Please excuse the interruption, Sir, but your Guide and Sentinel need to be awakened."

J.A.R.V.I.S. wasn't loud, but Steve and Bucky were both conscious instantly, upright and ready to fight. They both also immediately angled their bodies so they were between Tony and the door, which was both sweet and kind of awe-inspiringly coordinated. When Tony woke abruptly, he was lucky not to flail himself onto the floor.

"It's okay, guys. No emergency. No one's storming the bedroom. You can stand down or chill or whatever." Tony followed the words with calm, soothing thoughts, though he couldn't hide his irritation with his A.I. "Thanks, J. That was great. Next time how 'bout you just set off the fire alarm?"
"I do apologize, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. said, "but Detective Williams and Lieutenant Commander McGarrett have requested to speak to the three of you. And they have said it's a matter of some urgency."

"Well, that's not good." Tony fumbled his way off the bed then stood there scratching his chest, wondering if they had time for a shower. "What kind of urgency we talking, J?"

Bucky stood up as well. He frowned in concentration, then looked worried. "Whatever it is, both of 'em are agitated as fuck. Something's wrong."

Steve got up too, fishing his boxers off the floor. "Are Clint and the new Sentinel all right?"

Tony nodded. "They're fine. J.A.R.V.I.S. would've said. Right, J?"

"That is correct, Sir. Agent Barton and Officer Street are in the Medical suite. They are currently sleeping. Agent Barton is doing well and should be released tomorrow morning. But to answer your question, I'm afraid I can only tell you that Detective Williams and Lieutenant Commander McGarrett requested that they speak to the three of you in person as soon as possible."

"Thanks, J.A.R.V.I.S.." Tony scrubbed his face. "Well, that is in no way concerning. Do we have time for a shower, at least? 'Cause I don't know about Bucky, but I'd rather not walk into an urgent mystery meeting smelling like bonding sex."

"We should meet on the common floor," Steve said. "It's neutral territory."

"I'm not gonna do anything," Bucky said. His offense prickled, but it just made Tony sad.

"I wasn't thinking about you. I was thinking about McGarrett," Steve said, and Bucky was instantly mollified. "J.A.R.V.I.S., can you please tell them which floor that is? Thanks," he added when the A.I. did. "And you guys definitely need a shower."

"They're in the elevator already," Bucky said.

"Well, unless McGarrett's into second-hand bonding sex, I'm thinking they can wait." Tony sent Steve and Bucky reassurance, working to hide his own unease. "Probably something came up and they just need to leave early. Or they found out that the New York Sentinel-Guide Center is still crawling with Hydra." He pursed his lips. "Actually, I like the second one. We could kick Hydra ass. That would be really cool."

"I hope it's not Danny's mom," Bucky said.

"I'm sure Clara's fine," Steve said soothingly. "They know we both care about her, so they would've said."

"Yeah, okay." Bucky sighed, relieved. "Can't be that bad if nobody's hurt or dead, right?"

"Oh, fuck. Now you've done it," Tony said.

Steve McGarrett marched up to Bucky and hugged him practically the second they stepped off the elevator. Tony was pretty sure it was an imprint thing, since there was a certain amount of sniffing involved.

Tony, of course, couldn't use his new Guide abilities to know what was up with McGarrett, because he wasn't McGarrett's Guide. But whatever was going on with the other Sentinel's heartbeat or scent
or whatever made Bucky even more concerned. Tony could feel it like gravel tumbling along their bond, as Bucky hugged McGarrett back tightly and scented him in return.

"You okay?" Bucky asked McGarrett as soon as he let go.

"Yeah, I'm fine," McGarrett said. Tony didn't need to see Danny pinching the bridge of his nose to know how much of a lie that was. McGarrett looked like he'd seen a ghost and was kind of pissed about it. "But, Danny and I—and Street—were talking earlier, and we have some questions."

That didn't sound too bad, but Steve immediately crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. "What kind of questions?"

"It's fine, Stevie," Bucky said. "Just let 'em ask, alright? Can't be any worse than what we were talking about already."

Tony stared at him. "Why do you keep jinxing us?"

"How about Your Guide stops trying to intimidate my Sentinel and we all sit down like civilized human beings?" Danny put in brightly.

McGarrett looked like he wanted to protest that—Tony wondered which part—but whatever emotions he got from his Guide made him close his mouth and go sit beside him on the loveseat.

Steve grimaced and dropped his arms. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Aw, it's alright. I know you were just trying to protect me." Bucky threw his arm around Steve's shoulders and led him to the couch, catching Tony's hand on the way.

Steve and Tony sat down, putting Bucky between them. Tony would've rather tugged him back into the elevator. He knew Steve would've rather done that too, but Tony was also intellectually aware that Bucky wasn't actually in danger here.

Other than emotional danger, maybe, given how McGarrett still looked like he wasn't sure if he was miserable or pissed off. McGarrett put his ankle on his knee, then hugged Danny glumly across his shoulders.

Danny smiled at his Sentinel, then turned back to the rest of them with a sigh. "Okay," he said, running his palms along his thighs. "Here's the thing. When I first brought Bucky to my mom's house, I was surprised at how well he and Steve—my Steve—got along. I mean, Steve can play nice with the best of them, but he doesn't trust easily." He glanced at McGarrett, as if in apology for talking trash about him. McGarrett did a head-tilt, mouth-quirk combination like he more-or-less agreed with his Guide's assessment, and Danny relaxed.

"So," Danny went on, "that's with everybody in general, the not-trusting thing. But with other Sentinels you have to add in the whole territory thing, which makes it about a million times worse. Long story short, I was not expecting my Sentinel and your Sentinel to get along like best buddies from just about the minute Bucky walked in the door. But they did, and Bucky said Steve smelled like him, and Steve told me the same thing about Bucky, and how it felt like he and Bucky already knew each other, and their spirit animals are both white, and you get the idea.

"And then—" Danny finally took a breath, "—Baby-Bird Sentinel Street shows up, and his spirit animal is also white, and he also says that Steve and Bucky smell like him. And they're also getting along weirdly great, considering it wasn't exactly a meet-cute, you know? And they both said it's like they already know each other, and Street said he felt like he knew Bucky, just like my Steve did."
"I felt like I already knew Street too," Bucky added quietly. "I was worried about my Guides, but I didn't want to fight him. I wanted to protect him."

"He said basically the same thing," McGarrett said. "How he didn't want to fight us either, but he couldn't stop himself."

"So, yeah," Danny took over the story again. "At first I figured it's just one of those Sentinel things, like how Steve could pick up my heartbeat on the moon. But, no. Street, who actually worked with other Sentinels, says Steve and Bucky are the only ones who smelled like him, and the only ones he liked. And then you've got the fact that all three of them came online late. Street's 27 even, which was probably close to Bucky's age—"

"It was the same age," Bucky said.

Danny blinked. "Wow. Well, there you go. Anyway, then Steve told me that Clara smells like me 'cause we're family. And I called my mom and she confirmed that Sentinels don't normally smell alike unless they're related. And she said that she didn't know, but it was possible the color of the spirit animals and the familiarity thing could be because they share genes."


"I am," Bucky said. "I'm sorry."

"Wait," Danny said, staring at the three of them. "You knew, already? Like, all of you knew?"

"We just told Bucky this afternoon," Steve said. His guilt was like a slow, complicated waltz. "But, yes. Tony and I have known for a few days."

"Okay…" Somehow Danny Williams could make a blink look like a sign spelling out YOU ASSHOLE in giant neon letters. "May I ask why the fuck you didn't think this was worth mentioning? Especially when you had ample opportunity?"

"Because you had enough going on when we met," Steve said, resolute. "And Bucky was….." He glanced at Bucky, his expression suffused with love, sadness and concern. "He was in such a bad place. And the three of you were terribly stressed, and you and McGarrett had already done so much to help him…." Steve grimaced. "I was trying not to make things worse, but it was the wrong decision. I know that now. I wish I could go back and change it. But for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Danny blinked again, only this time in mild surprise. "Huh. Okay. I did not expect that. Apology accepted. Yes it is, Steven," he added to McGarrett, who looked a little disappointed. "He's not the only one on the planet who's ever decided they knew what was best for someone else. Right?"

He said it just pointedly enough that it was obvious there was a story there—probably several stories, maybe a few hundred—and the gentle reminder made McGarrett drop his grudge with a small puff of air.

"Okay," McGarrett said. "So, Danny was right about Bucky, then. I have to admit I don't know how to feel about it." He carded his fingers through his hair, then rubbed his mouth, staring at Bucky. Tony really didn't like the bleakness in McGarrett's expressive, blue-grey eyes. "Are my parents Hydra?" he asked finally.

"I don't know," Bucky said.

Tony cleared his throat. "Your mom is, though she may not be anymore, given how they were
brought down a few weeks ago. But your dad wasn't And he's—he was, I'm sorry—Bucky's son."

McGarrett gasped. His gaze snapped from Tony back to Bucky. "My dad was your son?"

Bucky's head jerked up at the same time. "He's dead?"

McGarrett nodded. "Yeah. He was murdered in 2010. My taskforce—Hawaii 5-0—was formed to hunt down the man who ordered it. I'm sorry," he said a moment later, because Bucky looked gutted.

"I wanted to meet him," Bucky said. The simple words belied the cavernous breadth of his shock, sadness and disappointment. Bucky would never know his son.

"He was a good man," McGarrett said. "He was a cop, like Danny. Very focused and dedicated. I wish I could have known him better, but he sent me and my sister away when I was fifteen."

Bucky blinked, then his eyes went huge. "You have a sister?"

McGarrett nodded again, then smiled wistfully. "Yeah, I do. A little sister. She still lives on the Mainland so I don't see her much. She drives me nuts, but I love her."

"I'm glad that you have her," Bucky said. "I don't know if my sisters are still alive."

Tony slid his hand into Bucky's. "We'll find out."

"As far as we could tell, your father wasn't involved with Hydra," Steve told McGarrett, "other than as an experimental subject. In the files he's just called 'Subject 15'. When your mother faked her death, part of that was an attempt for the shock of it to bring him online."

"Oh my God." McGarrett scrubbed his face. Danny put his arm around his shoulders and pulled him close. McGarrett pressed his face to Danny's neck for a moment and took a few deep breaths, then turned back to Steve and squared his shoulders. "But, he wasn't Hydra? Just her?"

Tony and Steve both nodded. "Just her," Steve said.

"Which is bad enough, obviously," Tony put in.

"That also explains a few things, doesn't it?" Danny said to McGarrett, then frowned. "Not sure if it makes anything better or worse."

"I'm sorry," Bucky said again. "I-I wish—"

"Did she even want me?" McGarrett interrupted, voice small and vulnerable. Tony's heart ached for him. He'd spent enough miserable nights certain his dad hadn't wanted him, and at least he knew Howard and Maria Stark weren't secretly Nazis. McGarrett didn't even have that comfort.

"There's no reason to think she didn't," Steve said.

"Of course she did," Tony said, with every bit of conviction he could yank up on short notice. "She wouldn't've volunteered to have a kid otherwise, right? Especially with her jet-setting, social-butterfly world destruction career going on." He had no idea if that was true, and if he had to guess he'd say it wasn't. He knew Doris McGarrett was Hydra from J.A.R.V.I.S.'s research, but none of it gave any hint to her motivations. And it wasn't like Hydra was big on either volunteerism or parenting. But Tony had never been above the kindness of a possible lie.

"It doesn't matter if she did or she didn't want you, babe," Danny said. "It doesn't change your past, and it doesn't change who you are."
"Yes it does!" McGarrett snapped. "It changes everything! Everything I thought I was! It's…." He broke off, looking away. "It changes everything."

"No, it really doesn't," Danny said. "You're still my Sentinel and a super ninja Navy SEAL, right? You're still the badass leader of the 5-0 Taskforce. You're still Grace's and Charlie's favorite unofficial parent and the most infuriating and best goddamn man I've ever met. And you'd still be that man even if you were grown in a fucking jar, okay? It changes nothing. You're still you, and I still love you to the moon and back."

It sounded to Tony like the kind of assertion you'd make to a child. But it clearly meant something to McGarrett, because he was suddenly fighting tears. But he crammed a tiny smile in there, and then an equally tiny nod because he couldn't speak. Danny tugged him into a full-on hug and held him tight.

"I'm sorry," Bucky said again. His remorse and guilt were so thick it hurt.

Tony squeezed Bucky's hand a bit more tightly. Steve slung his arm around Bucky's neck and pulled their temples together, filling their bond with so much love that Tony could barely feel the affection and reassurance he was giving Bucky himself. At least it seemed to help a little: Bucky didn't relax, but his miserable emotions stopped hurting quite so badly.

McGarrett straightened, keeping one arm wrapped around his Guide. "It's not your fault."

"Yeah," Danny agreed. "I mean, I'm pretty sure they didn't go, 'Hey, you wouldn't mind donating your sperm to the same Nazi organization that's been torturing and brainwashing you for years, right? Just take this specimen jar, lie back and think of Hitler'."

Bucky sucked in a startled, unhappy breath. His bond flared with his distress like porcupine quills. "They didn't…." He swallowed. "It wasn't like that."

"Well, yeah," Danny said, like it was obvious. "I was joking. I really don't think they were that nice."

"That's putting it mildly," Tony said.

"Please excuse me, Sir," J.A.R.V.I.S. cut in with all the subtlety of a parent on Prom Night. "But I have been able to compile the information you requested on Sergeant Barnes' descendants." There was a delicate pause, as if an A.I. could somehow need to consider his next words. "There are also several film and video recordings."

Bucky went white. His bond went as glacial with fear as a winter storm. If both Tony and Steve hadn't been holding him, Tony was certain Bucky would've bolted. "Shh, shh. It's okay," Tony said automatically, trying to soothe him. "It's not your fault, remember? Nothing that Hydra forced you to do is your fault."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Bucky," Steve said. "No one's going to blame you." The last part included a side-eyed glance at Danny and McGarrett, in clear but unspoken warning.

Danny frowned. "Nothing that Hydra forced…?" Tony saw the moment he figured it out, because of how he looked at Bucky, then at his Sentinel, then back at Bucky, his eyes progressively widening. "You're fucking kidding me," he said, in a way that meant he knew they weren't but really, really wished they were. "Please tell me they didn't actually do that."

Steve swallowed. "We can't."
McGarrett looked between Danny's horrified expression and Bucky's stricken one. He slowly pulled his arm away from Danny, curling his hands into fists on his thighs. "You mean, when my dad was conceived… it wasn't consensual."

Bucky shook his head, dropping his gaze. His bond filled with disgust and shame like blood seeping from a wound.

"Bucky was forced," Steve said. "You have to understand that. He had no choice. Most of the women were volunteers. He wasn't."

"They were Guides," Bucky said softly. "All of them. And Hydra… Hydra wanted—"

"Hydra wanted their own Alpha Sentinel army," Tony said. "So they bred your grandfather to their harem of female Guides like a prize stud."

"You mean… they forced you to have sex? With Guides?" McGarrett asked Bucky. He winced when Bucky nodded, as if his confirmation hurt him. "And they forced some of the Guides too?"

"Yeah," Bucky said.

"How many weren't volunteers?" McGarrett asked. He took a short breath, steeling himself. "Was my grandmother a volunteer?"

"I don't know," Bucky said. "I'm sorry."

"Fuck." McGarrett rubbed the back of his neck, jaw working.

"Babe…" Danny reached for him, but McGarrett shook his head, then surged to his feet. Steve was on his feet instantly as well, clearly prepared to defend his Sentinel to the death. But McGarrett didn't even look at him. He stalked to the far end of the open space of the floor, then stood with his back to them and his hands on his hips, staring at the wall. His entire being radiated misery and anger.

Bucky pulled his hand out of Tony's, wringing them in his lap. He kept his eyes down, quietly shrinking in on himself like he was trying to disappear.

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Steve sat back down. He tried to put his arm around Bucky again, but Bucky shifted away. "It's not your fault," Steve said to him. "Bucky, you know that. We all know that. Don't do this to yourself. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Your Steve is right," Danny said to Bucky, though he could barely keep his eyes off his Sentinel. "Steve's—my Steve's— worldview just got run over by the Reality Truck and he's not taking it too well. But he knows it's not your fault. Nobody's blaming you."

"You should go to him," Bucky said. His voice was too soft, and his bond was still dark and cold with self-loathing. "He needs you."

"I know," Danny said. He ran his fingers through his hair. "But he's also mentally yelling at me to keep the fuck away from him."

"I don't think he really wants that," Bucky said.

Danny flattened his lips, his attention still fixed on the dejected figure of his Sentinel on the other side of the room. "Yeah, I think you're right." He took a deep, obviously steeling breath. "I'd say 'thanks
for the info', but it sucks. So, yeah." He stood up, then turned back to Bucky. "For what it's worth, what Hydra did to you is fucking evil and you didn't deserve any of it. But my Sentinel's here because of you, and I will never, ever regret that. So, thank you for him being born. Which doesn't change how I still want to strap every one of those Hydra dickheads to the hood of my car and then roll it off a cliff. But believe me, my Steve is going to be really fucking happy to be related to you. Once he gets over, you know, all the rest of it."

Bucky nodded, but he didn't lift his head, and he didn't smile.

Tony watched Danny go to McGarrett. He couldn't really hear what Danny murmured to him, but after a moment McGarrett unclenched a little and wrapped Danny in his arms.

"He'll be okay," Steve said.

"Is Jim Street my grandson too?" Bucky asked.

"Yes, Sergeant," J.A.R.V.I.S. said. Then, "If it helps at all, I was able to ascertain from the available documents that both his and Lieutenant Commander McGarrett's grandmothers were volunteers."

"Thank you," Bucky said on a breath. Tony could feel the thin, icy whisper of his relief, like snow blowing over frozen ground.

"Even if they hadn't been, that still wasn't your fault," Steve said.

"I know," Bucky said, but his bond ached with how much he still really didn't.

Tony stood up. "Come on." He held his hand out. "I'm kind of thinking our work here is done, and I don't know about you, but I'd really rather not stick around here with a Sentinel-Guide heart-to-heart going on. You and Steve should eat something, and then I'm thinking maybe more sleep."

"It's not that late," Steve said.

"Then more bonding sex and then sleep," Tony amended easily. "My point is, there will be plenty of time to tell Hawkeye's baby-bird Sentinel about his ancestry, and deal with the fallout in the morning."

Bucky didn't take Tony's hand. "Do you think they'll hate me?"

"I don't hate you, Bucky," McGarrett said.

Steve and Bucky had probably heard him crossing the room, but to Tony his voice came suddenly and loudly out of nowhere and scared the hell out of him. "Jesus Christ, McGarrett! You know my heart is fragile, right?"

"I can hear it. Your heart is fine," McGarrett said. "I don't hate you," he repeated to Bucky. "I…." He laughed the way people do when they should really be crying. "I've just found out that not only is everything I thought I knew about my life a lie, but….but I'm only here because my father was conceived in rape. And…." He swallowed. "And my mom was Hydra and only wanted me because my dad never came online."

"You don't know that," Danny said to him. He had his hand on McGarrett's shoulder; it looked like he was trying to keep him together, one body quadrant at a time. "Like Tony said, she had to have wanted you. I mean, that's a fuckton of commitment for someone who wasn't into it, you know? Not to mention you have a little sister."
"She left us when I was fifteen," McGarrett said to Danny, before turning to Bucky again. "But that part's not important. What's important is that I don't hate you. I don't blame you for anything. In fact, the only good thing about this is that we're family." He hesitated, then grimaced. "I mean, I don't know if that's anything you wanted, but—"

Bucky shot to his feet and hugged him.

Chapter End Notes

Eighteen chapters. One more and an epilogue. Yep. It's going to happen. I mean it. For serious.
Danny's Steve wanted to be there when Bucky et al broke the news to Street about his parentage, since out of everyone he knew pretty much exactly how the kid would feel. Danny wasn't going to leave his Sentinel to deal with the fledgling's impending implosion on his own, so he of course went along too. Which meant all five of them ended up on Clint Barton's floor.

It was kind of overkill, Danny thought. But Barton seemed happy enough to see them, even if he was still squinty from pain and a little bleary from the painkillers. Street looked better too: a lot less pale and shaky now that he was rested and clean, even if he was still splotched with bruises and scrapes almost everywhere Danny could see his skin.

Street was more wary than his Guide, though, probably because the last conversation he'd had with Danny and Steve hadn't ended well. Street might have been a baby Sentinel even compared to Steve, but innocent wasn't the same as stupid. Danny could tell just from Street's expressive, goofy face that he knew this conversation wasn't going to end well either.

Steve straddled the arm of Danny's chair with his arm draped over the back, like a very large vulture. Street and Barton sat plastered together on the loveseat, and the trio sat on the couch. Tony and Rogers kept Bucky between them.

Street, because he was young but not innocent, cut right to the chase. "You're here to tell me I'm related to Sergeant Barnes, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Steve said, because he'd been the one Street looked at for confirmation. "Bucky's our grandfather."

"Whoa." Barton blinked, sitting upright. He stared at his Sentinel. "Holy shit. Really?" He switched his stare to Bucky. "How the fuck did that happen?"
Bucky was wringing his hands again and having a hard time meeting anyone's eyes. Danny knew him well enough by now that he could tell Bucky wanted to apologize some more. Probably for breathing. Danny was sure only the psychic support Bucky was getting from his two Guides kept him from actually doing it. "Hydra forced me to impregnate female Guides," Bucky said. "They were volunteers." He shot a quick glance at Steve: a silent plea for him not to amend that with the whole truth. "I wasn't, but…Hydra wanted Alpha Sentinels and Guides, and Alphas run in my family."

"What Hydra didn't realize is that Sentinels and Guides in Bucky's family tree are actually rare, because most of them never came online," Rogers said. "And if they did, it was almost always late, and only after some kind of terrible trauma."

"I was experimented on, during the war." Bucky said it like he was confessing a sin. "After my battalion got captured. I got sick, and then they dragged me off and…." He took a breath. "They used electroshock, and injected me with a different version of the serum Steve got. It hurt. More than anything I'd ever been through before." Danny wondered if Street caught the until Hydra captured me again that Bucky didn't say. "I don't know if it was the pain or becoming a Super Soldier like Steve that made me activate—that made me come online as a Sentinel. But that's when it happened."

Street's big doe-eyes were huge with alarm. "They electrocuted you?"

Bucky nodded. "Yeah. They were trying to make me forget who I was. It didn't work, though. I mean, I lost a couple weeks, but I was okay."

Danny was pretty sure okay was an overstatement of hilariously epic proportions, considering how Rogers grimaced like Danny usually did when Steve recounted his own near-death shenanigans. Rogers didn't call Bucky on it the way Danny would have, though. He just cupped the back of Bucky's neck, offering the comfort of his presence.

Street swallowed. "I didn't go through anything like that. I just…I had to shoot someone I…. Someone I grew up with. To protect my partner. He…. I killed him." Street held his casted left arm to his chest with his good hand, like he'd be hugging himself if he actually dared.

Street was trying to soothe himself instead of turning to Barton, even though his Guide was literally right there, with his arm around Street's shoulders. Danny had the sudden and unpleasant reminder of Bucky: feral and wedged under the sink, because he was terrified and that was the closest thing he remembered to comfort.

Street hadn't been that deprived, but Danny still recognized that kind of loneliness. He wondered when was the last time Street got a hug. Or, probably more likely, when was the last time Street got a hug and felt like he'd deserved it.

"That's rough," Bucky said. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks," Street murmured, then looked away. The move was so similar to Bucky that Danny blinked.

Barton carded his fingers through Street's hair. "That fucking sucks. I hate that you had to make that choice."

"Me too," Street said quietly.

"What our Steve was getting at, is that it took a few years—well, probably at least 27, if they were paying attention—but Hydra eventually realized that their Sentinel breeding program was mostly
useless, so they finally quit it in the 70s," Tony said. He had one arm around Bucky and was holding Bucky's closer hand. "J.A.R.V.I.S. was able to ferret that out easily enough. But unfortunately Hydra didn't bother to keep track of any progeny who weren't classified as Latent or Carriers. So we only have information on ten of Bucky's children, eight of which survived long enough to have children of their own."

"I have eleven grandchildren," Bucky said to Street. "Including Steve McGarrett, his sister, and you."

Danny gently squeezed Steve's thigh. The five of them had been briefed by Tony's ceiling robot that morning, so none of this was a surprise to anyone but poor Street and his Guide. Which didn't mean that Steve had taken it well.

Not the sudden family thing, because even for a change-phobic Sentinel that was pretty cool. The problem was that Steve was change-phobic. He was perfectly capable of, say, switching careers on the fly and Shanghaing a near-stranger into his taskforce, but change he wasn't in control of could still send him reeling. And he'd just learned the day before that Bucky Barnes was his actual grandfather, not the ensign Steve was supposedly named after who'd probably never existed. That was bad enough, but now Steve also knew that John McGarrett had been born under circumstances a decent person wouldn't wish on their worst enemy.

Throw in Cousin Sentinel Baby-Bird plus eight other people Steve McGarrett was suddenly related to and had never met, and Danny was honestly surprised he hadn't tried to swim back to Hawaii.

Danny was trying not to think too much about any of this himself, because the last thing his Sentinel needed was his Guide freaking out on him. But the knowledge that Steve wasn't the Aloha Soldier right now only because Hydra had basically stopped giving a fuck felt like they'd both dodged a grenade in a mine field. What would have happened if Doris faking her death had brought Steve online at 15? Or if John's real death had done it 18 years later? How close had Danny come to losing his Sentinel before he'd even met him?

Yeah. Danny was trying very hard not to think about it.

He could tell Steve was trying very hard not to think about it either, because he was keeping it together as well as he usually did (and wasn't that fucking tragic, that Danny could use the word 'usually'?), but Danny could feel Steve's part of their bond heaving and soughing like an old ship under the strain. Eventually something was going to snap. Hopefully Danny could help Steve pick up the pieces and not lose any himself.

Right now Danny just sent his Sentinel as much love, peace and comfort as he could. Hopefully it would be enough.

Street, unfortunately but really not all that surprisingly, looked like he was taking the information about as well as Steve had. He'd gone pale again, with that greenish tint licking at his jaw. His eyes looked like big, freaked-out marbles. He was holding his cast so tightly Danny was a little concerned for the material. "Am I Hydra? Am I related to Nazis?"

"Of course you're not Hydra!" Barton exclaimed. He sat up straight so he could look his freaked-out Sentinel in the face. "Who said anything about you being Hydra? No one here is Hydra. That's stupid."

"My grandmother was Hydra," Street said, voice tight as the skin over his scarred knuckles. "And my dad must've been Hydra, considering what he did to me and my mom. So, am I Hydra too? Am I...Is there something..." He looked away, sucking air through his teeth. "I knew there was
"Hey, no. Cut it out." Barton put his hand on the far side of Street's neck, gently bumped his forehead to Street's temple. "Nothing's wrong with you, okay? You're not Hydra and there's nothing wrong with you."

"Do you remember what I told you?" Steve asked him. "How even if one of your parents were Hydra it didn't matter? It wasn't you?"

"Yeah. What he said." Barton nodded. "Evil isn't genetic. It wasn't like your dad beat Hydra into you."

Tony cleared his throat. "It wasn't just your father. Both your parents were Hydra. I'm sorry," he added, because Street looked like he'd been stabbed right through the heart.

"My mom?" Street asked, in a voice that was so small and vulnerable Danny wanted to scoop it up and protect it like a baby bird. "My mom's Hydra? She…" He stopped abruptly, shaking his head.

"No. You're lying. Or…or your information is wrong. She's not Hydra. She can't be. She killed my dad to protect me! He was hurting us! She wouldn't…. She can't be Hydra!"

"She is," Rogers said with heartbreaking gentleness. "You can hear our heartbeats. You know we're not lying. She didn't kill your father because he was abusive, but because he wanted to take you to a different Hydra cell." He glanced at Bucky, apology flickering through his eyes. "One in Siberia. Your mom killed him to keep you in the States."

"He really was an abusive asshole, though," Tony added. "Nobody made up that part. Unfortunately. But stopping her husband from beating her toddler son was more of a perk than a motivation."

"No!" Street shrugged off his Guide's touch, fists clenched. "I don't care about your fucking heartbeats! You're lying! You have to be lying! My mom saved me! She went to jail for me! I owe her! I owe her everything! Why are you telling me this bullshit? What do you want from me?"

"Nothing," Rogers said. "Jim, we don't want anything from you. But this is the truth. You deserve to know the truth of where you come from."

"I know how hard this is," Steve said.

"No you don't!" Street shouted at him. "Don't touch me!" he snarled at Barton, wrenching away when his Guide reached for him.

They hadn't completed their bond yet, Danny remembered. Almost all new pairs needed something to solidify their nascent connection, even if it was just symbolic. That was what bonding ceremonies were for, especially for platonic bonds. Danny and Steve had needed to consummate the romantic relationship they'd both been denying; Bucky, Tony and Rogers hadn't had to do anything beyond Tony being welcomed in.

It looked like Street and Barton weren't that lucky. They obviously needed some kind of consummation too, but they hadn't gotten it yet. Of course, being stuck in the infirmary overnight would have made that difficult.

Danny hoped to hell it happened soon, because the cracks in Barton's and Street's bond were threatening to split them apart.

"Yeah, I do," Steve insisted quietly. He slowly leaned forward to make it easier to stand,
automatically preparing to protect his Guide. "I do know how hard this is. I found out the same thing yesterday. My whole life, I was told I was named after my grandfather, who'd died as an ensign during the attack on Pearl Harbor. I joined the Navy because of it, only to find out I've been honoring a legacy that never existed."

Street sniffed, then wiped his eyes. "Are your parents Hydra too?"

"My mom is," Steve said. "My dad is Bucky's son, but he didn't know his origins any more than I did. I'm sure he thought the story about my grandfather was true. But the real truth is, my father was born because Bucky Barnes was forced to impregnate someone." He crossed his arms, looking away at the wall. "He was an experiment, and I'm only alive because I'm the continuation of that experiment. So is my sister. My dad didn't know, but my mom did." He flattened his lips, the only outward hint of the pain Danny could feel like salt water in a wound. "And she abandoned me and my sister when we were kids." He turned back to Street. "Even if your mom was Hydra, at least she still loved you enough to fight for you."

Ouch. Danny thought. Because that, right there, might be Steve's snapping point. Not his ancestry, or the lie he'd been taught to believe, or even what Hydra had done to Bucky so that John McGarrett was conceived. Nope. Turned out Steve's emotional Kryptonite was the idea that his mom never loved him.

The worst part was that Danny wasn't sure Steve was wrong. He'd met Doris; he didn't think she'd ever loved anyone at all.

All Danny wanted to do was grab Steve and take him back to Hawaii, surround him with his team and Danny's kids, and flood his stupid head with love until he finally stopped thinking he was unworthy of it.

"My mom is not Hydra!" Street practically screamed it, then bolted to his feet like he wanted a fight. His hands were still clenched, white-knuckled and trembling. His whole body shook, and each breath growled out of him like an angry dog. Street was so close to going feral Danny could practically see the retreat behind his dark, wild eyes. "Stop saying that!"

Steve tensed, then stood, blocking Danny with his body. It was sweet, but completely unnecessary. If Street so much as twitched in Steve's direction, Danny was going to psychically dropkick Baby Bird into the next century. Gently, because he was family. But still.

Bucky stood as well, quiet but ready, then Rogers got up too.

"Uh, guys? You know I'm perfectly safe, right?" Tony said.

Bucky hushed him.

"Jimmy. Jimmy, hey." Barton stood up as well. He looked careful but relaxed, like he had all the time in the world. He cupped the side of his Sentinel's face, then when Street growled again and jerked his head away. Barton just took Street's face in both his hands. "Don't do that, Jimmy. Don't pull back. You don't really want to do that. I know you're scared, but I'm right here. You're not alone, Jimmy. You don't have to hide from me. You're safe. I promise, you're safe. I'm right here."

Barton wasn't just talking. He was using his Guide abilities, trying to soothe Street through their bond and keep him present. Barton wasn't showing any outward signs of what this was costing him, but he was trying to calm a Sentinel in such emotional turmoil he was almost feral; A Sentinel who was significantly more powerful than his Guide, and also actively resisting him.
And Barton was nursing a concussion, on top of everything else. Danny had even told Street just yesterday not to tax his Guide with anything more strenuous than the normal sharing over their bond. But Street was in so much turmoil he'd forgotten to be careful. And Barton was coping anyway. Jesus Christ.

Danny barely knew the man, but his respect for him had gone up astronomically.

"I'm not scared. Leave me alone," Street growled. He was still trembling. It reminded Danny of Charlie protesting he wasn't tired while yawning and rubbing his eyes. Especially with how Street turned his head just slightly, his nostrils flaring as he scented Barton's wrist.

"Okay, you're not scared," Barton amended easily. He stepped closer, pulling Street's head down to his shoulder, then wrapping his arms around him. Street embraced Barton too, holding him tight as he inhaled against his skin. "It'd be okay if you were, though," Barton said. "This is pretty scary stuff. I'd be freaking the hell out right now, if someone had just told me my parents were Nazis. I mean, I told you about my brother. He was bad enough on his own, right?"

"Yeah," Street said. The growl in his voice was softer. "I wish I could've been there. He would've never hurt you."

Well, that kind of casual arrogance was certainly familiar. Maybe it was another Sentinel thing. Barton definitely took it in stride as if it were. "I know," he said, then turned his head enough to drop a kiss on the side of Street's neck. "Barney was an evil son of a bitch, but he was my brother and I loved him. He might've tried to kill me, but if anyone had told me he was a fucking Nazi, I would've used them as a range target."

"My mom's not evil," Street said. The growl was gone. "My dad was. She killed him to save me."

"I know," Barton said gently. "We all know that. No one's saying that she didn't do it to save you."

"Stark just did," Street said.

"Well, sometimes Stark's an idiot," Barton said. He kissed Street's neck again, visibly sagging a little as his Sentinel relaxed.

"You mom is my daughter, Jimmy," Bucky said, with a soft weariness that came from resignation and grief. "And she is Hydra. Just like your dad. I know that's not what you want to hear. But, it's true. I'm sorry. Tony's robot can show you all the files if you want. We just figured it might be easier, getting it from us first."

Street lifted his head, though he was still clutching Barton like his life depended on it. "It's not easier!" he snapped. "You're telling me that my mom is a fucking Nazi, and she let…." He swallowed. "She let my dad beat me and she didn't care—!

"Hey, hey, no. It's not like that," Bucky said. He made a face at the coffee table, then just walked over it. He stood near but outside Street's and Barton's personal space. "Of course she cared. You're her kid. If she didn't care she would've let your dad take you to Siberia. But she didn't do that, she saved you. I was in Siberia. It…It was bad." He closed his eyes for a couple moments, just breathing. "My dad hit me too," he said at last, voice rough. "He was a real angry drunk, and he was drunk most of the time. Usually he'd slap me silly or use his fists. When I got older he'd use his belt sometimes, the end with the buckle. He threw me down the stairs once. Knocked me out cold and broke my arm. I was nine. Can't even remember what the hell I did that set him off."

"Oh, my God," Tony said. He gaped up at Rogers. "You didn't tell me that. Why didn't you tell me
that? Why didn't you tell me that?" he said to Bucky. "I thought we weren't protecting each other anymore. My dad was a mean drunk too. But, he never did that. He never hit me. How could anyone do that to you? Your own father...." There were tears in Tony's eyes, either sympathy or from feeling his Sentinel's pain. Rogers sat down next to him and took Tony in his arms.

"I'm sorry," Street said.

"Thanks. But, it's okay," Bucky said. "It was a long time ago." He looked at Tony over his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Tony. I wasn't keeping it from you on purpose. It's just...it was a long time ago. It's over. He can't hurt me anymore. So...it didn't feel that important."

"Newsflash: getting abused as a child is fucking important," Tony said.

"You're right," Bucky said. "And I will tell you everything. But later, okay?"

Tony nodded, mollified. "Okay. Good."

Bucky smiled at him before turning back to Street. "I didn't tell you that to make anyone feel bad. Just, I know what it's like, what happened to you. My dad hit me almost every day, 'til I was sixteen and big enough to start hitting back. It was hell. I hated it. I practically lived at Steve's house, 'cause mine was so bad. I wanted to die sometimes, 'stead of going home." He waited a beat, letting that sink in. "Siberia was worse."

Danny thought of Bucky's private dungeon on the spirit plane. He wondered which one of the shifting hellscapes was Siberia, then realized he really didn't want to know.

"I can't change who your mom is, or how she came into the world," Bucky said. "And she is Hydra. It's a fact, I can't change that either. But, if killing your dad kept you here, then she saved you. Even if she was Hydra, she saved you."

Street tried to say something, but his next breath shattered into a sob. He put his hand over his eyes as he cried, as if he was trying to hide it. His casted hand fisted the back of Barton's shirt, gripping like a man drowning.

Barton murmured to him, giving assurance and comfort. Danny took Steve's hand and Steve gripped it tight. Steve hadn't broken down like this—yet—but he knew exactly how Street felt.

Tentatively, Bucky went closer and put his hand on Street's back. Street didn't shrug him off, but he dropped his hand to look at him, sniffling and wiping his eyes with his palm. He relaxed his death-grip on Barton's shirt.

"My mom doesn't look like you," he said.

Bucky smiled a little. "Yeah, I don't look much like my sisters either."

"Lucky for them," Barton said. He stepped back but kept one hand on Street's arm. He held out his free hand to shake. "I remember you from yesterday, but we haven't met. Clint Barton," he said, diverting attention from Street while the Sentinel got himself together. Danny's respect for him went up again; Barton was one hell of a Guide.

"James Buchanan Barnes." Bucky shook his hand. "You can call me Bucky."

"Bucky. Cool," Barton said. "This is James Street, which is a pretty big coincidence, considering you're apparently related. Thank you for not killing him, by the way."
"You're welcome," Bucky said. "Thanks for not going for me," he said to Street, who already looked calmer. "I know how tense that was, with two wounded Guides and me feral. You're going to be a swell Sentinel, if you've already got control like that."

Danny hadn't thought Street had all that great self-control at the time. In retrospect, however, the kid had indeed managed to stay present until Danny and Tony could chill him out. That was pretty commendable.

Street looked shocked at the praise—of course he did—but at least he didn't refuse it. "I have a really good Guide," he said.

"Yes you do," Barton said, grinning. He accepted the wad of tissues Rogers pressed into his hand, then gave them to Street, who gave him a tiny, embarrassed smile before he dried his face.

"You going to be okay?" Bucky asked him.

"Yeah, sure," Street said, and Danny courageously did not roll his eyes. His Steve and Birdie were definitely related. Obviously the thick skull came from their common ancestor.

Barton snorted. "You're not fine. I know you're not fine. You're a fucking wreck. And it's okay to be a fucking wreck. This was terrible. No one in the world would expect you to be fine after learning this shit. I'm not fine after learning this shit, 'cause you're my Sentinel and it happened to you. So, don't be fine. Be whatever you are. It's okay."

Street's breath hitched and he had to wipe his eyes again. "I don't know what I'm supposed to feel," he said, which was understandable. He'd probably never been allowed to have emotions in his life. "I'm really angry. I want to hit something."

"That's cool. Be angry. I'd be fucking angry if I found out my parents were Nazis," Barton said. "And you want to go hit something? Great. Let's do that. There's, like, a giant gym a few floors down with loads of shit you can beat up. And a gun range, if you want."

Street looked cautiously excited, then torn. "What about your head?"

Barton shrugged. "I'll be your cheer squad."

Street smiled for real. "I love you," he said, then immediately froze. "I mean...I didn't mean that," he stammered, the big, dumb baby bird.

"Yes, you did," Barton said gleefully. "I love you too, you idiot." He beamed at him.

Street got very close to beaming back at him. He brushed Barton's cheek with two fingers, suddenly shy. "Awesome."

"You two should really finish bonding," Rogers said.

"No shit," Barton said. "We were going to, but then you guys showed up."

"And that's our cue." Danny stood, Tony and Rogers following. "Are you two going to be all right?"

"We will if you leave," Barton said.

Danny smirked, then clapped him on the shoulder a couple times. "Take care of him."

The imperative was completely unnecessary, but Barton was a Guide so he understood. He gave Danny a solemn nod. "I will."
"Wait," Street said to Bucky as he was turning to go.

Bucky looked back at him immediately. "Yeah?"

"Could I…." Street stepped closer. "I didn't know I had any family. I thought it was just me and my mom. And, she…. I was in a lot of foster homes, and I couldn't see her much, and—"

Bucky hugged him as ferociously as he'd hugged Steve the evening before. "You're not alone anymore, Jimmy," he said. "You got a family now. You've got all of us."

"Thank you," Street said. He hesitated. "Can I imprint on you?"

Danny bit the inside of his lip so he wouldn't laugh. But it was cute, seeing the goofy baby bird and Bucky imprint on each other. Bucky was so practiced and precise, and Street was so new and ridiculous. It was really, really cute, and God knew that Danny deserved some cuteness after the awfulness of the last 24 or so hours.

It had turned out pretty well, though, he thought, watching Bucky deliberately lick Street's face in retaliation for his managing to goob on Bucky's ear. Street looked scandalized, which was hilarious, and then when his Guide laughed he launched himself at Barton and rubbed his cheek on his Guide's hair.

Barton tried to lick Street in return, which somehow just ended up with the two of them kissing…and definitely their cue to leave.

"Well, that was fun," Tony said, once they were all clustered around the elevator. "What say we all watch Schindler's List as a chaser? Or Saving Private Ryan?"

"I just want to go home," Bucky said. "I'm beat." He rubbed his forehead. "It's been a fucking lousy couple days and I really don't want to think about Hydra for a while."

"Seconded," Tony said, lifting his hand. "I'm entirely in favor of not thinking about Hydra."

"I'm sure we can manage that," Rogers said fondly, sliding his arms around both of them.

Steve looked at Danny. "I want to go home too."

"Yes. That's a great idea," Danny said. The elevator car arrived and they went in. It was big enough that even with the five of them Danny still felt he could breathe. "I'd love some easy eco-terrorists or drug smugglers. It'd be a nice break. Relaxing."

"What about Bucky's other grandchildren?" Tony asked Steve. "You've got eight more cousins out there. Don't you want to know who they are?" He looked at Bucky. "And what about your kids?"

Bucky tilted his head back, closing his eyes. He reached out blindly then smiled when Tony took his hand. "Fuck. I don't know. I want to, but…It was bad enough, with Steve and Jimmy." He opened his eyes and looked at Steve. "Not that I blame you, or anything. I just…." He sighed. "I don't know."

"Nobody says you have to decide now," Rogers said.

Bucky nodded. "Yeah. Okay." He looked both relieved and a little disappointed.

The elevator dinged pleasantly and opened on Danny's and Steve's floor, but the car stayed put even after they got out.
"Anytime you're ready to leave, just let me or J.A.R.V.I.S. know," Tony said. "I can have a Quinjet ready in ten minutes."

"I feel like we owe you more than just a quick ride home," Rogers said. He looked at Tony and Bucky, smiling with such affection Danny could practically touch it. "None of us would even be here if it wasn't for you. I don't think we could ever thank you enough."

"I could probably buy you an island," Tony said. "You guys like islands, right? You live on one."

"We don't need an island," Steve said, smiling. "We're just glad we were able to help."

"And anyway, we're not gone yet," Danny said. He wasn't a huge fan of goodbyes. "We can have our tearful farewell on the runway, like in Casablanca."

"This is definitely the start of a beautiful friendship," Tony said.

"Hey," Rogers said, "I understood that reference."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, next chapter is the last one, and then an epilogue. I mean it.

And it's going to be another exciting meeting, guys! #ILOVEMEETINGS. Buckle up.
Chapter Summary

Natasha finds out where she comes from, Bucky makes a decision, and Tony finds out what he is. And the spirit animals break stuff.

Chapter Notes

This chapter makes reference to Bucky being forced to impregnate female Guides. There is nothing here that was not mentioned in previous chapters, and the mention is brief and not graphic. Please be warned, however, if that will upset you.

OMG HOW DID THIS CHAPTER GET SO LONG?

EDITED TO ADD That I was able to actually end this chapter thanks to Squeaky. She was a tremendous help with some excellent ideas. Unfortunately I forgot to tell her so.:(

THANK YOU SO MUCH to Darkmoore, my usual partner-in-crime. She read this mofo twice even though she has a lot going on at the moment, including fighting a cold. She didn't even mention how I mistakenly thought this was chapter 19, which it is not. That's the next chapter. Because there will be one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If someone had told Tony Stark a few days ago that he'd be hosting a Sentinel-Guide Spirit Animal Playdate on the common floor of Avengers Tower—and that one of the spirit animals would be his—he would've laughed then ignored them entirely.

Well, in retrospect maybe he would've cried, but that was just on behalf of his furniture. What was left of it, anyway. Turned out several very excited birds, apex predators (and one primate) did a lot of damage when they exploded into an impromptu game of chase. Who knew?

Things had started out relatively calm, which really should have made Tony wary if he'd been thinking about it. Danny's mom Clara Williams had come from New Jersey per her son's request, and Natasha and her still shiny new Guide Sam Wilson had come back from the Facility. That had been Steve's request, but one Tony wholeheartedly agreed with. There were going to be three Sentinels sharing territory, at least during Avengers' missions. They had to be able to get along.

Sam, it turned out, was awesome. He'd been a Temporarily Assigned Guide as well as Pararescue, flying with experimental wings which Tony began mentally redesigning immediately. Sam had retired after the Sentinel he'd been assigned to was killed. Even though they'd only been partially bonded, the pain of losing Riley had been too much for Sam to overcome.

He'd become a Guide Counselor like Clara, working at a Sentinel Wellness Center in Washington, D.C.. He also volunteered as a counselor for regular human veterans, and probably fostered puppies
and rescued kittens from trees in his spare time. And he exuded the kind of friendly, easy competence that made him easy to like. That was good, because Tony was already thinking of how Sam could help Bucky. Maybe in tandem with Clara, who was as amazing as advertised and seemed to have decided that Bucky was now her son.

Natasha adored Sam, and was protective of her Guide in a way that reminded Tony very much of Bucky and Street, which was therefore both hilarious and terrifying.

It was clear Sam becoming an Avenger wasn't going to be the problem. The potential problem was Natasha being an Avenger along with Bucky and Street. Especially Street, since he was now the bonded Sentinel of her former TAG, and Sentinels could be possessive as fuck. Admittedly Tony hadn't learned much about Sentinels or Guides beyond what they taught in health class, but everyone knew that.

Street, predictably, bristled when Natasha greeted Clint with an enthusiastic hug-imprint combo. He also wasn't thrilled when her Arctic Fox tackled Clint's dog and joyously licked him. But Street used the restraint Bucky had been so proud of and managed a tight smile instead of, say, throwing her across the room then dying when she retaliated.

All the same, Tony was wincing inwardly, and he could tell everyone was subtly preparing to pull Natasha and Street apart. Right up until Natasha scented the newbie, tilted her head, then frowned and said, "Do I know you?"

And then a second later Bucky said, "Natalia?" like her presence was a miracle, and Natasha (Natalia? What?), who'd been—not unreasonably—fixated on Street and Clint, suddenly realized that the very large, very quiet, human-shaped lump practically hiding behind Steve was, indeed, actually a human.

Natasha went completely, utterly still. Then she said "Vanya?" in a tiny, breathy whisper, and went pale so fast Sam moved to grab her in case she passed out.

Natasha looked like Bucky felt, so to speak, considering the tidal wave of complete, utter and abject astonishment Tony could feel from his Sentinel. The wonder and joy came second, seeping up like warm water, and then Bucky cried out and hugged Natasha so fiercely he lifted her off the ground.

Tony, Steve, Clint and Sam all looked at each other.

Clint rubbed the bandage on his temple, as if what they were watching had something to do with the remnants of his concussion. "I did not see that coming."

"Me neither," Tony murmured.

"Wait. Didn't he try to kill her a few weeks ago?" Sam asked. "You know, when he tried to kill all of us?"

"He didn't remember either of us, and she never saw his face," Steve said, though the Captain America certainty in his voice didn't really work with the stunned expression.

Bucky and Natasha were clinging to each other like long-lost siblings. Bucky (Vanya? What the hell?) had his nose buried in Natasha's hair. Natasha gripped the back of his hoodie with tears leaking from her clenched-shut eyes. Tony didn't speak Russian, but he recognized the particular cadence of apology in Bucky's voice. And he could feel the sorrow, remorse and regret, mixed with Bucky's incredulous elation.

"Just like that, we're supposed to be cool?" Sam said.
"...Yes? Obviously?" Tony said.

"Shh," Clara told both of them.

Celeste popped into existence barking jubilantly, and bounded over to Natasha's fox by pretty much going through the nearest end table. She licked Feodora's face with so much gusto she knocked the fox over, then started licking Feodora's plush, white belly fur.

Feodora was entirely white. Tony hadn't particularly thought about it before, because Arctic Fox. But he was thinking about it now.

Tony eased his phone out of his pocket. "JARVIS," he said as discreetly as possible to the screen, "why isn't Natasha listed as one of Bucky's grandchildren?"

"I have no idea, Sir," JARVIS responded just as discreetly, "I will go over the files again."

"Thanks," Tony said. "Maybe there—Holy fuck!"

The segue was, in Tony's opinion, entirely warranted, considering Sam's spirit animal had just decided to drop in. And Sam's spirit animal happened to be a lioness. A lioness roughly the size of a Volkswagen.

And that, evidently, was the party invitation all the other spirit animals were waiting for. Because suddenly they were all there. Every last chirping, roaring, chuffing, buzzing, squeaking, barking and screaming one of them. And they were all very happy to see each other. And spontaneously decided that the best way to express that happiness would be to gambol through the common floor's living room. Specifically the living room furniture.

This had gone on for a while.

Now things had quieted down, most likely because there wasn't much left to break. Celeste and Lucky were playing tug-of-war with what used to be a table leg, except Celeste was prancing smugly around the room while Lucky dangled from the stick like a Christmas ornament.

Clara's bluebird Seymour was being preened by Street's dove. The dove was named 'Tweety', because Street shared genes with Steve McGarrett. Celeste was probably lucky Bucky hadn't named her 'Goofy' or 'Pluto.'

Tigger and Hazel, Sam's lion, were giving each other tongue baths, and Feodora was licking Tazio. Or possibly tasting him, Tony wasn't sure.

Abigail was sitting on Maya's head doing some bee thing, while Maya was contemplatively picking apart the remains of a couch cushion.

"My goodness," Clara said, surveying the damage with an expression of mild shock. "I haven't seen that many spirit animals in one place since my graduation as a Counselor."

"At least they like each other," McGarrett said, watching Tigger roll onto his back to give Hazel access to his stomach. Feodora had stopped licking Tazio, instead carrying the rat around by his scruff like a kit. Or a snack.

"A fox and a wolf," Danny said absently. He looked at Bucky, who was standing with his arm around Natasha's shoulders, laughing at Celeste and Lucky. "I wonder how many of your other offspring have canine spirit animals?"
Natasha and Sam both blinked, then they both stared at Bucky.

"Offspring?" Sam said.

Natasha frowned. "You have children?"

"You smell familiar," Street said to Natasha. "I think we're cousins."

Natasha whirled to face him, gaping. "What?"

"Oh boy, here we go," Clint said.

Danny looked at Steve and Tony. "Why don't you two ever tell anyone anything?"

"So, you're really telling me that I'm genetically related to the Winter Soldier," Natasha said.

She was looking at Tony, who had somehow become the unofficial chair of this meeting-slash-family reunion, probably because they were all in one of the tower's meeting rooms. That hadn't been the plan. The plan had been to use the common floor, since it was a lot more casual and welcoming. The meeting rooms had an 'Avengers Assemble!' vibe that made Tony feel like something terrible was about to happen. Unfortunately, the spirit animals had wrecked that plan and most of the common floor with it. At least they'd had a good time.

The meeting room did, at least, have a nice, very large table and several comfy chairs. Not as comfortable as the couch or armchairs on the common floor, but whatever.

"We're telling you that you're related to Bucky Barnes," Steve said. "Vanya and the Winter Soldier were the names Hydra gave him." His prickly protectiveness would've been cuter if it wasn't giving Tony a headache. Bucky, who was sitting between him and Steve, kicked Steve's ankle under the table. Steve glared at both of them, but relaxed. A little.

Natasha was not relaxed, though Tony was proud he knew her well enough to see it. Neither was Sam, but that might've been because the last time he saw Bucky, the Winter Soldier kicked him off a helicarrier deck.

Not that anyone in the room was actually chill, despite the comfy chairs and lack of loud, rampaging animals. Street kept glancing between Clint and Natasha, as if his bonded Guide would tell him he'd changed his mind and then challenge Sam to a duel. Steve McGarrett kept glancing out the window, as if he was hoping something would explode so he'd have an excuse to leave. Tony couldn't really blame him. The Sentinels were picking up on Bucky's anxiety, and their Guides were picking up on the Sentinels picking up on it. Fun times wow.

Bucky was holding his and Steve's hands under the table. Tony was on his left, and Bucky's leg was bouncing so vigorously that his metal hand was shaking.

"He was Vanya when I knew him. Just like he knew me as Natalia," Natasha said, voice cool. On the surface she was taking the news better than McGarrett and Street, but she had her forearm over Sam's on her armrest with their fingers threaded, and that grip had to be tight enough to hurt.

"It's okay, Steve," Bucky said. "I was Vanya back then. I didn't remember being anyone else." Bucky didn't quite believe that, but he wasn't lying so much as unsure of his own memories. Tony kept his sadness and anger about that firmly to himself. "But, yeah." Bucky nodded at Natasha.

"You're definitely related to me. We're just...not sure exactly how, yet."
"We were able to find a list of some of Bucky's children and grandchildren," Tony explained. "Unfortunately, somewhere around the time Bucky got moved from Germany to Russia, Hydra stopped giving any fucks about Bucky's descendants who didn't at least test as Carriers, so we don't even know how many might actually be out there in the world. But you weren't on either list. And you should be, since you were already online when S.H.I.E.L.D. recruited you."

"How can you be so sure she's related to him?" Sam asked. He looked at Street. "You two smelling like each other isn't much of a litmus test, you know?"

"It is if you're a Sentinel," McGarrett said, somewhat grimly. "Family members have similar scents." He gestured at Clara, who gave him a warm smile. "Clara and Danny smell alike, and Danny's kids smell like them too. When Bucky and I first met, I noticed he smelled like me. I just didn't think it was significant at the time."

"We thought it was a Sentinel thing, like the imprinting stuff," Danny said. He spread his hands. "We haven't been around many other Sentinels, so we didn't know it meant anything."

"It does, though," Street said. "I was around other Sentinels after I came online. None of them smelled familiar, and just being around them got my back up. But Bucky, Steve McGarrett and you all smell like me. And it's like...it's like I already know you," he added to Natasha. Then he fastened his gaze on the table, like a gradeschooler who'd just admitted a crush.

"And your fox is white," Tony pointed out. "Bucky's wolf is white, and McGarrett and Street also have white spirit animals."

"Arctic Foxes are white for part of the year," Natasha said.

"That's true, I'd say none of your spirit animals have especially unusual coloring," Clara said. "But similar spirit animals and similar colorings can run in families. I wouldn't be surprised if there were other canines out there, too." She smiled. "But at this point I'd certainly expect any of Bucky's descendants to have white spirit animals, no matter what kind."

"I don't know if you remember meeting me, the first time, Natal—Natasha," Bucky said quietly. "I don't remember much of it myself. But, out of all the girls, you were the only one I wanted to train. I wasn't an active Sentinel then, so I couldn't scent you. But I remember how scared I was that they'd find out I wanted to keep you with me. Because I was sure if they did, they'd take you away and I'd never see you again."

Tony sucked in a near-silent breath, saw Steve scrubbing his face out of the corner of his eye. Their Sentinel had suffered so much. Tony hated how all he and Steve could do was hold his hands and send him comfort.

"I remember," Natasha said simply. Her mouth curved into a sweet, strangely wistful smile. "We all danced for you, and shot targets, and fought. I tried to be perfect, so you'd pick me to train. I was so honored when the Matron said it was me. I didn't realize your handlers picked me, that you had no choice about that or anything else. All the other girls were jealous, because I got to leave the Red Room and train with the handsome, mysterious Winter Soldier, who never laughed and barely spoke, and never took off his jacket or gloves." Her smirk was too quiet to hold such a lifetime's worth of pain. "I was glad to leave the Red Room. But I didn't care that the Winter Soldier was handsome and mysterious. What mattered was that he never hurt me, even when I made mistakes. And that he protected me, from the other men. He made me feel safe. No one else ever had."

"Damn," Sam murmured. He put his arm around Natasha, and she tucked herself close. Clint, who was on her other side, took her hand.
"Were you online?" McGarrett asked her, voice gentle.

Natasha shook her head. "I was ten, when we met. I became a Sentinel five years later, the day after they literally dragged me kicking and screaming back to the Red Room." She swallowed. "I thought I would never see you again," she said to Bucky. "I didn't know 'til the bridge that I already had."

"You mean that time when I shot you to kill my target," Bucky said, grimacing. "I'm sorry."

Natasha shrugged. "I would have shot you, if you didn't pull the trigger first. Then, and on the bridge." Her mouth quirked. "I'm just glad I missed with the grenade launcher."

Bucky made a sound a little bit like a smirk. "Me too."

"Wait," Steve said to Natasha. "Forgive me, but there's something I don't understand. If you were ten when you and Bucky met, it would've been 1994. Bucky had been moved to the United States by then. I thought you grew up in Russia?"

Natasha's mouth twitched. "I was ten," she said simply, "in 1956."

Everyone except Sam and Bucky gaped at her.

"Wait, what?" Clint said, turning to stare at her. "1956? You're, like, 30. How could you have been ten in 1956?"

"The serum," Bucky said. His smile was so bitter it made Natasha's expression look lighthearted. "The other prize, besides being trained by me."

"You're a Super Soldier?" McGarrett gaped, then his eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring as he scented the air. He blinked. "Wow. That is you. It was so faint I thought it was just Rogers and Bucky being in the same room."

"It didn't really take." Natasha said it with and ease that belied, well, everything. "I heal fast, and age more slowly, but that's about it. I'm only a little bit stronger than average." She smirked again, but this time it was at least slightly real. "And still small."

"Pocket-sized," Bucky said, then grinned when Natasha rolled her eyes, like it was a very old joke. Which it had to have been, because she'd been born in 1946—

"Oh, fuck," Tony said wonderingly. Then, "were you tested?" he asked Natasha when everyone looked at him.

She shook her head. "It's possible I don't remember, but I'm almost certain I wasn't."

"Most children are tested around adolescence," Clara said. "I know that's been the case since at least the early 1900s. You should have been by the time you were fourteen."

"I bet you fell through the cracks because you got pimped out to Hydra. Jesus." Tony put his hand over his mouth, regarding her. It was hard to imagine that anything about her life could have been lucky, and yet things could have been so much worse.

"So much worse. Like that child in Bucky's memory, chained to a bed and begging…."

"Tony? You okay?" Bucky asked.

"Always," Tony said automatically, blinking himself back to the present. His side of the bond was a
torrent of his Guide and Sentinel's concern. "I, uh," he started, then had to clear his throat. His voice was a little rough. "I was just thinking how ironic it is that I'm happy Natasha went back to the Red Room. Because I know the Red Room was hell on earth," he said to her, "but if Hydra had found out you were a Sentinel, they would've...." He stopped talking when he realized he was about to finish that sentence with *kept her barefoot and pregnant and shackled to a bed*, and wasn't sure he could actually say it and not end up vomiting all over the very nice table.

"They would have bred her," Bucky finished for him bleakly. "Like me."

"Yeah," Tony said.

"Uh, guys?" Clint cut in before Tony had to think about Natasha being *bred* by Hydra and maybe end up puking anyway. "I know I'm not so great at simple math, but...if Bucky was captured in 1945, how could he have a grandkid in 1956?"

"He couldn't," Danny said immediately, then stopped. "Holy shit."

"Bòţhe mòî, Natasha said. Her eyes were huge. Then, to Bucky, "I'm your daughter?"

"I'm sorry," Bucky said, just like he'd apologized to McGarrett and Street. Because of course he would.

"No!" Natasha shot to her feet and slapped both palms on the table. "Don't you *dare* apologize to me! Do you have any idea how often I wished I had parents when I was growing up, trapped in that fucking room where they handcuffed us to our cots at night? How often I wished for someone to come and say I was their daughter and rescue me from that place?"

"Natalia," Bucky said, stricken. "I—"

"Shut up!" she snapped at him, then swiped angrily at her eyes. "Shut up. You were my hero. I wanted someone to take me away from the Red Room, and you did. For five years, you made me stronger and protected me. You kept me safe. You were my mentor. You *belonged* to me. I'd never had that before. Ever. And when...." She gritted her teeth like she was offended by her own sadness. "When they took you away, for years I pretended that one day you'd come back, and say...and say I was your daughter. And rescue me."

"But I didn't," Bucky said.

"Shut up." Natasha glared, swiping at her eyes again. "You don't get it. You did. Of course you did. I held onto those memories every single day of my life. Like treasures. *For decades.* They were the only good things I had. I didn't give up and die because I told myself stories about how one day you'd come back and I had to stay strong so you'd be proud of me. I'm alive right now because of you and don't you *dare* fucking apologize to me for that!"

"Whoa," Street said into the ensuing silence.

Bucky swallowed. His bond was...not a *mess*, because that would be a bad thing, and it wasn't. But, complicated. He was feeling too many things at once for Tony to catalogue, though most of it was awe, a careful kind of happiness, and pride. And guilt, because a Bucky without guilt was like a day without sunshine.

Bucky said something in Russian that Tony wished to hell he understood—Clint did, if his approving but suddenly watery smile was any indication—but made a mental note to ask Bucky to translate later. Tony was pretty sure it wasn't an apology, though, because Natasha slapped both her hands over her mouth and burst into tears.
Good tears though. Probably. Because when Bucky all but threw himself across the table to get to her they hugged even more tightly than they had when Natasha had first seen him.

Sam scrubbed his face, then looked at Steve and Tony. He seemed a little overwhelmed. Tony couldn't blame him. He was feeling more than a little overwhelmed himself.

"What did he say, anyway?" Street asked Clint in a whisper.

Clint shrugged a little. "That he was always proud of her, and so glad he'd been blessed enough to have five years with her. And how he's really happy, 'cause he'd wished she was his daughter, too."

Bucky murmured something else to Natasha, and Tony wasn't at all surprised that they imprinted on each other before Bucky kissed Natasha's cheek and stepped back, still holding her hand. At this rate, Bucky's catalogue of imprint-buddies would end up like the Stark Industries company directory.

"If you'll excuse the interruption," J.A.R.V.I.S. interjected, "I am pleased to remind Sergeant Barnes that I still have information on ten children and eight more grandchildren. And per Sir's request, my extended research into Sergeant Barnes' offspring resulted in information on three great grandchildren as well."

McGarrett let out a long breath. Tony was no Sentinel, but even he could hear the anxiety lacing through it.

Bucky's bond careened from surprised happiness at discovering he was Natasha's father to practically humming with tension. "I have great grandchildren too?"

"We don't have to look at any of them now, Buck. Or ever, if you don't want," Steve said. "It's your choice. This has been a lot to deal with already."

Bucky bit his lip. He looked around the table, at the three Sentinels related to him. "I...I don't...." He turned helplessly to his two Guides. "I don't know what I want. There're so many. And they don't know about me. I don't...." He dragged his fingers through his hair. "They all got lives. I don't want to ruin 'em."

"You made my life better," Natasha said.

"You didn't ruin my life, Bucky," McGarrett said. "It was just...hard to take. At first. It's a lot to deal with. But not because of you."

"Yeah," Street said. "I'm glad to know where I came from. But at the same time, I'm not."

"You don't actually have to contact them, though, right?" Sam asked. He shrugged when Bucky looked at him. "No one's saying you have to have anything to do with them at all."

"Then what's the point?" Danny said, sounding incredulous and even a little angry. "Why even bother if all you're interested in is their names?"

"I don't know!" Bucky burst out, then winced. He put his elbows on the table, linking his fingers behind his neck. When Tony tried to rub his back the muscles felt like iron. "I don't know," Bucky repeated miserably.

"It's all right, sweetheart," Clara said to Bucky. "Danny has strong feelings about children because he has a girl and a little boy—"

"You have kids too!" Danny protested.
"But like Sam and your Steve said," Clara continued serenely, patting her son's hand, "there's no reason to contact them. Or even know their names. You're right, they all have their own lives and history. If you never find out about each other, it won't change anything."

"It's up to you, Bucky," Steve said. "Whatever you want."

Bucky nodded, though he wouldn't lift his eyes. "I'm not ready," he said softly.

"Hey, that's fine. That's just fine. You don't have to feel guilty," Tony said, because naturally there was as much guilt mixed up in Bucky's head as relief. "Hell you probably saved us all at least an hour of looking at slides or whatever."

"So, that's it? We can go?" Clint perked up like his spirit animal about to ravage a chair leg.

"This wasn't a briefing, Clint," Steve said. "It wasn't mandatory."

"I know that. But, you know, moral support." Clint gestured at Bucky. "He's gonna be on the team, right? I wanted to be friendly."

Bucky finally raised his head. His chuckle was faint but genuine. "You're very friendly, Barton."

Clint grinned, pleased with himself. "Yes. Yes I am."

"Danny asked me to find out what I could about Tony being Bucky's and Captain Rogers' Guide," Clara said, as Clint was happily getting to his feet. "There wasn't much but it might be helpful, if you're interested," she said to Tony, Bucky and Steve.

"Oh. Well, that's cool." Clint sat down again, then put his elbows on the table and his chin in his hands. For the life of him Tony couldn't tell if Clint was being serious or goofing around. "What's up with Bucky's two Guides?"

"Tony Stark is a Guide Augment," Clara said.

"A what?" Bucky, Tony, and Street all asked at once.

"A Guide Augment," Clara repeated. "Which I'd be happy to explain if you give me a moment," she added sweetly. She waited a moment, then went on when no one jumped in again. "They're extremely rare, as I'm sure you already know. So rare, in fact, that most of the sources I found said they were myths."

"Yeah, I had that problem too," McGarrett said. "I could only find three articles that even talked about it seriously."

Clara nodded. "We were probably reading the same sources. But I was able to track down most of the references cited. The most relevant one was a Paper published in Canada in 1916. It described an incident with a soldier, a Sentinel, who had been put in what was colloquially called the 'Moribund Tent.'" She grimaced. "Which means exactly what you think it means. He'd lost his Guide during a major battle, and was dying of what was then called Broken Bond Syndrome. At the time there was almost nothing that could be done to help bereaved Sentinels even under ideal conditions, which this definitely wasn't. The best they could do for him was keep him comfortable until he died."

"I'm assuming he didn't die," Tony said.

"You're right. He didn't." Clara gifted Tony with a sunshiny smile. He could see why Steve and Bucky liked her so much. "Apparently, a day or so before the poor man was expected to pass on, a
Sentinel-Guide pair arrived. Only the Guide was wounded, and not too badly, but the instant they got off the truck, he all but dragged his Sentinel to where the bereaved one was. The three of them bonded almost instantly, and the Sentinel survived."

"That is, like, the craziest fucking thing I've ever heard," Clint said. "One Guide for two Sentinels?" He glanced at Street, eyes wide, as if imagining him doubled. "How did he not lose his mind?"

"I'm still finding it hard to believe at all," Sam said. "I mean, I know it's true. I'm seeing it, but…" He shook his head. "Wow. And, I'm with Clint. Two Sentinels for one Guide is crazy."

Natasha elbowed him gently then gave him a mild glare. "You both make it sound like we're explosive toddlers."

"It's not that at all." Sam cupped her cheek, smiling at her adoringly. "Being your Guide is amazing. It's just that making sure your mind and abilities are safe is a fulltime job, and one I take seriously. It's hard to imagine being able to split my attention like that. Or that I could feel for two people what I feel for you."

"It's not that hard," Bucky said. He grinned at Tony and Steve. "Feels pretty good, actually. It's like what I was getting before, from Steve. Only…better."

"I admit I'm also having trouble imagining balancing two Sentinels at once," Clara said. "It was hard enough helping more than one at a time at the Wellness Center. Though honestly, I admit I find it difficult to imagine what it'd be like sharing my mind with anyone at all. But you need to remember that Guide Augments are extremely powerful. Possibly above the top end of normal Alpha range. That's what allowed you to help your bond partners and James before you even knew you were a Guide," she said to Tony. "The hypothesis is that Guide Augments only come fully into their abilities in the presence of other Guides or Sentinels in extreme distress. That could also account for some of the anecdotes of bereaved Sentinels miraculously bonding with a second Guide, which is something that almost never happens. And of course how Tony could bond with another Guide, at least if there's also a Sentinel involved."

"What about the two Sentinels in that story? Were they really bonded?" Street asked. "How could they handle sharing territory like that? I mean, they'd both be living with their Guide, right?"

Clara nodded. "Yes, you're right. That was the hardest part to believe, how two stranger Sentinels could be willing—or able—to share a single Guide. But according to all evidence at the time, the Sentinels were bonded with each other. They described it as a triangle with the Guide as the apex."

"Huh." Steve blinked. "I hadn't thought about it like that, but Tony feels like our apex too."

"Yeah." Bucky grinned at Steve. "Yeah, you're right. We're all equally together, but…it's kind of through Tony. I didn't…." His smile faded. "Tony?" He looked at him. "You okay?"

"Tony?" Steve asked. His and Bucky's part of their bond was full of concern. Probably because Tony's bond was a kaleidoscope of mixed emotions, most of them not pretty.

"I'm fine," he said, then remembered how his bond partners would instantly know that was a lie. "I mean, yeah, okay. Not fine. It's just…." He was near tears; he had no idea what the hell was wrong with him. "I wanted to be a Guide my entire life. But I was told I wasn't good enough. Strong enough, I mean," he amended hastily, because whoops, he hadn't meant to give everyone a free show into his fucked-up psyche, thanks. "My dad…that was one of the reasons he didn't like me, much. My mom was a Guide. I was supposed to at least be a Guide too, or better yet a Sentinel. But I wasn't anything. Except, surprise! Turns out I was, the whole time. But we never knew. And the
things he said….” He took a breath, did his best to roll around in his bond partners' love and comfort like a cat, because he was Iron Man and he absolutely refused to break down because of his daddy issues. "So it's a little weird, knowing for realisies that I was a Guide all along."

"That must be both vindicating and enraging," Clara said. "Finding out that you actually surpassed your father's expectations doesn't change what you went through."

"No, it really doesn't," Tony said, voice creaking a bit. He forced himself to lift his head and smile. "But, hey! Enough about me. Or, enough about my drama llama childhood. 'Cause the stuff about Guide Augments is really cool."

"You don't have to pretend you're all right, Tony," Steve said.

"I'm not pretending," Tony said, pretending like hell. "I'm fine. Really, it's fine."

"I think maybe this would be a good time to end the information session," Clara said, as easily and brilliantly diplomatic as Pepper. She took Danny's hand and beamed at him. "I'd like to find out what's been going on in my son's life."

"You spoke to me two days ago," Danny said.

"Not in person."

"Come on, Jimmy, there's still all that neat crap in the gym you can hit." Clint stood and held out his hand to Street. "You haven't seen my mad cheering section skills yet."

Street did not blurt out 'I love you' this time; his expression said it for him. He let Clint pull him out of his chair, then slung his arm around Clint's shoulders as they left the room.

Natasha gave a gentle, warm smile to Bucky as they left. Clara basically towed Danny and McGarrett out of the room, and then it was just Tony, Bucky and Steve. And their issues, which were probably like fifteen other people.

"I'm fine," Tony said again, trying to stave off the inevitable.

"The hell you are," Bucky growled, then leaned across their armrests and hugged Tony fiercely. "Your dad was an asshole. There's nothing wrong with you, and there wouldn't be even if you weren't a Guide."

"What he said." Tony could tell Steve wanted to hug him too, but Bucky was in between them. His bond felt like a hug, though. Between the two of them it was like being in a warm, well-meaning vise. "You're a good man, Tony. And you always were. I'm so sorry Howard wasn't able to see that. But it doesn't change anything. You're a good man and we love you."

"You barely know me," Tony said.

"We're bonded, idiot," Bucky scoffed. "We know you better 'n anyone. And we love you. 'Cause you're lovable."

Tony reminded himself he wasn't going to cry, but all the staring at the ceiling in the world didn't make his eyes any less wet the next time he blinked. "Thanks," he said softly. He found a laugh and used it, though it sounded pretty wet too. "It's been a really wild few days, huh?"

"That's one way to put it." Steve reached across Bucky and managed to clap Tony on the shoulder without sending their chairs toppling like dominos. "I haven't been through this much emotional
upheaval since…maybe since Bucky and I first bonded."

"You mean, since I fell," Bucky said. He kissed Tony on the head, then let go and pulled back. He put his hand on Steve's nape. "I wish to hell I'd never closed the bond on you," he said to him. "I almost killed you 'cause I thought I was doing the right thing."

Steve shook his head. "Don't apologize. You were just trying to protect me. I've made mistakes for that reason too. And if you'd kept the bond open, we wouldn't be bonded to Tony now. And that's one of the best things that ever happened to me, besides having you back."

"Same here," Bucky said. His bond nearly overflowed with affection.

"Yeah. Well." Tony cleared his throat. "I'm pretty sure I already said that myself. So…yeah."

"Wow, you are a smooth talker. Almost as good as Steve," Bucky said, deadpan.

"Fuck off," Steve said.

Bucky shoved him playfully, then flailed and caught him before Steve's chair fell over.

"Maybe you should go to the gym," Tony said.

"Sure," Bucky said. But he didn't move. He looked down at the beautifully polished tabletop, his expression clouding. "Do you think I should contact 'em? My kids and grandkids?"

"Great grandkids too," Tony said gently. "But, no. I think you should do whatever you feel comfortable with."

"I'd want to know my past, personally, no matter how terrible," Steve said. "But it's true, they won't be any worse off for not knowing. And maybe for some of them they'll be better."

"You know, you don't have to do it in person," Tony said. "We could write them letters or emails. Give them the option of whether they want to contact you or not." He shrugged. "Or just toss it and never think about it again."

Bucky's head snapped up. "Yeah? You think that'd be okay? We can give them all the information like that. In case they think it's a scam or something."

"As if you'd need their money," Tony said. "But that's true. It might be easier for them to believe it."

"Do you want to do that, Buck?" Steve asked him.

Bucky went back to looking at the table, his bond churning. But eventually he nodded. "Yeah. I think that'd be good. Thanks, Tony," he said, smiling at him. It didn't quite reach his eyes, but it was close.

"Anytime."

"J.A.R.V.I.S. can even write it for you. He's a very good speller."

"My grammar is also excellent," J.A.R.V.I.S. added primly.

"Thanks, J.A.R.V.I.S.," Bucky said. For the first time since they'd told him about his kids, Bucky actually looked—and felt—something other than anxious and guilty about it. It wasn't excited, per se. More like hopeful interest. But it was definitely good enough.

"I will have a prospective letter ready in a few minutes," J.A.R.V.I.S. said.
Bucky thanked the A.I. again, then took a breath. "I don't know if I want to hit something or take a nap."

"I am always in favor of naps," Tony said. "But I don't know about you, but I just realized I'm starving. So I'm thinking food first, then naps or controlled violence or whatever."

"I could eat," Steve said. He looked at Bucky. "What about you?"

"I don't care," Bucky said. "As long as I'm with you guys, I'm happy."

Well, Tony could totally get behind that.

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Chapter End Notes

#ILOVEMEETINGS amirite? OF COURSE I AM.

Chapter 19 will include the epilogue. You heard it here, folks.

![Alrighty then!](http://via.placeholder.com/154x345)

(Gif courtesy of [Tenor.com](http://Tenor.com))
A Good Sentinel and a Good Man

Chapter Summary

Bucky Barnes is safe, Steve McGarrett is consoled, and everyone is going to be fine.

Chapter Notes

Last chapter. Holy cheese doodles.

I can't thank everyone enough who was brave and possibly sufficiently foolhardy to follow me on this epic of epicness I started a little over five months ago. This novel is now officially the second longest thing I've ever written. The former second-longest, now third, is a novel I had published in 2013, just for comparison's sake. (And if you're curious, you can find it via the 'fiction' link on my Tumblr page.)

(The still-absolute longest thing I've ever written is a 400+ k novel that will probably never see the light of day anywhere. Which is for the best, I assure you.)

Anyway! This is done! I'm both thrilled and sad to see this end, since so many of you have enjoyed it so much. I can never thank you all enough for your lovely comments. As you know I'm terrible at answering them, but they have made me smile and lifted my spirits on more sad days than I want to think about. This has not been a great year overall, and your kinds words have often been what kept me writing.

I wrote this story for Darkmoore, but it's also for all of you. Thank you.

Since this wouldn't be a chapter without thanking Darkmoore, let me give my usual gratitude to my beloved buddy for her constant encouragement, and for reading this when it was so rough some of the sentences were incomprehensible in any language. Her joy and enthusiasm all the way through made even the most grueling chapters worthwhile. I'm so glad I was able to give her something that made her so happy. ♥

I also want to be sure to thank Squeaky, who basically told me how end McGarrett's arc when I was flailing around, and who gave me a brilliant idea for the epilogue that in the end I was unfortunately unable to use. (This chapter has no epilogue, even--that's how unable I was.) She always has the best ideas. :D

And, of course, I hope you enjoy this. Thank you again.

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See the end of the chapter for more notes

The eight of them—nine if you count the ceiling robot—had their tearful, Casablanca farewells, but not on a runway. Tony Stark had Tony Starked, and somehow finagled two whole more days on the Mainland for Danny and Steve, with a promise of one of his space planes as soon as they wanted it. He'd also thrown in two suites at the swankiest hotel in existence, and three matinee tickets to
Hamilton that were so close to the stage you could look up Lin-Manuel Miranda's nose.

Clara loved the musical. Danny would've loved it more if it wasn't so obvious that his Sentinel was getting broodier and broodier as the day wore on, and so agitated Danny was a little worried when the Duel Scene started, in case Steve rushed the stage to protect Hamilton with his body. That didn't happen, but Steve startled when the gun went off, and squeezed Danny's hand so hard Danny yelped then had to apologize to the irritated guy behind him.

Danny might've attributed Steve's volatility to the crowded New York sidewalk, except they lived in one of the most densely-populated states in the country and normally Steve had no problem. It wasn't the different territory, either, though that contributed to it. Steve mitigated the stress of being out of his territory by basically claiming whatever territory he was in for as long as he was in it—one of several reasons Danny hadn't taken him to Jack Rollins' funeral—but a Sentinel couldn't change their spots, so to speak. And Steve had never liked being away from home anyway.

Still, he wasn't normally this tense. Hell, he'd been more relaxed while they had a feral Bucky wandering around the house. Whatever was bothering Danny's Sentinel had to be big.

Okay, it wasn't 'whatever'. Danny knew damn well what was bothering Steve. This was the snap approaching, like the wind that heralds an oncoming storm.

Steve let Clara hold his hand on the way back to their hotel, though his shoulders were so tight it looked like she'd break his arm off if she pulled too hard. Steve also opted to have a ten-mile run instead of dinner. He came back tired and unappealingly sweaty, but sadly hadn't acquired the zen ridiculous amounts of exercise usually gave him.

"Why didn't you call guest services? The room service dishes are still outside. They stink," was the first thing Steve said when he walked dripping and glowering through the door. His bond was hissing like burning oil. "You're a Guide, Danny. How could you think I wouldn't smell that?"

"Hi. I'm glad to see you too. Yes, dinner was delicious, thank you. I called guest services and someone should be here to get the dishes in a few minutes. Did you have a nice run?" Danny responded blandly.

"It was fine," Steve snapped. "I'm going to take a shower.

"You seem upset, sweetheart," Clara said as Steve stalked to the suite's bathroom, because she was a kind, gentle soul and not yet inured to Steve's occasional crankiness.

"I'm fine," he snarled, then showed how fine he was by slamming the bathroom door behind him.

"Okay," Danny said on a sigh. "If you'll excuse me, I am going to have to deal with that." He scrubbed his face, suddenly exhausted. The past few days hadn't been easy on either of them, and it was clearly about to get that much worse.

"What's going on with him?" Clara asked, looking worriedly at the bathroom door. Somehow the hiss of the shower sounded angry. "He's not usually like this. Something's wrong."

"You'd be surprised," Danny said dryly. "But, you're right. Something is wrong." He took another breath. "Finding out his mom was Hydra didn't exactly go over well. I've kind of been waiting for it to finish sinking in."

"Oh dear. That would be a terrible revelation for anybody." Clara looked at Danny. "That must've been extremely hard to take."
"To put it mildly," Danny said. "He didn't have the screaming shitfit that Jimmy did when he found out about his parents, but I figured it was just a delayed reaction." He spread his hands. "And I'm pretty sure he's about to make like Pompeii and—"

"Damn it, Danny! I said I was fine!" Steve—who should not have been eavesdropping—stormed out wearing nothing but a towel and his indignation like the world's angriest antiperspirant commercial. "I'm not about to explode like fucking Pompeii!" he said, in a voice that sounded exactly like he was about to explode like fucking Pompeii. "I know about my mom, okay? She was Hydra. I can't change that so I just have to accept it. Which I have. I just want to get out of this fucking city. It stinks. Even the ocean stinks. And the sky's like a damn grey slab. It's like walking through a morgue. How the hell can anyone stand living here? It's disgusting. I can't stand it. I just want to go home—"

Danny didn't know if home was the Magic Breakdown Word or if it was just inevitable, but Steve's voice cracked like ice, then fragmented into wrenching sobs that broke Danny's heart. Steve collapsed on the side of the bed with his elbows on his knees, weeping with his face in his hands. It reminded Danny of Street back in the tower, sobbing his baby-bird guts out for pretty much the same reason. The stoic ones always had it the worst.

Steve's bond was so full of anger, sorrow, betrayal and grief it felt like a tangled mess of barbed wire. Danny gathered up all of his love, comfort and support that he could and sent it back to him, but it felt like a paper airplane in a wind tunnel.

He cast his mom a brief glance that he hoped conveyed every bit of how overwhelmed he was. Then he girded his loins, got with the Guide program and sat next to Steve. Danny threw his arm around him, but Steve's body was so rigid Danny didn't try to pull him into his arms. He didn't speak either; just offered his Sentinel whatever comfort he would take from their bond and Danny's presence.

At some point Clara crept up and quietly pressed a towel to Steve's arm. "Here, sweetheart."

Steve took it, sniffling, and used it to wipe his face. "S-sorry," he rasped, like finally expressing his anguish was somehow impolite.

"You didn't do anything wrong," Danny said. "You're dealing with some really bad shit that blindsided you. No one would be okay finding out their parents were Hydra. And considering what a lousy mom Doris was already, this is just like, the terrible icing on the awful cake. It's only reasonable for you to be crying your eyes out about it. It's awful. It fucking sucks."

"Yeah." Steve nodded, then sniffled again. "It's s-stupid, but…I th-thought she was good," he said, breath hitching. He gulped, then wiped more tears. "It's n-not like sh-she was nice, you k-know? I m-mean she left us, right? Pre-pretended she died, and I m-missed her so much…"

Danny finally pulled him into a hug when Steve's tears started again. At least this time Steve allowed it. With the way Steve's part of their bond felt, Danny was sure this was the first time he'd permitted himself to really, truly grieve since it had actually happened. Steve had probably been too caught up with worrying about his sister and being brave for his father to deal with the shock and pain of losing his mom. The fact that she wasn't dead meant nothing. Steve had thought she'd died for nearly twenty years. Her being alive didn't mitigate any of that pain.

And now Steve had learned that not only had his mother lied to and abandoned him, she'd done it in the name of one of the most evil organizations on Earth.

"She wasn't anything you thought she was, or anything she was supposed to be as a mother, was she?" Danny said. "She betrayed you and your sister and your dad, and she didn't do it because she
was some special snowflake government agent who was trying to protect you. She did it 'cause Hydra wanted her to move on and maybe bring your dad online in the process." Danny kissed the side of Steve's head, wishing he were taller so it'd be easier to hold him. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry you had to go through that. I wish I'd been there to help you. Or, honestly, just to be your friend. I think you could've used a friend."

Steve nodded mutely, clinging to Danny like his Guide was a lifeline in a world threatening to drown him. "I thought s-she cared about m-me," he said. "E-even after everything. I th-thought she really did. B-but she's Hydra." The Hydra don't care about anyone didn't need to be said.

"Steve, sweetheart." Clara sat on the bed on Steve's other side. She rubbed his back. "Look at me, honey. Please."

Steve swallowed and snuffled a few more times, then let go of Danny and lifted his head. "Yes, Ma'am?" he asked. He used the towel to clean his face again.

Clara handed him a fresh one. "Just Clara is fine, sweetheart," she said. Her smile and the gentleness of her voice reminded Danny a hell of a lot of how she'd talked to Bucky, especially when he was feral. Steve was definitely present, but Danny could see the similarities in the emotional fragility, like fault lines beneath Steve's skin. "But Steve, your mother loved you. No, listen," she went on when Steve shook his head. "Listen." She took his face in both her hands. "I know she loved you, because I am a mother and I love my children more than anything. She gave birth to you and raised you.

Even if she had ulterior motives, she loves you. Not well. There's no question of that. I'm not saying she was a good mother. But I know she loves you." She gently wiped Steve's tears away with the pads of her thumbs. "The other reason I know she loves you is because I love you too. I love you very, very much, Steve. And I am so glad you're part of my family."

Steve didn't think he was lovable, which was something Danny had known since they'd met and seen how Steve acted like an expendable commodity. Having his team and Danny's family and their genuine affection had helped, but it couldn't undo decades of emotional neglect. Being constantly inundated with Danny's love through their bond had helped a lot more, but it'd only been a few weeks. And sometimes Danny suspected that Steve just figured his Guide had low standards. Which Danny did not, but that wasn't the point. The point was, it was both funny and very, very tragic watching Steve's incredulous-owl blinking, especially coupled with the awe and disbelief in his bond. "You do?"

"Oh yes." Clara beamed at him, then hugged him tight. "I love you so much."

Danny might've had to borrow Steve's towel for a second. It'd been a very long few days.

Steve's breath still shuddered a little bit when he pulled back, but when he wiped his eyes one more time they stayed dry. "Thanks," he said softly. His lips curved into something that was almost really a smile. "And, you know, me too."

"I know," Clara said. She gently patted his cheek, then stood and stretched. "I'm going back to my suite now. This has been a very eventful day and I'm wiped. I'm just going to watch Law and Order and go to bed."

"You wild thing." Danny grinned at her as he got up. He gave her a bearhug. "Thanks, Mom," he said, then kissed her cheek. "You're the best mom ever."

She squeaked, then laughed. "Thank you. And you're a pretty fine son yourself. I love you." She kissed Danny's cheek when he let her go, then dropped a kiss on Steve's forehead. "Love you too,
Steve smiled at her, then watched as she went through the door connecting their suites. As soon as the door clicked shut he flopped backwards onto the bed, arms spread like a sacrifice. "I feel like I just ran a marathon."

"Technically, you did just run a marathon. But I know what you mean," Danny said. "Are you okay?"

The question wasn't necessary. Danny could feel Steve wasn't okay, though Steve felt more okay than he had when he'd stalked into the room. And, "Yeah," Steve said, which Danny could've predicted. He turned his head so he was looking up at Danny's face. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Danny shrugged. "You were upset. It happens." He unbuttoned his shirt, thinking a shower would be a great idea. "You might've noticed I'm not exactly a paragon of self-control when I get upset either."

Steve smirked tiredly. "I might've, yeah." He lifted his arms without moving anything else. "Come here?"

Even if he'd wanted to, there was no way Danny could refuse that big-eyed, hopeful expression. He grinned, dropped his shirt on the nearest chair, then more-or-less lay on Steve and hugged him. It wasn't exactly comfortable because their feet were still on the floor, but Danny persevered. Some things were worth the sacrifice.


"Just 'Danny' is fine." Danny chuckled at Steve's irritated huff. "I love you too," he said seriously. He thought about elaborating on that, but decided to just kiss Steve instead.

Steve, as it happened, was pretty fine with the kissing. But he broke off just when Danny was thinking how the shower could wait, especially with Steve so conveniently naked. He might've grumbled about it a little, but Steve's side of the bond was still putting out misery. It'd been mitigated, but it wasn't gone.

"Do you think Doris actually wanted kids?" Steve asked.

Danny wasn't surprised Steve would've asked him. He'd gotten a new blow on a very old hurt, and he'd be raw and aching for a long time. "As a parent, I want to say of course, just like my mom did." He pulled in a breath, let it out as he considered his answer. "As someone who actually met her and knows more-or-less what kind of person she is, I have to say I don't know. I mean, I'd fake my own death too, if it meant keeping my kids safe. Ditto with never seeing them again. But she faked her death 'cause Hydra told her to. I don't know if keeping you and your sister safe was even part of the equation. Of course, her willingness to leave you guys doesn't mean she never wanted you in the first place, right? It just means…."

"What? She lost interest?" Steve said when Danny couldn't figure out what it actually meant. Steve's voice was light. Ish. He was trying to joke, anyway, but he couldn't hide what he felt.

"I'm sorry," Danny said. "I don't know what to say, other than what I already did. I know you, so I can't imagine you couldn't be wanted. But Doris was Hydra, and their agenda's so twisted I can't even wrap my head around it. All I can tell you is that I'm so glad we have this bond, because I love you more than I could possibly tell you. And for what it's worth, what I said before is still true.
Whatever your mom felt about you, it doesn't change who you are. And Clara Williams thinks you're awesome, and I really can't think of a better endorsement than that."

Steve smirked, then settled Danny that much more securely in his arms. "I think your mom unofficially adopted all the Sentinels at Avengers Tower." Danny could feel the skepticism behind Steve's glib response, because why would he believe someone who said 'I love you' to his face?

"Oh, yeah, sure," Danny said easily. It was still uncomfortable, lying like this, but he could go with it. "But they're all just as awesome as you are, so it makes sense. Well," he amended, "Birdie is not entirely awesome, but he's close."

"He's just young and scared," Steve said. "Clint will lick him into shape." He paused. "Or, you know, just lick him."

Danny could tell a firm change of subject when he heard it. There was only so much emotional upheaval Steve could take, and he'd reached his limit.

That was fine. Steve's side of the bond had smoothed out at least, even if the sadness hadn't retreated that much. But Danny was comfortably certain he'd be able to nudge his Sentinel back to an even keel again. Being home would help too. And now that the Sentinel-Guide Center was officially Hydra-free, Danny could make sure Steve got a Guide Counselor as well.

"Licking will probably help too," Danny said philosophically, taking Steve's segue and running with it. "Though, Street's the Sentinel, so technically he'd do the licking."

"This is true," Steve said, and Danny could tell from the tone of his voice exactly what would come next. "I can demonstrate, if you like."

"I don't know, I think I've had enough being licked by Sentinels for a while." Danny pulled his knees onto the bed, so he was straddling Steve's hips. This was not a view he'd ever get tired of. "I was thinking that this time I'd do the licking."

Steve gave Danny a slow, wicked grin. His bond was practically purring. "That's what you were thinking, huh?"

"That is indeed what I was thinking." Danny couldn't help grinning back at him: his ridiculous, beloved Sentinel. "Would you like that?"

Something in Steve's eyes went fond and warm, and his bond flared with affection. "I like everything about you."

"Good. 'Cause, same here," Danny said. Then proceeded to show him how much.

"You okay, Buck?"

Steve was standing behind the couch Bucky was sitting on, reading through the letter J.A.R.V.I.S. had written on his behalf again. Steve had no idea how many times he must have read it over already. It reminded Steve of how methodically Bucky would write assignments for school: going over it again and again until Steve wanted to scream just watching him.

He was sure Hydra appreciated his meticulousness, which made Steve sick just thinking about it. He made sure none of that reached Bucky; he was already miserable enough.

Bucky kept his eyes on the paper on the table, but automatically raised his right hand for his Guide to
take without looking. "Yeah, I'm okay," he said. "I am, really," he added, because he had to know his emotions didn't feel okay at all. Bucky turned to smile up at Steve, though it was thin and wan. "I'm just…" He shrugged. "It's stupid, but I'm still scared that they're all gonna hate me."

Steve squeezed his hand, then let go and came around the couch and sat next to him, putting his arm around Bucky's waist. "It's not stupid," he said gently. "I don't think it's something you need to be scared of, but your fears aren't stupid."

"Kinda' feel like they are. " Bucky leaned his head on Steve's shoulder, then smiled again at the love Steve had gathered for him. "Most of 'em had pretty fucked up childhoods, too. I hate that. I can't help thinkin' it's all my fault. And they're gonna hate me for being responsible for them being born."

"Hydra's responsible for them being born," Steve said easily. "And you know, you and I both had pretty fucked up childhoods too. So did Tony. And I don't know about you, but I'm still glad I'm here."

"I guess," Bucky said. "I mean, yeah. I'm glad I'm here too, even if it took a fucking long time and a lot of misery." He sighed. "I just wish that they'd had better parents. None of 'em deserved the crap Hydra did to them."

"I know," Steve said. "Though both McGarrett and Street would probably disagree with you, at least about one parent. Not to mention that you weren't raised by Hydra, and your parents were still pretty awful. Much as I hate to say it, Sarah is the only good parent I've ever met."

Bucky smirked in miserable agreement. "My mom tried. But, yeah."

Steve nodded, his cheek brushing Bucky's hair, and pulled him closer. "I don't think they're gonna hate you, Buck. And I don't think they'll resent you because they were born. I think they'll understand that it wasn't your choice, just like Street and McGarrett did." He smiled, turning his head to kiss Bucky's crown. "I realize I'm biased here, but I can't imagine any of them being upset to be related to you."

"Yeah, you're biased," Bucky said. He smirked, though, and the dark emotions in his bond felt less substantial and oppressive. "They're all pretty remarkable, even the ones who are still kids." He smirked again. "I really know this is stupid, but I'm proud of them. They all took their lousy childhoods and did something good. I mean, fuck. Two of them are running a kingdom together, and one of my great granddaughters is a CEO. And I have a son who's a goddamn top-secret astronaut or something."

Steve kissed the top of his head again. Of the two of them, Bucky had always been the one fascinated by technology and the future. If things had been different, he probably would have been an engineer, maybe working with Howard; Steve had heard the two of them talking about it often enough. He was sure Tony would be thrilled to give Bucky some of those opportunities he'd lost. "Maybe we'll be able to visit him in space."

Bucky snorted and sent Steve the emotional equivalent of rolling his eyes. Still, it was impossible to miss the longing behind it. Steve couldn't wait to introduce him to Thor. "Yeah, right. Let me just find my rocket boots and ray gun."

"Tony actually has rocket boots," Steve pointed out. "And Hydra had ray guns. Just saying." He grinned when Bucky lifted his head to glower at him.

"Where is Tony, anyway?" Bucky asked, shifting so more of his body was plastered against Steve's side. "He said he had to make an important call, then disappeared."
"My guess is that he had to make an important call," Steve said, then laughed when Bucky moved his hand right in front of Steve's face to flip him off. Steve checked Tony's part of the bond, poking him gently. Tony barely poked back, but his bond was full of pleased accomplishment. Whatever the call was about, at least it'd gone well. "I'm pretty sure it's finished now. He should be home soon."

Funny to think that Steve had been certain he'd never have a home again, only to be waiting with his Sentinel for their Guide to come back. Steve had been certain he'd never be happy again either, let alone this much.

He could practically hear Bucky's bond humming in agreement.

They both heard the 'ding' of the elevator when it stopped directly in the penthouse, and turned to look at Tony as he exited the car. "Honeys, I am home!" he crowed happily.

Bucky and Steve stood to greet him properly. "You're happy," Bucky said after he finished kissing him.

Tony, who was now kissing Steve, put up a finger to tell him to wait. Bucky made a huge show of impatience, then laughed when Tony and Steve gave him nearly identically unimpressed looks.

"So, spill already. You're like the cat who got the canary. What's the deal?" Bucky said.

"The deal," Tony began, slipping his arms around them both, "is that I was just talking to a very nice young woman who has connections in the Main Sentinel-Guide Center at the Hague. She assured me that all we have to do to get you officially reinstated as a Registered Sentinel is to have you given the all-clear by an impartial Alpha Guide." His big smile quirked a bit, but his sense of happy triumph barely flickered. "Unfortunately, the nearest Sentinel-Guide Center with an Alpha Guide who's certified to do that is in Washington D.C."

"Road trip. That's fine," Bucky said. His part of the bond was full of slightly wary joy. "You mean, I'll be able to walk around outside without worrying about people trying to stone me to death or anything?"

Steve winced. "Nobody was interested in that, Buck." That wasn't quite true, especially in some of the countries where Hydra had used the Winter Soldier to commit their crimes. But Bucky was safe in North America, and the Sentinel-Guide Centers worldwide had a hell of a lot of clout. Very few governments would be interested in pissing off their population of Guides and Sentinels for revenge on an innocent man.

"But to actually answer the question, yes," Tony said cheerfully. "Yes you can. The Hague has declared you innocent of all crimes committed by the Winter Soldier, and has demanded your exoneration by any countries still interested in holding you responsible. I figure you'll be cool everywhere in a couple months."

"Wow," Bucky said softly. "Thank you." He looked both overjoyed and overwhelmed, and Steve could feel through their bond that Bucky wasn't entirely convinced he deserved it. It was sad and frustrating, that Bucky still felt guilty for the crimes Hydra committed. But Steve kept reminding himself that it'd been barely any time at all since he'd brought him home from Clara Williams house, and Bucky had only just started his sessions with a Guide Counselor. He was already so much better, mentally and emotionally, than he'd been. Hopefully his two Guides' constant encouragement would help him to understand that nothing Hydra did was his fault.

"You're going to get reinstated as an Army Sergeant too," Tony said, then kissed Bucky's temple when he goggled. "Yup. If you want it, that is. You'll be promoted too, though the brass still needs to
figure out how many ranks that'll be. I'm thinking Sergeant Major of the Army, myself, but we'll see."

"Wow," Bucky said again. "You did all this for me?"

Tony blinked. "Well, yeah. Of course I did. You're my Sentinel. A few hours making phone calls is nothing at all, if it means you get the recognition and safety you deserve."

The funny thing was that Steve was certain Tony would have done that anyway, even if he and Bucky hadn't met. Steve didn't think Tony knew that about himself, but Steve did. He always had.

Bucky hugged Tony. "Thank you," he said again. "I can't…. Thank you, Tony. You're amazing."

"Yes I am," Tony said, which was all veneer for his shy happiness at the praise.

"Yes you are," Steve agreed, and tried to let Tony feel how very much he meant it.

"But all that wasn't the big deal, though," Tony said, grinning enormously. "So, we all know how the Main Sentinel-Guide Center in the Hague told all the Sentinel-Guide Centers in the U.S. that Bucky'd been brainwashed and tortured, and needed immediate assistance instead of being put down, right?"

Bucky and Steve both nodded. "Of course. It might've saved his life," Steve said seriously. He cupped the back of Bucky's neck and kissed the side of his head. "I was hoping to find who was responsible, so I could think them."

"Funny you should mention that," Tony said. "Because the person responsible is the nice young woman I was speaking to just now on the phone." He beamed at Bucky, his bond glowing with love and contentment. "Her name is Ellie Delfont-Bogard, and she's your great granddaughter."

Bucky stared at him. "Seriously? But, she wasn't on the list."

"Nope," Tony said, still grinning. "Turns out, one of the prisoners you impregnated managed to escape. That Guide was her great grandmother. And that's why she wasn't listed—because Hydra lost track of their escaped Guide."

"Oh, my God," Bucky said, dumbfounded. "Someone got away." He laughed in astonished, vicarious triumph. "One of 'em made it! That's fucking great!" He turned to Steve, his face alight. "One of them made it, Stevie! They got out!" He hugged Tony again, fiercely. "Oh my God, thank you. Thank you for telling me. I tried so hard to help them, tell them how to escape without anyone hearing us. I thought none of them did. I thought they….I thought they all died there."

"One didn't," Tony said. "You did it, Bucky. You got one out."

Steve put his hand on the back of Bucky's head. "Maybe more than one," Steve said. "It's possible there were more. That might account for some of the missing names, even. I'm so proud of you, Bucky. You were in hell, and you were still putting others first."

Bucky sniffed, then let go of Tony to wipe his eyes. "I couldn't leave 'em," he said. "Not the ones who'd been captured too. I just couldn't."

"Of course you couldn't," Tony said. "That's why you're a hero."

Bucky flicked a smile at him, but it was obvious he wasn't ready to believe that yet. Steve hoped someday he would.
"That's one hell of a coincidence, though, that she's the one who kept Bucky safe after he went feral," Steve said. "How did she even find out about her great grandmother?"

"Actually, that's not the coincidence," Tony said. "The coincidence is that she saw a picture she recognized as her great grandmother while she was researching our Buckster's really awful history."

Bucky went pale. "She saw it? She saw what I…what Hydra did?"

"Yeah," Tony said gently. "It's okay. She already knew about it. Her grandmother told her. Ms. Delfont-Bogard also asked me to tell you that her great grandmother was fourteen at the time. In case you remembered her."

Steve gasped. "It's her, isn't it?" he asked Bucky. "The one from your dream."

Bucky's bond flared with a wild, roiling mix of emotions, too fast and too complicated for Steve to parse. What he could grasp, though, was the relief: the tentative end to the fear and sorrow Bucky had been carrying for decades. "It was really her?" he asked. "She's the one who escaped?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah, Bucky. She made it."

"Oh my God," Bucky whispered. He put his hand over his mouth, then hunched against Steve's shoulder, shaking as Steve held him.

Steve was familiar with how that felt: the kind of happiness so huge and unexpected it hurt.

"Ms. Delfont-Bogard wanted to tell you about her great grandmother herself," Tony said quietly, "but since you're a little skittish right now, she agreed that I could do it. But you can expect a long email."

"She sent me an email?" Bucky sniffed and wiped his eyes, still in the circle of Steve's arms. "Why?"

"She really wanted to meet you," Tony said. "I'm hoping that you'll be willing to video call her or something, after reading what she has to say."

"I don't know," Bucky said. "But, thanks. For telling her to email instead. I know I can read that."

He swallowed. "I was reading the letter J.A.R.V.I.S. wrote."

"Yeah? What do you think?" Tony asked. "I mean, I know J.A.R.V.I.S. is, like, perfect. But…." It was sweet, how Steve could tell Tony was a little anxious, like a parent worrying about their kid.

"It's great. Thank you, J.A.R.V.I.S., you did a terrific job," Bucky said.

"You are most welcome, Sergeant," J.A.R.V.I.S. responded. "I am prepared to contact your descendants whenever you wish."

Bucky hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. Do it. Please."


"Thank you." Bucky took a breath. "Okay. It's done."

"That was brave of you, Bucky," Steve said. He gave Bucky a squeeze before letting him go. "I know you're worried about how they'll react."

"Honestly? They'll probably react the way Steve and Street did," Tony said. He put his arms around Bucky's waist, effectively taking over the hug from Steve. "You know, requisite freak out before
deciding it's actually way cool."

"Don't know how cool it is," Bucky muttered.

"It's way cool, believe me," Tony said. "Ms. Delfont-Bogard definitely thought it was way cool. She wanted to thank you, on behalf of her great grandmother."

Bucky gaped at him. "Thank me? What the hell for?"

"Off the top of my head?" Tony smiled at Bucky. His love for their Sentinel was clear on his face, but in their bond it shone like a beacon. "For helping her escape. Or being as gentle with her as you could. Or for how you tried to free her, or warmed her feet in your hands. Basically, for being who you are."

"For being who you've always been," Steve said. "A good Sentinel and a good man. Someone I'm honored to be bonded with."

"Ditto," Tony said. He cleared his throat. "I mean, me too."

Bucky smiled at them, still watery but very real. "When Steve brought me here, I was thinking just being near him would be the best I'd get. That I'd never really have a Guide again. But now I got both of you. I didn't think I could ever be this lucky."

"Me too," Steve said. "I didn't think there could be anything better than having you back. But this..." He put his hand on Tony's shoulder, making sure Tony knew Steve meant him as much as Bucky. "This is everything."

END

Chapter End Notes

I said Chapter 19 would be the last one, and it was the last one. I can barely believe it.

::falls over::

Here, in case you are interested, are Bucky's descendants. Only the ones I care about the (sort of?) relevant ones are listed (and in no particular order other than generational).

**Children:**
- John McGarrett (Carrier)
- Natasha Romanoff (Sentinel)
  - John Sheppard (Guide)
  - John Winchester (Father of Dean and Sam Winchester; Sentinel)

**Grandchildren:**
- Dean Winchester (Guide)
- Sam Winchester (Sentinel)
- Steve McGarrett (Sentinel)
- Mary McGarrett (Sister; Negative for genes)
  - Jim Street (Sentinel)
  - Alex Karev (Guide)
- Aaron Karev (Brother; Negative for genes)
Amber Karev (Sister; Carrier)
Jack Benjamin (Guide)
Michelle Benjamin (Twin Sister; Sentinel)
Alice Cooper (Guide)

Great Grandchildren:
Ellie Delfont-Bogard (Guide)
Felicity Smoak (Latent Sentinel)
Mieczyslaw "Stiles" Stilinski (Latent Guide)
Betty Cooper (Daughter of Alice Cooper; Latent Guide)

End Notes

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