Waiting for the Gates to Open

by china_shop

Summary

Missing scene from the movie. Spoilers!

Notes

Taking a new fandom/ship out for a test drive. [Insert many disclaimers here.]

Written for the Shinies challenge on fan_flashworks. Title from one of EliseM's lists of earrings, used with permission. A million thanks and chocolate easter eggs to mossybomb for beta. <3

Staying in shape isn’t the only reason Sam runs every morning. There are other considerations. Like having a routine is a luxury, and Sam’s going to make the best of it. Like reminding his body that he’s in a peace zone, and he can lope along in the sun, no body armor, no cover, no wings, and he’ll be fine. Like training himself to slow down, make friends with gravity. Accept that the ground passes under his feet at a human pace, slow enough he can make out pebbles and cracks and leaves on trees, sweat dripping down his face. Slow enough that he has time to breathe deep and enjoy the sun-blinding ripples on the water and the soft monotonous sounds of the city.

Slow enough to rewrite his reaction time. He doesn’t need lightning reflexes anymore. He doesn’t need to dive and weave, dodge artillery fire or swoop through clouds of dust and shrapnel. There are
other, quieter ways to save the world.

Day by day, he runs himself into a trance, breathing hard and taking in his quiet surroundings, teaching himself to trust that everything's okay.

"On your left."

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Just meeting Captain America – Steve – is exhilarating. Just talking to him. Sam knows he's smiling a little too wide. He'd tone it down, but Steve's grinning back as he takes out his notebook, and okay, the smile's only skin deep, Sam can see that. The guarded layer underneath is all too familiar. But that doesn't mean the smile isn't real.

Steve has this way about him like his body is a weapon that's been entrusted to him, and it's his duty to only use it for good. Like he's a living breathing propaganda poster and a WMD made flesh. Like he's government property.

Sam knows that feeling. He wonders, with practiced concern, whether Captain America ever kicks back and lets himself be Steve Rogers. And at the same time, in the presence of this bona fide hero, the muscles of Sam's back twitch. Gravity pulls hard, and the air is too still on his face. He hides his restlessness and makes nice. He's got his own shit to deal with, but that doesn't mean the making nice isn't real.

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"Justine in R&D," says Natasha to Steve, apparently picking up an ongoing conversation. "You should ask her to show you Star Wars."

"I've seen Star Wars." Steve ducks his head and deflects like a pro. The two of them have taken refuge at Sam's place, potentially bringing a tide of trouble with them, and they're sitting at his table eating breakfast, Sam's file at Steve's elbow.

Sam watches them, forcing himself not to overreact to their larger-than-life presence in his ordinary kitchen. Glad to be on their team. Natasha flicks him a curious look, and he wonders if she's genuinely trying to push Steve into dating or just making it clear the two of them aren't an item. And if it's the latter, whether that's for Steve's benefit or Sam's.

Steve clears his plate in under thirty seconds and gets up for more toast. There's an innocence about him, a purity, even after everything he's so famously been through, and it's mesmerizing. Sam can't look away, caught in a thermal of curiosity, because that guarded layer is still there, and Sam's dying to know what's underneath. Whether beneath the purity there's anger or bitterness or whether the innocence goes right through to the core.

Steve sits down again and catches Sam watching, but he doesn't seem to mind. He winks, butters a slice of toast and eats it in three bites, and changes the subject to how they're going to retrieve the EXO-7 Falcon.
Surprisingly, the plan doesn't involve explosives. Natasha will create a distraction while Steve neutralizes additional security and Sam finds the wing pack. Steve seems confident they can pull it off in time to intercept their target, Sitwell. "But Sitwell won't talk," he says, "and we don't have time to persuade him."

Natasha leans back in her chair, her expression bland. "Leave Sitwell to us."

She's including Sam in that us, signing him up to cross lines so Steve won't have to. It's a different kind of protection detail, and Sam doesn't relish it like he does a straight-up fight, but under the circumstances, if that's what it takes to stop HYDRA, if Steve needs him to, Sam's willing to give their target a scare to elicit intel. Loyalty to the country always, and Steve is practically America personified. "We've got this," he agrees.

Steve nods, but it's obvious he's not happy.

Natasha punches him in the arm and stands up. "I have to shower."

Steve's eyebrows twitch up, and controlled as they both are, between the two of their reactions it hits home how much they've been through in the last few hours: death of a CO, branded as fugitives, any shred of security destroyed.

"Towels in the hall closet," Sam calls after Natasha as she heads away down the hall. He stacks the plates in the sink, turns to find Steve standing right behind him, his hands full of empty coffee mugs in the slanting morning sunlight. Captain America. Steve. It's on the tip of Sam's tongue to ask how he's doing, but they don't have time for a real answer even if Steve were prepared to give one.

Steve puts the mugs on the counter and frowns, and Sam's stomach sinks. Whatever goes down with Sitwell, they have to get him to talk, there's no other option and no time, and if it gets messy – well, Steve wears his moral code on his sleeve, and Sam doesn't want to risk damaging the respect that's growing between them, doesn't want to let him down. He likes how Steve turned to him for help. He likes it a lot. "Don't worry about Sitwell, man. It'll just be a show of strength. We won't take it further than we have to."

"I know." Steve looks around the kitchen, at the takeout menus on the fridge and the everyday clutter, then back to Sam, his gaze clear now, and Sam has a split second of embarrassment because he's getting a man-crush on Captain America and could anything be more obvious. Except it's not a man-crush, it's a crush pure and simple. And it's Steve, and there's nothing about him Sam doesn't like.

"I, uh, I should call the VA, tell them I won't be in," he says, but neither of them move.

"We're asking a lot of you." It's not an apology, just a recognition that the call to arms comes at a cost.

"Whatever you need." The words come out softer than Sam intended, and Steve is standing close, with his broad chest and clear eyes and that rueful tilt to his mouth, but there isn't time to get distracted, to find out if Sam's reading this right, so he keeps his breathing even and shrugs slightly.

Steve bends his head forward a fraction, curiously, and Sam mirrors him, and somehow their lips press together, just for a few seconds. Maybe Sam started it, he can't be sure, but they're both doing it, and it's warm and thrilling and a little clumsy, a promise of things to come.

Then Steve straightens, clears his throat lightly and gives his boyish all-American smile. His cheeks are flushed. "Remind me to thank you properly later."
The innuendo is mild, maybe even unintentional, but Sam can’t help grinning, exhilarated all over again. "Count on it."

He meets Steve's gaze head on, and in the stillness between them the sun is bright and warm, and gravity loosens its hold.

END

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