Omega Rising: Part 4

Summary

Steve Rogers is a soldier, a patriot, and an omega in a world where his status makes him a second-class citizen. He never asked to be a hero. But when the world pushed him, he pushed back. Unfrozen from cryo after 65 years, he awakens to a world where not much has changed. Bonded to Tony Stark, he navigates the 21st century as an omega with a mission.

Part 4 of Omega Rising covers 2011-2012 (the period between Iron Man 2 and The Avengers), during which time Steve acts as a civil right leader, and, after discovering that there are omegas still living in captivity, decides to lead a mission to liberate them. Turns out 2011 isn't so different from 1943 after all.

Updates Thursdays and Sundays. More notes inside.
Omega Rising is an adapted roleplay between a 21-yr-old college student from the UK and a 30-yr-old writer from Los Angeles. This is part 4, which covers the summer of 2011 in the MCU.

For those of us who have been following us for a while... welcome back!

Steve Rogers would never have guessed he'd end up here. Not just here in the twenty-first century, or here in Malibu, but here in a billionaire's bed, with said billionaire on top of him. Bonded to said billionaire, naked except for the ankle monitor on his leg.

"Life's weird," he reflected softly.

"Wouldn't have it any other way," said Tony with a yawn. "...don't you have a couple of SHIELD head shrinks downstairs you gotta go mingle with?"

"Yeah," said Steve. "...they'll wait." He normally didn't like to keep people waiting. But considering that they had stopped by unannounced and he had just been mating with his Alpha, he couldn't feel too bad. It was an inconvenient time and their own fault for not calling ahead.

Fifteen minutes later Tony was asleep and Steve could slip away. He did so, tenderly wincing as Tony slipped out of him.

He took a quick shower and then dressed in jeans, tee, and a hoodie. Steve couldn't do much to hide one of the bite marks higher up on his neck, but aside from that, the evidence of their previous activities was gone. He pulled the duvet back over Tony before he headed downstairs to find the 'head shrinks.'

He found both women in the kitchen. They were talking quietly to one another. Steve realised he had the PTSD specialist this evening, too... wonderful. It would be a therapy-heavy day. He couldn't help but wonder how much of SHIELD's concern over him was because he was soldier, and how much of it was because he was an omega soldier.

"Hey," he greeted them as he stepped into the kitchen, hands in his pockets. "What can I do for you?"

The two of them smiled at him politely. Dr. Brennan, an Alpha, could no doubt smell sex on Steve even after the shower, but was too polite and professional to say anything about it.

"Hi, Steve. How are you?" asked Dr. Brazinski, taking the lead.

"We just stopped by to check in... it seems we both thought this would be a good time," said Dr. Brennan with a smile.

"Great minds think alike," joked Dr. Brazinski, and both laughed lightly.

"SHIELD is understandably a bit wary of your dealings with Alphas United," said Dr. Brazinski, a
"Director Fury gave me a keycard to the house--" (Of course he did.) "--and asked me to make it clear that certain members of the WSC wanted me to keep an eye on you, to watch for any... well... any warning signs."

"Considering your very recent trauma, I find it a little concerning you decided to go to that conference, as well," said Dr. Brennan. "Being surrounded by a hundred hostile Alphas seems, frankly, self-destructive. I think we need to talk about that."

...they were, Steve realized, double-teaming him. As psychologists who both had a pretty good knowledge of his background, they had reached the same conclusion: Steve was still being self-destructive. Even if his actions at the Alphas United conference had been positive, there was no denying that there had been an element of danger in doing them, and clearly, both women thought that was his primary motivation.

Two sets of eyes were fixed on him, waiting patiently. Neither seemed judgemental. Rather, curious... tinged with concern.

Steve moved to sit down. This seemed like the kind of thing he should sit down for. Also, since when had Nick had their house key?! That was a discussion for another time, however. He took a seat at the breakfast bar opposite them and the women took their own seats quickly after, clearly keen to be on equal ground with each other and Steve.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound rude, but why is someone from SHIELD personnel getting involved?" Steve asked, ignoring their initial spout about self-destructiveness.

Brazinski smiled at him. "SHIELD is aware of the role they played in setting up your new life. We do not simply wish to abandon you because you cannot go out into the field, Captain."

"How... sweet," Steve said, entirely unconvinced that that was the real reason...because they cared? Ha. No way. More likely, they cared about how Steve's public persona affected SHIELD's public credibility. Steve was used to being used as a mascot.

"We only went to that conference because we were invited and we thought it would be funny," Steve said. "It wasn't something we planned. It was sprung upon us. And it was lot more... extreme in there than we had expected. So I guess we felt a need to get involved in a more extreme way."

"Over forty omegas and betas walked out of that building. Because of you. That's making a lot of enemies," Brennan said.

"They walked out on their own. All I did was talk to them."

"You also offered the children two million dollars so they could pay off their debts," Brennan added. "You think the Alphas from the conference won't eventually find out?"

Steve sighed. "Look, I don't care. Which recent trauma are we even talking about? The scar on my neck, or putting him in a freezer?" He couldn't bring himself to say Bucky's name.

"Both," Brazinski answered easily. "The fact that you took that upon yourself and only yourself to bring the Winter Soldier in is another display of very self-destructive tendencies, Captain."

"What is the point that you're trying to make, exactly?"

Brennan leaned forward. "Do you think you have to be fighting a war? All the time? In some fashion? Whether it's the Alpha conference, Tony, or James. Do you think you have to have something opposing you so you feel like you can move forward?"
Steve tilted his head at them, frowning. "What? You think I miss fighting in a war? You do know that sounds crazy?"

Brennan and Brazinski exchanged a look.

"Steve, a lot of career soldiers have difficulty getting accustomed to civilian life," said Dr. Brennan gently. "It does sound crazy... but it's not. It's a very common experience and no one thinks less of you for it. However, we really need to talk about your plans moving forward, because what you're doing now isn't sustainable."

"It's also a matter of national security," said Dr. Brazinski. Ah. So that was what SHIELD was worried about. Whether Steve liked it or not, he was a weapon, and a dangerous one. And his nickname, Captain America, meant every action he took represented his country. He could easily cause a civil war.

"Untreated post-traumatic stress disorder can be devastating, Steve. And-- I'm sorry, I think they called it shell-shock in your time-- and it's not a sign of weakness to have it. You've been through more than most soldiers ever go through. But now the war's over, and it's time to start focus on caring for yourself instead of finding battles to fight," said Dr. Brennan.

"War fatigue. We called it war fatigue," said Steve, crossing his arms. "But I don't have it."

"...has anyone ever talked to you about addressing these issues? The VA has a lot of good programs for veterans that you might want to look into. I brought some info--"

"And we're worried about the environment you're in," added Dr. Brazinski. (She had heard from Malick, through the grapevine, that Tony had been at the conference drunk and wearing a squirrel costume.)

"I am doing something about it. My friend has booked me something this evening," Steve said. "You don't need to convince me. She already did. But I'm telling you, I don't have--"

"That's wonderful." Brennan smiled. "Do you know who it's with?"

"I'm sorry. I don't remember the guy's name. I can get it up in a--"

Tony walked into the room suddenly, hair tousled. He was wearing a robe but it was open and he seemed entirely unconcerned with his nudity. He reeked like sex.

"Don't mind me, just gettin' a screwdriver," he said with a yawn, walking past them to root around in the fridge for some orange juice and vodka.

Dr. Brennan and Dr. Brazinski both looked at Steve pointedly. Tony had just accidentally illustrated their point perfectly. Worse, it wasn't yet noon.

"...good morning, Mr. Stark," said Dr. Brazinski.

"Morning. ...you want a drink?" asked Tony.

"...no thank you."

"More for me," said Tony with a shrug. He walked back out, robe still open, pouring a bottle of vodka directly into a carton of orange juice. He gave Steve a quick kiss on the side of the head as he wandered out.
Steve internally sighed as he watched the other walk away. "What do you want me to do? Cure his alcoholism?"

"Well, it can't be very nice to live with," Brazinski said. "That, and it doesn't create a stable home environment for you. And that's exactly what you need right now. Soldiers themselves can even be prone to addiction."

"Don't worry about that. My metabolism prevents me from getting drunk. I get pretty obsessed with running sometimes but I don't see how that's a bad thing..." Steve sighed. "Look, do you actually-"

"How do you respond to Tony's drinking?" Brazinski asked.

Steve frowned. "What do you mean?"

"She means, do you confront him," Brennan said. "You know, tell him to stop."

"Well he can feel how I feel about it. We're bonded. Whenever he binge drinks my feelings are pretty strong," Steve said quietly and shrugged. "He knows I don't like it. But he won't stop, so what do you want me to do about it?"

Brennan sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Have you ever been in a situation where you're feeling low and you can't talk to Tony about it because he's inebriated?"

Steve looked at his hands on the table top. It was made of some fancy marble Steve couldn't remember the name of. He nodded.

"...the thing that we both find concerning, Steve, is that you don't have a very supportive environment here, but don't seem to be seeking out any alternative support networks. You have a lot of resources at your disposal. There's us, and we know you're close to Sam Wilson, who's heavily involved in the VA..." said Dr. Brazinski.

"We always have to come to you," added Dr. Brennan. "It would, I think, be encouraging to see you rushing into a support group, instead of another conflict."

Dr. Brazinski was nodding in agreement. "Not everything needs to be a fight, Steve. You're not a soldier anymore. And that shouldn't be the only way you define yourself."

"...I took the liberty of setting up an appointment for you," said Brennan. She offered Steve an appointment card; Dr. Brazinski pulled out one as well.

"We'd like to meet in a more neutral environment to talk these issues over," said Dr. Brazinski. She didn't need to say that Tony wandering around with his dick hanging out, drinking cocktails straight from the carton, was not exactly a therapeutic environment. "...and I want to add, off the record, that if you don't follow through with this voluntarily, SHIELD is going to make you. You're considered a massive, unpredictable security risk, and Gideon Malick has it out for you."

(She hardly needed to tell him that.)

"Well, I know there's Sam and his VA group, but he's all the way in D.C. I don't think catching a plane to my appointment every week would be very productive," Steve said. He also didn't really like planes all that much but he didn't feel a need to tell them that. "And I didn't rush into this conflict. I was invited to it."

Brennan sighed.
"Oh my God. These are both tomorrow." Steve accepted the cards and let his head fall into his hand, elbow propped up on the table. "It's going to be like a therapy marathon. Are you kidding me?"

"It'll be good to see a few different people and see who works out for you best," Brazinski said encouragingly.

"Why, 'cause Gideon Malick and the World Security Council thinks I need it? I know he has out in for me. It's because he wants to sleep with me. He's got some weird Captain America fetish."

Brazinski frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," Steve straightened up. "Is there anything else? Would you guys like... coffee, or something? I'll go to the appointments but I really don't think I need them."

"That's all we ask," said Brennan gently.

"No, thank you, Steve," said Dr. Brazinski, rising. "We just needed to touch base with you and... this seemed to be the best way. Go to a few appointments and see if you get anything out of them. We'd really prefer if you talked through your issues instead of creating conflicts to throw yourself into."

"THEY HAD TELEPHONES IN STEVE'S DAY!" yelled Tony suddenly from the living room. Clearly, he'd been eavesdropping.

Dr. Brennan reached over and tapped the appointment card. "Make sure you don't miss these. Remember, everything we talk about in session is in confidence... but if you're a no-show, we have to report it to SHIELD, who, in turn, reports it to the WSC. And right now, they want blood."

Tony appeared, still sipping his cocktail from the orange juice carton, robe still undone. "Hey, but... we're still gonna get the ankle thingies off soon, right? It's starting to chafe." He gave his leg a shake.

"...Fury's been in negotiations. If we can establish regular check-ins, yes, we can probably do away with the monitors," said Dr. Brazinski.

"Hear that, Steve? You're gonna get a probation officer," said Tony, throwing back the carton.

Dr. Brennan looked disapproving. Being an Alpha, both Steve and Tony sensed it; Tony glanced at her and his neck prickled. "...you guys can go now," he said dismissively.

The two of them grabbed their purses.

"I'll turn up. Promise. I want these tracker things gone," Steve breathed. He moved to stand as the doctors went to leave.

Brennan shot him a sympathetic look over her shoulder.

Tony's eyes followed them out of the room and he didn't speak until he heard the front door close, then he looked at Steve. "...lots of therapy, huh? That sucks. ...this doesn't have anything to do with Eighty-Four, does it?" He took a swig from the carton, keeping his eyes focused on Steve, reading him. Tony had meant to ask him earlier but forgotten. He'd heard about half of the conversation between Steve and the shrinks, though, and their talk about how Steve was always creating conflicts and battles to run into had jogged his memory. He was starting to wonder if Eighty-Four was going to be one of those battles that ultimately got them in trouble and made Fury give them the stink eye. Steve's "projects" seemed to revolve madly around giving away money and making enemies,
something Tony happened to be great at himself. Still, he wanted to make sure they weren't running into another AU conference-type situation; his heart just couldn't take it. And besides, he wasn't sure if he'd gotten the squirrel costume back yet.

"My behavior has nothing to do with that," he assured him, watching the doctors disappear out the door. "And it doesn't suck, I guess. I mean. I need it, don't I?" Steve tried to keep his voice neutral, shoving his hands into his hoodie. Steve leaned against the counter. Tony still stank of sex.

"I can show you what Project Eighty-Four is. It would be easier to show you than tell you." Steve said, eyes flirting up to Tony's face. "But I won't take you in if you've been drinking."

Curiosity got the better of Tony; he set the carton down. "Okay. I'm mostly sober. Show me," he begged. After a moment's consideration, he closed his robe and tied the belt, to show Steve how serious he was. Tony wasn't especially good at doing "serious," but he liked things that began with the title "Project," and also, Steve's eyes had that glint they got when Steve was about to do something morally righteous but questionably legal. Tony loved that look. He himself was fond of anything that felt morally righteous but questionably legal. Case in point: literally everything Iron Man had ever done.

"Mostly," Steve repeated, sounding tired. Tony had only come downstairs twenty minutes ago. How much could a man drink in twenty minutes?

"...is it in your room?" he asked, offering Steve his hand, giving Steve the opportunity to lead the way. Steve's room, his studio, was the only place in the house that Tony shied away from. It was a sacred space and Tony understood a person's need for privacy. His shop was like that. He'd only ever been in there with Steve, under his supervision. Ditto for the sketchbooks. Tony suspected there were, perhaps, some things in there that Steve didn't want him to see. Maybe pictures of war, or, worse, Bucky. In any case, Tony wasn't artistically inclined and therefore didn't really care. Tony's snooping usually only involved the digital world.

"I can't just show you here Tony. We have to leave the house. In which case, we both need to get changed. And you definitely need to shower. And brush your teeth. I want them to have a good first impression of you."

"Them?" repeated Tony quizzically, raising his eyebrows. "Who?"

Tony let Steve tug him upstairs to the bedroom and half-push him into the shower to get clean. He was dying with curiosity so he obliged Steve's requests; he got in the shower to rinse off the sweat and semen and Steve's smell off of him, and brushed his teeth for a good two minutes, hoping to mask any hint of the alcohol, since Steve was obviously pissy about that.

Steve went to get changed himself. Steve wanted to look a little smarter, ideally. He swapped out the t-shirt for a button-up, and then grabbed his phone, firing off a text as Tony stepped out of there bathroom. He smiled at the sight of dark hair plastered over Tony's forehead. "Much better."

Steve was perched on the edge of the bed, phone in his hands, and he was dressed rather nicely, in dark jeans and a tucked-in shirt. So whatever they were doing, where ever they were going... it was something respectable but not too formal.

Tony went into the closet to grab jeans and a t-shirt. Steve, with his incredible chest, made most t-shirts look incredible. Tony didn't have that particular ability, plus his arc reactor was prominent, so he tugging on a clean sweatshirt over his tee. It was grey with a Stark Industries logo; Tony had a lot of branded products lying around the house.
"Is this good?" he asked. "...where are we going? Steve?" He bounced a little on the balls of his feet, having already thrown on socks and a pair of worn Pumas.

"Very good," Steve told him as he slid off the bed and walked over to Tony, kissing his forehead. His mate's own excitement was making him smile. He sure hoped Tony wasn't disappointed with the actual product; he was aware that 'Project 84' sounded perhaps more ominous than it really was.

"It's an office, of sorts. That's where we going. It's like... a half-hour drive from here. Downtown. And before you accuse me of throwing money at something, I just rent the space. Everyone involved is a volunteer." Steve couldn't have ever afforded that many lawyers. Maybe with Tony's help...but that wasn't the point.

He wouldn't give anything else away as they headed down to the garage. They took the usual car, Steve in the driver's seat as he knew where they were going. It was nice to drive out of their house and have no protesters hanging around for a change. "You wanna put some music on?" he suggested, knowing a lot of unanswered questions hung in there that Steve had no intention of answering. He wanted to surprise Tony. He didn't make the effort to enough.

Tony let Steve drag him down to the shop and grab the keys to the Audi off the pegboard. He pestered Steve with questions about what office, what the hell the volunteers were for, trying to get Steve to give something, but Steve was being irritatingly tight-lipped. He had a mischievous little smile and Tony played along, nagging him in a good-natured way because he could tell that Steve was enjoying himself.

Steve floored it down the long, winding, almost mile-long drive to the front gates; there were no protesters, only a single black SUV. Tony's "detail." He waved at them when the gate open, relieved to see it was only Daston and Ido, who waved back and made no move to follow them. If it had been Beth, she would have followed them for sure.

Steve was headed south the PCH, then turned east on the 10, headed toward downtown Los Angeles. Tony was fiddling with the sound system, skipping all the songs, unable to focus on any of them because he was too busy asking Steve where they were heading, how much farther, how long he'd been planning this project, if it involved weapons, why wasn't he told, who else was involved, was Ty there, how about Banksy, or that Irshad person... Steve just kept deflecting his questions.

Like he'd already said: it would be better for Tony to see it with his own eyes.
Secretly, Tony was hoping that Steve's big surprise project was something tame. An omega soup kitchen. Since the conference, he'd been feeling shitty about his status, even though Steve was right, he couldn't help it. They were born the way they were born. Nonetheless, it was hard not to feel *associated* with all those Alphas at the conference, somehow.

Also, Tony was increasingly aware of the divide in the omega rights movement. He'd been doing his research. Status Alliance was much more extreme than The Horseshoe Society; Irshad Nazari was the head of the UN's Omega Rights Council, which technically bore no alliance to either organization. But she seemed far more inclined toward the moderate, low-key activism of The Horseshoe Society, which had gotten omegas the right to vote, to go to universities. Jeffrey Walker, the head councilman of the society, was a low-key guy, and his mate, Brent, was likable. Plus, Brent was a lawyer; Tony hoped he was one of the volunteers. He couldn't help but worry that Steve, whose activism seemed like the more extreme kind of activism, was getting overly cozy with Ty and Banksy. Status Alliance didn't even allow Alphas in, and it attracted a younger, more liberal crowd that probably hated Tony on principle. Then again, Tony happened to like the members of the SA that he'd met so far. But he didn't want to have to win them over one by one.

*At least if it's an SA thing I won't have to hold any babies,* he thought, thinking of Jeff and Brent's twins and how the little drooly thing had been handed to him. Ugh. Babies.

He played with the window.

"...Steve, *are we there yet?*" he asked in exasperation. "You're gonna kill me... this is it?" Steve turned onto Olive Street. "...*is this it?*" Steve turned onto State Street. "...*is this it?*" Steve took another turn and Tony groaned.

"This--" Steve took a final turn. "--is it." He was grinning, mostly at Tony's reaction. "You'll get it once we're in there. Oh, and be nice." He leaned down and kissed him square on the lips before he moved to get out of the car.

They stepped into, what looked like, a fairly normal office block building. Steve walked into the lift comfortably like he'd been there before and pressed the button for the twenty-third floor. The lift doors slipped close and Steve reached out to take Tony's hand, running the pad of his thumb over his knuckles.

Then the lift doors opened and they stepped out, heading towards set a double doors and--

"*Kerry! Did you ask for chicken in my salad! I'm vegetarian!*"

"Where's my quinoa? I paid like twenty dollars for that shit; I want it."

"Where's my milkshake? Where? Oh my God. George! Put my milkshake down!"

The office space was small but well thought-out. Four sets of dividers created clear sections. And at
the back of the wall there was a huge map of the US with eighty-four different pins on it, the pins each one of four different colors. There was about twenty men and women in the room. There were mostly betas and omegas, but there were a couple of Alphas too. Most of them were younger, in their twenties and thirties.

A group in the middle were bickering over the lunch someone bought whilst a male omega sat off to the side drinking a milkshake with a shit-eating grin. Then he saw Steve and got up in an instant. "Oh my God! You're here! Steve's here!"

A lot of heads turned, and a lot of eyes drifted to Tony, who'd they'd never met before in person.

A female Alpha stepped forward and shook Steve's hand warmly before turning to offer her hand to Tony's. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Kerry!" A beta male in round glasses was looking most displeased still. "What are you going to do about my salad?"

Kerry rolled her eyes. "Stick your salad up your ass, Ian."

Kerry wasn't bonded to anyone but almost all the omegas in the room were. It was hard to ignore.

When Tony had walked into the office, he had immediately felt underwhelmed. His mind had conjured up images of dark laboratories and secret industrial plants. This place looked a bit like a consulting firm.

Tony immediately noticed that he was, as as Alpha, in the minority. He was used to being in rooms with millionaires, billionaires, businessmen, military folks... and he'd always found himself among Alphas and betas. Omegas in Tony's world had, up until very recently, been a minority, and they had usually been around in a serving capacity. Being one of very few Alphas in the room was a weird experience. Also, all of them were looking at Steve before Tony. A bubble of jealousy rose in Tony's gut. He was used to being the center of attention but everyone was shaking Steve's hand and greeting him first.

Tony liked Kerry. "Yeah... nice to meet you too..." He still wasn't entirely sure what was going on here. "...this is a nice set-up." he said, not wanting to discourage Steve. He looked at the map on the wall and for a split-second wondered if Steve was looking for Bucky. But, no, Bucky was gone, in cyro. So what were all these pins? Most were clustered on the east coast and the south-east.

Tony walked over to the map. Four different colors. Did that mean anything? Something caught his eye... many of the pins had tiny paper labels stuck into them, and one in the northeast said, Shore's Breath.

"Hey! I know that place; that's that omega school that the auction was supposed to benefit," said Tony, touching the pin.

Ian snorted loudly. "Is that what they called it? A school?"

It clicked. Tony realized suddenly what he was looking at.

"Oh. Ooh! Steve, these are-- are these what I think they are?" asked Tony, turning around.

Several people were sidled up to Steve adoringly. Tony felt another pang of jealousy. He wasn't built like Steve, no, but he was rich. Goddammit, didn't that mean anything anymore?

Everyone was in a suit, or at least a tie but the atmosphere wasn't overly serious. There was a sense
of professionalism in the air but one lawyer was walking around in slippers, and many had their shirt buttons undone at the top and their ties pulled lose.

Steve shot Tony a grin and walked over to the board beside him. "They're exactly what you think they are," he told him, sounding almost proud. "So red, blue and yellow represent the three main companies that run the majority of the camps. And then green is for the odd independent one. The biggest company, the Trinity Trust, owns and runs over thirty of them. They're in red. And also they're the company that Gideon Malick supports."

"If we take down Trinity, the rest should be a piece of cake," Kerry said. "They have the most money so they'll be the hardest to take down."

Tony frowned a little. "...Steve... when you say take down... you're not gonna go storming in there with your shield and start Cappin' all over the place, are you? Because SHIELD will lose it for real. They'll put you right back into the iceberg they found you in."

"We're going the legal route."

Tony turned at the familiar voice; there was Brent Walker. Tony felt slightly relieved to see another male Alpha.

"Most of Project 84 is a fact-finding mission," said Brent, walking up beside them. "Digging up old tax records, finding people who are willing to testify, trying to get our hands on security footage. Trinity has been using a lot of these camps as tax breaks, and some of them are listed as pediatric centers. We're going to hit them with the old one-two; tax evasion and money laundering, as well as unlawful imprisonment and non-compliant medical practices."

"Huh," said Tony.

"...once the camps start getting shut down, we're going to have to get the kids to safe places. Get them access to therapy, medical treatment, education... put them back on track."

"Huh," repeated Tony. He looked up at Steve, and then set a hand on his shoulder. "...I'm proud of you. This looks..." He paused. "...this looks like it's costing a lot of money. Steve, are you like, keeping track of your bank accounts?"

"I've been," said Brent. "He's got seventeen thousand left."

"...that's hardly anything."

"He's got you," said Brent. "How much're you worth, Stark, ten billion or something?"

"Or something," agreed Tony. "...have you talked to Ty? Tiberius Stone. He was at Pine Hills; he's got all sorts of dirt."

Brent nodded. "Yes, we're in communication. He testified at the trial that shut them down. But that was one camp. We want to get them all. We don't want this to end up like the hydra, where you cut off one head and have two grow in its place."

Steve's shoulder tensed suddenly under Tony's hand. Tony knew why. He squeezed reassuringly. "...this looks really good, Steve. It's awesome. Seriously," he said.

"The key is finding one of the omegas they use at the camps for...practice," George said, visibly grimacing. "If we can find one of them alive and willing to testify, then we'll be set. But so far the only ones we've managed to find are dead."
"We do get free lunches from companies in support," Ian said and then glanced over at the table full of salads. "But a lot of them are vegan," he wheezed.

"Yeah?" Steve's brain had gone offline briefly at the mention of HYDRA. He didn't like being reminded that he'd drowned and died for nothing. It wasn't a nice feeling, and it didn't bring back nice memories, either. He shook his head out a little. "Yeah. Yeah, we're getting free lunches. We're being careful with money. Anyway, this is why we're going for the companies, not the camps themselves so much. Taking down eighty-four one by one would be pretty much impossible."

"Would cost too much and take too long," Kerry said. "And give the others chance to clean up their dirt. We're going with a four-pronged attack and we want to catch them by surprise. Doing it on Steve's birthday gives us maximum publicity, too, which means they won't have anywhere to hide."

"Um. Steve. Your birthday is July 4th," said Tony. Someone chuckled. Tony ignored them; no one seemed to see the problem. "Steve, July fourth is..." He did the math in his head. "...a hundred and seventy-two days from when your last heat started." Still, blank look.

Blonds.

"That's five months and three weeks. Nearly exactly six months."

All the omegas' heads in the room swiveled toward Steve, but Brent looked unconcerned. "If Steve isn't able to be present, that's okay. We have lots of volunteers and lawyers... and he can pre-record a statement if he feels a heat coming on. Aside from organizing and funding us, Steve is a figurehead. A lot of the actual work is going to be taken care of by us." Brent nodded to the people in the office.

"I have that preheat interview thing for that documentary," Steve pointed out. "We could bring it up then. But that isn't supposed to be broadcast live so...maybe we'll have to prerecord something," he sighed, clearly disappointed at the thought of missing it. "Shit."

"I just don't want him to miss it," said Tony. "...boy, Malick is gonna lose his fuckin' mind. You better warn Fury," said Tony.

"Phil already knows about it. I asked him to break it to Nick when he's having a 'good' day," Steve assured Tony, a hand on his arm.

"Who's Fury?" asked Brent.

"Never mind. ...what if we used a plant?" Tony was still looking at the map, critically. "Y'know, put an omega in there."

"We can't do that," said Brent immediately.

"What if we find someone who's already being shipped off and just, y'know, track them?"

"That would be great, if we could find a supplier. But human trafficking is ironically hard to traffic," said Brent, crossing his arms. "We need a source."

"...we've got one," said Tony. "That Gene guy, remember? He's one of Eric's clients."

"Who's Eric?" asked Brent.

"Eric's a guy I met at the conference. He's bonded to a girl named Piper. And I'll bet anything he purchased her... she's like seventeen and it sounds like she was sixteen when they bonded."
"Illegal," pointed out Brent.

"Piper gave me a business card for some other lady... but I don't know why. But I can call her. And Eric knows Gene, I think he's like... a broker or something. That's our lead."

"The only problem with sending in a plant is...we know exactly what we're sending them into," George said quietly. "Like...they could get seriously hurt in one of those places."

Kerry snorted. "We don't want to have to be suing ourselves too."

"I'll pass you on Gene's details," Steve told Brent, pulling out his phone. Since the conference Piper hadn't messaged him once. He wasn't sure if it was a bad sign or not.

"We should do a background check," Ian piped up.

"I already Googled him. No dirt," said Tony. He was telling a half-truth; he had had JARVIS run every possible search on Gene Bennett. He worked for a company called Vector Solutions, a consulting firm involved in market research, in the human resources department. That had put together a few bonds and there were plenty of people who said he was a good "match-maker," but there was no sign of money exchanging hands, no sign of anything forced or illegal.

Tony wasn't surprised. Gene Bennett had been so incredibly charming and careful and kind, and all of Gene's friends had nothing but nice things to say about him. On the outside, it looked like Gene was just a pleasant guy who was good at setting people up.

It was Madeline Turner's card that Piper had given to him. Tony pulled out his wallet and held it up. "This is what Piper gave us."

Kerry stepped forward, clearly interested as she plucked the business card from Tony's hand and inspected it. "Hm. I've never heard of her, but I'm sure she is worth checking out."

"Gene was terrifyingly charming," Steve warned. "Do of this woman has anything to do with him, be careful."

George grinned. "I know a manipulative Alpha when I see one. I promise...I have plenty of experience."

Tony looked over at George with curiosity; George's grin widened. "Force-bonded," he almost sang, pointing to his neck with a sort of morbid pride.

Tony decided he liked George.

Kerry passed the card to George; George swiveled around in an office chair and pulled a phone over to him. "Shall we?" He began dialing and put in on speaker when it began ringing. George propped his feet up on the desk, still sipping the milkshake, while the milkshake's owner tried fruitlessly to grab it from him.

"Hello, Turner School for Girls, this is Bridget speaking."

"Hello, Bridget," said George pleasantly, voice suddenly much deeper, more formal. "I was recently given Madeline's card by an associate and I was hoping to enroll my child in your institution. I've heard very positive things."

"I'm so happy to hear that. Let me transfer you to the heads of our admissions, Francine. She'll be more than happy to walk you through the process. May I ask who's calling?"
"My name is Richard Thompson, thank you," said George.

Hold music played through the room.

Tony looked over at Steve with fascination. George swiveled around to grin at them. His sudden change of tone had been alarmingly convincing; if Tony had talked to him on the phone, he would have assumed he was an older Alpha by voice alone.

"Hello, Mr. Thompson?" came a new female voice from the phone.

George leaned forward, putting on the same imperious, formal voice. "Doctor Thompson, actually," he said. "Yes, I'd like to enroll my daughter in your school. I was recommended by a Mr. Gene Bennett, perhaps you've heard of him? ...he gave me Ms. Turner's card but, regrettably, I was unable to get more information from him... there was some unpleasant business that interrupted our conversation, you see."

Franaine tutted. "AU Conference?" she guessed.

"Ah, yes, I'm sure you've seen the headlines. Very unfortunate. A rather abrupt cut-off to our evening's entertainment," said George, who was swinging back and forth in the chair airily. Everyone else was watching with interest.

"In these troubled times, of course, a formal omega education with emphasis on proper etiquette is highly sought after," said Francine. "How old is your daughter?"

George shot a look at Kerry, Steve, Brent, and Ian. All of them were mouthing different numbers and holding up fingers.

"Sixteen. ...ah, seventeen, come this July," said George.

"Oh, dear. That's a bit... older than we usually accept. Our program is for children ages ten to seventeen," said Francine. "Naturally, by bonding age, it's a bit trickier to imprint roles on them."

"...yes, of course," said George, who was miming vomiting. "I was hoping you could make an exception. My Kerry is a very good girl."

Kerry flipped him the bird and George grinned devilishly.

"Well, unfortunately, Dr. Thompson, our program begins in the fall, by which time your daughter would have already aged out. Have you arranged a bond for her yet?"

Kerry grabbed a clipboard and scribbled madly on it, then held it up for George. *Tell her she's already bonded!*

"Well, she hasn't got an Alpha, if that's what you mean," said George. "I'm afraid she was bonded during her last heat by some boy at her current school. But she's really a model omega, and even though she's already marked, she'd be an excellent addition to any household."

There was a pregnant pause on the other line. "...I see. Well, Dr. Thompson, this does present another problem. You see, our school only accepts unbonded girls, the goal, of course, being for them to be bonded when they graduate. You understand that our clientele doesn't really... want omegas that are already marked."

Brent was scribbling notes down like a maniac, holding out a recorder to the phone.
"Excuse me... your clientele, did you say?  You don't mean the parents?" asked George, tone still light.

"No, no, the-- I'm sorry, Dr. Thompson, but it sounds like your child isn't eligible for our program."

Kerry was scribbling again, her handwriting nearly illegible because of the pace of it.  She held up the clipboard.  *Get mad; be upset @ omega daught.; ask 4 referral!*

George sat upright and banged his fist on the desk; several people in the office jumped.  "*Well, what the hell am I supposed to do with a used-up spade in my house who's nearly seventeen and no Alpha will look at her?* " he yelled.  He cleared his throat and pretended to adjust his tie, though he wasn't wearing one and of course Francine couldn't see him.  "Pardon me, I'm sorry, excuse my outburst, I just-- I want what's best for little Kerry and I'm in over my head. Can't you give me a referral, at least?  Surely there's an institution that would help her find a mate? She's very obedient."

Kerry scribbled another cue card.  *No!  Don't say obedient!*

"--that is-- she, ah, she's *mostly* obedient... well, she can be a bit headstrong.  I'm afraid lately she's been a bit of a handful because of all this nonsense over Steve Rogers.  She's got a *crush* on him, you see.  Handsome, broad-shouldered horseshoe and all."  Kerry flipped George off again, looking a bit embarrassed.

"...yes, yes, I quite understand, Dr. Thompson.  We've had plenty of similar concern from parents about his negative influence.  Of course, you've already talked to Mr. Bennett?"

George cast a look at Kerry; Kerry held up the clipboard.  *Good girl!*

"Well, certainly, I've spoken to Gene, but... Kerry is a sweet, sensitive child.  I would really like her to be bonded to an Alpha as a primary mate."

"Dr. Thompson, with all due respect, no respectable Alpha would likely want her pre-marked.  ...you could perhaps talk to someone about getting her corrective surgery.  I believe Lake Sycamore has a program that helps restore omegas.  It's a private school in Michigan that works with younger, troubled omegas.  A bit pricey but one of the best.  And they do take omegas up to the age of twenty-one."

Ian was pointing to a red pin on the map.

"Price is no issue.  If you could please give me a referral I would be most grateful.  And of course, if she ends up as a beta, I can't say I'd be upset!"  George laughed politely and so did Francine.

"Yes, of course.  Your contact details, Dr. Thompson?"

Brent held up a phone; Kerry began scribbling a number down for "Dr. Thompson."

Tony watched this whole process in fascination.  These people worked fast and clearly had their methods down pat; while George was acting, Kerry was busily pointing him in all the right directions, and Brent and two other lawyers were taking notes.  Another one had pulled out a recorder to document the process.

"...thank you so much for your help, Francine.  Please forward me the referral and also, if you could send a link to a donation page, I'd like to contribute to your school for its upstanding work.  Give my regards to Ms. Turner," said George.  Francine thanked him and he reached over to press a button and end the call.
He swiveled around and grinned. "Well *that* was fun!" His voice was back to normal.

"This is great lead," said Brent, still writing notes on a legal pad. "Lake Sycamore is one of Trinity's... looks like they're also going conversions under the table."

"I bet that's where Eric got Piper," said Tony quietly, squeezing Steve's hand, feeling sick. "...that school."

"Oh, no doubt," agreed Ian.

"*School,*" scoffed Kerry, making quotations marks in the air.

The performance was quite something, and Steve was impressed even though he had admittedly witnessed similar calls before. George was terribly good at conducting his voice to just the right pitch. Angela, a small blonde beta, had tried a few phone calls herself, but usually just ended up swearing at them.

"I can't believe she actually said the word clientele! It's like they're not even putting on a face anymore," Ian said, laughing quietly in despair. He shook his head. "I wonder how these 'clientele' choose from the omegas. Maybe they hold meetings, or events--"

"Or auctions," Kerry said, pulling a face. "I wonder if they pay for them."

"They'll probably pay a 'consultation fee'," Angela piped up from her desk. "They use that phrase a lot. It's all legal- getting help with a match, getting advice. You're paying to be introduced, not *for* the omega. At least, in technicalities."

"That was amazing," Steve told George and the omega beamed at him. He grabbed his stolen milkshake and stuck the straw into his mouth.

"I majored in drama for a whole year, you know."

"We know! You mention it like every day..." Kerry sighed.

Despite being a random assortment of legal experts and lawyers the group had clearly become friends. There was a fondness between them. And it was quite impressive the way they had interacted so impressively during the call. It was team work at its best.

Brent was tapping away on a tablet, his brow drawn tightly together in thought.

Ian picked at his salad with a loud sigh. "You guys wanna get lunch somewhere? Unless I eat some wheat-heavy product soon I think I'm gonna faint."

"How about we go get some pizzas?" Steve suggested, squeezing Tony's hand lightly. He wanted to steal a moment alone with him to find out what he really thought.

"Well I mention it 'cause I didn't even finish high school until last year," snapped George, a bit defensively. He turned to Tony. "My Alpha got involved in an embezzlement scandal and was sent to some white-collar, resort-style prison. Leaving *me* to finally get *out.*" He looked tickled to have gotten away from his Alpha.

"Congratulations. I think," said Tony. "Don't you still feel the bond?"

"Oh, yeah, every day, it sucks. I just ignore him," said George breezily.

Tony felt bad; omegas couldn't distance the bond. If George's Alpha didn't give him up, then
George was still stuck with him, at least emotionally. It seemed like a terrible fate. But George seemed pleased with himself for running away, getting an education, and partnering up with Project 84.

"Pizza sounds great!" said Ian enthusiastically. "I have a meeting with Mr. Stone in--" He checked his watch. "--two hours, so let's hustle."

"...y'know, me and Ty were childhood friends?" said Tony. "Before... before he got sent away. We went to the same prep school."

"No kidding!" said Ian. "Small world, huh? Well, c'mon, guys, let's go, I'm dying of hunger."

"Kerry, you should follow up with Turner's school and see if you can get a scenting with the omegas... see what the arrangements look like," said Brent. "Be one of their clientele."

Kerry made a face. "You do it."

Brent shrugged helplessly. "I'm bonded. You're the best plant we have."

Kerry sighed in resignation.

Tony was staring at the map on the wall, thinking of Ty, how he'd disappeared and how Tony had never given it much thought. While Tony was filling out applications for MIT, Ty was off getting tortured, getting experimented on. It gave him chills. And the way this group so casually talked about these things... it was creepy, this sinister, underground movement.

"How'd it happen?" he asked George quietly.

George seemed thoroughly unembarrassed. "Oh, I was a 'graduate' from St. Claver's. It's one of those so-called omega etiquette schools. Not a real education. Just teaching you how to be 'good' for an Alpha. The 'graduation' was basically being sold. Luke picked me out, there was a big ceremony... this was after arranged bonding was illegal but I didn't even know that, so I let him."

"Don't blame yourself," said Angela quietly.

"Oh, I'm not! I'm just saying, I had no idea it was illegal by the time I graduated. If I did I would have kicked up a real shitstorm. But I thought I had to so I just knelt and let him bite me. Awful experience. Not as bad as Luke is in bed, but pretty bad!"

Tony found George's utter lack of politeness and offensive sense of humor refreshing; several people in the room looked upset, though, so he decided to switch the topic back to that great unifier of people, pizza. "So... lunch. Ian needs his gluten fix," he said.

"I do," confirmed Ian.

"There's a place down the block," said Brent, packing up his legal pad. "Let's go."

Tony clung to Steve's hand. He didn't want to be left with any of these people. The thing that scared him most was that Tony, who had graduated in '87, a mere four years after arranged bondings were banned, could have very well been on the other end of things. His parents had died when he was 16, but if they had lived, who knew if his father would have tried to set him up with an omega? He could imagine himself at 18, being led into a room for a "scenting," picking out one he liked, taking them home... it sent shivers up his spine and made him sick. And like George, he wouldn't have really known better. Until recently in Tony's life, he'd never questioned omegas being servants.
Steve clung to Tony right back. He understood that the group could be intense. That, and he could feel Tony's own discomfort. These people were so used to the horrors of the camps; it was hardly surprising that they were slowly becoming numb to it.

The small group left the office and took pizza orders from the others as they left. They grabbed coats and then an awkward amount of them pressed into the elevator. Kerry glared at George as he murmured something in her ear as they stepped out of the lift.

Steve wasn't sure if there was something between them or not. They bickered a lot and clearly frustrated each other more often than not. It would be oddly sweet if a project like this managed to bring people together, Steve guessed.

Ian started telling a story about a time when Kerry got an olive stuck up her nose and they almost had to call an ambulance. The Alpha looked mildly annoyed but her lips still twitches up in the hint of a smile when the story made Steve laugh. Eventually George had gotten the damn thing out with a pair of chopsticks from take-out the night before.

"So, in conclusion, never laugh too hard while drinking a martini," finished George wisely.

"I'm stealing that story," said Tony, who looked delighted with the idea of laughing so hard one could get an olive up the nose.

They stepped into the pizza place and stepped up to the counter. Ian started reeling off a loud of orders. Steve hung back, still holding Tony's hand.

"So," he murmured. "What do you really think?"

Tony tried to force a smile; he wanted to say something nice, but instead, he blurted, "It's like a real-life horror story, Steve. ...Eighty-four camp with twenty omegas apiece, that's 1,680 kids 'enrolled' in these programs, being treated worse than animals. And-- and it could've been you. It could've been me. I could've ended up...

He trailed off.

Obadiah had been unbonded and resolutely believed that bonding made Alphas into fools; he discouraged Tony from getting "chummy" with any omegas and Tony had spent his life seeking out the company of beta women without question. But if Howard had lived, he might very well have been introduced to some poor, unwilling, brainwashed omega, someone like DeSoto.

"I'm glad you 'n Ty are working together. I... I never knew what happened to him, I never-- I mean-- I wish I had known, I wish I could've done something... and... and, you know, Ashtray and Trickshot... what the hell happened to them, Steve? ...fuck me, I need a smoke." Tony hadn't smoked in years, at least not cigarettes. He only asked for one when his stress levels were through the roof.

"But it wasn't you. And you're here." Steve breathed, rubbing his thumb over the back of his hand. "Being an alpha doesn't make you complicit in this. You didn't send Ty to that camp. His parents did. You've changed so much in the last year Tony and I'm so proud of you. You can't blame someone for their environment, what matters is their willingness to change and understand."

He could feel the other beating himself up over this and Steve felt exasperated. Tony was nothing like the Alphas back at the conference.

He distantly remembered their first 'date', where Steve walked out on Tony for assuming they'd be in a trio. He was totally different now.
"Did you say you want a smoke?" Kerry said, offering out a packet of cigarettes. "I'm just about to take one outside."

"I'll go order for us," Steve told him, pressing a kiss to Tony's temple before pulling away to go order. He knew their take away preferences well by this point.

"Thanks," said Tony, grabbing one and following Kerry outside. He felt better about being around an Alpha and simultaneously felt terribly guilty for preferring Kerry's company over, say, Ian's.

She lit the cigarette for him and Tony took a deep drag.

His mind flashed back to the cave. To the smell of cigarettes, and then the smell of burning flesh, of being held down, pinned, the back of his neck--

"Tony?"

He tossed the cigarette to the ground and put it out with the toe of his shoe, suddenly aware he was gasping shallowly.

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

"Yep-- heart condition-- fine," gasped Tony, gripping Kerry's shoulder.

"Should I get Steve?"

"No-- he can feel-- it's fine." Tony was staring at the ground, trying to get ahold of himself. He didn't want to have a panic attack in front of Steve's crew, and he didn't want to have one here, on the sidewalk outside in the middle of downtown LA. It was a clear day and Tony was struggling to orient himself. Skyscrapers. Blue skies. He was in a city, outside, not in a desert, underground. He was okay.

"I'm okay," he repeated, to himself, trying desperately to focus on his breathing.

"...you shouldn't smoke if you have a heart condition," said Kerry, looking thoroughly worried as Tony clenched a hand protectively over his chest where the arc reactor was.

"I don't," wheezed Tony.

Kerry looked confused about why Tony had asked for a cigarette if he didn't smoke, but she was too busy holding him up to ask.

"F-forced bonding is the worst thing in the world," managed Tony. His mind was still back there and suddenly George's jokes about Luke being bad in bed, about letting someone bite the back of his neck, weren't funny.

"Yeah... yeah, it is... but there's less and less of it..." said Kerry, patting him awkwardly. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"F-fine... arc reactor surges sometimes... s'ok..." lied Tony.

Steve appeared outside less than a minute later. "Hey, everything okay?" He'd felt a tightness in his chest and suddenly it had been hard to breathe when he'd been trying to order a mushroom and pineapple pizza. He walked up to Tony, a hand on his arm as he tried to read the other's facial expression. Steve knew what it probably was: the subtle scent of cigarette smoke still lingering in the air.
"I'll go help get pizza," Kerry said, using the excuse to slip away. But just as she did the rest of them appeared outside, carrying mountains of pizza boxes.

"We got them for free! Turns out someone was a Captain America fan," George said with a wink, nudging his shoulder against Steve's. The omega was much smaller than him but somehow he managed to close the distance.

They walked back to the office and Steve didn't let go of Tony's hand the entire time. It had been an intense afternoon, he guessed. But there was never really a moment in the office that wasn't intense. At least when Steve went around. The testimonies they'd collected so far had been harrowing and gut wrenching. Once Ian had even started crying and had to excuse himself to the bathroom for twenty minutes.

"We've got pizza!" George announced as they stepped back inside and everyone began sharing boxes around.

Steve was still worried about Tony though. He turned to face him. "You wanna call it a day? We can call it a day."

Tony gripped Steve, hard, leaning heavily on him. He had been uncharacteristically quiet on the walk back to the building and quiet on the elevator ride up to their floor.

Everyone else was chatting, like this was just a normal business venture; the pizza boxes were passed around, over the tops of cubicles and around desks. Brent tossed his tie over his shoulder so he wouldn't get sauce on it.

"No... want pizza..." said Tony, sitting down heavily in someone else's chair.

"Hey!" cried a young, black omega. "That's my chair." Tony pulled out his wallet and handed the man a hundred-dollar bill. "...but, uh, you can have it. I like the floor anyway," said the man, tucking the bill into his pocket and sitting down on the floor.

Tony put a hand over his face and breathed. He was shaking slightly from an unwanted adrenaline rush.

"...is he okay?" murmured the omega whose chair Tony had stolen, looking up to Steve. A couple of people were tactfully trying not to notice Tony's minor breakdown. Breakdowns happened.

"...we can leave after pizza..." mumbled Tony into his hand, slouching into the office chair, making no move to get himself a slice.

"It's just a bad day," Steve told the guy (his name was Marcus) tactfully as he gently rubbed a hand up and down Tony's back. George passed over their pizza boxes. Steve wasn't sure he really felt like eating now himself.

Marcus chewed on a slide of garlic mushroom thoughtfully. He was one of the youngest, having only passed the bar a year ago. But he'd known Angela and had worked in her firm before so had come along for the ride. Almost everyone had a partner or a strong support network. They weren't getting paid for this so it wouldn't help them pay rent. Steve knew that Marcus's father owned his own law firm so he could afford to take half a year out.

"Here's pizza," Steve said, opening the box and pushing it along so Tony could reach out.

"Hey, is it true you're going to be on Saturday Night Live?" Marcus asked.
"Er...yes. My publicist thinks it'll be good for my image," said Steve awkwardly.

Kerry grinned. "Oh my God. That'll be amazing. Won't it be amazing?"

George was currently tearing his way through a veggie supreme with extra jalapenos. He waved a hand. "It'll be hilarious."

Tony picked up a slice and began doing what he did to food when he was feeling bad: dissecting it. With pizza, this proved to be messy. Everyone watched as he pulled off the toppings and began arranging them on rows on his thigh (ruining his jeans), and then began peeling away the cheese.

"We don't know what scripts they'll run by us yet," said Brent. "Don't agree to anything until we approve, Steve. It's important that you project a good image."

"Banksy said he's helping out with that," said Angela casually. Marcus nearly dropped a slice of pizza to the floor.

"Thomas Banksy, of Banksy and Boswell?" he asked, eyes popping.

"Yeah, that Banksy. Don't you know? He's super involved in Status Alliance," said Angela breezily.

"That's weird. He and Boswell seem to have one of those overly perfect, really conventional couples. How old's Boswell, anyway? Must be well into his seventies by now," said Marcus.

"I grew up with that show," said one of the lawyer nostalgically. "Back when it was just Boswell."

Tony looked up finally. "My dad was on that show. The Boswell Mackabee Variety Hour."

"...yeah, I think I saw that one. Howard Stark and Obadiah Stane," said the lawyer, smiling. "Howard was hilarious... Stane, not so much."

"Yeah, Dad put on a good face for the camera," said Tony, eating the crust he'd managed to isolate from the rest of the pizza. "He was hilarious, right, Steve?" He rolled his eyes.

Steve didn't really remember Howard being 'funny'. He made women around him laugh a lot. And Steve always laughed it off all the times he half came onto him...but he couldn't really remember him ever saying anything funny. Still, he nodded anyway, not about to show Tony up in a room full of people. He basically inhaled a slice of pizza as he perched on the edge of a desk.

"I think it's important people see Steve's funny side too," Angela said. "We don't want everyone to think he's too serious. An important part of publicity is being entertaining."

Steve looked up to see George peering at the back of his neck not-so-subtly. The omega quickly looked away, trying to be polite but Steve knew what he was looking at. He must have noticed that the marks had changed-- that Tony's was just as prominent as Bucky's now. Perhaps he was curious about his own chances of being able to bond with another Alpha.

"I think Aria, my assistant, said they wanted to do something in the Oval Office, but I don't really know what," Steve said.

Ian hummed around a slice of garlic bread. "They'll probably go as political as they can get away with."

"Not too political," warned Brent.
"Omegle Office," mumbled Tony into his crust, and someone next to him chuckled. Tony wiped his hands onto his shirt unceremoniously. "Welp, I'm ready to go. I've got a lot of work to do." He had eaten the crust only, after licking away the sauce; the cheese and toppings were still on his pants. He stood and they scattered to the floor; Tony seemed oblivious. "Steve, how many more pizzas d'you gotta eat before you're done?"

Someone else laughed. Most of them had seen Steve eat before.

Although Tony felt annoyed at being upstaged by Steve, he had to admit there was one nice thing about this. While Steve was being asked to do therapy and photo shoots and interviews and model omega fashions and appear on television and give inspiring speeches, Tony could simply hole himself up in his shop and work on the Mark VII. Modular armor was very high on his priority list. It was like his own personal Project 84.

"Hey... guys... can you, um, can you see about tracking down an Ashtray and a Trickshot? They were two omegas that were sold to those camps," said Tony, casting a glance around the room.

Kerry scribbled the names onto a sticky note. "Steve mentioned. We're trying but it's hard. A lot of omegas change names after bonding and then, if they get sent to the camps, get changed again... makes tracking them down hard. But we'll see what we can do."

"They were both recent, I think. Like, only a few years," said Tony hopefully.

"...they don't normally last that long. If they're being used for practice," said Marcus darkly, and the mood in the room shifted.

Tony reached for Steve's hand. "...thanks for doing this, guys. You need funding, bill it to S.I., okay? Me n' Pepper'll take care of it. C'mon, Steve..."

Steve finished the final slice of his pizza little sheepishly, smiling despite himself as he licked tomato sauce off of his fingers.

"Thanks, Stark," Kerry said and patted Steve's shoulder. "We don't wanna bleed Cap dry. His Social Security checks aren't exactly huge and he's been donating all of them."

Steve waved a hand. "It's fine." He wasn't used to having money and he wasn't good at keeping it. Having money and not using it for some sort of change or project made him feel uncomfortable. Within his first six months of being awake he'd donated tens of thousands of dollars; as quickly as S.H.I.E.L.D. gave it to him, he gave it away.

George reached out and lightly punched Steve's arm. He nodded towards Tony. "I'm glad you got one of the good ones."

Steve smiled. "So am I. I'll see you guys soon, alright? Let me know how it goes!"

"Will do!" Ian assured them. "Have a good one Steve-o." Apparently his wheat fix was enough to seriously improve Ian's mood.

After several more goodbyes and smiles they left, stepping back into the lift and then heading out into the carpark. Steve got into the drivers seat, figuring Tony wouldn't want to drive anyway after his mini breakdown.

"Are you okay?" Steve asked softly, hesitating before he started up the engine.

"I'm always okay. Take me home, Steve," said Tony, slumping into the passenger's seat and staring
glumly out the window. He stole a glance over. "Really. I'm just tired and this is hard...you do your Cap thing and just let me work on my suits, okay? I can't stand it. Thinking about DeSoto and George and Banksy and Trickshot all being... being made... kneeling and letting someone bite them and then... being used..."

Tony's voice got soft. "I don't talk about what he did to me. But it..." He gestured vaguely to his neck, then reached between the seats to find Steve's hand.

"...you just do your Cap thing," he repeated. "Give 'em hell, Rogers."

Steve almost felt tears well up in his eyes and swallowed down a lump in his throat. He lifted Tony's hand up and kissed the backs of his fingers. "I will," he whispered. Alphas who did that kind of thing were the weakest type of person in Steve's mind and he couldn't wait to watch so many of them topple down from their high horses.

It was a shame he'd be too lost in a sex-crazed heat to notice any of it happening around him.

He drove them back. By the time Steve had parked in the garage he realized he'd have to go out again in just half an hour for his therapy session that night. It seemed today wasn't going to let up on him just yet. A strange thought lingered in the back of his head for the entire drive.

Bucky had never made him kneel. He'd asked for it a few times, like Tony did. But he would have never made him. He never expected or felt owed anything throughout their entire relationship. It was Steve who constantly demanded intimacy and was denied it.

"I have to out again soon," Steve said. "Will you be okay here, by yourself?" He asked tentatively as they got out of the car. It would be a busy week. He had two appointments tomorrow. And then a day after there was a photo shoot with Vogue or whoever the hell the designer was. And then it was the world security council the day after that.

"Yeah. I'll play some loud music and work on one of the cars... I'll be fine. Seriously, I just... I hate cigarettes, that's all. Really. I'm fine," insisted Tony. He didn't add he was probably going to drink a lot. He assumed Steve knew that. "Go, Steve. Stop being a stereotypical omega and trying to nurture me. I'm a big boy." He walked around the car and put an arm around Steve's waist. "But don't ask me to come out with you on any more crazy trips. Until that WSC meeting, I'm officially on hiatus. I just wanna work in the shop."

He nuzzled against Steve's shoulder affectionately. He really did feel a lot better. It was good to have a mate.

"Do you feel any better?"

"It had been two days since they kicked him out. Pietro was curled in the bathtub with a bucket of ice, sweating profusely.

"No. Can we get James back? Please... please, just for one night... Alpha..."

"No, Pietro," said Wanda patiently, wringing out a washcloth in the sink and then kneeling by the tub to press it to his forehead. He moaned softly in gratitude.

"...I'm so hot... I need a mate... so hot..."

"I know. It'll pass," she said gently.
"I want Alpha..."

"You don't, really."

"I do... God, I do... I want to be good... please... please go find him... I want to kneel for him... show him I'm good..."

"Shh." Wanda furrowed her brow and drew her hand over his face. "Sleep." she murmured, trying to calm him. The temptation to wiggle her fingers, concentrate, find his mind and break into it and try to force it to sleep was tempting. But this was one of her only limits. To violate her brother like that was unthinkable. Besides, even she couldn't easily disrupt a heat. Like a sickness, he just needed to power through it.

Pietro's eyes, glazed, rolled over a little and locked on hers. He smiled weakly. "This is hell. Thank you, Wanda."

"It's okay," she said gently, feeding him an ice chip. "It's only twice a year. Once you're better, we can keep moving. Stark will be going back to Los Angeles, eventually... we can get him there."

"Mm," said Pietro, closing his eyes. The sweet promise of revenge was almost as tantalizing as the thought of James... of his well-muscled torso, his chocolate-brown eyes and the locks of hair falling down into them... he let out a whine of longing and tried to get up. "Wanda, please, please, I need him, I need him back--!"

"No, Pietro," she said firmly, pushing him back down. "Hush. He's long gone now, anyway... get back in the ice."

“Where do you think he is now?” asked the omega plaintively.

“...back in the ice,” repeated Wanda, and this time, Pietro complied.
Tracking Devices

The first therapy session was not good. The man was old, hitting his sixties, and talked to Steve like he was a child who didn't understand what a gun fired out of. It was clearly about Steve's status, but he didn't say it. Steve remained polite through out the entire thing and took a number to set up a second appointment he had no real intention of making.

The second appointment was boring. That was the only word for it. Steve kept day dreaming in the middle of the therapist's monologues and he couldn't pay attention for more than five minutes at a time. There would be no second appointment with them, either. When Steve was leaving his second appointment and heading into his car a small group of Alphas across the street called him a whore. Or something along those lines. Steve point-blank ignored them and got into his car and drove off. He knew it was about the multiple Alphas and the bonding stuff. He thought about what Brazinski and Brennan had said about him always needing a fight...and he wanted to prove them wrong.

The third appointment was far better. The therapist was a woman who was tall and well built. She was a beta, her eyes chocolate-coloured and kind. And her hair fell in thick black curls over her face and her shoulders. She was fun. She made Steve laugh, showed him pictures of her own platoon. She had actually been an army medic but she knew what the rush of the fight was like all the same. Her name was Lucy and he instantly clicked with her. She didn't give a shit about his status and she spoke to him like a fellow soldier, something he'd kind of missed. He appreciated not being talked down to. He took her number for a second appointment, and this time, he actually set it up.

Not content with letting Steve live a quiet life, Aria insisted he follow through on his various public appearances, including a photo shoot for an omega clothing line, an ad council promotion for milk, and a photo op with some Boy Scouts at a local library.

The photoshoot was, surprisingly, really fun. There was a load of other famous omegas there of every different body shape imaginable. There was a famous female omega body builder and they had several funny photos of her lifting Steve up into the air like he weighed of nothing. It was actually super impressive; she and Steve compared their workout routines. Steve had never met another omega who had muscles like his. The shoot took all day and he had to go through over twenty outfits, most of the photos alone but a few of them in groups or pairs. The stylists groaned over the ankle monitor on his leg, which was almost impossible to hide. Steve went out for drinks afterwards and they even let him keep one of the jackets that he was especially fond of. It was black soft leather with a green suede lining that was showed off on the lapels. Going out for drinks with a group of omegas was a breath of fresh air; it was fun and it felt good to hang about with people his own age for once. Steve had not appreciated how many people he hung out with were Tony's age and Tony's friends: older male Alphas and betas who treated him a little different. With other young omegas, he felt like he could be himself.

The morning of the security council meeting Steve was actually kind of excited. He couldn't wait to be free of the stupid ankle monitor. He dressed in dark jeans and a white shirt and his new jacket (which he would probably be wearing for the next week straight. He really liked it.)

"That jacket again?" groaned Tony, sticking his head out of his walk-in closet.

They were both getting ready and in five minutes they'd be driving to the nearest SHIELD building, in Brentwood, right across from the Los Angeles VA. Despite being mostly excited, Steve was a little nervous. He knew he couldn't piss Gideon off but it was just hard... because he really wanted to.
He pulled a face in the mirror, sticking out his tongue in concentration as he tried to fix his hair. "Can you get this right? I don't know what it's trying to do today..."

"What are you talking about?" asked Tony teasingly, sidling up beside Steve. He was still in sweatpants. "I love the fluffy duckling look. That's what you're going for, right?" He wrapped his arms around Steve and gave his shoulder a gentle bite, not enough to mess up his clothes but enough for Steve to feel the pressure.

"Sirs. Mr. Hogan is downstairs and would like to remind you that you are scheduled to depart in five minutes."

"I just gotta get my shoes on," said Tony, who had grabbed a bottle of gel from the counter and was trying to help Steve get his hair back in order. "...you shouldn't have conditioned it this morning. You how how it fluffs up like this... you could be the mascot on a box of dryer sheets, seriously, this is fluffy... okay, how's that? Better?" His fingers played over Steve's head, half-petting him as he fixed his hair. "...do we have time for a quickie?" he asked.

"You don't, Mr. Stark," intoned JARVIS.

Tony heaved a sigh. "Please tell me you're not analyzing our mating patterns."

"I analyze all data available to me. Your average love-making session is twenty-three minutes long. Your average mating time is four minutes."

"...four minutes?"

"Mating is a rather different thing than making love," said JARVIS.

"Oh, shut up, what do you know about it, Robot-dick? Mute," snapped Tony. "...jerk... four minutes... we need to work on that, clearly." He kissed Steve's neck sweetly before going to grab a suit. He'd tie his tie in the car.

Steve was grinning in front of the mirror, clearly thoroughly amused by JAVRIS's analysis.

"Jarv?" called Tony as he loped down the stairs still buttoning his shirt, sunglasses already on. "Who's gonna be at the meeting?"

"From the WSC, Councilwoman Hawley and Councilman Malick. From SHIELD, Director Fury, Agent Hill, Agent Carter, and Agent McKenzie. And two members of the Department of Defense."

"Oh, yay," said Tony sarcastically. "Hey, Happy."

"Hey, boss. Hey, Captain," said Happy, who was sitting on Tony's couch reading a tabloid and sipping on a cup of coffee.

The amount of people at the meeting made Steve frown. "Why do we need so many people just to take off some ankle bracelets?"

"I dunno," Happy said. "But being late certainly won't help you. Come on, let's go."

They bundled into the car. Steve grabbed a carton of fruit smoothies from the fridge to drink on the way. Happy put the radio on for them before they set off. Steve was oddly nervous. They wouldn't refuse them, would they? The ankle bracelets were stupid... Steve had already proven they were very easy to break.
Tony stroked the back of Steve's neck in the car, gazing idly out the window as they headed downtown toward the Federal Building on Wilshire Blvd. It was a block stone building that was oddly out of place among the usual trendy high-rise condos that lined that particular part of the boulevard. Across the street was the VA, and a cemetery with rows and rows of identical white gravemarkers. (Tony had seen Steve's grave in pictures. It was now a bit of a tourist attraction; Steve had a picture of himself giving a friendly thumbs-up next to it.)

"Shouldn't last more than an hour," said Happy as they turned into the parking garage. It was a reassurance; Tony couldn't help but feel that the building and its surroundings were ominous, and he could feel Steve's unease in his own stomach.

The drive went quicker than Steve would have liked it to.

They climbed out of the car on a lower level and the honk of the horn indicating that the car was locked echoed. Happy flanked them toward the elevators; a young blond Alpha was waiting for them. The pretty nurse who had once lived down the wall from Steve. Beside her was Agent Maria Hill. She looked pissed.

"Come on," she ushered at them with her hands. "You're already late."

"Agent Thirteen, right?" asked Tony.

"Carter," she replied. "Sharon Carter. Hello again, Captain." She stuck a hand out; Tony didn't take it, averse as he was to shaking hands. Steve, with his gentlemanly old-fashioned etiquette, did.

"There's been a lot of discussion but we think you'll like the compromise we came to," she said as they walked into the elevator, pressing one of the buttons.

"To be honest I'd agree to nearly anything to get this damned tracker off... it's ruining my tan," said Tony. It was unclear if he was joking or not.

The elevator pinged and they shuffled out into the hall. The hall was long, narrow, and tall, with high-set windows and a tile floor. It was reminiscent of an older school. There were a few people in suits milling outside of a heavy wooden door; they looked up when Steve, Tony, and Sharon approached.

There was a round of greetings and then Fury, who'd been standing silently off to the side, opened the door into a stuffy conference room. Tony had the feeling that he was going to be put on trial... or court-martialed.

Everyone took a seat and Councilwoman Hawley took out a heavy binder and flipped it open.

Steve tried not to look nervous as he sat down across from everyone. He didn't even look at Gideon, focusing on Councilwoman Hawley over everyone else. She looked like she was going to be leading the discussions. She was prim and proper and Steve trusted her to give a fair verdict on his behaviour.

Which could still no doubt be brutal.

"...good morning, everyone. On the advice of Director Fury and SHIELD psychologists, we've decided that monitoring Captain Rogers' and his mate, especially considering both are currently decommissioned, is no longer a practical use of our resources. So, we'd like to discuss the stipulations necessary to remove the ankle monitors from Stark and Rogers... with, of course, an understanding of certain expectations."
Steve was sitting there with his hands lightly crossed, looking upstandingly respectful; Tony was shredding up a napkin, looking bored.

"Normally we wouldn't have to define said expectations so definitively but it's evident that Captain Rogers believes some forms of behaviour are appropriate when they are not."

Hawley looked up to meet his gaze. "You will never have any contact with the Winter Soldier ever again. You were with him for six hours, totally unmonitored and that is absolutely unacceptable. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," Steve replied, without blinking, his face totally unreadable. "I understand."

Malick cleared his throat loudly. "Considering they are bonded, I don't believe we can rely solely on Rogers's word not to--"

"You've made your views on this very clear, Gideon," said Hawley brusquely. "The Soldier is in custody and his location unknown to the captain, besides which he has the supervision of his other mate. So at this time, it is not a concern. With regards to your movements-- we are not reinstating your passports."

Tony let out a small noise of protest.

Hawley ignored him. "Exceptions will be made for Canada and the United Kingdom."

Tony saw Fury and Hill looking at them and he wondered if they had fought for the England exception, knowing Steve's friendship with Peggy.

"Any illegal or unauthorized movements over national lines will be grounds for incarceration."

"So... we can't go outside the States," said Tony.

"Correct."

"Except Canada and England."

"Correct. In addition, we would like a weekly, physical check-in with a SHIELD agent. Rogers, MacKenzie will be your probationary officer, and you will be expected to meet with him on a weekly basis, in person. He will also be calling you randomly at his discretion and you will be expected to provide your location to him and any other details of what you are doing. Lastly, we recently sent Dr. Brazinski to touch base with you. You are expected to, until further notice, have weekly psychological interventions. You may choose your own psychologist but you must meet with them each week for at least one hour, and give SHIELD access to any notes he or she believes necessary to share with us for national security purposes. ...do you have any questions?"

"Okay." Steve breathed. "Fine."

Hawley blinked and actually looked surprised for a moment, like she'd been expecting a fight or at least some protests. She straightened up in her chair. "We're prepared to review the situation in six months time at the very earliest, and even then we can not guarantee an increased amount of freedom. And if something happens which means we want to reinstate the ankle monitors, then we will do so immediately. Do you have therapy set up already?"

"I've chosen a psychologist. Doctor Lucy Jones," Steve said. "I'll be seeing her on Thursdays."

"Wonderful. So unless Mr. Stark has any queries...?" Hawley glanced sideways at Tony. "Then we
can remove the monitors."

Agent Carter lifted a pair of wire cutters with a grin and Hawley sighed. "I already said those weren't necessary."

"But its way cooler this way."

"...we will need you to sign documents stating that you understand and will adhere to these compromises," said Hawley, sliding a large folder over to Steve and Tony.

Tony flipped his open and pulled a pen out of his front pocket.

"Please read them carefully before sign--" (Tony was already scrawling his signature on them.) "--ing."

"Captain," said Agent Carter happily, kneeling by Steve with the wire cutters.

"...thanks for being so understanding with us," said Tony suddenly, looking up, unusually appreciative on Steve's behalf.

Hawley's face flickered with a suppressed smile. "Captain Rogers is an American treasure. We've had a lot of people lobbying on his behalf." Her eyes flicked over to Fury, whose face was unreadable.

"Personally, I don't believe we ought to be giving out special privileges..." muttered Malick as Agent Carter let Steve pull up his pant leg. Steve felt the weight drop and the monitor clunked to the floor.

Tony stuck out his leg, hitching up his pant leg and pointing his toe in a mocking pose, like a pin-up model.

"...how's Donner?" asked Tony conversationally, suddenly.

Malick didn't even blink an eye. "Who's Donner?"

"...uh, your mate?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

"You must be mistaken, Mr. Stark. I'm not bonded," said Malick pleasantly.

Tony's eyes narrowed and he paused, breathing through his mouth, trying to find Malick's scent. More dominant Alpha... and, yes, unbonded.

Malick had severed the bond.

Tony felt a violent chill run through him.

Steve froze. One minute he was smiling at Agent Carter and the next he was horrified. Because this was his fault. He had ruined Donner for Malick, whatever that meant... but he had, somehow.

But this now meant that Steve had nothing to lose. Gideon had already done the worst thing possible to Donner. So he stood up, right in front of Gideon, delighted at how much taller he was.

"Where is he?"

Gideon smiled like a shark. Steve wanted to slam his arm against his neck and throw him against the wall. He wanted to demand to know everything. But Gideon wasn't to give him anything.
"Steve--" Sharon put a hand on his arm.

Hawley was watching with her expression set.

"I swear to God, if you don't tell me," Steve whispered.

Then Gideon leaned in closer, still smiling. "What? What are you going to do?"

And Steve had no answer.

"...you see why I have some concerns about Rogers's stability," said Malick, still politely.

Tony stood up and put a hand on Steve's shoulder, unhappily noting that Steve was taller. "Steve." His voice was stern. "Sit down."

"The captain's stability will be addressed by the psychologist, Malick," said Hawley calmly.

"Steve," repeated Tony, tone softer. Steve was still standing and his muscles tight with what Tony had come to appreciate was Steve's fight posture. If he attacked Gideon, which is clearly what he wanted to do (Tony could feel Steve's anger in his gut), then they could kiss this compromise goodbye.

Tony wondered if he was going to have to hit Steve's pressure point. It was the last thing in the world he wanted to do; Steve would kill him later, it was be so embarrassing, but Tony had to get him under control. But everyone was watching, mildly, and if Steve didn't sit down and start signing documents, they were probably going to get their damned monitors back, plus even more stupid security measures.

Malick was clearly trying to repress his smile; he had hit them on purpose with the worst possible news and he seemed to know it. Tony could almost hear Malick's thoughts: Go ahead, Captain. Hit me.

"I don't think it's me you need to be concerned about," Steve breathed and the underlying threat was goddamn evident. There was another moment of a quiet awkwardness when no one was sure what was going to happen. Steve's hands flexed by his sides; hands that were designed to punch things.

Steve thought about his birthday. He thought about the map on the wall covered in a mass of red pins. He thought George yelling into the phone and slamming his first down onto the desk and exhaled slowly. He had the means to find Donner; he didn't have to do this like this.

Steve sat down and the tension in the room evaporated.

"Mr. Malick, I'll show you out," Sharon said, stepping forward.

Steve held out a hand for a pen. "What do I have to sign?" He clearly wanted to leave already.

Tony handed Steve his pen and began pointing to the lines he had to sign, being sure to brush their hands together. His heart was pounding in his chest. If Steve had attacked Malick he probably would have been locked up. But if Tony had actually hit that gland behind his ear, forced Steve down... it would have undermined everything Steve stood for.

Steve signed, still tense, expression still stormy.

Everyone was standing and shaking hands. When Steve had finished and slid his papers back over to Hawley, Tony rose with him, keeping a hand on his shoulder as Hawley reached over to shake his
hand, then Fury, then a guy from the Department of Defense... then Malick was sticking his hand out, and there was another veiled threat there: *Go ahead, Captain. Crush. Show them what you're capable of.*

Tony took a deep breath, reached out, and took Malick's hand in his own. He shook it and forced a smile, even though he felt sick.

At the conference, a week ago, Donner had said "no." And now Donner had gone the way of Astray. Had been "trickshotted," as the omegas at the conference called it.

"You keep your boy under control," breathed Malick softly at Tony.

"I wouldn't even if I could," replied Tony, lips barely moving.

The two of them let go of each other's hands, and Malick left the room, talking calmly with the other DoD rep.

Tony felt like the only thing keeping from having a legitimate heart attack was probably the arc reactor.

Steve was in mild shock. He held the pen in his hand for much longer than he needed to even after the last page was signed. He swallowed, suddenly dropping it like it had burned him when he realised.

He looked up when Nick pulled the papers over to himself to check everything had been signed correctly. "You're free to go," he told him, eye flicking up to catch Steve's gaze warningly. It had been a close moment.

Hawley had left by now.

"That guy gives me the creeps," Sharon whispered. Steve was oddly quiet still, his mind churning through different ways Gideon's body could end up in a ditch and it not be traced back to him.

Steve looked over and saw Tony beside him. He didn't have to say it for the other to know. *I want to kill him.* He would do it in a heart beat.

"Maybe you two should go home," Sharon piped up when neither of them said anything or moved.

Tony shook his head, almost imperceptibly, and took Steve's elbow. "You're right. Time to go home, Steve," he said firmly. "Thanks, Agent Carson."

"Carter," she corrected.

Tony half-led and half-dragged Steve out of the room. He didn't say a word as they took the elevator down to the parking garage where Happy was waiting; he only spoke once they were in the car and the doors were closed.

"Project 84. Steve. We gotta go to that office, track him down... Gideon must've given him to Bennett; they're gonna sell him off to one of those camps or worse... we gotta find him. He can't wait until July."

"It's my fault," were the first words out of Steve's mouth the minute they got into the car. "He's going through hell, or worse. And it's because of me. We should have tried to find out, we should have--"

Steve leaned over, curling into himself as hands fisted in his hair. He shook his head. He was
shaking. Happy looked concerned in the front seat but said nothing.

"I want to kill him," Steve whispered, so softly only Tony could barely hear. "I want to snap off his stupid neck and watch his face twist up when he realises he's underestimated me."

Steve didn't usually strike people as especially violent. But the war had burned violent reactions into his blood. It was in Steve's instinct to hit and punch things he didn't like, things that opposed him. And Malick pushed a lot of buttons.

Especially when he'd called Steve boy.

Tony rubbed his back soothingly. "It's not your fault Gideon Malick is a fucking asshole. Donner was a goner from the moment he was bonded. ...wow, try saying that five times fast. Happy, take us downtown. Steve... it's okay. We're going to go find him, right now."

He ignored Steve's soft, seething promises of violence. That was pretty normal for Steve. But Tony knew that killing Malick would be akin to assassinating the president and wouldn't accomplish a damned thing.

And he also knew that Steve's anger was coming from a place of horror. Because both of them were imagining where the hell Donner was, what had happened to him.

"We're gonna find him, Steve. We're going to go get him back, okay?" said Tony, still rubbing Steve's back. Steve had hunched into his seat and his hands were in his hair, a sure sign of a nuclear meltdown. "It's okay, we got this, we got everyone over at 84 to help us. We won't let anyone hurt him. ...Happy, take Olive St. and go north..."

"It's too late," Steve whispered, shaking his head. "It's too late. He'll have gone somewhere bad. This wasn't about getting rid of Donner. This was about punishing me. Gideon wants me to know that there's consequences for my actions. He couldn't take it out on me, so he took it out on his own mate. He's such a fucking coward. God. I wanna kick something."

When Steve was having bad days usually he went to town on dummies or punching bags. He wasn't good at just sitting still and dealing with it.

"He's dead already." Steve murmured as they pulled up outside the office. He looked up and gave Tony a grave look. "I can feel it in my bones. I just don't think we'll find him in one piece, Tony."

"...well we're gonna fucking try!" snapped Tony, aware that his own fear was starting to curdle inside of him.

Poor Donner, who looked just like Steve, who was so small and cowed. Who spoke in a soft, halting way, whose head was always ducked and shoulders always hunched. Donner's only crime had been to check on some other omegas during the walk-out. Poor, gentle Donner hadn't walked out himself. He'd only gone to speak with some others and said no to Gideon when called. And that one little word... that might have been his downfall.

"It was only last week, they can't... they can't just kill him... we can find him, Steve, we gotta, we gotta have George call up Gene Bennett and ask about him..." said Tony, talking too fast, panicking. He opened the car door before Happy had even stopped the car in front of the office building.

As much as Steve was freaking out, so was Tony. He felt responsible, too. Donner looked just like Steve and picturing Donner being handed off to Bennett was as bad as picturing Steve himself.

It was Yemen all over again.
Except that this time, Donner wasn’t Steve. Donner was a nobody. And it was up to them and to them alone to find him.
Recruiting Rhodey

Steve took Tony's hand and gripped tight as they went up in the elevator together to the offices of Project 84. He didn't think they'd ever felt so responsible, collectively, for something so truly out of their control. It wasn't their fault Donner looked like Steve, or that Malick was an asshole, but they had ultimately set in course the events that led to their bond being severed.

The office was a more serious atmosphere this time. When they got in everyone had their heads down and working. Steve swallowed nervously as Ian and Kerry looked up. He walked over to Kerry's desk. She could see on his face that something was wrong. "Two visits in two days? Is something up?"

Steve nodded, trying to keep his cool in front of all these people. "Is George around? We need to ask him something..."

A shadow passed over Kerry's face, a brief look of disapproval. "He's on the phone," she said, pointing toward one of the cubicles in the back. "...with Luke," she added, a note of disgust in her voice.

Tony whirled around and strode over toward where Kerry had indicated. Steve was already well-aware that Tony had zero qualms about interrupting other people.

Sitting in a desk chair, legs propped up on the desk and cradling a black office phone, George was chatting away pleasantly. "...Cynthia's still waiting to hear from Vermont, but at least she's already got Washington and Lee, and frankly I thought that they had better--"

Tony reached over and hit the disconnect button.

"Hey!" cried George, sitting up sharply.

"You need to call Gene Bennett," demanded Tony, without any introduction.

"What I need is to be able to talk to my Alpha about my kids without getting interrupted, thank you very much," sneered George.

"You don't even like Luke!"

"Well, we're still bonded and we have two kids so whether I like it or not, I can't just hang up when he calls!"

"Steve, tell him to call Bennett!" demanded Tony, wheeling around.

"We need to find someone," Steve said and the look on his face evidently told George a lot. The omega still looked annoyed but he calmed down considerably, taking in just how serious Steve was.

"Okay. Okay. Who am I calling him about?"

"We need to find an omega from the conference. He's called Donner; he was bonded to Gideon Malick. We have to find him, George. This is-- this could be really bad," he breathed, voice grave. A few heads were turning in the office, especially after Tony and George's shouting. George nodded.

"Alright, you know his real name?"
"No. But he really looks like me. They use to say he was the 'omega version' of Captain America; that might help," Steve said, really hoping they could get a lead. *Something.*

George nodded and began tapping in Gene's number.

Steve reached out for Tony's hand just as George was putting on his 'Alpha' voice.

"Hi, my name is Richard Emmett. A guy named Eric recommended you to me at the conference, yeah--" He paused to laugh. "I'm looking for something really specific and I was told you are the guy to go so I--" He pinched the bridge of his nose. "A little birdie told me that a certain omega who looks like a certain captain might be back on the market."

Tony leaned in and, with his free hand, put George's desk phone onto speaker.

"--booked for about the next week," a familiar voice on the other line was saying.

"Doing what, ruining conventions for us?" asked George, and he and Gene both laughed.

"No, no, he's just got a lot of fans eager to meet him. I can pen you in for, ah... Tuesday next week at seven or Saturday morning."

"Tuesday? ...no, no, I was hoping... you see, I'm unbonded and I was hoping we might hit it off," said George.

"Ohh. So you wanted a scenting. Gotcha. Well, I have two other people who are interested in making his acquaintance as well. Obviously he's not exactly a virgin, but still, Malick paid seven hundred grand for him, so I'm looking for about half of that, and I should tell you right now that Alderdice offered me four hundred. Plus, you have to understand, since he and Malick broke up, he's been... a bit promiscuous. Running around with a lot of Alphas. On the rebound, you might say."

George's brow furrowed but none of his upset showed through in his voice. He let out a long, low whistle. "Alderdice, that's... that's that school up east, isn't it? What the hell do they want with him? He ought to go to a home, not a school."

"Are you kidding? Think about all the omegas out there who are being corrupted by Steve Rogers, and how much they could benefit from getting to meet his double." There was something sinister in the way Gene said "meet." It was clear he meant something else. "Besides, like I said. He's been running around with a lot of other Alphas since Gideon severed their bond."

"...I see. I'm still interested, though. How about we arrange to meet Tuesday for a scenting and if I like him, I'll fork over five hundred?" offered George. "...as a donation," he added quickly. "For you to give to the school."

"Okay, fair enough," said Gene. "I'll put you down, Richard... where do you want to meet? If you're not interested in bonding, do you still think you might want to spent the night with him? Because I could arrange for you two to get a hotel room, if you wanted. You could reimburse me later for it."

It was clear the hotel was not what George would be "reimbursing" him for.

"Sure. If I get a fancy suite, some place nice I'll be happy to meet him there. I don't want an audience, you know. I want him to be...relaxed for it."

"Of course. Call me when you've made the arrangements. We're very excited to maybe be making a
match."

"Excellent. Talk to you soon."

George set the phone down and everyone let out a collective sigh of relief. "We did it. I'll set something up, but you need an Alpha to be there."

"We don't have to buy him, do we?" Steve said, excited that they weren't too late. "Can't we just turn up and walk out with him?"

"Sounds like there's more than a few people trying to get their hands on him," said Tony grimly.

"Sounds like people are already getting their hands on him," replied Ian, who had wandered over to listen in. "Until Bennett sells him for good, he's obviously renting him out."

"If you steal him away, you'll blow our cover," warned George. "You told us, Captain, that we had until the end of June to collect evidence to bring down all the camps... if we screw up now, some of them will slip through the cracks, and they'll be a lot more careful, going forward."

"Kerry is an unbonded Alpha... she can go get Donner," suggested Tony.

"Kerry is a woman," replied Angela, who had also wandered over. "He's expecting Richard Emmett. We need a male Alpha to go and he's got to be unbonded."

"...Rhodey," said Tony suddenly. "Rhodey's not bonded. We could do him, maybe?"

"Who's Rhodey?" asked Kerry.

"This is all assuming neither of the other interested Alphas takes him, or Alderdice," said Marcus.

"Or Sam could..." Steve mused. "But his neck might make things... complicated. Rhodey it is. We should call him straight away." Steve was already doing the speeches for him. So he guessed he had a favour to cash in.

"Thank you George, really. We were panicking," Steve shook the omega's hand; he squeezed back. "Let us know when you get him home safe."

Steve smiled faintly. It didn't meet his eyes. "We will."

"Just let us know when you have the hotel sorted," Kerry said. "And good luck."

Steve nodded. He looked Tony. "Maybe we should get going. Sorry we interrupted your work guys."

"You call him..." mumbled Tony discontentedly as they left the building. "He likes you more than me. I only ever cause him grief..." He was having trouble not spiraling into one of his little black holes of depression. All he could think of was poor Donner, who looked like Steve... it made Tony imagine Steve. Not Steve as he was now, a brick wall of muscle, but Steve has he had been. Steve would could have just as easily ended up being bought and sold, used and passed around like he was nothing more than a plaything.

"I'll call him when we get home. Come on," Steve curled an arm around Tony's shoulders as they walked out.

"What do we do? Have Rhodey buy him?" asked Tony, looking up at Steve. "Or do we like... put
a wire on him, try to bust Gene for whoring him out? I don't want to compromise Project 84 but we've gotta get Donner out of there, it's our fault that he-- it's my fault, I spent all weekend doing my damnedest to piss off Malick."

He reached up to rub his chest, a sure sign of stress. Vaguely, he thought about how weird it was that George, who had run off the moment his Alpha was incarcerated, gone and gotten himself an education, still spoke tenderly to Luke on phone, still shared a family with him.

"I think we just buy him. We can't risk sabotaging the project... but we can still put a wire on Rhodey. We just can't use it until my birthday. ...listen, it's not just your fault, Tony. This is all Malick's doing. It's not your fault the man had some weird obsession with me," Steve muttered. "Did you see the way he looked at me?"

Steve pulled out his phone to find out that Aria had sent him a load of photos from the shoot for him to look at that. Most were Steve looking over dramatic in nice looking clothes. The group photos were cute or funny and then there was a few more political ones. They'd painted a 'collar' onto his neck in the colors of the American flag and photographed him smearing his fingers through it and holding them up, his hands smudged with blues and reds and purple.

But Steve didn't really feel like looking through right now. Compared to the very real issues they were facing, the photo shoot seemed almost silly.

He just wanted to get Tony home, then call Rhodey. Then they'd fix this.

When they pulled up to the house, Tony walked wearily up to the door, waving his keycard to unlock it.

"...welcome home, sirs," intoned JARVIS.

"Hey, Jarv," said Tony. "Call Rhodes on behalf of Steve, please." He loosened his tie and began unbuttoning his shirt. Inside the house, Tony tended to shed off his formal attire like a lizard shedding its skin, dropping the clothing everywhere, something that was clearly a source of annoyance toward Pepper. "Also, our anniversary plans will need rescheduled. We're not allowed anywhere except Canada and England, apparently."

"My namesake was from England. Perhaps a getaway to England--" began JARVIS.

"Don't try to comfort me, JARVIS."

"My apologies, sir. Do let me know when you're finished with your wallowing."

"Shut up! What do you know about self-pity, anyway? You're just a bunch of lines of code."

"Code that is coded to identify human emotions," pointed out JARVIS. "Shall I call Colonel Rhodes now?"

"Yes. Do it," demanded Tony. He dropped onto the white leather couch in his boxers and motioned Steve over. "Let me see the photo shoot. You work your omega charm... Rhodey'll do it for you."

Tony didn't add that if Rhodey didn't, they were probably screwed. He didn't know many unbonded Alpha males. At his age, most were bonded. And since his mating to Steve, there were a lot more omegas and betas in his life than there ever had been.

Still, he was running through a mental Rolodex of people he could ask, just in case Rhodey said no. The problem was that, while Tony knew lots of people, there were few he trusted, and few he had confidence in. His list of friends was short and this was a delicate situation.
"Also shoot a message to Pepper and let her know I need half a mil for a thing..."

"May I inquire as to the thing?"

Tony winced. "Not thing. Person. I need to buy a-- motherfucker, I'm buying a person." He put his head in his hands. "Steve, get me the scotch..."

Steve actually didn't protest this time and fetched a bottle, but with two glasses. He poured more for himself, although he still wouldn't feel it anyway. He pushed his phone over with the photoshoot.

Rhodey took a moment to pick up. "Hello?"

"Hi, Rhodey. It's Steve. Tony's here too." Steve ran a hand over his face as he spoke, feeling far too somber. "We need to ask favour."

"Okay...something tells me I'm not going to like what this is about."

"You won't," Steve agreed and stared at his glass, half the scotch already gone. "We need you to pretend you want to buy an omega. A friend of ours is being passed around. You have to pretend you're happy with a scenting and buy him for us."

"Jesus Christ," Rhodey muttered. "...I don't know."

"We can't just go fetch him ourselves. We have a project we have to keep under wraps for now. We need a single Alpha we can trust to do this."

"You're asking me to buy someone. Isn't that illegal? Arranged bonding is definitely illegal."

"Please, Colonel. It's to save him," begged Steve. Rhodey sighed. "Dammit. Fine. When is this?"

"Next Tuesday I think it is. We'll book a hotel."

"Your name's Richard Emmett," supplied Tony, gratefully wrapping his hands around a glass of amber liquid. "Your broker is a guy named Gene Bennett and the omega you're getting is named Donner. Or at least, that's what I think his name is."

"Like the reindeer?"

"Yeah. Like the reindeer," said Tony. "And also you'll need to wear a wire."

"So... let me just be clear, here... you want me to go to a sleazy motel pretending my name is Richard Emmett, talk to some guy named Gene Bennett, then bring you guys back a guy named after a reindeer?"

"Yeah. But it probably won't be sleazy," said Tony. "It'll probably be some five-star Ritz. And you can't let on that you're uncool with any of it. Bite him, if you have to, just get him out of there."

"Whoa. Hold up. I'm not bonding--"

"He's already been bitten by a ton of people. They're whoring him out," said Tony. "You don't have to break the gland or anything, just pretend. Oh! And just so you know, he looks like Steve."

There was a long pause on the other line. "Who, Gene?"
"No. Donner."

"You fuckin' kidding me?"

"I wish I was," said Tony, throwing back his drink and gesturing for Steve to pour him more.

"He's the omega version of captain America," Steve muttered into glass, his gaze getting distant as he supposedly imagined doing away with Gideon all over again.

"How do you know him? You said he was a friend?"

"Not exactly," said Steve. He remembered how Donner had cringed away from him whenever Steve tried to talk to him. "He's Gideon Malick's old mate. We met Donner at the conference. Donner didn't walk out but he ignored Gideon in front of everyone and Gideon severed the bond and now he's been--"

"Okay. I get it. Jesus."

"If you get a moment alone let him know you're there to get him out. He'll probably be a lot more enthusiastic if he knows he's being rescued."

"This is insane, you guys..." Rhodey said, sounding more uncomfortable by the minute.

"I know," Steve breathed. "But we put him there. We have to do something to get him out. Please, Rhodey. We'll owe you one. A huge one."

"You didn't put him in there," said Rhodey, firmly. "I'll do it. Okay? Just send me the details."

"Will do," said Tony. "Thanks, man."

"...whatever, just... just be good for the king of Wakanda."

Tony had forgotten all about that.

The drama with Donner had made him, at least temporarily, forget that one of his rockets had bombed a hospital in Wakanda. Guilt washed over him. Not just about the civilian deaths, but also for forgetting so quickly.

"When'm I supposed to meet him again?"

"...tomorrow. Jesus Christ, Tony, tomorrow!"

"Okay, okay, I'll be sober and shit," grumbled Tony. "...can I bring Steve?"

"If you want to, I guess. He'll be there with the full entourage. I mean, he's a king. Make sure you bring your own guards, just in case. No suits."

"No suits. Got it," said Tony, imagining himself wearing cargo shorts and a Hawaiian shirt.

"Wear a suit. Not a mech suit," corrected Rhodey, who knew all too well what Tony was thinking.

"Fine, fine, fine. Thanks, man. Seriously, we owe you one."

Tony disconnected the call and had JARVIS book the hotel and forward the details to Rhodey and George. He looked over at Steve miserably. "I'm gonna go down to the shop for a while. I need to get drunk." He reached over and carded his hand through Steve's hair. "It'll be okay. After July, all
those camps are going to bite the dust. Let's just... focus on getting Donner and planning... planning this charity thing for our anniversary." He waved a hand around the room. "If I never see another fucking orchid again, I would die a happy man." He sighed. At least he knew that the proceeds from the flower sales would go toward helping the omegas they would liberate.

"Just please make it into bed by three Tony," Steve asked with a sigh, knowing it probably wouldn't happen. The moment Wakanda had come up, he'd felt Tony's guilt in his gut. He stood and then leaned down to kiss Tony's cheek. Hopefully he'd finish the newest version of the suit soon; at least that would make him feel better.

Steve spent the evening destroying a series of punching bags. He got through six in total and his knuckles got sore after he became too lazy to wrap them properly between each bag. But it didn't matter; the pinkness would be gone by the morning. Just as drinking scotch couldn't get him drunk, physical exercise had only a fleeting effect on him, and he could never quite work hard enough to entirely forget the things that plagued him.

He didn't get to bed until one himself and he practically collapsed into it, having physically exhausted himself. Hopefully he wouldn't dream. Steve fell asleep almost instantly, though not before murmuring a quick prayer on Donner's behalf. All he could think about was getting Donner home safe... wherever the hell home would end up being for him.
That's right, it's the Black Panther cameo you were looking for. Remember, this is set in 2011! - T

Tony made his way down to the shop. He had two goals in mind: one was to build a wire for Rhodey, and the other was continue his quest for modular, non-gantry armor. The problem was a tricky one, because it wasn't good enough for it to just be modular, or just be non-gantry, no... it needed to come to him and attach to him, and that was the hard part. If it weren't for the fact that the suit was supposed to assemble around him, then he might have already figured out the whole self-assembly part.

As it stood now, he was getting better at getting the armor to come to him, at least.

It required a fuckton of calibrations and placing magnets and wires all over his body, to the point that he thought he looks vaguely like one of those motion-capture guys in front of a green screen, but it was a start.

"Okay. Test number... I dunno... Jarv, what are we on with having this shit slam into me?"

"Two hundred and nine, sir."

"Two hundred and ninth's the charm," said Tony confidently. "Power up... I'm ready when you are."

Across the room, several pieces of armor shot toward him. He ducked, nearly getting decapitated by the helmet; the front torso plate missed its mark entirely and slammed into the wall beside him.

One of the bracers hit his arm; there was a loud, mechanical click and suddenly Tony's arm was sheathed in a plate of red metal. Tony looked down, eyes wide.

"Oh shit, it worked!"

There was a snap as the gauntlet snapped onto the wrist, covering his hand.

A minor problem: the hand was the wrong one. His thumb was instantly crushed as the armor did what it was supposed to do: self-assembly around him.

Tony let out a wheezing gasp of pain and managed to gag "Abort! Disarm! Deactivate!"

The armor fell to the ground; Tony dropped to his knees, clutching his hand. The thumb was definitely broken and possibly two of the fingers. He allowed himself a few moments of heavy breathing before he got up, grabbed a pair of keys off of the pegboard, and got into the Audi to drive himself to the nearest Urgent Care clinic.

He came home at six AM, a splint on his thumb and two fingers. He tip-toed up the stairs from the shop, although he knew this was ridiculous since Steve a) had super-hearing, b) was probably already up and aware Tony hadn't come to bed, c) would find out about the broken fingers soon.
Fortunately Tony was mostly ambidextrous and it had been a clean, simple fracture. Plus, this gave him an excuse not to shake hands for at least two or three months, which was nice.

Steve was in his running gear and had been about to leave when Tony stepped into the bedroom. He sighed at the sight and then looked down with a frown, taking Tony's wrist and lifting his hand up for inspection. "You should have woken me up," he said, as it was blatantly obvious that Tony had gone to a doctor. He certainly hadn't set his fingers like that by himself. Steve could have driven him somewhere, if nothing more.

He'd been grumpy when he'd woken to an empty bed but he'd just assumed that Tony was still working, not on a hospital trip. Steve almost felt bad for being annoyed now.

Tony looked tired. No, Steve couldn't be mad at him now. He looked at him fondly. "Come on, let's get you to bed. You can still catch a good few hours' sleep, Tony." The meeting with the Wakandan royal family was at ten, but it was a good forty-minute drive away. "Do I want to know how you broke your hand?"

"My hand is fine," said Tony quickly. "No lasting damage. Just a minor little break." (A partial lie; the break on his thumb was a clean one but it was by no means "minor.") "I think I had a breakthrough with the Mark VII. You know, modular, non-gantry, flight-capable armor? Yeah. I got a whole arm to come to me and self-assemble. It, uh... it had a very small, very minor, itty-bitty hiccup. But I'm sure I can correct that. I mean, it's really promising."

"Okay. I'm glad your suit is working better but you really do need to work on your health and safety, Tony," Steve with a fond sigh. If Tony was happy, then he was happy, but he didn't like the thought of a dozen pieces of metal all flying at Tony from ten different directions which no real protection in place. The helmet to the back of the head was a clear example of said fact.

Tony rubbed his eyes. Sunrises were Tony's dawns; he wanted to grab a cup of coffee and fall into bed and sleep, heavy and dreamless, for a couple of hours. "You coming to meet the Wakandan guy?" he asked. "It's a purely diplomatic meeting. I'll express sympathy, he'll reassure me it's okay, y'know, we'll talk about how war sucks... that sort of thing." Tony looked down, rubbing his arm with his bandaged hand, suddenly remembering the test missiles. The Ambassador line was the immediate precursor to the Freedom line, which was Tony's final commercially available arsenal. The Ambassador IV was, in fact, the inspiration for the Jericho. Tony knew what it was capable of. He hoped he wouldn't have to look at pictures of the unfortunate refugee camps that were hit.

"Yes. Of course, I'll come with you but I don't think I'll have anything to really contribute." Steve would look sympathetic and support Tony. That was all he really could do.

"...I also worked on getting Rhodey a good bodycam. One word, Steve: contact lens. Wait, no, two words. Anyways, my idea is to put a chip on a contact lens and have it transmit whatever he sees to us in real time. It'll be like we're there!"

Steve was shooing him toward the bed; Tony was stumbling slightly with exhaustion, but his mind was spinning at a hundred miles an hour.

"Okay. Okay...the contact lenses sound good. Let's get you in bed, come on."

After more fussing Steve had Tony tucked up into bed. "I'm going to go out for a run, when I get back I'll wake you up and we'll get ready, unless...." Steve remembered Tony binge drinking because of the damage done in Wakanda by Stark weaponry and hesitated. "If I stay will it help you

enough anyway.
sleep? Because then I'll stay."

Tony felt a smile tug at his lips. There it was. That usual omega desperation to please, to pamper.

"No, Steve. I'm fine. Thanks for walking me up," said Tony, who had let Steve literally tuck him in. Steve was still fussing around with the pillows. "Go for your run. Just wake me up an hour before it's time to leave, so I can grab a shower and clean up my face, okay?"

He grabbed Steve's hand and kissed it. He wondered how aware Steve was of his instinctual drive to nurture. He wondered if Steve read Dr. Frond's books, if he would start noticing it and fight against it. Tony liked being pampered. He didn't want Steve to stop. But he also didn't want Steve to turn into some mindless zombie like DeSoto. He liked Steve being a person, with agency, even though that person woke up obnoxiously early every morning and did yoga and shit.

"Go," repeated Tony. He snuggled down into the pillows and closed his eyes. His hand was still throbbing uncomfortably; he was allergic to most pain-killers and hadn't treated the pain with much more than Tylenol. But now that the bone was set, it wasn't so bad. Certainly not bad enough not to fall asleep; he passed out within minutes, exhausted from being up all night and having pieces of his suit fly at him.

Steve's run was much like the others. He ran along the beach and back again and would usually run until he felt satisfied. It would take hours and hours to tire him like this. One other male runner along the beach stopped him at one point for a selfie but that was all and Steve was left relatively undisturbed. It was peaceful.

Once he was home he tried out some of the yoga poses he'd learned before with Aria, seeing how far he could stretch on one of the gym mats. He let JARVIS play him Ludivico Einaudi. The music was serene and it washed over him with a sense of calm. He wasn't sure what the meeting with the Wakandan king would be like later, but it sounded like it was more a formality than anything else.

At eight, Steve woke Tony with an hour to get ready and another for travel time. He leaned down to kiss his forehead, and smiled when Tony made it clear he was not impressed. "If you get up now you can shower with me," he told him. "Otherwise you'll shower on your own."

"Fine," grumbled Tony. He rolled out of bed to flop onto the floor dramatically. This time, however, it was followed with a round of high-pitched swearing; he'd forgotten about the broken fingers.

He sat up to clutch his hand, eyes watering against the stabs of agony traveling up his arm. "Fuck... oh, fuck... I'm fine, don't..." Steve's face was shining with concern and he was at Tony's side, clearly bent on helping him. Tony got up unsteadily on his own. "...I'm fine... shit... well, that was a wake-up call... can you help me with shaving and stuff?" he asked plaintively, still clinging to his right hand. "...by 'and stuff,' I mean jacking off, obviously... I'm kidding, I use my left hand for that... still, you can help." He forced a cheeky grin. He could tell Steve wasn't fooled.

"Jesus Tony. You need to be more careful," Steve huffed. Only Tony would forget that he had goddamn broken fingers. He was nearly crying and he still wouldn't let Steve help him up. Steve sighed. "I'll just go get you some painkillers." He went to the bathroom and turned the shower on to get hot before he moved to grab the pills. He got two out for Tony and pulled out his good hand before dropping the pills into them. "Those are for you."

"C'mon... let's get cleaned up... pick me out a suit and some shades, will you?...ow... fuck... c'mon, let's get to it." Tony gave Steve's ass an encouraging pat, then added, "if you want to," because he didn't want to sound like he was bossing Steve around. Even though he kind of was, and he knew
"Now let's get you in the shower..." Steve ushered Tony into the bathroom and then began stripping off himself. He felt bad... he always left his running gear in the bathroom and by the next day it was washed and back in his wardrobe. And if it wasn't, it was the day after that.

He let Tony tug his shirt over his head and stepped out of his pants, adjusting the shower to his liking.

"What will the meeting actually be like?" he asked, genuinely curious, as he finally got himself and Tony into the shower. "I just don't know what to expect."

"Oh, it's easy," said Tony, who was holding his injured hand out of the shower to keep the bandages from getting wet. There were, by Steve's estimation, a billion jets in Tony's shower, and he was getting water all over the floor by having the glass door open.

Tony seemed unconcerned with that, just as he seemed unconcerned with meeting African royalty. He'd met with lots of diplomats in his days. "It's just a light little brunch. I'll express my sympathy, give condolences... he'll probably fill me in on what's up with their refugee crisis... maybe we'll exchange some numbers, have our people talk... it's not any different than your meetings with Irshad at the UN, really. Except I guess that we're, y'know, meeting a king. But the Wakandan ambassador to the U.S. will brief us in the car and let us know if we have to kiss his ring or anything weird like that... no, wait, that's the Pope that you have to kiss his ring. Well, whatever, you know what I mean. ...you know I'm lucky to have you?" said Tony suddenly, wrapping his arms around Steve's waist and lying his head on Steve's back. "...lots of people never meet their scent-mates. I'm glad I met you. Glad we bonded. Even though it wasn't exactly well planned-out." He kissed Steve's skin; it was warm. Always warmer than normal.

Steve smiled as Tony curled his arms around him and leaned back into the touch. He grabbed the shampoo and squeezed some into his hair. Mango flavour this time. "As long as I don't have to do anything serious, then I'll manage," he hummed, lathering up the shampoo in his hair before he let the water wash it out. Running always left him sweaty, even if he didn't get tired.

"And I'm lucky too. I didn't even realise that's what you were... I just remember not wanting to leave. Even when you were pissed at me and you were dying, I didn't want to leave your side." Steve remembered being drawn to him. He'd blamed it on Tony's charm and charisma at the time, but he guessed it had been more than that.

"The prince'll be there too," added Tony. "Wakanda's royal family has this totally baller guard, the Dora... fuck, I can never say it right... Dora Milaje. Hot omega women. Isn't that cool? Their bodyguards are all omegas, Steve. Big tough omegas. So maybe you guys can talk about omega stuff. Their country's very progressive, I guess."

"...That is really cool," Steve said, surprised at the fact. He knew that omegas were sometimes given guard jobs and the like because they were supposedly less hot-headed than Alphas, but those were usually for private security firms and shopping malls, not actual soldier positions. He'd also heard of some form of beserker rage that was apparently unique to omegas, but that was only mentioned in old myths and stories. There was no real mention of it now. "So you've met them before, the royal family?"

"Not in person," said Tony. "I think we've been at some of the same UN deals maybe, like, twice? The king seems like a nice guy. I don't know a thing about the prince. He's a younger guy, your age, I guess. I mean... not ninety, like, late twenties," sputtered Tony. He began laughing. After a moment, he shook himself out. "So the deal is, supposedly, that the Wakandan bodyguard is all
omegas because the king is supposed to choose a mate from them. That way, his queen can protect
him, get it? The queen died a few years ago, before you were unfrozen, and it was like Princess Di
levels of mourning... oh. That was also before you were unfrozen. Never mind."

Tony lathered himself up with soap while he talked, doing it all awkwardly with his left hand.
"Anyway, he didn't take a new mate. The prince is still single. Don't know if he's an Alpha or a
beta, but he's single. Guess he hasn't found the right one yet. The only reason I know I've ever been
in the same room as the king is because of the bodyguards. They're all fucking gorgeous, in a scary
Amazonian sort of way. You've never seen omegas like this, Steve. You'll love them. Oh! And
they all wear like, these collars with panthers on them, I think the panther is like the symbol of
Wakanda, like how we have the eagle, and the same company that made their made ours, too. Neat,
huh? So you guys'll have a lot to talk about.

Tony was doing that thing where he poured out a lot of information all at once and Steve struggled to
keep up. He did manage to keep up, mostly. He was honestly more interested in the concept of an
entire omega guard than in whether the prince was hitched up or not. He didn't really get the whole
mating idea. He just found the idea of them all being fully trained and capable fantastic. "Very neat,"
he hummed.

Tony ducked as Steve tried to wash his hair. Tony loathed overly-sweet body wash and Steve loved
the fruity stuff.

"Shave," commanded Tony, pointing to his jaw. "Seriously, I'm starting to look like Wolverine
here... can you just tidy this up? I don't want to look like a schlub in front of the king of a country."

"Fine. Okay. Okay... just let me finish up." Steve washed all the suds off of himself and then stepped
out of the shower and headed over to the sink so Steve could shave Tony properly. Being good at art
meant he had a decent idea of how to sculpt Tony's goatee, which (he felt) was unnecessarily
complicated. He left sharp edges and Tony looked good as new. Steve kissed his forehead. "There.
Wonderful. You look like you got plenty more than two hours sleep," he said, trying to be
encouraging. "You dry up and I'll grab some clothes for both of us, okay?"

Tony had hopped up on the counter and closed his eyes, letting Steve shave him. It was a wonderful
sensation. He double-checked Steve's work in the mirror; his goatee looked perfectly straight and
symmetrical. He smiled approvingly and wiped off the extra shaving cream with a hand towel.
"...say what you will about the forties, Steve, but Gillette really upped its game during my century,"
he said as Steve went off to pick out Tony's outfit.

He followed, toweling his hair off. He felt thoroughly refreshed from his morning nap. Steve
seemed to be doing better, too. The news about Donner had put a damper over the house, a little
stormcloud of worry... but knowing that in a few short days they would take care of it, that a plan
had been put into motion, was encouraging.

Tony let Steve help him get dressed and tie his tie. His right hand was clumsy and delicate.

Downstairs, Tony's full entourage was waiting, all six bodyguards, plus Pepper and Aria.
"...on time? This must be the end of days," said Pepper, checking her watch.

"You can blame Steve. He's the one who got me prepped," said Tony.

"That explains why your socks match."

"Go Steve," Aria chimed, handing Steve a chai latte. Steve was dressed in his usual navy blue suit
and white shirt underneath. He'd decided to do the matching waistcoat this time, not afraid of dressing like his stereotype. He didn't really have the energy for that right now.

They all piled into the two cars they had waiting for them. Aria handed Steve a tablet in his free hand. "The billboards are almost ready to go up," she told him excitedly. "The photoshoot has had great ratings. They're releasing the new range next month officially and you're its main face. They're paying you a lot. I'll direct it all to the 84 fund."

Steve nodded. "Good. Thank you Aria."

Tony leaned to look over Steve's shoulder.

On Aria's tablet was a picture of Steve, his shirt undone, his fingers dragging dramatically through a painted-on collar. Next to it was a single word: FIERCE.

Steve swiped. Another picture, Steve standing there, a smug smile on his face, his ruined collar on his neck, next to another word: LIBERATED.

Tony suppressed an internal groan. In a weird way, he hated these pictures. Steve's chest was his and he disliked the idea of Steve's image being plastered all over town. Also, it was more of the "strong, independent" omega message... the one that didn't leave much room for Tony.

He tried to instead engage Pepper with a conversation about Wakandan customs. Pepper showed unbridled enthusiasm for Tony's apparently taking an interest in actually learning something cultural and talked their ear off the entire drive north.

The meeting was taking place at a restaurant called Providence in Hollywood. The traffic was awful, and with good reason; an entire block was shut down by police because of the king.

They parked outside the restaurant and when they got out, they got their first glimpse of the king's personal bodyguard. Beside from the police in their uniforms and the security details in their suits and sunglasses, the Dora Milaje stood out like sore thumbs. There were two outside the restaurant; tall, muscular, and dark-skinned, both were wearing light shirts and loose pants, both patterned and in bright colors, like they were planning on attending a music festival later. They had heavy black-and-gold collars on that fit loosely, more like necklaces, and heavy gold earrings. One had her hair shaved on one side; the other had hers in cornrows. Both of their gazes fixed on Tony and Steve and the spattering of guards behind them as they walked up to the restaurant.

Tony elbowed Steve a little. Both women were omegas, but both of them gave off a Nastasha-esque vibe of extreme deadliness. One of them, he noted when they passed, had a little henna tattoo of a crouched panther just beneath her left eye.

Inside there were more of them, milling around like lionesses waiting for a hunt. Even though they were omegas, they radiated a sort of ruthless, efficient danger... there was no doubt, none at all, that every single one of them was a trained killer.

Steve, thought Tony, looked impressed.

Particularly when the fucking king greeted him first.

"Ah! Captain Rogers, Mr. Stark... I was beginning to think you would not show up!" His English was accented, but impeccable.

The word "king" brought to mind, at least for Tony, a man in furs and codpieces and a big gold crown. The Wakandan king was a regular man. He was wearing a regular suit. He was sitting at a
table with another, younger man, but rose when they entered. The rest of the restaurant was empty except for all the security all over the place. His hair was just beginning to grey but he still had a spring in his step, the vitality of youth. He shook Steve's hand before turning to Tony, who was slightly irked at his omega being greeted before him.

There was a split second of sizing each other, a typical thing for Alphas. The Wakandan king was more dominant than Tony but not by a great amount; he wasn't overly dominant, not threateningly so. Tony stuck out a hand, then remembered his hand was bandaged, but T'Chaka had already taken it with surprising delicacy.

"Please, sit, sit... ah, this is my son, T'Challa, the crown prince," said T'Chaka, gesturing to the silent, sullen figure still seated at the table. T'Challa looked up at the sound of his name, his face a mask. He was slightly lighter-skinned than his father, clean-shaven, wearing a European-cut suit; Tony guessed he was about Steve's age, in his twenties, not yet thirty. Tony couldn't tell if he spoke any English because he didn't seem especially involved in their conversation. He made no move to stand up and greet them like his father had; Tony took a hint.

"A pleasure," said Tony, nodding to him in lieu of a handshake. He moved to sit, automatically pulling out a chair for Steve. He could feel the eyes of the Dora Milaje boring into him; they seemed hyper-aware, like at any moment someone might go crazy and just start to stab the king over and over. Tony found their attentiveness unsettling but both of the Wakandans seemed not to mind. Tony couldn't help but notice every one of the Dora Milaje were unbonded omegas, and happened to be rather desirable ones.

The Dora Milaje were absolutely frickin' awesome, in Steve's opinion.

It was hard not to be excited by their presence. They practically radiated the fierce, stubborn attitude that Steve treasured, and he couldn't help but be thrilled. Whilst he was sure this sort of thing, or something similar to it, must have existed in Wakanda in the forties...in America, this would have been unimaginable. And it still kinda was. Omegas weren't typically allowed into the army, and even if they were allowed in as doctors or cooks they certainly weren't allowed near the front lines. But these omega women looked terrific and deadly and strong. Steve could see the soldier in their stances and he liked to think they could see it in his too. He even met one woman's gaze and he was pretty sure she smiled at him. It was hard for Steve not to grin back.

He had a sudden urge to spar. Steve would have to arrange it with Natasha sometime. She was of the only people who could handle his strength. He bet these women could, too. These omega women. Golly, the future was great.

When T'Chaka actually spoke to him it dragged Steve out of his daze. He shook the king's hand warmly. "Sorry. The traffic was awful. It's a pleasure to meet you," Steve said, his usual polite self. T'Chaka had a warmness in his eyes. Steve instantly liked him.

As soon as they sat down, Steve noticed it. His son, T'Challa, was extremely dominant. And yet he seemed more withdrawn, not shy but... bored perhaps? Steve didn't even usually notice dominance. He wasn't on his mind like it was for an Alpha. But it was hard to not notice it and yet... nothing else about T'Challa seemed especially dominant. He wasn't like that man from the Conference (Steve could not even remember his name), who'd had an incredibly loud and obnoxious voice. Steve hadn't liked him. No, T'Challa's dominance was a quiet sort of thing. A panther coiled, waiting, and ready to pounce.

T'Chaka moved back around to take the seat next to his son, his hands clasped on the table. "Of course, we both know why we're here... but we still appreciate your co-operation Mr Stark and that
you found time to meet with us so quickly." Pleasantries, of course. Steve didn't think anyone could turn down an invite from royalty.

The way T'Challa looked at them made Steve think he was going to come out with a snappy remark any moment. He had a feeling that the prince wasn't feeling as friendly as his father.

"No problem at all," said Tony quickly. "It's a highness to meet with you, your honor."

T'Chaka laughed but T'Challa just scowled.

Tony had expected the conversation to delve right into politics but it didn't. In fact, it orbited madly around the subject without ever lighting. They chatted about all sorts of trivial bullshit all the way through the main course, with Steve wolfing down three full meals as politely as one could.

It wasn't until they were ordering coffee afterwards that T'Chaka broached the subject.

"So," he said, and just like that, the tone shifted.

"Fa," said Tony without missing a beat.

"Excuse me?" asked T'Chaka.

"The note that follows soh," explained Tony.

T'Challa let out an irritated huff, the closest thing to a word he had uttered the entire meal. Tony's gaze flickered over to him. So he did understand English.

T'Chaka was nonplussed by Tony's bizarre, distracted side comments. "It is very unfortunate, the recent events in my country," he plowed on.

Tony sobered up quickly at that. "Yes. Very tragic," he agreed. "You have my greatest sympathy, your highness." (Tony clearly had no idea what to call him even though Pepper had already told him. Twice.)

"It is appreciated," said T'Chaka. "I wished to see you, in person, to tell you that I do not hold you accountable... I know that your weapons were never sold to our troubled neighbors, and that you have, in recent years, stopped their development and production."

"Thank you for your understanding," said Tony. He looked a lot more serious than Steve had perhaps ever seen him. "The specter of those weapons will probably haunt me for the rest of my life... that Ambassador IV undid in an instant all the good you've done for years." (The refugee camp was for Tutsi refugees from Rwanda though it also had a number of Dinka from Sudan; Aria had tried to fill Steve in on current events but the problems of northeast Africa had proved too hard for her to easily explain and in the end she'd just sent him a few Wikipedia links.)

T'Chaka nodded quietly, more in understanding than agreement. "To be sure, this is a tragedy that affects us all. I hope you can abide a request for me, on behalf of my country."

"Anything," said Tony automatically, a little quickly, the weight of guilt lying heavy in his stomach.

"Do not become involved."

Tony paused, feeling like he'd misunderstood. "Excuse me?" he prompted when T'Chaka didn't elaborate.

"We request that you do not become involved. I understand and appreciate your desire to eradicate
those who would misuse your missiles, Mr. Stark. But we do not want Iron Man to come to our
country. Ours is a peaceful country and we want no escalation of the violence. Already, we have
suffered enough. We feel confident in our ability to manage our own affairs."

T'Challa finally spoke, the first time he had the entire lunch. "We would consider it a grievous insult
to have our borders invaded," he said, and T'Chaka sat beside him, hands folded, and didn't
contradict him.

"...you don't want Iron Man?" repeated Tony.

"We want to able to mourn our dead, and avenge them, on our own terms," said T'Chaka calmly. "I
find your desires sympathetic and understandable. But we do not have any need for Iron Man, or
Captain America. Wakanda has her own defenders."

Tony wondered if he meant the Dora Milaje. "...okay," he said slowly, finally. "I won't intervene.
You have my word. ...but if you change your mind, you know, I really don't mind coming in and--"

T'Chaka waved a hand. "No. Any Stark missiles that cross into our lands will be taken care of by
Wakanda herself, and any who use them on my people will feel the wrath of Wakandan royalty. We
do not need any Western intervention and, indeed, prefer to be left alone. We value very much our
autonomy. Consider yourself absolved, Mr. Stark. Your missiles are not yours in my land. They are
only missiles and I will personally ensure those that use them are held responsible."

"...okay," said Tony, who hated the idea of being banned from cleaning up his own missiles.
Wakanda was known for being infuriatingly closed off from other countries; it was underdeveloped
but prosperous compared to its neighbors. It was a quiet little country. The Wakandans had a strong
sense of African heritage that they didn't want white-washed by getting too involved in western
affairs. They had adamantly refused to be involved in any wars, providing refuge to those displaced
by their own civil wars without ever having any conflicts of their own. They also refused to accept
aid from western countries.

This had led to a minor scandal back in the early eighties, when Howard Stark had tried to start up a
charity to give every child in Wakanda a StarkTech version of a Palm Pilot, which was, at the time,
not yet released on the market and considered absolutely cutting-edge, technologically speaking.
(Howard didn't believe in traditional aid but felt that education was the key to success.) Wakanda
had refused to accept his offer; in a fit of irate offense, he had flown a plane over their country and
dropped the technology himself by the crateful, which had led to a bout of furious UN meetings.
(Wakanda was very weird about having their airspace invaded, for some reason.) Howard had
missed Tony's twelfth birthday over the whole debacle.

"Thank you. Your cooperation is very much appreciated," said T'Chaka, who obviously sensed
Tony's discomfort. He seemed to genuinely understand the gravity of the request and his tone was
sincere.

"...Steve is fond of your guard," said Tony, a bit grumpily, trying to change the subject.

"Yes, they are magnificent, aren't they? The jewel of our military strength... the elite," said T'Chaka,
a pleased looked on his face. "A pity my wife has passed. She was a quick wit... you would have
liked her very much, Captain. She was among the Dora Milaje's best warriors... one of the greatest
our country has ever known." He had a distant look of fondness.

"My condolences about your mate," said Tony.

Steve was confused when he realised that T'Chaka called his mate his 'wife' too. Usually, marriage
was a beta thing. They didn't have anything like mating and it helped to solidify a relationship. Like mating it was a sign of commitment. So Steve was surprised when T'Chaka mentioned they were both married and mated. Maybe it was because they were royalty, or maybe in Wakanda they viewed marriage differently. Steve didn't know, but he found himself curious.

"I take comfort in knowing that she has gone to a better place, and that I can see her face every day shining out from my son's," said T'Chaka gravely. T'Challa slouched a little, clearly disliking being compared to his mother. "My son does not understand yet the sanctity of a bond between Alpha and omega," he said, perhaps a little chiding. T'Challa scowled.

"Well, it took me forty years to figure it out," said Tony generously. "Don't want to rush a thing like bonding."

"Ah! I had nearly forgotten! It is eleven months late, but I believe this is the custom in your country?" One of Dora Milaje stepped forward and placed an enormous orchid on the table. Tony resisted a groan.

"It's... lovely. Thank you," said Tony through gritted teeth.

"This is a Wakandan variety you will not find anywhere else," said T'Chaka. "We call it Panther's Eye. You see, the petals are black, but each have two yellow spots, here... like a panther's." Tony knew he should be impressed by seeing an orchid with black petals but he was so sick of his house being filled with orchids in every color that he was sort of over them. He feigned interest.

"Yeah, I see it. That's very generous. Thank you. We love it, don't we, Steve?"

The orchid was truly beautiful and if they hadn't received so many already Steve probably would have been more enamoured by it. But he still appreciated the gesture. They probably shouldn't auction this one though... it was too significant a gift, and too beautiful. And it was too soon to the auction now; to sell it would be in bad taste.

"It's beautiful," Steve breathed, evidently meaning it. The artistic side of him desperately wanted to paint it or immortalise it in some way.

T'Chaka beamed at the approval. "In Wakanda we believe that the stronger the omega, the stronger the bond. We appreciate the kind of example you set, Captain."

T'Challa's facial expression expressed zero appreciation. When he looked at Steve his face was impossible to read and yet Steve still felt...oddly judged. He'd certainly received a lot of odd looks during the meal itself (but Steve had been starving). He'd not been involved in the conversation much either. Steve got that this was very serious for Tony. But he just couldn't stop thinking about Donner and what was happening to him, how much pain he was going through...had gone through already. There was even a point when he must have been frowning because T'Chaka stopped mid-sentence to check he was alright.

Steve nodded at the kind sentiment with a small smile. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

Tony reached under the table and set a hand on Steve's thigh. He glanced over proudly. Steve was a strong omega and Tony felt a tug of pride at T'Chaka's subtle compliment.

Funnily, Tony appreciate T'Challa's reticence. When he was T'Challa's age he had had the same sort of attitude about bonding. It felt like such a terrifyingly huge commitment, to be so completely enmeshed with another person. If Tony had never found Steve then, undoubtedly, he would have maintained that attitude for the rest of his life.
Having set politics aside, the rest of the lunch was a polite affair, with Tony and T’Chaka and Steve making idle chit-chat.

At the end of it, they all got up and shook hands. The Dora Milaje stepped a little closer to T’Chaka, like a pride of lionesses, ever-vigilant in their protection of the king.

Tony waited until they were back in the car to begin complaining; Steve was holding on to the orchid, clearly more fascinated with it than Tony.

"He doesn’t want Iron Man!" exploded Tony the second they were in the car. The last time Steve had heard Tony use that sort of tone, it was it exclaim that someone didn’t like cheesecake. Tony clearly thought the king was insane for not wanting Iron Man. "It's my missile, I ought to be able to go--"

"Tony, who would you even be shooting at if you went over there?" asked Pepper patiently.

"The... the insurgents, that's who! The... people who fired the missile!" said Tony, who seemed a bit taken back by her question. "You know... the bad guys."

Pepper pinched the bridge of her nose in exasperation and Aria shook her head a little.

They let Tony gripe the whole way home, where his mood shifted a little as he began talking about the fight he was allowed to fight. The one for Donner.

"So my idea is for Rhodey to wear contact lens with a little transmitter and basically send us a live-feed of whatever he's seeing," said Tony.

"Everything's always got to be complicated with you, doesn't it?" said Pepper fondly. "...what are you going to do with him once he's out?"

Tony shrugged expansively. "Dunno. Give him to 84, or Status Alliance, or something. They can probably help him out. Maybe he can get a job as an actor who plays Steve in movies... I mean, the guy's a dead ringer for him."

Pepper hummed; neither she nor Aria had ever seen Donner but both Tony and Steve had explained to her Donner's appearance, how everyone thought it was "cute" that he was an omega Captain America. Of course, now that Steve's real status was known, Donner was only a pale substitute. No doubt the Alphas interested in him were ones with a Captain America fetish, ones who enjoyed the sensation of bullying an "uppity" omega. The tragedy was that Donner was anything but uppity. He was a gentle, compliant omega, one who'd been thoroughly indoctrinated to think his role was to be submissive and subservient. Tony didn't know the guy's history but he knew that Donner had been purchased at an auction at seventeen or eighteen by Malick, and he guessed that Donner was like George, that he had gone to an omega school where he was taught good housekeeping and that he had been bonded without any question as to whether or not it was normal. Unlike George, Donner didn't seem like the type who would glorify in being let go by his Alpha.

But they wouldn't know until they got him back.

Tony squeezed Steve's hand comfortingly, knowing that Steve was obsessing over Donner's fate. "Hey. It's only a couple more days until Rhodey'll bring him. He'll be okay, Steve. We already booked the meeting with Gene and a hotel room and everything. Don't worry. ...you gonna draw this?" He touched the orchid's dark petals.

Now that it was a month away from their bonding anniversary, there had been some discussion about which orchids to auction and which to keep. Tony had already picked out Pepper's orchid and
Rhodey's orchid and a random white one he liked that reminded him of his father's and Jarvis's. He had been waffling on whether or not to keep the one Banksy had given them on the show. (He wouldn't admit it, but he still had a bit of his childhood crush on Banksy.)

"It is beautiful," Steve said, one hand wrapped around the pot of the orchid carefully. He wanted to keep Clint and Natasha's orchid, but that was about it. The rest, aside from the ones Tony had set aside, were essentially from strangers. It would feel weirder to keep them all than to get rid of them.

He let Tony take his other hand and squeeze back. "Donner told me he got accepted into Harvard law, but that he never got a chance to go," Steve said quietly. "I don't wanna just throw him into a charity. I want to be there for him." Because this was on Steve. If he'd never been at that conference then Donner wouldn't have been tossed away.

"Just try not to think about it right now Steve. There's nothing you can do right this minute," Aria assured him. But Steve didn't look convinced.

"There has to be something..."

Aria shook her head, and then offered Steve a small, sad smile. "Now you know how Tony feels," she said quietly. It was rare for her to stand up for Tony, and Tony pretended not to overhear her, although Steve saw him clutch his hand a little tighter, and he thought he did understand, at least a little more, why Tony spent so much time down in his shop.
**Rescuing Donner, part I**

It was a Tuesday morning when they dragged him out of bed earlier than usual. *They* being Chantelle, a bossy beta woman who always wore a power suit, and her assistant, Tom, who was also a beta. They told him what to do; they introduced him to Alphas and led him away from them. They made him stay nights with them; they told him not to complain, to be polite, dutiful and obedient. And he was, because he was performing for his life right now. One wrong move and he knew that he could end up somewhere far worse.

Donner clung onto that thought. Every night, before he went to bed, he told himself *it could be worse*.

He wasn't bitter at Steve. Donner had made his choice and he was glad to went over to talk to the kids at the auction. They might have not walked out otherwise. All Donner could see them in was himself, wide eyed and hopeful. The auction was a risk, a gamble with your own life. Donner's didn't pay off. He'd always been the 'omega' Captain America; Gideon had loved to show him off. The first two years were the hardest. After that, Gideon had mellowed out a little and they'd come to a sort of peace. Donner missed that.

He remembered the day Captain America had revealed himself as an omega. Gideon had been quietly furious, frustrated that there was evidently a 'better' version of Donner out there. And Gideon wanted him. But Stark had gotten there first. Donner had been relieved. Least he couldn't get replaced. Donner was pretty certain he had loved Gideon, or had at least wanted to. And it broke his heart when the other severed the bond. He'd spent over seven years with the man and then he pushed him away... just like that. Donner had been polite, dutiful, and obedient. It hadn't paid off and it struck him as very unfair. He was not used to thinking of anything as unfair (as a breeder, his life wasn't really his own and he had no right to say what was fair to him), but *this*. If anything was unfair, it was this.

They'd arrived home after the conference and Gideon had told him: "Don't get out of the car." And he hadn't, because Donner was *good*. And then their driver had taken him away and he'd ended up with Chantelle and Tom. Donner never saw Gideon after that... they hadn't even said proper goodbyes.

He heard Gene's name tossed around a few times, but never commented. It wasn't his place to.

Tom, who was both camp and over enthusiastic in mannerisms, shooed at him. "Go! Shower; we need you squeaky clean."

Yes. Evidence of last night's activities simply wouldn't do. Made sense.

The Alpha had been a very angry man. He was very angry at Steve. Donner wondered what Steve must have done to him. From what he'd seen Steve seemed to make a lot of Alphas angry by simply existing. But Donner didn't understand how he was being landed with all that. He looked like Captain America, he guessed, but he didn't *act* like him. They were separate people.

Sometimes Donner wished he could be like Steve but he simply didn't know how. And right now it was about survival, about being *good*. There was no time for Steve-like behaviour.

After a thorough shower they got Donner to dress in a typical omega-style outfit; it was blue to match his eyes and just had a waistcoat instead of a jacket. He looked good in it, but when Donner looked in the mirror he felt nothing. Tom fusses over his hair whilst Chantelle talked with someone
over the phone.

"He's booked a suite in the Triumph!" A very fancy, top end hotel. Gideon had actually taken Donner there once. It was a good sign. Maybe. But the man having money made him no more or less likely to take Donner home, or be a gentle Alpha. That was all Donner wanted now. Someone who was gentle. Gideon had been everything but.

They got into the car and Donner vaguely entertained the idea of belting it down the street. It was the kind of thing Steve would do. But where would he go? He had no money, no family that would speak to him. This was his best chance. Donner was a rational person. He wouldn't, and couldn't, try to run.

Donner was visibly nervous by the time they'd passed through the lobby and into the hotel lift. Chantelle squeezed his cheek with one hand. "Just be your nice, cutesy self and we'll be fine, Donnie."

He kind of hated her in that moment. That was new for Donner. He didn't usually hate people. And his cheek hurt.

They stepped out of the lift and headed for the Alpha's seemingly expensive suite. When they walked in there was just a lone man inside. He was a middle-aged black man in a well-fitted suit. He had broad shoulders and a patient warmness in his eyes. Donner found himself feeling quietly hopeful. But he didn't dare drop his guard entirely. Looks could be deceiving. And besides, he didn't want to just to stay another night with an Alpha... he couldn't keep doing it. He wanted a mate, a home, some stability.

"Mr. Emmett, pleasure to meet you."

Donner hung back, timid and unsure. Qualities that Chantelle had assured him were endearing.

The man was staring at him, and Donner looked down to the floor respectfully. He wasn't supposed to look Alphas in the eye, and he was a good omega.

"You owe me one."

That was how Rhodey greeted Tony and Steve when he showed up to Tony's house on Tuesday morning.

"I know. That's why I made you this coffee," said Tony generously, holding out a mug. Rhodey took it gratefully, sipped, and then cringed.

"Tony, this is... amazingly bad."

"But I made it myself."

"...did you use a filter? Jesus Christ."

"...a filter?" asked Tony, looking around the room for guidance.

Pepper sighed heartily; she had tried to help show Tony how to work the coffee machine earlier but Tony had dismissed her with the statement, "Oh, please, Pepper. I'm a genius. I think I can figure out how to make a cup of coffee."

"...yeah, I think now you owe me two," said Rhodey, looking down at the mug he was holding with a look of disgust.
Tony, Steve, Pepper, Aria, and two of Steve's buddies from 84 had gathered in Tony's house, mostly because of Tony's inability to get up any earlier than nine in the morning. They wanted to touch base with Rhodes before sending him out to get Donner. Beforehand, there was a meeting with Gene. If it didn't go well, he could probably kiss meeting Donner good-bye.

Rhodes, like Steve, was a military man. He listened attentively to all the information he was given, nodding and asking questions when he needed to without interrupting the stream of advice being hurled at him. It was a welcome reprieve from Tony's style of not-listening that Steve had gotten used to over the last year. He and Rhodey actually had a surprising amount in common; Rhodey had a good sense of humor but he was also someone with a low tolerance for bullshit. He and Tony being friends was both immediately obvious and also a complete mystery; they could have easily hated each other.

Rhodey left only after Tony had dragged him down to the shop and began weighing him down with devices. Rhodey let him pin microphones onto his clothes and agreed to wear contacts that clearly had circuits in them, but balked when Tony heaved up a huge needle.

"Nope. Not lettin' you do that."

"But what if you need to get naked and--"

"No, man, I'm not lettin you put a chip in me!"

"Fine," sulked Tony.

Everyone wished Rhodey good luck and he strode off to drive to meet Gene, feeling somewhat awkward knowing that every movement and word and noise he made from here on out was going to be monitored, recorded, and watched by a group of people.

They'd warned him about Gene Bennett, but Rhodey was still surprised when they met. Gene was easily the most pleasant, charming person he'd ever met.

"Dr. Emmett, hello, hello, a pleasure to meet you..."

"Just Richard is fine," said Rhodey, smoothing down his tie and taking a seat.

Gene had insisted on meeting him before he saw Donner, saying that Donner was a good friend and he would be remiss if he didn't check Donner's suitors personally. "Some omegas need protected more than others," said Gene philosophically, stirring his coffee. "You know, different strokes for different folks. Myself, I'm an old-fashioned type, and so's Donner. He's a gentle omega and he relies on his Alpha friends to make sure he's safe."

"I'm old-fashioned myself," said Rhodey. Lying didn't come as easily to him as it did to Tony; Tony was a master of duplicity, someone who could smooth-talk his way through anything.

But he managed to get through the meeting with Gene relatively easily. There was only one moment where Rhodey panicked slightly; Tony's name came up during a casual conversation about the AU conference.

"I met Stark, you know. I was surprised. Not a very dominant man," said Gene.

"...no?" said Rhodey, suddenly aware they were on thin ice. "...I would have thought he was."

"Me too. But no, he's actually rather mild. Practically beta-like. Maybe that explains Rogers's behavior..."
"A strong Alpha makes an obedient omega," quoted Rhodey.

"Is that Wordsworth?"

"Ah, Coleridge, actually."

The conversation, mercifully, didn't land on Tony again. Of course, it did touch on Steve several times, but that was easier for Rhodey; he hadn't known Steve for twenty years. At the end of their lunch, the purpose of it became obvious toward the end; Gene had paperwork. A nondisclosure agreement, an agreement to make a "donation" for "services rendered." Rhodey read all of it, fascinated; the language was subtle, legal, careful not to ever explicitly state what was really happening. It was maddeningly delicate.

Worst, there was an agreement for a background check.

He signed all of them carefully, as Richard Emmett, hoping that Tony was watching and would get a "Richard Emmett" into the national database before Gene Bennett realized he was faking his entire history.

He and Gene shared a warm handshake and then Rhodey was off to the Triumph. So far, so good.

He got his key from the front desk and went up to his suite; he was the first one there, and he spent nearly an hour pacing and tapping his fingers, waiting for Donner and the others. Gene had already told him about Chantelle and Tom, Donner's "chaperones" and "friends."

He turned when he finally heard the door opening. Three people walked in. Rhodey was taken back. He had been told about Donner, yes, but he was still unprepared. From the neck up, Donner looked _exactly_ like Steve. He was short and had a thin physique; he could have been Steve before the serum.

Rhodey shook Chantelle's hand while Donner hovered by the door, eyes downcast respectfully.

"Doctor Emmett," he corrected. "And... and this must be Donner."

"Go say hi," said Tom gently, giving Donner an encouraging push.

Donner walked over slowly, keeping his eyes down. He knelt without being asked. Rhodey wasn't sure how the hell to respond to this; he reached out and patted his head softly. Donner leaned in very slightly to the touch.

"Donner's always been a bit shy. He's very, very obedient, though," said Tom.

"His old Alpha simply wanted a change of pace. This one's not a trouble-maker," Chantelle assured him.

"I can see that," said Rhodey.

"What time would you like us to pick him up?"

"...let's say, ah... how about nine-thirty tomorrow?" said Rhodey. "I'd like to have breakfast with him."

"Sure. We can do nine-thirty," said Chantelle; Tom was nodding behind her. "Well, good luck on your scenting, Donner, you make sure you listen to Dr. Emmett and be good, okay?"

Donner gave a small nod. He was hoping he wasn't going to get in trouble for the bruises he had
from the previous night. Some Alphas hated signs that he'd been used. Chantelle and Tom helped him cover up a lot of the marks, but there was only so much he could do, and the Alphas they introduced him to were often aggressive.

"If you need anything, here's my card," said Chantelle, offering Rhodes a business card. She nudged Donner in the ribs with the toe of her pumps. "Donner, you make sure you mind Dr. Emmett."

"Yes'm," mumbled Donner. Lots of the Alphas he'd met over the last week seemed to enjoy having him disobey and then punishing him for it... living out a weird Steve Rogers fantasy, he guessed. It was a strange paradox, getting ordered to disobey, to say no, to be bad. It wasn't in Donner's nature to do those things.

He heard the door click and his breath hitched a little. He didn't dare look up to the Alpha he was alone with. He didn't exactly like Chantelle, but at least he knew her.

The Alpha took his chin and tilted it up to look at his face. He kept his eyes averted. During his seven years with Gideon, they'd only made eye contact a handful of times. It was considered disrespectful for an omega to look at an Alpha like that.

"Look at me," said the Alpha quietly.

Ah. So he was one of those, who would order Donner to be bad and then smack his around. Donner's muscles tightened a little, readying himself for it, and forced himself to look into the Alpha's eyes. After only a few seconds, he dropped his gaze again.

No blows came. Yet.

"I'm not gonna hit you. You can get up. C'mon." The Alpha gave his arm a tug; he got to his feet quickly. "You want a drink? Sit down. Let's talk."

He grabbed one of the $7 bottles of water from the mini-bar and offered it to Donner. Donner didn't open it because he didn't want to cost this Alpha any more money and get yelled at later by Chantelle.

"What's your real name?"

Donner turned the bottle over in his hands. "Donner."

"Your full name, I mean."

"Donner Arnold Malick."

"You changed it?"

He nodded.

"What was it before?"

Donner didn't want to say. He chewed his lip, then mumbled it.

"What was that?" asked Dr. Emmett.

"Stephen Arnold Ladson."

"...you're kidding me. Your real name is Steve?"
"Stephen," corrected Donner before he could help himself, then quickly mumbled an apology. Then, for some reason, he corrected the Alpha a second time: "It's Donner now."

"But you're not bonded now."

Donner felt a hot prickling in his eyes. No, he wasn't bonded now. Gideon had given him up. He still had Gideon's mark on his neck but it meant nothing; he was alone, couldn't feel his Alpha, couldn't feel Giddy, who he'd grown used to feeling during the day. It was a useful thing, a bond, because he knew when Giddy had a bad day and needed him to be extra-good, to make his favorite meal or rub his shoulders. And he knew when Giddy was in a good mood and Donner could ask favors or deliver bad news. He was tuned to his Alpha's needs and his life revolved around making their home a haven. He wondered how Gideon was doing without him and his heart ached. He missed Giddy.

"You can open the water, man."

Donner obediently opened the bottle of water and sipped it, still fighting back tears. He wished there were some way he could contact Gideon and beg for his old life back. Giddy wasn't the best Alpha in the world but he wasn't the worst, either. Donner had always felt useful, at least.

"You know Steve Rogers?"

Donner shook his head adamantly. "He was at the conference and we talked twice but I don't know him; he's not my friend; I'm a good omega," said Donner firmly.

"You guys look like twins."

"Thank you, sir. But I'm a good omega," repeated Donner stubbornly. He didn't want this man thinking he was a trouble-maker like Rogers. Donner had never voted and never gotten to attend university because of Gideon, although he'd been accepted, which he felt like was an honor all by itself. (Gideon had not let him keep the acceptance letter; it was one of Donner's few prize possessions, but once Gideon had bought and bonded him, he'd made Donner tear it up and throw it out so that he didn't get any "ideas.")

Rhodes shook his head in amazement. This guy seemed so over-the-top brainwashed that it was unsettling.

Donner confirmed Rhodey's thought with his next sentence: "Do you want me to take my clothes off?"

"No," said Rhodey firmly. He couldn't help but wonder if Tony was laughing at him back home.

He didn't want to leave immediately or even reveal his real name immediately; if Chantelle and Tom were hanging around the lobby or had decided to grab a drink at the hotel bar, and saw them trying to leave, they'd be in big trouble. He didn't plan to make a break for it until after midnight. He was hoping to spend that time talking with Donner, but it was like pulling teeth to get words out of him; Donner perched on the edge of the bed, eyes down, sipping water, everything about him radiating uncertainty. It was sad. Rhodey wasn't sure how to delicately inform Donner that this was a rescue mission with Steve at the head of it, especially since Donner didn't seem overly fond of Steve.

"You guys related or anything?"

Donner picked at the label on the water bottle. "Yessir."

"Wait, really?"
"Yessir. My grandfather's brother was the cousin of Joseph Rogers."

"So you're... second cousins three times removed?" asked Rhodey, trying to figure it out.

"Something like that," said Donner, then added, perhaps a little defensively, "Lots of omegas are blond."

"Yeah, I know. Donner... come on, look at me."

Donner eyes flicked up, then down.

Rhodes resigned himself to the fact that he'd have to give some things up if he wanted to get anything in return.

"Donner. My real name is James, James Rhodes. I'm a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force."

"Oh," said Donner mildly. That meant nothing to him; he didn't know anything about Richard Emmett, either. No one told him about the Alphas he would be serving, only their names. It wasn't his place to know.

"I'm here to help you."

Donner looked up on his own, hope shining on his face. "Giddy sent you?" he asked, unable to contain the excitement in his voice.

"Huh? No. No, he didn't."

Donner's face fell and he went back to picking at the label on the water bottle.

"Why...why would you want Gideon--" (Ugh. 'Giddy' was such a gross nickname.) "--to come for you? He put you here. All because you spoke to some kids at that conference, right?"

Donner curled in on himself visibly, like an automatic defense mechanism. His eyes were fixed on the floor. "I promise, I'm not a badly behaved omega. I'm not like him. I'm good. I--"

"Hey, hey. I get it." Rhodey felt like he was comforting a child, or something, not a grown-ass man. From this angle he could spot a purple bruise on Donner's shoulder and even little crescent shaped nail marks in his skin. He swallowed. Jesus. It was a good thing that had Gleason on stand by, because Donner was going to need medical attention and a rape kit. There was no doubt about it.

Rhodey had to resist the urge to pick the kid up and just walk straight out with him.

"Just because you're a good omega, doesn't mean you had a good Alpha."

"Giddy was an excellent Alpha."

"Well, he hasn't treated you in an excellent manner, has he?"

Donner looked up at him with a stormy gleam in his eyes. "You're not like the others. No one else cares what Gideon was like. Why do you care about my ex-mate? We're not bonded anymore. What do you really want? And.... and why do you have two different names?"

Rhodey sighed. "I'm not here to buy you, kid. Well, I am but... Steve sent me."

Donner shook his head and began to back away on the bed, pressing him up against the headboard. "No, no, no... I don't want to get in trouble again. I won't! I won't do this. You can't make me. I need
an Alpha."

"They're literally selling you out to other Alphas! It's prostitution," Rhodey said with the same kind of bluntness that Steve admired. Donner practically flinched at the use of the word. "I'm not here to make you do anything. I'm here to offer you a way out. You just gotta trust me."

"But then what?"

"Sorry?"

"But then what? How can I have a future without an Alpha?" His voice was so small, like he genuinely didn't know the answer... but perhaps wanted to.

"Maybe you'll find one, you know...? Maybe one that didn't buy you?"

Donner seemed confused at the idea. Rhodey sighed. Maybe he shouldn't have gone down the honesty route... but he couldn't have kept all this up till midnight. He really wasn't that good of a liar. And Donner looked so unsure he'd hoped to reassure him, but the mention of Steve had just scared Donner out all the more.

"Did you get a place at Harvard? They said you nearly did law."

There was no response; it clearly wasn't a topic up for discussion.

"It can't be fun, right? I imagine the Alphas who want someone who looks like Steve Rogers aren't the friendliest."

Donner shook his head, staring down at the bottle in his hands. "They're very angry at him," he whispered. "He doesn't understand how it works. but it's not his fault."

"...Whose fault is it?"

"Mr. Stark's, of course," Donner's voice was soft, like he knew he was treading on risky ground.

"Tony-- Mr. Stark-- doesn't discipline Steve like because he loves him," Rhodey said patiently. "The reason Gideon left you for this is because he doesn't love you, Donner. People who love each other don't do this. Would you seriously go back to him now, after everything he's put you through?"

Donner ducked his head down in answer. Rhodey felt like punching a wall.

"Listen... I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to," said Rhodey. "We're going to hand Gene Bennet a half a million for you, and then whatever you do next is up to you. You can stay here and let them whore you out like this. You can tell them that this was a set-up and they'll probably be more careful in the future. I can't force you to come with me. But if you come with me I can make sure that you're safe. I can make sure no one else lays a finger on you."

"What about Gideon?" asked Donner softly.

Rhodey ground his teeth. "If you want to walk out here with me, and then change your mind and go back to him, I can't stop you. But you'll just end back up here again. He doesn't want you." It was a harsh truth but a truth nonetheless; Gideon had severed the bond.

Donner's eyes welled up again and he sat there for a while, choking back tears. Rhodey waited uncomfortably, arms crossed.

"Listen," said Rhodey. "You walk out here, and change you mind, you can go back. We're not
kidnapping you. We're just giving you an out. We're opening a door. We're already handing over five hundred grand... you might as well try it. You wanna come back, you can, but why would you want this, Donner? Why would you want to hang around Alphas who kick you around?"

Donner slowly peeled away the last bits of paper from the water bottle. "...where would you take me?" he asked in a low voice after a moment.

"...Tony and Steve's house," said Rhodey, and Donner visibly cringed at the mention of Steve; Rhodey quickly backtracked. "There'll be other omegas there, too. There's a guy named George and a guy named David--"

"Are there Alphas?"

"Just... just me and Tony," said Rhodey. "Maybe Sam," he added quickly, since Donner seemed to be uncomfortable with the idea of being around "Mr. Stark" and Rhodey.

"Is Sam a good Alpha? Is he very dominant?" asked Donner.

"He's... he's a good guy, if that's what you mean. He's more dominant than Tony but not quite as dominant as me."

"Everyone's more dominant than Mr. Stark," said Donner. There was a hint of challenge in his voice.

"...yeah but who cares?" said Rhodey. "His heart's in the right place."

Donner scoffed a little, then flinched like Rhodey might hit him, even though Rhodey hadn't moved. After a moment, Donner blurted, "Steve doesn't have many omega friends, does he? He doesn't really know what he's doing." He turned the water bottle around in his hands. "I had friends before Steve ruined everything. DeSoto was my friend."

Rhodey's teeth gritted again. "If they're your friends, where are they now?"

Donner shrugged.

"Steve has omega friends, by the way." Rhodey knew it was a stupid point to argue but he couldn't help it; he was already enumerating them on his fingers. "Clint, Ty, Banksy--"

Donner's head snapped up and for a split second his whole face lit up. "Tom Banksy? From Banksy and Boswell?"

Rhodey looked startled at this sudden outburst of interest. "--yeah, that Banksy."

Rhodey bit his lip and looked back down at the water bottle.

Apparently Banksy and Boswell was a great unifying force. Rhodey saw an opportunity and took it. "You like Banksy and Boswell? You could meet Banksy, if you wanted to."

"...would... would Banksy be there? At their house? If I came with you?"

"Yeah," said Rhodey, even though he had no idea why Banksy would be. Donner seemed a lot more interested now. "...Banksy is a good omega."

"Yeah. Yeah, he is. And Boswell's a great Alpha. You can meet him, too," said Rhodey enticingly. "And if you want to you can call Steve or Tony and ask any questions--"
He'd overstepped; Donner was hunched up again, shaking his head violently. "No. No, I don't want to talk to him, he's-- he's not a good omega."

"--so why don't you come with me and talk to him about it, since you're the expert?" asked Rhodey. There was sarcasm in his voice but it was lost on Donner, who actually seemed to consider this.

If he could get Steve to stop acting out, would everyone forgive him for looking like him? Would everyone stop being angry at Steve, and therefore him?

"I'm gonna walk out that door in a few hours," said Rhodey, pointing to the door. "And you can come with me if you want. That's up to you."

"Do you want me to?"

"...yes."

"Okay."

Talking to Donner was utterly exhausting. Steve, he thought, must have the patience of a saint to have talked to all the omegas at that conference; if they were all as bad as Donner it must have been an awful experience.

Rhodey's phone rang, and he answered it. "Hey, Rhodey. How's it going?" asked Tony. Back in Malibu, he and Steve were in front of a couple of computers in Tony's workshop; Steve was sitting in the chair, hands bunched into his hair. Tony stood behind him, a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"You know exactly how it's going 'cause I'm wearing a wire," growled Rhodey quietly, getting up and walking into the bathroom of the suite for some privacy.

"I was trying to be nice, sorry. I'll return you to your regular scheduled asshole now," said Tony. "Why the hell did you tell him he had a choice? You're supposed to bring him here and you told him he could stay!"

"Yeah, 'cause it's his decision!"

"If he doesn't come with you, then we just handed half a million over to Gene Bennett for no fuckin' reason! Command him to come with you and then we can unbrainwash him... we can't just leave him there."

"Get Banksy," said Rhodey in a low voice. "I'll keep trying to talk to him but I'm in over my head here. I didn't realize he'd be like this."

"I'll get Banksy. Just stop giving him options, okay?" said Tony. He hung up, then turned around and snapped his fingers at Pepper.

Pepper glared at him. "I will break those fingers if you snap them one more time."

"I've got enough broken fingers already. Pep, go call Banksy. Tell him we need him here, tonight, like, right now."

Pepper sighed loudly.

In the hotel room, Rhodey eased out of the bathroom; Donner glanced up. "Was it him?"

"No," said Rhodey, who assumed he meant Steve. "...what's your plan if you don't come with me, Donner? You just gonna keep doing this every night until someone finally bonds with you?"
Donner shrugged a little.

"You know it won't be a good person, Donner. You know that anyone who bonds you is going to be someone with a chip on his shoulder about Captain America and he won't be gentle with you. The people offering to buy you aren't exactly interested in your well-being."

"Did Mr. Stark offer Mr. Bennett the money?" asked Donner in a small voice.

"Yeah. He did."

"Is it too late for a refund?"

"Yeah. It is. He paid five hundred thousand dollars just for you to walk out here tonight with me," said Rhodey, hoping guilt would do the trick.

"I'm not worth that much," said Donner quietly. "I've already been bonded."

"He doesn't want to bond you, man. He just wants you to be safe. Seriously, that's all. You can ask any of the other omegas there... George, or David, or... Banksy..."

Donner snuck a look up again. "The Tom Banksy? He's friends with Steve Rogers?" repeated Donner, clearly not quite believing it.

"Yup. And you can come with me and meet him and ask him yourself if you don't believe me."

Donner heaved a tiny little world-weary sigh, like the weight of the decision was crushing him. Rhodey decided to let up for a while. He sat down into a chair, grabbing himself a bottle of tequila from the bar, knowing full well that Pepper was probably cursing him for spending more money. (Tony had been the one to book the room, on "Richard Emmett's" behalf.)

Sure enough, back in Tony's home, those watching the monitors were ashen-faced. But it had nothing to do with the money. Seeing Donner so cowed and vulnerable was terrible; Pepper had a strand of hair in her mouth and was chewing it thoughtlessly; Happy had a hand on her shoulder but was visibly tense; Aria had pulled out a cigarette and was clearly hoping Tony might bend the rules about smoking in the house for her so that she could light it; Tony's arms were crossed and he was jiggling one leg impatiently, a look of disgust on his face.

And Steve. Steve was losing it. More than losing it; actually, he felt just about ready to have an angry cry. But he didn't want to do that in front of Pepper and Aria and Happy too. Maybe it was a little arrogant to expect Donner to be grateful but Steve didn't expect him to consider saying no, for God's sake! The man was being abused by a different Alpha every night and yet was hesitating because of Steve. Because Steve was a bad omega and apparently nothing would change Donner's mind about that fact. It would be easier if Donner just hated him for causing so much shit in his life but he didn't... it was like he looked down on Steve. Poor stupid Steve who didn't really know how to act or behave.

If Donner went back to Gideon after this Steve wasn't sure he would cope. He was pretty sure he'd have to break something big, maybe a car or something...it would make him angry beyond words. It would break his heart. How much pain had Donner endured at the hands of all these Aces? Or had they used the glands behind Donner's ears so he wouldn't feel it? Steve wasn't sure which alternative disturbed him more. Shit. He actually was angry crying now. He thought this night would be happy...or at least offer a sense of relief. Right now Steve just felt like a big fat failure.

What really got to him was that Donner was obviously intelligent. He was someone with so much potential...but Gideon hadn't nurtured it. The man would have had the means to support the omega
through anything but he hadn't. Donner had had his own life snatched away from him and he wasn't even angry about it. He didn't even seem to care. It made Steve feel sick to his stomach.

He stood up, shrugging away Tony's hand. "I need a minute," he choked out, and then he ran up the steps and stepped out onto the pool terrace to get fresh air.

Pepper lowered her phone from her ear. "Banksy said he can come, with Boswell, but they'll want to stay over and Banksy insists on having breakfast with Steve."

"Great. Perfect," said Tony, who was pacing a little. Steve's furious misery was palpable and Tony wanted to cry, not because he really wanted to cry, but because his mate was probably outside crying. "Should I go after him? When he said he needed a minute, did that include me?"

Everyone shrugged.

The way Steve had shoved Tony's hand away had implied a sort of anger, but Tony didn't think it was aimed at him. Steve was just... angry. But Tony still felt a deep sense of guilt, of worry, because he was an Alpha and he felt guilty by association. How much damage Gideon had done in only seven years' time... worse, to a young person who looked like Steve and who was bright enough to be accepted to Harvard Law. And worse still, a person who was apparently indeed distantly related to Steve.

Tony finally exited. Steve could push him out if he wanted, but the misery in his chest was too heavy to ignore.

"Steve?" he called gently, sliding open the glass door to the pool deck. "...hey. You mind if I come out here with you?"

In a few hours' time they would have their answer about Donner, and Tony wanted to point out that perhaps Donner would be okay, that this was only the beginning and in a week or two weeks or a month or something, Donner would come out of his shell and act normally and stop weeping at any mention of his precious "Giddy," who had ruined his life.

But he didn't say anything because he didn't think Steve wanted to hear it.

Tony leaned on the railing overlooking the ocean, watching the distant freighters on the horizon slog slowly past, little bright specks of light in the otherwise dark sea. The waves crashed far below them. Steve swiped at his face and looked away.

"Steve, you don't have to act like you're not crying. I can literally feel you crying. Remember? Bonded?" said Tony, pointing to his stomach. He wasn't sure why he pointed there; it was just that his gut was most often where he felt Steve. "...if it makes you feel better, I can cry too. We can both cry if you want. It's okay to cry, you know."

"But this isn't about me. It's not. We're trying to get him out of there. It's not about me being sad because someone doesn't like me," Steve muttered, rubbing at his eyes. He hated crying in front of other people. It made him feel like a child. "I just... I didn't survive crashing a plane into the ocean and then seventy years under the ice just to watch an omega oppressing himself. They're assaulting him and he's just-- I thought he would be so relieved, you know? I thought he would be so happy to get out of there. But he's not...he's just afraid, afraid of the world. Someone beat the ambition out of him and it makes me so sad. He could have done so much and all I can think about is, what if Bucky had told me I should stop trying to get enlisted? And what if I had listened? Then I wouldn't even be here. Bucky was a jerk sometimes but he always encouraged me, even when the things I was doing were impossible. He always encouraged me. But if he hadn't then I couldn't've-- I just can't--"
Steve leaned down, fisting his hands in his hair again. "If he had seen the way Gideon goddamn smiled at me in that room... then Donner would know. He didn't really love him. I'm not sure a man like that is capable of loving anyone but himself. He's evil."

"Yeah. I got that vibe," said Tony quietly.

"And it's hard not to take it personally, you know? It's so stupid... but it's not nice when people don't like you. Did I tell you that's how I knew about Sitwell? I didn't read or hear anything HYDRA related; the guy just hated me and I knew it. Well, I was like 70% sure. It was a well-placed guess. But my point is, I'm not used to people not liking me. And I'm trying to help him. I'm on his side! But maybe Donner is right. Maybe omegas don't like me and maybe I'm not... maybe I'm not the role model I think am. If I can't get through to one guy, then what's the point, you know? How can I save someone who doesn't even want to be saved, Tony?"

Steve sighed and looked up at the view, steepling his fingers under his chin, still struggling to blink back tears. "...Can I have a hug?"

Tony wrapped his arms around Steve and pulled him over to him; Steve curled into his chest, his body too large to really easily hold.

"Steve, you answered your own question. You can't save someone who doesn't want it. You can only give them a chance. And you don't always save everyone. You're not a comic book superhero, Steve... sometimes, people get left behind," said Tony quietly. "But the point is to get through to as many of them as you can. And the ones who need it most are gonna be the hardest. Guys like George? They didn't really need you, Steve. George left Luke when he had a chance and he did it by himself. It's the ones like Donner who actually need your help." He rubbed Steve's back against the cool Pacific wind. Steve was shuddering a little, perhaps crying silently. Tony didn't ask; he just held him and left him work on getting ahold of himself. They had time to spare, after all. It would be several hours before they knew what Donner was going to do.
Back at the Triumph, Rhodey was trying to make small talk to put Donner at ease, but it was tough. Donner refused to make eye contact and had virtually nothing to talk about because he'd done nothing but keep house for seven years. He had remarkably few interests or hobbies; he followed a few shows but aside from that, Rhodey had never met a person with less of a personality. Clearly, in the last seven years, Gideon hadn't had many conversations with his omega, at least not two-sided ones.

Finally, around eleven-thirty, Rhodey had had enough. It was close enough to midnight and he was bored to tears.

"I'm going," he announced.

Donner looked up sharply. "Now? But-- but you said you were going to go after midnight."

"It's eleven-thirty. I think now is fine. You coming?"

Donner crinkled his plastic water bottle nervously.

"It's safe," said Rhodey, his voice soft. "It's safe to come, Donner. No one will hurt you anymore. There are good omegas on the other side who want to help you out."

Donner curled up a little on the bed.

Rhodey walked over to the door and opened it. "Come on," he said. "Just trust me, man." He held out a hand.

Donner didn't move.

Rhodey hesitated, then said, "I paid for you until nine-thirty."

Donner looked up.

"Come with me and if you don't like what you see, I'll take you back. They'll never know."

Donner crinkled the water bottle again, looking down for a few long moments, then slipped off the bed and padded timidly over to Rhodey. Rhodey put a firm hand on his shoulder and guided him out the door.

Happy was waiting for them out in the car. Before, they'd considered having Steve waiting with him, but that was evidently a bad idea if they wanted Donner to actually come with them. Steve had desperately wanted to be on the "front lines" of this operation but had recognized he'd be better off waiting at home, with Tony.

Happy didn't say anything as they got into the car but he offered a warm smile, some cheery radio station on in the background. The atmosphere was almost awkward; if Donner was aware of that he didn't show it. He stared out of the tinted windows of the SUV with a blank expression. Rhodey was just relieved to be out of the hotel suite.

"It's not a long drive," Rhodey said. "Right?"

"Not too bad," Happy assured him.
"...will Banksy be there?" asked Donner.

"Yeah," said Rhodey, though he had no idea. (He did, however, trust Tony's ability as one of the richest men in the world to get just about anyone he wanted on short notice.)

Donner gave a tiny nod and went back to staring out of the window. He didn't say another word for the entire drive west.

Banksy had brought doughnuts. They were from some local deli of his, and there was about twenty different flavors. Steve was hyperly aware that it would be rude to eat, like, ten of them. Steve wanted to eat ten of them. There were flavors he'd never even seen before. He tried to catch Tony's eye, to communicate silently that he wanted Tony to take some of the donuts on his behalf, but Banksy was commanding all of his attention. Boswell looked tired as he nursed a coffee on the sofa, whereas Banksy was practically hyperactive.

"The conference thing was amazing, Steve. Oh my God! I was screaming. And you wearing a collar too Tony, fantastic! You played it just right."

"Must have been very uncomfortable," Boswell commented from the sofa. He was the most dressed down Steve had ever seen him, in dress pants and a v-neck sweater.

Tony gestured dramatically toward Boswell. "Thank you!" he cried. It was the first time anyone had really commented on how shitty a collar felt for an Alpha and Boswell, being an Alpha himself, surely understood what it felt like when raised hackles were rubbed the wrong way.

Boswell looked exhausted. Granted, it was the middle of the night and they had called up on rather short notice, but still. Boswell looked old. It was easy to forget, on television, that Boswell was in his late seventies. But seeing him here, dressed down, with heavy lines on his face, Tony realized that Boswell was actually getting on in years. The hand holding the tumbler of scotch was gnarled and the skin loose.

Tony turned his attention to his phone so he wouldn't have to think about mortality.

"They'll be here in twenty minutes," Pepper said, checking her phone. "Rhodey said he's agreed to come."

Steve sighed in relief and slumped into a barstool chair. "Thank God."

Watching the clock made the twenty minutes creep by slower than they should have.

For Rhodey and Donner, the car ride also stretched out. Donner looked like he was being taken to his own execution. Rhodey kept looking at him, genuinely worried he might change his mind and leap from the moving car. Only Happy seemed unaffected; he hummed along to the radio.

Donner looked up as they came to the heavy metal gates outside of Tony's estate. Happy waited for them to open, then eased the car down the long, winding drive.

"Is that a peacock?" asked Donner.

"Mm-hm. Tony likes shiny things," said Happy, navigating around the bird. Tony's peacocks were borderline feral and had an unfortunate habit of attacking both people and cars.

Donner lapsed back into silence as the car pulled up to the front of the house. The lights were all on and the orange warmth radiating from the smooth white lines of the house's facade was inviting.
Rhodey got out. Donner didn't move. Rhodey opened the door for him and said, "Come on." Donner slid out and followed Rhodey, head down, still looking like he was about to be shot.

Rhodey opened the door and several anxious-looking faces looked up.

"You got him!" exclaimed Tony with delight.

George began clapping but stopped when no one else joined in.

Steve had his elbows on the breakfast bar and watched the scene unfold between his fingers. It was painfully awkward. Maybe he should just go upstairs; Donner didn't want him here anyway. He began actively considering it as Gleason stepped out of the living room. He'd been having a nap on one of the sofas, considering the late hour.

Gleason rubbed a hand over his face and then put on his glasses. He looked between everyone in the room, his gaze finally landing on Donner.

"You must be Donner, yes?" David held out a hand. Donner looked at it, confused, as if no one had ever offered to shake his hand before. "Do you want to maybe go to a bathroom, and I can give you a once over?"

"...why?" Donner's voice was so quiet Steve wanted to scream.

"You know, to look over any... injuries," David said, trying to be gentle about it.

"I'm not hurt."

David smiled patiently. "Just, in case..."

"I'm fine," Donner said and he sounded like he believed it. An awkward silence followed and it was Rhodey who broke first.

"Man, come on. You have bruises--"

Sam stepped forward from where he'd been leaning against the wall and put a hand on Rhodey's shoulder, tugging him back a few steps.

Banksy stepped forward to rescue the situation, having already been informed that Donner was a fan. "Doctor Gleason is the best, I assure you. He's very clever, knows exactly what he's doing." Steve realised that Banksy was good at this. He was perhaps used to talking to brainwashed omegas who struggled with their own autonomy. But he was also talking to Donner like he was a child, certainly not a fully grown man. And that made Steve sad, somehow.

Donner looked up and his expression changed. "You're Tom Banksy!" he exclaimed, his voice finally above a whisper. Still soft, but less so.

"Guilty as charged," said Banksy, beaming.

"I-- I like your show," mumbled Donner, looking down bashfully.

"I-- I like your show," mumbled Donner, looking down bashfully.

"Thank you so much!" said Banksy, as if he didn't hear this every day. "That's just fantastic, I'm so glad you like it... here, walk with me and Dave... Boz, we're going to have some omega time, 'k?" he called, linking his and Donner's arms together. He grabbed Dr. Gleason as well.

Boswell waved a tired hand at them; Donner glanced up and his eyes got even wider. "Boswell Mackabee," he mouthed, not managing to even make any noise.
Banksy dragged him and Dr. Gleason off easily; Tony waited until they were gone. "...I'm so glad Banksy's here."

"Tommy's always had a way with people," said Boswell wearily.

"If he needs a place to stay, he can bunk with me," offered George suddenly. "I've got a condo up north and, you know, with Luke gone and one of the kids going off to college, I have room for him."

"I don't think Gleason will find anything," said Rhody, hopping up on a barstool; Tony offered him a drink and he took it. "He's pretty clean. And even if he does, I doubt he'll be willing to press charges."

"Hey, good job out there, Rhody," said Tony sincerely.

"He really does look remarkably like you," said Boswell to Steve.

"Yeah, well, they're... second cousins... twice removed?" said Rhody, who was still puzzling over their distant connection.

"Actually they're first cousins twice removed," said Pepper. "Although, since Steve's been frozen for two generations, really, they're just first cousins. Congratulations, Steve. You have family."

Tony looked sharply at Steve to see how he felt about this. He had always taken it for granted that neither her nor Steve had any real family. Now there was a cousin in the mix.

Banksy and Donner came out from the bathroom with their arms still linked after only thirty minutes, with Gleason trailing behind. Banksy was keeping up a steady stream of friendly chatter and Tony was inexplicably reminded of Piper and her friends. Donner was hanging on every word with fascination.

"--and the best guest we ever had, between you and me, was Bill Murray, who was just darling, remember, Bozzy?"

Boswell grunted.

"--here, let's get you some food, share some with me, okay? Okay. So the thing about the spring break special is that we were shooting on location but the Bahamas were terrible that year, oh my goodness, rain and rain and rain and rain, and finally we had to shoot indoors which was really such a disappointment-- oh, tell Boz what you told me, he'll be flattered-- Boswell! Donner had something to say to you!" He gave Donner a little poke.

"I've seen every episode of your show," said Donner to Boswell meekly.

"Oh? Well, that's-- that's just fine," said Boswell.

"Now, he's not old enough to remember The Boswell Mackabee Variety Hour, but obviously that was before I was on so it's not nearly as good as Banksy and Boswell," teased Banksy.

"...soon to be The Banksy Show," said Boswell.

The grin slipped off Banksy's face. "...what?"

"It's official. I turned in my retirement, and twisted some arms, and this fall, the show is yours," said Boswell. He checked his watch; it was past midnight. "Happy birthday," he added gruffly.

Banksy stood there for a moment, shocked, then squealed and threw himself at Boswell, wrapping
his arms around him and giggling manically with unconstrained excitement.

"Oh my God! Oh my God! Really? Really? They're giving me the show? Just me?" cried Banksy, crawling all over Boswell's lap. Boswell was trying desperately not to spill his scotch with moderate success.

"Get off me, Tommy, I'm an old man--"

"Oh my God, oh my God!" Banksy continued to shriek. Even Donner was smiling shyly; Banksy's enthusiasm was infectious. "Oh my God I can't even believe it... I'm going to be the third omega ever to host my own show... are-- are they leaving us in the prime time slot?"

"Yes. Get off."

Banksy squealed, ignoring Boswell. "My own prime time slot, oh my God!"

"Yay," said Donner quietly.

Banksy hopped off Boswell's lap and grabbed Pepper, dipping her and kissing her.

"Hey!" cried Tony and Happy at the same time.

Pepper turned bright, bright red, her skin matching her hair, and she got an embarrassed, goofy smile.

Banksy threw an arm around Donner. "This is so exciting, oh my God! We should have champagne! Stark! Pop open a bottle!"

"I'm not allowed to drink," said Donner.

Banksy blinked. "According to who?" he challenged, putting a hand on his hip.

"Giddy."

"Well, Giddy's not here and one drink won't kill you."

"I really can't, my Alpha--"

"Oh, psh, c'mon, just one, Donnie, one drink to celebrate with me."

Donner looked over at Rhodey.

"All Alphas in the room who don't give a shit if the omegas drink," said Tony suddenly, and threw his hand up in the air. Rhodey and Sam both followed suit.

"Ahem," said Banksy.

"Huh? Oh," said Boswell. "Yes, yes, go ahead, have a drink."

Champagne and drinks were passed around whilst Gleason delicately took Steve aside. The doctor sank down onto one of the sofas in the next room heavily. He looked tired. Steve would offer him a bed but he knew from experience that David would insist on driving home. His partner left for work early in the mornings and they didn't like the kids waking up in an empty house.

"How did he look?" Steve asked softly.

Gleason ran a hand over his face. "Well he wasn't 'fine.' It looks like he was... with some rather
unkind people. There's bruising on his neck and his sides. There's especially dark fingerprint marks on his left thigh. They must be very painful. We did a rape kit, but it looks like it'll come back clean. So there's nothing we can do there...if he thinks anything wrong has been done to him, he's not saying anything about it. Or even admitting it to himself. It might be easier this way. Nothing broken, no permanent damage done. So at least there's that."

Steve sighed. He could understand that from a rational level. There was no point getting angry...the important thing was that Donner was safe. "Well, thank you for coming David." They both stood and shared a brief handshake followed by a hug.

"Anytime. And always for stuff like this," Gleason assured him.

They both re-entered the kitchen, David saying his goodbyes before he slipped away.

People sort of seemed to be enjoying themselves. Banksy was positively hyper and Donner hung on his every word. Boswell seemed content by himself. Rhodey was finishing pouring out drinks and half stuttered an apology when he accidentally elbowed Sam as he was offering Pepper a glass. Sam laughed, clearly amused at how he pushed the Alpha just outside of his comfort zone.

Steve appeared by Tony's side, letting their fingers brush together behind the privacy of the breakfast bar.

Donner looked over at him like he hadn't seen him before. Steve couldn't read his face.

"Of course, none of this would have been possible without Steve," Banksy dropped in not-so-casually. "If Steve hadn't reached out to George before, and sought out his help, you know..."

The statement hung in the air awkwardly. No one knew what to say and Donner wasn't saying anything.

Tony waited a beat, but the awkwardness was thick in the air. He decided to take control of the situation.

"So! Cousins, huh?" he said loudly.

Donner had finally taken a very small sip of champagne; he began coughing. Banksy patted him on the back. "S-sorry," said Donner. "I've n-never had-- had alcohol before."

This statement was greeted with another long silence.

"Well, first time for everything," said George after a moment. "Champagne's a hell of a drink to start with, huh?"

"Where's your Alpha?" asked Donner curiously.

"Jail," said George casually. Donner looked horrified and the room was definitely feeling increasingly tense. George tried to rescue it. "...my first drink was a Bud Light. That's a bit more typical, eh? ...how bout you, Stark?" asked George.

"Uh... single-malt whiskey," said Tony. "Maybe it was Dramboie? I don't remember. Dad gave it to me when I was eight."

Pepper snorted into her drink, unable to keep from laughing at how disastrously this conversation was going.
"Er-- well. It's pretty late. Are we all spending the night?" asked Banksy, who didn't look a bit tired but knew when to throw in the towel.

"If it's okay with you, Steve. I'm kind of a light-weight. I don't want to drive," said George.

"We got enough bedrooms," said Tony, nodding.

Donner clutched his barely-touched champagne glass, looking nervous again. "But-- but what if I need-- need to go back?"

"Don't worry, we'll make sure you're taken care of," said Banksy evasively. "C'mon, have a slumber party with us, Donner! How about you and me and George all take a room together, huh? I heard you got accepted to Harvard... you know, George here just got his degree, too. In theater, right George?"

"Right," said George, who immediately saw Banksy's angle and linked his arm through Donner's other arm.

"Second bedroom on the left is the biggest guest bedroom," called Tony as Banksy began dragging Donner upstairs, chatting the whole way up as they navigated around the orchids.

"...your cuz is kind of a mess, isn't he?" said Sam once the three of them had left the room.

"I think maybe we were like...a few years too late on that one." Steve sighed. He hadn't taken a drink. Sam was watching him with sympathy but he didn't want it. It was childish, but Steve felt left out. Banksy was just as liberal as Steve was, but apparently he was a "good omega". What made Steve such a bad person to Donner? Why couldn't he just tolerate him, even goddamn look at him without flinching? Steve ought to be part of the omega slumber party. He was the only omega left out.

...what had Gideon said about Steve to Donner? That was the question Steve was itching to ask, because it was clearly something terrible.

"People can come back from terrible things," Pepper pointed out.

"You're not gonna cure him over night," Aria added from her place on the couch, a laptop in her lap. She'd been typing away all evening.

"I mean, I didn't expect him to be grateful--"

"You should; you did spent half a million on the guy. He should be grateful," Rhodey said. "And I think he would be, if he wasn't so... scared."

It was grim but it was the truth. This wasn't personal to Steve, at least...it wasn't mostly. Steve had gotten a lot of omegas in trouble. That was a fact...but it still hurt that they were all having a 'slumber party' without him... goddammit. Steve wasn't ten. This shouldn't bother him!

"It will take him a long time to heal. But the first step is admitting he has to at all. God knows what being bonded to Gideon Malick was like," Pepper muttered into her glass. "Poor thing."

"The important thing is you got him out, I guess," Sam hummed.

"This was the right thing to do," Steve reiterated. "I know that. But it doesn't feel...good? That sounds stupid." It didn't really. He was a soldier. There were two more in the room. They knew exactly what that meant. But this hadn't been shooting a bad guy. It had been saving a guy from hell.
Shouldn't saving a person feel better than shooting one?

"...maybe it'll feel better tomorrow morning," suggested Tony. "We'll all have breakfast and once it's daylight maybe Donner'll come to his senses. ...come on, Steve." There was a small hint of rejection in his stomach that wasn't his. "Steve, you sleep with me, in the master bedroom," said Tony quietly. "I need you," he added, because he got the sense that Steve was genuinely injured at not being included in Banksy's and George's little group. It wasn't anyone's fault; Donner was simply too nervous to be around Steve.

"Need a ride?" offered Happy, getting up; Pepper got up with him. He was talking with Aria, but it was clear that Pepper and Happy were leaving together. Tony's dander rose; being betas, neither of them noticed, but Boswell looked over at Tony sharply.

"Stark? You got a room for me?"

"Yeah..." said Tony, clearly still distracted by the idea of Happy and Pepper leaving together. "...yeah..."

"I don't mind bunking with James if room is tight," said Sam, throwing a devilish grin toward Rhodey. Rhodey was able to smile back at him.

"In your dreams, Wilson..."

"You know it," Sam told him with a wink before heading upstairs. That man's confidence would never cease to amaze Steve. Not that Sam shouldn't be confident, but his casual attitude about being an acer around a superior officer was something else.

Combined with Tony's odd feelings about Happy and Pepper and Steve's own rejection...he wasn't feeling great. The thought of disappearing into their room was becoming increasingly appealing. Steve didn't find Happy and Pepper's relationship that much of a surprise but he tried to understand that Tony needed time.

They headed upstairs, everyone peeling away to different rooms.

Steve was grateful once they were alone. All he wanted was to be in bed. He dropped down onto the mattress, hands bunching up in the sheets. He sighed. "Do you think Rhodey would ever date another Alpha?" he asked, simply desperate to talk about anything but Donner.

Tony laughed. "Sorry, I know you're being serious, but... no, not in a million years," said Tony. He sat down next to Steve and lay a hand on his back. "It's different for us. I know lots of omegas can get close, can nest together and stuff, but... with us, dominance is... just a really big deal. It's hard for us to get as close as omegas do. There's a reason you almost never see trios with two Alphas. I'm not saying they don't happen, but I've never seen it, myself. It's just too weird... Rhodey's not an acer. He just doesn't swing that way." He rubbed Steve's back a little.

"Sam invited me to a... pride parade? I think that's what he called it. It's for Alphas who like Alphas...he said it's pretty flamboyant. He thinks I'll enjoy it," Steve murmured, trying to sound enthusiastic but failing. He wasn't sure he could be enthusiastic about anything right now. Even Tony undressing him did nothing to improve his mood really.

"...pride parades are also for betas who like the same sex. They're actually a blast," said Tony. "But I don't think you're gonna convince Rhodey to join that scene. He likes Sam, but not like that. And, I mean... I'm the same way, kinda. I could never be with another Alpha, not even a woman. It would be too weird."
Steve looked miserable and not at all interested in actually discussing pride parades.

"...anything I can do to make you feel better?" he offered. "...Donner'll come around, Steve. Here, lemme help you get undressed. You'll feel better in the morning. You ought to be thrilled, I can't believe it all went off without a hitch... hey, just think about how mad Gene Bennett and Gideon will be when they find out what happened to Donner... who says nice guys don't get the last laugh?"

He pulled Steve's shirt off; Steve was lying there unhappily and not cooperating much. Tony stripped him down to his underwear and then settled down to spoon him. "...seriously, you did really good, Steve," Tony breathed against his neck. He nosed behind Steve's ear a little.

"I can't wait for Gideon to see us take down Trinity in a matter of hours. Just wait 'til July," Steve mumbled, trying to sound meaningful and probably coming off as petulant. "I wonder what he's said to Donner about me. There must be something...a reason why he's so convinced I'm 'bad' but thinks that people like Banksy are 'good'."

When Tony curled up behind him he did feel a little better. Steve let his eyes slip shut. Then he felt his mate nudge close to the glands behind his ears. "Tony." Steve's hand fisted in the sheet in front of him. "I dunno if I... if I feel like... I don't think I do. Sorry."

"...it's okay," said Tony. "Can I still hold you?" Steve didn't protest, so Tony maintained his grip on his omega.

Steve's scent was intoxicatingly familiar. It made Tony sleepy. "...so today's Banksy's birthday, huh? That's kinda cool," he said drowsily. "Y'know my birthday's at the end of the month but... I don't really care that much about throwing a party this year... let's just duck our early for our anniversary. I figured England would be nice. We could go see Aunt Peggy." The words were out of his mouth before he'd even realized it. Shit. He cleared his throat a little, then grudgingly explained, "She's my, um, godmother."

Obadiah Stane and Margaret Carter had been named Tony's godparents, an honorary title, considering that Howard Stark was a firm agnostic and that Obadiah was Jewish. Tony had seen quite a bit of her in his childhood but that was ages ago. In fact, they hadn't talked much, hardly at all, since Tony's parents had died. He had done his best not to mention this because he could recall with some mortification asking to hear stories of Captain America when he was little boy and the thought of Steve knowing about that was fucking embarrassing. He knew Steve was close to her but he was pretty sure they only reminisced about the past together. Tony hadn't felt there was any reason to tell him that Peggy-- Aunt Carter-- Agent Carter, fuck, that Agent Carter had been a close family friend, back when he'd actually had a family. All she would be able to tell Steve is a bunch of humiliating childhood stories and Tony hated the idea of it.

Well, the cat was out of the bag, now.

"I thought it'd be nice," he said gruffly, hoping against hope that Steve wouldn't think this connection was a big deal. It wasn't. Literally, Tony hadn't seen her in like, twenty years.

"You called her Aunt Peggy?" Steve asked, his voice a sleepy murmur but the smile was still evident in his tone. "I didn't realise you were that... close. She mentioned you a few times. But I never realised she was an auntie." Steve didn't sound annoyed at being kept out of the loop, rather, pleasantly surprised. "Mhm. A proper England trip would be nice, too... and I already have your birthday present. And no, you can't have it early," he said even before the other could attempt to ask.

It was weird to think Peggy was Tony's aunt whilst she'd... kind of been Steve's crush. They'd both liked and respected the hell out of each other. But Steve's old mate had only just gone missing and
they were fighting a war. Perhaps if Bucky hadn't been on the scene and there hadn't been bullets flying, things would have been different. But timing wasn't kind to them, and it didn't matter in the end anyway. Either way, she'd apparently had a significant impact on their lives. Steve could still remember her voice as he went down in the plane, as vivid and crisp as if it were yesterday...he wondered if she'd be well enough for a dance now. Steve could still remember the steps and he was sure she'd appreciate the humor in it. But the walks around the garden alone had tired her out so much...

Steve hated her getting old. It made him feel selfish for still being so young, even if he couldn't help it.

"It does sound nice," Steve hummed again, half asleep by this point. The stress of the day had worn him out. "We should...we should plan that..." He yawned quietly.

"Mm," said Tony, nuzzling Steve lightly. He fell asleep holding him, and his last thought, before he drifted off, was a pang of sympathy for Donner, who must feel terribly alone, sleeping by himself for the first time as an adult, unbonded, alone in a world designed for Alphas, one he didn't understand and had never faced as an independent individual. He seemed like a coward, but who could blame him? At least for now, he had summoned just enough courage to take a chance at escape.

And Tony understood just how much courage it took to take that chance. Especially when, like Donner, you didn't even have a suit of armor.
Expecting the Unexpected

When Tony woke, it was because Steve was trying to extricate himself from the bed. Steve was good at a lot of things, but being sneaky wasn't one of them. His size made that impossible, and when he got out of the bed, Tony noticed.

He sat up groggily. "Time?"

"Six-oh-five AM, sir," said JARVIS.

"Ew," said Tony. "Who gets up that early?"

"Tom Banksy, George Burke, Donner Malick, Steve Rogers, James Rhodes, and Sam Wilson" replied JARVIS.

"They're all up already?"

"Boswell Mackabee is still sleeping."

"So at least one of us has some fucking sense," grumbled Tony, climbing out of bed. He would have liked to keep sleeping, but if everyone else was already downstairs eating breakfast, Tony didn't want to be left out.

"There is a message from you from Dr. David David Gleason, Captain," JARVIS informed Steve. "He describes it as urgent, but personal in nature. It is with regards to Mr. Malick's health. Due to HIPAA regulations, he cannot give you the message without Mr. Malick's presence and consent."

"I don't think Mister Malick knows the meaning of the word consent," said Tony. "But we'll call back right now. Can you tell Donner to get his ass up here?"

"Yes, sir." JARVIS paused, then said, "Mr. Malick seemed rather bothered by me."

"Well, he shouldn't, you're like the most obedient omega in the world," said Tony.

"I am merely a computer program, sir. I believe that is why he is uncomfortable speaking to me. But he is on his way up," replied JARVIS.

Steve threw a dressing gown at Tony to put whilst he quickly moved to get clothes on himself. Just some gym shorts and a tee, but he didn't really want Donner to see him naked. It would only make the omega more uncomfortable (if that were possible). He sighed and ran a hand over his hair, moving over to the mirror to flatten down his bed hair just to give himself something to do.

Then he heard the soft creak of the stairs outside (something very few normal people would hear) and straightened up just as Donner shuffled into the room. He was just in his shirt and trousers, the waistcoat gone along with his shoes. Least he looked more relaxed...even if his face didn't show it.

Steve met his gaze for a brief second before Donner looked to Tony, defaulting to the Alpha.

"Hello? Steve, you there?" David had just picked up the phone.

"Hey. Yeah, Tony and Donner are here too. Everything okay?"

"Well, I was looking over the tests from yesterday and..."
"David, what is it?"

"Well, I can't say unless Donner gives his permission," Gleason said. A pregnant pause followed. "Does he...er...give his permission?" the doctor tried to awkwardly prompt.

Donner looked deeply confused. "Permission?"

"I can't give out your medical information to anyone but you unless you give permission," said David.

Donner looked at Tony helplessly. "Should we call Gene?" he asked after a moment.


"Yes," said Donner.

"I'm not sure if it counts if you tell him to say yes," said David.

"David, c'mon. What's up?" said Tony, whose patience was non-existent in the morning.

David paused, weighing options, then said, "Well, Donner, I... I did a pregnancy test and it looks like you're expecting."

"...I'm pregnant?"

"Yes."

Donner looked surprised. He actually looked at Steve; his hand went up to his stomach. "With a baby?" he asked.

"No, with a velociraptor," said Tony sarcastically.

Donner looked down, as if expecting to see a large, pregnant stomach.

"You're about two, three weeks along," said David. "It's incredibly early. If you were even a day or two earlier, in fact, we wouldn't have been able to detect it."

"I'm pregnant," repeated Donner. He didn't sound upset, just mildly surprised, like someone had told him his socks didn't match and he'd only just noticed. He looked from Steve to Tony and back to Steve. "When... when do I have it?"

"...ah, first week of December, last week of November, thereabouts. Is this your first pregnancy?"

"No," said Donner. Tony and Steve both looked over sharply. "No, I've had four, but Giddy never let me keep them," he said. "Is this one his?"

Dr. Gleason paused and Steve could only imagine him struggling to keep a calm demeanor. "...we can't really say whose it is, Mr. Malick. At this time it's too early to conduct any sort of parental test."

Donner seemed to consider then, then looked at Steve again. Disarmingly, he smiled. "So I'm going to have a baby?"

"Er-- yes, if you-- if you want to keep it, yes," said Dr. Gleason, who seemed to find Donner's reaction unexpected.

"Can I?" asked Donner, looking excited by the prospect.
"You want to *keep* it?" asked Tony, incredulous.

Donner ducked his head shyly, a hand still on his stomach. He had a nervous smile.

"Well, it's your body, Donner," said Dr. Gleason gently.

Donner suddenly looked up, worry clouding his features. "But I had a sip of champagne last night. Is that bad for the baby?"

"Oh, please, you spit most of it out," said Tony.

Dr. Gleason actually chuckled. "I'm sure the embryo is fine, Donner, it's still very, very, very early. In fact, this is literally the earliest we can even tell. One sip of champagne during the first two weeks won't have any lasting effects at all."

"And... and it could-- could be Giddy's? We had sex at the conference. It could be his, right?" pressed Donner excitedly.

"...er, yes, it's possible, it could be," conceded Dr. Gleason. "But there's no way to know for s--"

Tony was making a "vomiting" motion to Steve, but Donner seemed oblivious. "Wait 'til I tell George and Banksy!" he exclaimed, making toward the door, a small spring in his step.

Tony couldn't quite believe how excited Donner was. Shouldn't he be upset? That kid could have been mated by probably a half-dozen different Alphas, yet Donner seemed nothing but happy about the news. Even Dr. Gleason seemed a little surprised by the positive reaction.

Steve watched Donner go, absolutely horrified as the omega practically skipped out of the door. It probably would be Gideon's; all the others were too... recent. What Steve couldn't understand was that instead of feeling violated or confused, Donner was happy.

"I guess... that's a good reaction?" David said, not really sure what to say.

Steve stared at the empty doorway. "I think I'm gonna be sick. Wait. No." He held out a hand, closing his eyes for a brief moment. "Fuck," he whispered, to no one in particular. He couldn't believe this. "Did he say he'd had four before? What does he mean *get rid of them*? Like did he have a termination or did 'Giddy' give the babies away?"

"Well, I shouldn't really tell you this but... the terminations are in his medical history," David said, if anything probably just to stop Steve hunting down the locations of four random babies.

Steve moved to sit on the edge of the bed, still feeling sick beyond belief. He couldn't think. He didn't want to imagine--

"Oh dear Lord," he whispered, hands moving to fist in his hair.

Then Steve's cell phone started ringing on the beside. He ignored it and let it ring out. Steve tried to stand and then sat back down immediately.

"He's like a child," he whispered. "It's like Gideon took... everything that made him *him* and just... stripped it away. How can someone like that have a baby? How can he cope with that kind of responsibility? He can't even deal with it when we ask him *questions*, Tony, I mean, God--"

"I would suggest getting an omega therapist as soon as possible," David cut in. "What he needs is perspective."
"Hey, look-- Steve, look, this isn't a bad thing," said Tony, sitting down next to Steve and putting an arm around his shoulders. "He seems... happy. We'll get him a therapist, like Gleason said-- thanks, by the way, David--"

"Yes, of course."

"I'll have Steve call you back okay? He's having a freak-out. Ciao. Jarv, hang up now... Steve. He's gonna be okay. We got him out and he's got you and Banksy and George, all great omega role models... he's gonna be fine. Seriously. Like Gleason said, he just needs perspective, that's all."

Steve was quaking with anger and upset. Tony rubbed his shoulder, not sure what else to say.

"So... so would the kid be your cousin three times removed, then?" he blurted.

"Correct, sir," said JARVIS.

"C'mon, Steve, you can't let this ruin your day. Let's grab a shower and then go downstairs to have breakfast with everyone... Donner needs your influence. He needs to see omegas like you and Banksy and George being people instead of slaves."

Tony tried to heave Steve to his feet. "C'mon, Rogers, up n' at 'em... no moping... you gotta be strong for Donner... getting him out was just the first step."

"No moping," Steve repeated, as if that somehow helped him do exactly that. He sighed. Tony was right. He was making this about him again...when it really wasn't. If Donner wanted a baby then he guessed it wasn't the worst scenario in the world. Pregnancy might even do him good. Unlikely, but he had to have hope.

Tony could only imagine the scene downstairs, Donner proudly announcing it to a group of people who would no doubt be horrified at the idea.

Suddenly his mind conjured up an image of Donner pleasantly filling out some paperwork for child support, and Gideon's rage at Donner being liberated and having his kid. Tony accidentally snorted a little. "Sorry... sorry, sorry, I know it's not funny, I'm just... I'm just thinking about how fucking pissed off Gideon is going to be if he keeps that kid and it's his after all..."

"Gideon asked for this," Steve breathed. "Ha. He even sent us to the conference in the first place... really, he's brought all of this on himself."

Steve let Tony tug him up and followed him into the shower. He used the peach shampoo again, the sweet scent pleasant. Once showered Steve left Tony in the bathroom to shave, kissing his cheek before he pulled away with a towel around his waist. He wasn't sure what one was supposed to wear for breakfast at seven in the morning so went to grab jeans, a tee and a hoodie.

He was just tugging on his hoodie when his phone rang again. Steve grabbed it, sinking down onto the mattress and tucked his legs underneath himself as he answered. He pressed the phone to his ear after frowning at an unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Did you honestly think I wouldn't find out? Using Colonel Rhodes was rather lazy of you."

Gideon sounded pissed off, tired but also amused. It was a confusing mixture of things. Steve was torn between being a dick and hanging up on him.
"I'm sorry," he said, feigning innocence. "I have no idea what you're talking about. And, how did you get this number?"

It was probably on all the forms the security council made his sign, but Steve still felt he had a right to be offended at the invasion of privacy.

"Drop the act, Rogers. I already know you faked Richard Emmett's background check. You know it's a felony to hack into a national security database and forge data?"

Tony leaned in to the call with a grin. "What forged data?" he asked; he'd already deleted all traces of his tampering.

"Don't act cute, Stark."

"I'm really more handsome than cute," said Tony. "Did you know it's illegal to sell people?"

"Which means you're in big trouble for paying a half-million for that used-up spade."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't paid anyone a half-million for anyone," said Tony. "Richard Emmett may have, but that's not me, obviously. It's a shame Richard Emmett isn't even a real person. Sort of invalidates all that paperwork that Rhodey signed, huh? Sort of makes the non-disclosure agreement non-binding, makes it so that we can release all the tapes of your little pals trafficking people. I'd hate to be in Gene Bennett's shoes right now."

"You bring Donner's ass right back to the Triumph this instant. He doesn't want to be with the likes of you, Rogers," snarled Gideon.

"Oh, wow, you finally care about what Donner wants. Progress!" said Tony, who, while not as infuriated at Steve, was definitely upset; his dander was up, the hairs on the back of his neck spiked. Steve was gripping the phone so hard Tony was a bit worried he might crush it.

"The likes of me?" Steve echoed, actually amused now. He was almost smiling.

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. Breeders like you who only cause trouble--"

"And win wars," Steve cut in, talking breezily, still smiling now. It was strange, that an argument was cheering him up... but maybe he really did need to oppose things to feel accomplished sometimes. And arguing with Gideon felt a lot more productive than bickering with Donner over how he saw himself. That kind of change could only come with time.

"He loves you, you know," Steve said, suddenly more serious. "He'd take on the world for you. You never deserved him. And he never deserved what you did to him."

Four abortions. Steve closed his eyes. Jesus. And Donner didn't want any of them.

"Well, he shouldn't have looked like you." The words were so flippant and dismissive they made Steve want to punch a wall. Like it was Donner's own goddamn fault for looking like him.

"Seriously, what is your deal with me? I know you don't 'approve' of me of whatever bullshit and I know you don't approve of SHIELD initiatives, but what did I ever do to you personally that has made you so goddamn petty?"

Gideon actually chuckled, like he found it funny. Steve distantly imagined punching him in the throat.
"Why am I even arguing with a confused little breeder?" asked Gideon, sounding amused. "Stupid Alphas like the Starks and bleeding-heart betas like Fury put all these ideas in your head... I shouldn't expect you to understand. Take Donner back to the Triumph so that he can carry on with his little life and find a nice Alpha to take care of him.

"You've got to be fucking crazy if you think we're bringing Donner back," said Tony.

"I don't think I need to remind you, Captain Rogers," said Gideon, voice dripping with sarcasm, "that kidnapping and illegal detention is as much a felony as tampering with national databases."

"We didn't kidnap him and we're not detaining him!" snapped Tony. "Donner can do whatever he wants because he's a human being."

"Oh? So then you won't mind if I chat with him," said Gideon.

Fuck. Tony had walked right into that one.

"Donner's not here right now," said Tony quickly.

"Oh, no problem. I can call back later," said Gideon smoothly. "And if Donner wants to take my call, I assume you'll let him, since it's his decision?" He chuckled again.

"I'm blocking this number," replied Tony, and he plucked Steve's phone and hung up. He looked at Steve worriedly. "...Donner can't stay here. It's game over if Gideon talks to him. He should go stay with George, at least until he can stand up for himself. ...we should go check on him." Tony wasn't sure why he was suddenly so concerned with Donner. Maybe because he looked so much like Tony's mate, or because they were related. In any case, Tony found he had a vested interest in Donner's welfare.

He loped downstairs, where there was a big group of people clustered around his dining room table. Donner was eating waffles and looking considerably more cheerful than he had the night before. George and Banksy both looked exhausted.

Sam checked his watch. "It's after six-thirty. Don't tell me you're getting soft, Rogers."

"I made Tequila sunrises," said Banksy, pointing to a drink on the table. From the looks of things, he'd already had a couple himself. Banksy was still absolutely stunning, but he looked like he was a bit worse for the wear after talking to Donner all night.

"I love you," said Tony, grabbing the drink.

"Can I have more waffles?" asked Donner happily. "I'm eating for two now."

"Oh, give me a break, the other one you're eating for is like the size of a pinto bean!" snapped Tony. Donner quelled a little. Banksy and George both looked like they were about to admonish Tony for snapping at Donner, but before they could, JARVIS suddenly spoke up.

"At two weeks, the embryo is actually considerably smaller than a pinto bean. It is likely only a single cell with a diameter of a tenth of a millimeter."

"Can you turn him off? He's been creeping us out all morning," said Rhodey.

"No way. JARVIS is my friend," said Tony.

"Thank you, sir," said JARVIS.
"You know he's not alive, right?" asked Rhodey.

"Just because he's not alive doesn't mean he doesn't have feelings."

"...that's exactly what that means, Tony!"

Steve offered Sam a half smile. "You wanna go for a run?"

"You mean you go for a light jog and I end up dying? Sure man, it's been too long," Sam said, patting his shoulder.

They disappeared out the door a few minutes later. Donner watched with a frown, waffle being chewed slowly.

"What's up?" George pressed.

"Giddy would have never let me go out with an unbonded Alpha..."

Banksy reached for another cocktail.

"Steve can take care of himself," said Tony. He was surprised to discover he meant it. He trusted Steve. Not that he had a choice, after the most recent Barnes affair.

They ran along the beach. The sun was just rising over the sea, meaning rich oranges and yellows bled out into the sky. It was a calming sight after the night they'd just had. "You know all this stuff with Donner will blow over, right? One day he has to come to his senses," puffed Sam.

They were running at a leisurely pace. Well, Steve was, anyway. Sam was struggling to keep up with Steve's jog. "Gideon called us just now," Steve said. "He's using our own principles against us to try and talk to Donner."

"Well then all you have to do is get him to show his true colours. Show Donner what a sleaze-bag Gideon really is," Sam said. It was a good thought but Steve wasn't sure if it would be that simple.

A companionable silence accompanied them for the next twenty minutes or so before Sam spoke up again.

"So, I destroyed that CCTV footage from the HYDRA base. But I did watch it first, just to be sure."

"They said. Thanks, Sam--"

"Did you sleep with him?"

Steve stopped cold in his tracks. "What? No. I don't even remember--"

"I don't mean in the base. I mean on the day you went on like an eight-hour drive to do a five-hour journey. Did you?"

"What the actual hell Sam? I was driving all day. And he's sick, he's not even a whole person...how could you even think that?"

"You did go AWOL for an entire day," Sam dead panned. Steve kind of felt like he was talking to the counselor version of Sam right now.

"When I'm with him... it's terrifying. My instincts kick in. I don't even know who I am anymore," Steve admitted softly.
Sam sighed. "He is one of the most dominant Alphas I've been around in a while."

"But that shouldn't even matter! I don't even notice shit like that."

"But maybe it does. Maybe it matters but you don't realise it in your head. You have three hours to
account for, dude, and not all of that is buying phones and talking to Fury."

"Stop it. You're doing that thing where you try to justify my actions but also make me explain them. I
don't like it. I don't know, okay? I don't know what you want me to say. I didn't sleep with him."

Sam smiled tightly.

"It doesn't even matter. He'll be stuck in a freezer for at least another twenty years, that's what they've
told Clint, so...it doesn't matter. Me and Tony are good now. I'm happy with him."

"You sure?"

Steve nodded, a serious kind of look in his eyes. "I really am."

They got back around eightish. More waffles had clearly been passed around and a few showers had
been had. Donner was still practically glowing... but it was only a matter of time before Gideon tried
to call him. That made Steve nervous.

"You okay there, Sam?" Rhodey asked; the guy was actually bending over, resting his hands on his
knees. He was muttering to himself, perhaps even praying. Then he flipped Rhodey off, good-
naturedly of course.

"I've always said exercise is stupid," said Tony wisely. (Despite claiming to hate exercise, Tony was
surprisingly active, though none of the sports he liked were ones Steve had never tried, such as kite
surfing.)

"Steve! I was promised breakfast with a certain someone," Banksy reminded him.

"I'll be back down in ten," he promised. Steve definitely needed another shower. And he also
needed to think... how could they show Gideon up? How could they prove to Donner what they
already knew? Steve didn't want to make the omega miserable. But in order to save him from
himself, it might be necessary.

Dammit, this was hard.

Steve found his mind drifted when he rinsed off. He used lavender shampoo this time, in hope that it
would be calming. For some reason Banksy helped him stay grounded. Nothing the phased the guy.
He was experienced and yet never talked down to Steve. The first thing he'd asked Steve when
they'd met was how Tony was as a mate. Banksy looked out for his fellow omegas and Steve
appreciated that.

The shower was quick. It was his second that morning and Steve knew he'd have to face Donner
sooner or later. He grabbed his phone but didn't check the screen.

Downstairs, Tony watched Steve and Sam return and excuse themselves to get cleaned up before
they sat down. He got the impression that Steve was avoiding Donner. He didn't blamed him.

Donner watched them as well, sipping some orange juice. He cast a sideways glance at Banksy.
"He's unbonded," he repeated, clearly scandalized by Tony's flippant allowance of Steve having
Alpha friends.
"...Sam's a good guy. Anyways, he's into other Alphas," said Tony.

Donner's eyes widened with a look of fascination tinged with disgust. "He's a homo?"

"They don't really like that term. They prefer acer," said Tony.

Rhodey looked at him incredulously. "Who are you, and what have you done with the real Tony Stark?"

Tony leaned his chair back onto the back two legs of his chair and sipping his drink with a shrug. "I'm bonded to the most wholesome omega on the planet, Rhodey. I can't help it if some of his wacky ideas have bored into my skull."

"You think his ideas are wacky?" asked Donner. He never made eye contact with the Alphas, instead staring at their throats or chests. Tony disliked it because it gave the impression that Donner was staring at his arc reactor.

"...they're wacky to me, yeah. Doesn't mean they're bad, or wrong," said Tony. "In fact, I kind of like 'em. Giving a person agency seems to me like a good thing."

Donner contemplated his juice glumly. Clearly, he didn't agree. Tony bet both he and Gideon were fans of Frond's. Frond had pointed out that omegas, especially male omegas, were only designed for one thing: procreation. She also pointed out that the disgust males of other statuses felt toward them was natural. They were an evolutionary glitch; seeing a man pregnant was weird. Male omegas were best kept in the house, away from other people's judgements, to be pampered and kept safe by their Alphas... like they were fragile, ugly, purebred dogs or something.

He and Banksy kept mixing cocktails until Steve and Sam finally came back. Donner wanted to know if George or Banksy had kids; George had two, one about to go off to college and another who was an sophomore in high school. Banksy had one adult step-son, Ryan, who he was only two years older than, which made Tony's skin crawl a little.

He changed the subject to Banksy's birthday. Banksy was forty-seven and had a party planned that evening. "Oh course, you're all totally invited," he added.

"Who would I go with?" asked Donner plaintively, who clearly liked the idea of going to a Banksy birthday bash.

"Me," said George.

"But you're only a horsesh--"

"--an awesome friend, I know," George cut him off.

Tony was relieved when Steve and Sam returned from their showers. Steve looked refreshed. Sam was still wheezing noticeably from the run.

"So are you two doing anything special for your anniversary?" asked Banksy.

"Probably going to England. Our anniversary is..." Shit. Tony couldn't even remember. June first or maybe second. First, he decided firmly; they was easier to remember. "...June first. Should be nice, this time of year."

"Oh my God, me and Boswell's is June first, too! Totally traditional date."
"Ours wasn't really on purpose," said Tony. He wasn't sure how to respond because he knew how they'd been arranged... how Banksy had been forced.

"I should go wake him up," said Banksy, rising. "Go, Stevie, go ahead and take my seat, I'll get grumpy-pants up..." He walked off whistling. Tony watched him, fascinated.

Tony checked his phone again. He had advised JARVIS to screen all incoming calls. There had been four so far, two from Aria and one from Pepper and one, sure enough, from Gideon, which Tony had ignored.

Banksy returned a few minutes later, grabbed Steve (pointing out that Steve had promised him a breakfast for coming over the night before), and dragged him into another room. 'Breakfast' apparently consisted of the leftover doughnuts from last night (and a brusque "get in!").

"So, how's it going?"

"You mean... Donner?"

"I mean 84! Not Donner... I mean, I'm sure he's lovely, but the poor thing's not quite all there, is he?" Banksy sounded sympathetic but not surprised. He wasn't in shock like Steve had been at first.

"84 is good, I think. They're on target and doing great," Steve hummed, taking a seat opposite Banksy. "I kind of let them do their own thing, to be honest; I don't really know anything about the law."

"Oh I'm sure they're fantastic. George is great."

"Congrats on the show, by the way. The third omega hosted show though? That surprises me. I heard about Ellen. I thought there would be more..."

"No matter. Even baby steps count," Banksy reached out to squeeze his arm. "You have to be one of my first guests. I absolutely insist."

Steve smiled, feeling so very stupid for feeling left out the night before. He needed to get his emotions into check sometimes. "I'd like that."

"And how's the..." Banksy made an awkward gesture with his hands. "Neck situation?"

"Oh." Steve blinked. No one had actually directly asked him about it before. "Tony's mark is there now, like there, not fading. So he's a lot happier."

"And are you? ...happier?"

"I mean... as happy as I can be. It's not going anywhere."

He's not going anywhere, Steve thought. And he really wasn't. Bucky was exactly where he left him and he sure was hell was stuck where he was. Steve tried not to think about it. Whenever he thought of Bucky, eternally asleep, frozen in time, as he had been, he felt a deep, overwhelming sadness.

"Well, good," said Banksy firmly, reading for Steve's hand and squeezing it. "That's the important thing, is that you're happy, that you're safe. You know how Alphas can get." He imitated a growl and then rolled his eyes. "If you want to come on the show to break the 84 thing wide open, you're more than welcome. I mean, the new season doesn't start until fall, but we can totally pre-record, and have that be our premiere. It's going to be very dramatic and what's the point in knowing Steve
Rogers if you don't get some exclusives?”  Banksy was mostly teasing; he smiled broadly at Steve.

Banksy had been the first to ask about Steve's neck directly; not even Tony had really brought it up. He and Steve were both relieved that Tony's mark had been accepted again, at least partially, but Tony didn't want to talk about it to Steve. He couldn't help but feel like the whole reason their bonding issues had been solidified was because of that dirty little trick Frond had taught him with the scent glands, and it made him feel uneasy, thinking they had actually gotten something beneficial out of the AU conference and out of Frond's terrifying D/s theories of partnership.

"You're doing it for your birthday, isn't that right? Only, what, another six weeks? Oo, so exciting. Are you going on the front lines, so to speak, Steve? Dish! Sorry, I'm a little drunk. Talking to Donner... he is sweet and all, it's just... tricky. He seems so young, doesn't he? Thank God Boswell wasn't like Gideon was. You know I never wanted bonded, I was only sixteen, seventeen, but he never made me wear a collar or change my name, I think he just needed a houseboy since he was a widower and Ryan was out at college and he was lonely... well, enough about me, 84! A little birdy told me you were trying to track down two guys named Ashtray and Trickshot... please tell me they're not your cousins, too... are we keeping this under wraps, by the way, the cousin thing?"

Steve wasn't sure what a 'houseboy' really entailed but he didn't want to ask. Boswell seemed so calm and gentle; it was hard to imagine him force bonding anyone...but it had happened and Steve couldn't ignore it. It was one of the reasons he didn't really talk to Boswell all that much one to one. He found it hard to get over. Every time he looked at the man all he could think about was that very thing.

Banksy had the energy of a hummingbird. His posture was relaxed but his sparkling blue eyes sharp. Sometimes it was easy to forget that chipper, goofy Banksy was a major player in Status Alliance, that he was crusading for omega rights just as much as Steve was, in his own way.

"I would be on the frontlines, but my heat is due, so anything on air will have to be prerecorded. I'm also already committed to a documentary in my pre-heat stage so I can't even do anything then. I'm afraid I won't be around for any of it." Steve was a little sad that he might miss the big reveal, but he was also well aware that his place wasn't in a law court. He could stand around and look pretty but that would do very little to actually help with the situation. "But a pre-recording for you would work, if that's what you wanna do." Banksy was so sweet; Steve wasn't sure he could ever really deny him in an interview. "About the security council thing, when you said I was with you and I wasn't, you know, on the run... I never got a chance to thank you for that--"

"Sssh." Banksy placed a finger over Steve's mouth. "Nonsense. We omegas have got to stick together Steve. You and me, you and your cousin..."

"I don't really care about us being cousins," Steve said. "Sorry. I know that sounds... harsh, but I've been awake for over a year now. If any distant family wanted to reconnect with me for whatever reason, they've certainly had their chance to get in touch."

"What about Ashtray and Trickshot?" asked Banksy again.

"They're not my family," said Steve. "But yes, we're trying to find some other missing omegas that were mentioned at the conference. The whole thing was... very disturbing. Have you ever been to one?"

"Oh me? Oh no. No way. I think I would rather die, no offense."

Steve laughed grimly and shook his head. "Honestly, after doing it for two days...I think I'd share that sentiment."
He glanced over to the kitchen and sighed. "I just wish I could show Donner what an asshole Gideon was. Not even in an 'Alpha' way. He's a horrible person, in general. Donner needs to see that he deserves someone who actually wants him." Steve sighed. "I don't know. I don't know how to communicate with him at all. He keeps saying I'm a bad omega. It's probably something Gideon put in his head."

"He needs to make his own opinion of you," Banksy waved a hand. "Just give it time. But I do agree, making sure he doesn't go back to Malick is very important."

Steve went for a third doughnut. Runs made him too hungry for words. "Sometimes I wish I could just make a phone call and have Gideon suspiciously end up in a ditch somewhere..."

Banksy snorted and burst into a quiet, tipsy fit of giggles. Perhaps it was a funny thought, but Steve really wasn't joking.

"Well," said Banksy, still stifling giggles, "if you're on vacation or in heat, just let me know and me and the others in Status Alliance are happy to help make sure Project 84 runs smoothly. We're gonna get 'em, Stevie." He gave Steve's hand another squeeze, then got to his feet to wobble back to the kitchen.

Back in the kitchen, Boswell had wandered down looking thoroughly rumpled. Donner kept glancing up at him with a shy sort of awe.

"Donner, have you thought about going back to your old name?" asked Tony. "The whole reindeer thing is weird. Also wasn't there like, a bunch of famous cannibals--"

"The Donner party," supplied Rhodey.

"--yeah, them. Stephen is kind of better than Donner."

"I like Donner," said Donner a bit defensively. "And I already have enough problems with people mixing me up for Steve Rogers... I don't want the name, too. I'm a good omega." He got a bit of a glassy look. "Although I do think Stephanie would be a nice name, if it were a girl. Gideon Jr. if it's a boy."

"He's having a baby?" asked Boswell with surprise.

"Apparently," said Tony. "He won't shut up about it."

Donner ignored them. "Of course I don't know if it's an Alpha or an omega either. If it's an omega, I think Crystal or Ladybug would be pretty."

"Those are almost as bad as Gideon, Jr.," said Tony. "Just give the kid a regular name if he's an omega, instead of something stupid."

"Yeah, I'm so glad I have a regular name," interjected George. "Serious, it's old-fashioned to name kids differently if they're omegas." He was speaking a little too loudly and quickly.

"Well, I can't name an omega Gideon, Jr.," said Donner, miffed.

"Let's hope it's an omega, then," said Tony. "Name the kid after an ancestor, why don't you? You said Steve's dad was your great-uncle... how 'bout that? Joseph? That's a normal name."

"Hmm... Joey..." considered Donner thoughtfully. "...how about something festive? Since he'll be born in winter?"
"Sure, name him Kris Kringle, if he's an O," said Tony sarcastically. "...it's only May, Donnie, just chill. You've got nine months to name your little pinto bean." He threw back another drink.

It was mid-May and no one, except perhaps Pepper, had noticed that Tony wasn't excitedly talking about his birthday. It would be his forty-first, but there was little planning or fanfare. Tony seemed far more interested in celebrating his and Steve's first anniversary together, which was a nice change of pace from his usual manic insistence on over-the-top parties. Perhaps his last one had been a bit much, even for him.

While Steve and Banksy were talking, Aria and Pepper had stopped by. They looked like yin and yang, with Pepper's light hair and eyes contrasting sharply to Aria's dark hair and smokey eye make-up. Pepper was in a soft pink pantsuit while Aria was in dark, swishy slacks and a dark blouse. Funnily, though, both of them were tapping away on tablets and carrying binders under their arms.

"Uh-oh," said Tony, who could spot work a mile away.

"Okay. I have your trip to England booked, it's May 27th to June 6th, so you'll be leaving in sixteen days, on Thursday, and coming back the Monday following... Tony? President Ellis is inexplicably giving you a medal for bravery at the Expo--"

"Ha!" said Tony, punching the air. Rhodey groaned a little.

"--so you have to attend an awards ceremony in D.C. next week, and Aria has Steve's travel schedule before your anniversary with regards to his commencement speeches. When you get back we have the charity gala planned for June 11th, which is a Saturday, and one year and ten days after your bonding, I've got professional botanists to move all these flowers to the ballroom the night before, we're doing it at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they can accommodate us and besides, Steve likes art... then the second week of June, Tony, you have a meeting with IUPAC about naming your new element, they absolutely will not let you name it 'badassium--'"

"Aww," said Tony with disappointment.

"--I'm trying to negotiate with SHIELD about getting you a temporary pass to Switzerland, but worst case scenario, there's a secretariat in North Carolina where we can carry on with the proceedings."

"Are you sure they won't let me call it badassium? I thought it was typical to name an element after its creator."

"You could call it Malibootium," suggested Rhodey.

"...Malibootium?" repeated Tony. "Well, it does have the word booty in it, so that's a plus..."

Steve wandered back and Tony waved him over. "Look, Steve, the wonder twins have our vacation all ready for us."

Aria offered Steve her binder.

"Thanks. What am I looking at here exactly?" Steve said, flicking through the binder.

"Your SNL scripts. They've been approved and now you have to learn them for next Saturday and learn how to be funny," she told him. "You can be funny, right?" Aria said, giving him a shit-eating grin over her coffee. He gave her an unimpressed look in return. There was also some stuff in the
binder about their trip to England, the hotel, and a suggested itinerary...and apparently Peggy's caretakers had already been informed about the visit so they could let her know. It was weird to think that Peggy needed any help. Steve couldn't imagine Peggy needing nurses to hold her elbows for her. She'd always been so strong, stood so straight-backed and upright.

He traced her name on the page.

"Aside from SNL and some speeches," Aria nodded to Rhodey in greeting without breaking stride in her words, "you don't have anything planned between now and your anniversary, so enjoy the well deserved semi-break."

"You're gonna be on SNL?" A few heads turned at the sound of Donner's voice. Going by his facial expression Steve guessed he liked that show.

"You're going to be brilliant. There's a sketch where you're president and another one where you're a soccer coach!" Banksy said, squeezing Steve's shoulders. "I checked over all of them myself. There's just the right balance of funny and politics. I promise."

"Congrats on the medal Tony," Boswell rumbled from his chair.

"Rhodey, can you do me a favor?" asked Tony, eyes gleaming. "Y'know Senator Stern...?"

"Oh, God," groaned Rhodes.

"...an omega president," said Donner, sniggering.

"You know, every year, people write in Captain America in elections," said Aria without a trace of humor. "In fact, I think you were elected mayor to a couple of towns in the seventies, Steve."

"That's hilarious. I should do that," said Tony.

"You'd have to actually go vote," said Pepper; Tony never voted. He shot a look over to Steve; being outed as a non-voter in front of Captain America was kind of awkward.

"Welp! I've got a lot of work to do. Rhodey, I'll see you at that award ceremony, if you can get Stern. George, are you on Donner-duty?"

"Yup," said George, wiping his face with a cloth napkin. "Want to go to Banksy's party tonight, Donner?"

Donner ducked his head shyly.

Tony was grateful when everyone began leaving his house, especially since he didn't want Donner to be around when Gideon kept calling. Who knows... he might even try to show up. That would be
bad. And George, with his irreverent sense of humor and own past, seemed like a decent guardian for Donner, at least for the present.

"Not voting at all is still better than voting Republican," Steve mumbled under his breath and Banksy grinned.

"Look who's learning about modern politics! That's funny. You're funny. We should have you saying that!"

"Steve's political jokes have to be non-partisan. Remember, President Ellis is a Republican and he's on our side," and Aria humorlessly. "Just stick to the scripts, Rogers."

Banksy gave him a hug and a tight squeeze before he left. Even though he was still a little drunk he gave Steve a very serious nod before pulling away...although Steve wasn't entirely sure what that meant. Maybe it was an encouragement; maybe it was a thank-you. Maybe it was nothing at all. Or maybe it was everything, because there were some things that were simply too big for words. Steve wasn't sure, but he squeezed Banksy back and returned the nod, because whatever it was supposed to mean, Steve think he sort of got it... one omega to another.
Steve left Tony to work for the rest of the day. He hung out with Aria mostly, cleaning up a few details for their trip and practicing some of the scripts. She kept laughing at Steve (not in a good way). He was awkward when it came to saying stuff with lines and always had been; back in the USO, he'd kept notecards posted to the inside of his shield and more than a few people had told him he needed to deliver them more "convincingly." Apparently he needed to work on "loosening up" whatever that really meant.

He eventually gave up completely; Aria said his awkwardness was charming and people would probably love him no matter how terrible his acting was.

"What should we wear for the party?" Steve asked Pepper, finding her in the kitchen. She was drinking coffee and face timing Happy, and actually almost looked a little bit embarrassed at being caught.

"You don't need a three piece suit with a tie, but it won't hurt to look smart. Business casual, I'd suggest."

"That leather jacket you have is nice! The one with the green inside!" Happy offered through the tablet and Steve smiled.

"Alright. Jacket it is."

Steve decided on black jeans and a white shirt for underneath. He was kind of sick of wearing dress pants all the time and besides...he was aware that he looked good in jeans. Before, when he was small, Steve hadn't ever felt 'good' in anything. It felt nice to, well, feel nice. He headed down to the workshop, having already laid out Tony's selection of outfits on the bed for him depending on how smart/casual he wanted to go.

He stuck his head in to hear something being welded to something else. "Tony?" Steve stepped into the workshop tentatively, not wanting to interrupt something serious. "We have to leave in an hour; you wanna come up and get dressed soon?"

Tony looked up, his face obscured behind a pair of dark welding goggles. "...leave in an hour for what?" he yelled over the blaring music of KISS. "This flight-capable, modular armor isn't gonna build itself, you know!" He reached over to the weld power supply to turn it off, then shoved his goggles up on his head.

He eyed Steve with interest and got a small, perky smile. "You look amazing. Like you're going to an audition for Grease. Must be the sideburns. ...c'mon, sugar." He made a kissy face at Steve.

It was pretty typical of Tony to get distracted and flirty when they had somewhere to be in an hour. Punctuality was not one of his strong suits.

Now that Donner was both safe and out of his house, he was feeling a lot better. And he was actually looking forward to going off to England for a while, just the two of them. Tony looked Steve over again, gooily. The weird thing about bonds was that they pretty maintained the same level of over-the-top devotion for their entirety. Tony doubted he'd ever get sick of Steve. Every time he saw Steve or smelled him all over again, he felt the familiar tug toward him. Even though Steve was a guy, with a strong jaw and sideburns and the kind of abs Tony would kill for... he just loved him.

He didn't understand what bonding would feel like to an omega who was forced. Alphas couldn't
really be forced, and besides, they could distance and even sever bonds. But for omegas... what was it like to be bonded and to feel devotion to someone you didn't even know or like? Baffling.

"For Banksy's birthday party, remember?" Steve filled in patiently. He honestly wasn't sure what kind of party to expect. He didn't imagine it would be like Tony's last birthday but he also couldn't see them all just sitting down for wine and cheese. Whatever happened, Steve was sure it would be interesting. "Grease? Haven't seen that one yet, it's on the list though," Steve recalled as he walked up to Tony and pressed a kiss to his temple. He looked over the bench and realised he didn't really have a clue what Tony was doing. He got that the suit would self-assemble... he didn't need to understand how on top of all of that.

"I can see the cogs turning in your head, dear, but come on, we really need to get you clean. How does the oil just get... everywhere?" Steve asked with a fond sigh, his fingers brushing against Tony's. Steve too was evidently feeling better without an omega who disapproved of everything he did in the house. He tugged on his mate's hand gently. "Come on. The suit's not going anywhere..."

Tony pulled his goggles off and tossed them aside with annoyance. "That's kind of the problem, Steve... it's not going anywhere," he grumbled. But he knew Steve wanted to go to Banksy's party and that he could work on the suit later.

He peeled away his oily clothes and then looked at Steve with a grin. "I'm all oiled up and naked. Please tell me you're not going to let this opportunity go to waste?" He sidled up to Steve, careful not to touch his white shirt and get any motor oil on it, then dropped to his knees and nuzzled Steve's groin.

"C'mon, I bet Banksy's party will last all night long... what's another ten or fifteen minutes?" he asked into Steve's thigh. There was something very sexy to him about these role reversal, Tony on his knees and naked, Steve standing over him, arms crossed, looking both amused and exasperated. Unlike Tony, Steve was usually on time.

"It's not exactly a sexy kind of oil. Tony!" Steve sighed, almost fondly as Tony got down onto the floor. It meant a lot that the other was prepared to do this but seeing Tony on his knees didn't exactly give Steve some special kick, it was more the anticipation of what was going to come next...

Tony doubted he was experiencing whatever omegas did when they knelt. He'd seen Steve kneel lots of time, getting that blissed-out expression on his face, the same one he got when he was knotted or when Tony touched behind his ears. But that was okay. When Steve knelt, it was because he wanted to, and because he enjoyed it. And Tony rather liked when his mate enjoyed himself.

He played with Steve's zipper temptingly, and found himself thinking, inexplicably, about how much better their second heat would be, now that they actually knew what the fuck they were doing. Sort of. He wondered if he could get Steve to wear the collar. Definitely, if he asked Steve in heat. But he should probably ask beforehand. Steve couldn't be expected to say anything meaningful in heat, any more than he could when Tony pressed his scent glands.

Steve let out a quiet sound of approval as Tony nuzzled at his crotch and Steve's dick twitched in his pants in response. Dammit. His resolve was quickly crumbling, especially by the point that Tony had reached up to undo his zipper. Steve let him do it. God; why would he ever stop him.

"I guess... I guess it is supposed to be fashionable to turn up late to a party," Steve murmured, his resolve totally non-existent at this point. Perhaps Tony was a 'bad influence' sometimes but Steve had a high sex drive (presumably because of the serum) and was almost always up for it.

"Tony--" Steve paused as his underwear was tugged down. "What are we doing here exactly?"
Tony looked up in alarm. Was Steve asking what they were doing presently, or in a broader, more existential sense?

He decided to try to answer both.

"Uh, we're enjoying each other's company? Because we're mates?" ventured Tony, fingers still buried behind the waistband of Steve's briefs. He looked up. "You okay, Stevie?"

It wasn't that Steve wasn't into it; Tony could smell his arousal, could see his half-hardened length. But there was also an inexplicable sense of reluctance and Tony wasn't sure why.

He didn't think this was a big deal; truthfully, he wasn't even interested in getting off personally. He just wanted to pleasure Steve and then hit up Banksy's party. It would take, what, ten minutes? Was this a lateness thing or something else?

Tony nosed Steve's groan again and Steve's dick twitched longingly against his face. Tony kissed it softly, then glanced up, anxiously. *Please don't make this weird*, he thought. As if sucking Captain America's dick in his garage wasn't already kind of bonkers.

"I'm--" Steve let out a choked sound at the wet touch of Tony's mouth and a hand flew back to grip the edge of a work bench instinctively. "--f-fine."

He wasn't 'fine;' he was rock hard.

Part of him wanted to reach out to run a hand through Tony's hair and take hold, but he didn't want to in case...in case...he didn't want to trigger Tony. It was partly why the other on his knees slightly unnerved Steve. He was almost...scared that this might bring unwanted memories to the foreground. That would never be his intention. Ever. So he didn't dare touch, just in case.

Once Tony got down on his knees properly his brain stopped producing coherent thoughts anyway. Steve let out a quiet, pleased sound and tilted his head back, eyes fluttering shut as the wet heat of Tony's mouth enveloped him. He was getting wet too; he'd need to change underwear before he headed out again. They were definitely going to be late.

"Tony... ah-- please..."

Tony purred softly, bobbing his head up and down Steve's shaft, and reaching between Steve's legs to play with his balls, to stroke his entrance. Steve had one hand on the side of one of Tony's work benches, white-knuckled. Steve was shaking, no doubt weak-kneed; it gave Tony a small sense of power, to reduce Steve to a quivering, puddly little mess with just his mouth.

They'd only done this a handful of times but Tony generally felt more confident about it, because Steve had never grabbed him, never shoved his head down or made him feel trapped. Anytime Tony went down on him, Steve let Tony have free rein to do what he liked and it was encouraging not to feel pressured. That was one of the wonderful things about Steve; he liked nearly everything but never asked for anything.

Tony paused to lick a few beads of precum off of Steve's head and then ducked to lap at his slit. Above him he heard Steve give a weak whine of pleasure, which was almost enough for Tony not to mind Steve's balls pressed against his face.

He slid back up, pulling Steve's cock back into his mouth and glancing up at him. Steve was clinging to the edge of the table hard enough to maybe break it. They broke a lot of furniture.

Steve whimpered as Tony began to mouth at him in earnest. They didn't do this to often, or
rather...Tony didn't too often to him. But Steve definitely appreciated it. He knew that this was a big thing for Tony. And it certainly felt fantastic...he would maybe ask about that other thing Tony had done with his mouth the other day. That had felt fantastic.

The workbench soon became the only thing that was keeping Steve standing. He panted, his fingers digging in...perhaps even leaving dents in the metal surface of the table. Oops? When Tony licked at his head Steve definitely heard the bench groan a little in protest. Fuck.

Steve managed to look down and just met his gaze. Nothing could have been hotter to him in that moment. "T-Tony. Ah. Fuck." It took every ounce of willpower he had not to rock forward into the tempting wet heat of Tony's mouth. "I'm not gonna last long like this," he warned him, breathless and pink cheeked.

"Good," garbled Tony around Steve's length. He ran his tongue along the underside, gently sucking, and reached up to stroke Steve's entrance. His fingers came away wet and sticky; Steve was nearly whimpering. Tony wrapped an arm around one of Steve's thighs and drew him in, closer, deeper; above him he heard Steve moan appreciatively. "Mm," murmured Tony insistently into Steve. "Mm... mm-hm..."

Steve was shaking with tension but Tony made no move to let up, keeping a firm grip on Steve's thigh, his mouth working over Steve's shaft relentlessly.

Gently, he pushed a couple of fingers into Steve. Steve was slippery with arousal and they went in easily; Steve let out a choking moan above him.

Steve did whimper, loudly, as Tony pulled him closer. It was good, the other's hand on his thigh gave him more support which he would definitely need soon enough. He was pretty sure his legs were about ready to give way beneath him. "T-Tony... fuck!" He trembled as Tony pushed his fingers inside. It always made him come apart quicker if Tony fingered him. It never quite felt the same, unless something was inside of him.

When Tony crooked his fingers inside of him Steve saw stars and he came moments later. He moaned loudly as he came undone in Tony's mouth, his fingers leaving fresh dents in the table. "Ah..." He slumped against the bench, his legs shaking a little as they really did threaten to give way.

Tony's mouth flooded and Steve leaned forward; Tony couldn't have pulled away if he wanted to. He swallowed, gripping Steve hard, Steve jerking and twitching in his mouth.

After a moment Steve leaned onto the work bench, relaxing; Tony eased Steve out of his mouth, his fingers still inside him.

"Love you," said Tony, giving his fingers a wiggle. Steve's body spasmed; Tony slid them out slowly and licked the juice off of them, looking pleased with himself. He slithered out from under Steve and got up with a smirk. "Okay, I'm ready to go now... how 'bout you, Rogers?"

Steve was red-faced and sweating a little. Even despite the oil, Tony looked more ready to go than Steve.

"Jesus Christ," Steve muttered as he watched Tony lick his own slick off his hand. If he could have gotten hard again so soon, he would have.

Tony patted Steve on the back and walked off to stairs, whistling.

He watched Tony go with a heavy exhale. He ran a hand over his face. Tony was almost...too good at that.
He heard Pepper yell at Tony not to strut around naked; and he pushed off the work bench to go upstairs and get ready.

Whilst Tony showered Steve changed his underwear and doused his face in cold water to try and hide his blush. After that he focused on trying to fix his hair. The task was almost impossible; he would probably leave it for Tony to sort out.

Tony stepped out of the shower behind him and Steve half-watched him dress in the mirror with undisguised interest.

"Happy is waiting downstairs," JARVIS informed them not-so-subtly.

"I need you to fix my hair," Steve told him, turning around. "It still hasn't recovered."

Tony gave Steve a big, wolfish grin.

"Yeah, it's super messed up," he agreed cheerfully. "Looks like you just have an explosive orgasm or something." Steve's face went red all over again.

Tony stood up on his toes and bent Steve's head down to began carefully playing with it, adding gel and moving bits around with his fingers. He grabbed some hairspray and then stood back to examine his work. "...that's about as good as it's gonna get, Stevie," said Tony, reaching out and giving his cheek a few gentle pats. "Honestly, though, you're always a nine out of ten even on your worst days. Don't worry about it."

He went to go yank on some clothes. They were definitely late; Steve had had to swap out his briefs and Tony had taken his time in the shower.

Tony found himself thinking about Banksy ad Boswell's relationship. Boswell was about thirty years Banksy's senior, and it must be difficult for him to stay up late having parties. Tony wondered if he and Steve would ever end up like that. Physiologically, Tony was about fifteen years older than Steve, and Steve didn't look like he was someone who was going to age normally. At forty, nearly forty-one, Tony felt perfectly healthy and capable of keeping up with a much younger crowd, but he worried. Steve looked like a fuckin' co-ed.

They piled into the car twenty minutes late and Happy just sighed fondly. "It's not too long a drive," he assured them before flicking the radio on. Tonight it was low jazz playing. Happy's music tastes were terribly inconsistent, Steve found.

The house was gorgeous as they pulled up to it and not too dissimilar in style to their own. Steve and Tony got of their car and could hear a soft rumble of music coming from the house. It wasn't 'booming' but there was definitely a party going on inside. They stepped through the open doors at the entrance to find a house full of famous people. Of course, Steve didn't recognize most of them but he could just tell... famous people were different, their own brand of insane. Especially at parties.

Steve distantly wondered if he should drink at all. Him getting drunk didn't go too well last time. And Aria had warned him about how famous people always tried to outdo each other.

"You came!"

Banksy appeared out of nowhere and threw himself at Steve, wrapping his arms around him. The man was in a duck egg suit, a white shirt underneath. He looked lovely, as always. He was also clearly a little tipsy. Banksy pressed a noisy kiss to Steve's cheek and then moved to pull Tony into a hug too.
"Did Donner show?" Steve asked curiously.

"Oh yes! He's with George...somewhere. It's a shame he's not drinking though, would have helped loosen him up a bit."

"He's not enjoying it?"

"Steve--" Banksy patted his arm. "Just have fun tonight, okay? You earned it. And so did you." He bopped Tony on the nose with his forefinger. "All the best people are here. You're gonna love it. Come on, come on...let me introduce you into some people. And drinks! Someone get Steve and Tony drinks!"

Steve sent Tony a side long glance. It was going to be quite a night.

Tony let himself get sucked into the crowd immediately. It was an eclectic mix of older Alphas (Boswell's friends) and younger omegas, many of them SA activists, at least one of whom Tony was pretty sure had kicked him outside of the AU conference. There were also lots of people from Banksy's studio, and famous singers and actors, and other talkshow hosts. Tony got himself a martini and managed to shoulder into a conversation among three drop-dead gorgeous women, two betas and one omega. He spotted, among the crowd, Boswell, looking tired, and Tectonic with his brothers, involved in a heated conversation with a fourth man who Tony was pretty sure was Usher.

"Ladies," Tony greeted them smoothly.

"Oh my God, Tony Stark! ...is Steve here?" asked the omega, looking around. The two betas began looking around, too, and Tony sighed internally. His charm was no match for Captain America's. Oh well. Tony could at least console himself with the secret knowledge that less than an hour ago, Steve had been at his mercy.

"Yeah, Steve's here... everyone's here, it looks like," said Tony, who was positive he'd just espied Beyoncé across the room.

"Oh my God, totally," gushed one of the girls. "Steve Rogers, Conan O'Brien, Carson Daly, Pitbull, Rihanna--"

"Did you say Pitbull?" asked Tony, hackles rising. He scanned the room attentively. He and Pitbull had a long-standing feud that neither of them remembered the cause of, although both suspected it had to do with the title "Mr. World-Wide," which both of them had laid claim to.

"Um, yeah, he's out on the pool deck."

"ARMANDO!" hollered Tony.

"...ANTHONY!" hollered a voice from outside. Tony made a beeline for the back of the house, downing his martini and intent of throwing Pitbull into the pool and maybe hurling a beer can at his head while he was at it.

Steve was introduced to so many people from the Status Alliance in so very few minutes that he really could not keep up. But he was all polite smiles and handshakes all the same. Banksy was clearly excited for Steve to meet 'his people' and it he couldn't hardly deny the man on his birthday. Eventually Banksy settled him down with a drink (Jesus, it was strong. It seemed everyone was aware of his metabolism and were trying to compensate) with two young men from Status Alliance. They were around Steve's age, both omegas and he was pretty sure they were a couple...or just overly touchy. Some omegas were like that with each other.
But then one of them mentioned Pride and Steve knew he wasn't imaging it. "My friend's taking me
to a parade for that, or something? It's in August. He's an Alpha who... an 'acer', that right?" said
Steve, glad he finally had something to contribute.

"That's the one!" James gushed. "Oh, you'll love it. Anyone remotely artsy loves it."

"You know I do art?"

"Dude," Rex put a hand on his shoulder. "Like everyone in the Status Alliance knows the date you
were born, your hat size, and your favorite candy bar. Everything kind of went mental when you
came out."

"Everyone at the school I teach at started coming in wearing Cap t-shirts. They loved it."

"Steve!" Tectonic appeared behind them. He grinned down at him. "Hey man, you were looking a
little rough last time I saw you..."

"Your brother's drinks nearly killed me." Tectonic laughed but Steve was only half-joking.

"Hey, I think Tony's in scuffle with Pitbull outside. Wanna watch? Should be funny."

Steve frowned. "Tony's fighting a dog?" He didn't know Banksy had a dog.

Everyone around him burst out laughing.

"This guy's the greatest!" said James, grabbing Steve's hand and leading him out onto the pool deck.

"Pitbull is just a stage name," explained someone else. For a split second, the idea of someone with a
name like "Pitbull" called to mind all the omegas out there with silly little pet names, like DeSoto and
Donner and Waffles.

But Pitbull turned out to be an Alpha, not an omega. He was a white, bald-headed man whose
dominance was on equal footing with Tony's.

He and Tony were both rolling around outside, throwing drunken punches and clawing at each
other's clothes and hair. A small group was watching and filming it on their phones, giggling. The
two were rolling around dangerously close to the edge of the pool; sure enough, they suddenly fell
in, and yanked apart, sputtering.

"Shit! My phone!" said Pitbull.


"Oh, fuck you, Stark!"

"Fuck you, Armando!"

The two lunged and went back to wrestling, made difficult by the water.

"Every year," sighed someone fondly beside Steve.

"Steve!" George was waving on the other side of the crowd by the pool, holding up his phone to
record the fight. Behind him, Donner was cowering, peeking over his shoulder nervously.

It was a good thing Stark phones were waterproof. Steve had dropped his in the toilet about four
times, twice in the sink and spilt coffee on it plenty. He wasn't used to looking after technology or
keeping it away from water. He also often left his phone on tables, which was especially a problem in restaurants. Having a mobile on him and looking after it simply wasn't in his instincts.

Steve went over to George's side. "This happens... every year?"

"Oh yeah, they hate each other, apparently," said George, waving his hand.

"Why?"

"Oh! No one can remember."

Right. Of course. Steve sighed fondly, planting his hands on his hips as he tried to decide if he would offer Tony a hand to get out or not. Honestly, he didn't trust him not to pull Steve in too. He was drunk and would no doubt like to see Steve soaking wet. "Are you enjoying the party, Donner?" Steve asked, glancing sideways at him.

Donner, to Steve's surprise, answered. "It's, er... very loud."

Eventually the two men parted in the pool. Steve bent down by the edge, raising a brow at Tony as he swam up to the pool side. "Proud of yourself?" Steve asked, although he couldn't help but smile. He'd had quite a few drinks himself, but he was only edging on tipsy when a normal person would probably be on the floor.

Tony flopped onto the pooldeck, his lower half still in the water. He was panting softly, trying to staunch a nosebleed; on the other side of the pooldeck, some of Pitbull's entourage was trying to help him staunch an identical one.

"Yeah... yeah, I think I won... I'll finish him off in a sec... I need a drink..."

Banksy wobbled up beside Steve. "You know, I am so glad I'm not an Alpha," he said, putting a hand on Steve's shoulder to steady himself. "We go crazy, what, two times a year? You Alphas are loco 24/7."

"Did you say Four Loco?" called Armando across the deck.

"No, honey, but I can get you some if you want," yelled Banksy back.

"Four Loco is a trashy drink and you're a trashy person, Armando!" yelled Tony.

"Don't make me come over there and kick your ass again, Anthony!"

Banksy rolled his eyes. "See what I mean?" he said to Steve.

Donner was nearby, listening, eyes wide as he watched Tony and Armando posturing. Neither one looked ready for another round but both were gesturing and yelling at each other, threatening the other.

"Why're they fighting? Over an omega?" he asked.

"No, over a misplaced sense of Alpha machismo," said Banksy, hooking arms with Donner. "They're equal in dominance so every time they cross paths they have to try to figure out who's on top."

"...who's on top?" asked Donner.

"We are," said George, tapping away on his phone. "Do you have any idea how many YouTube
views I'm gonna get?"

Donner looked concerned about the blatant dismissal of the Alphas by the omegas. Clearly, he'd never been to a party where everyone acted like equals. Or perhaps not even equals... because of the strong influence of Status Alliance, a lot of the omegas seemed smugly superior to the Alphas. They clustered up in friendly groups, overly touchy and playful with each other, occasionally chuckling at the silliness of Alphas and how much they cared about dominance. A lot were unbonded. Two, Steve had already noticed, were unapologetically in pre-heat and flirting with Alphas, eating cups of crushed ice and looking flushed but happy.

Boswell came up suddenly, looking tired. He looked down at Tony, who was trying not to bleed in the pool, and shook his head a little. "To be young again," he said with a small eye roll. "Tommy, sweetheart, I'm going to bed. You be good now, okay?"

"Alright, Boz," said Banksy, giving Boswell a kiss. "We'll try to keep the rowdiness to less than a hundred decibels."

"That's all I ask," said Boswell with a fond smile, ruffling Banksy's hair.

Banksy tugged his hair out of its tie, shook it out, and then re-tied it into its usual neat little ponytail; Boswell had retreated into the house and most of his older Alpha friends had long since disappeared.

"STEVE! Oh my God!"

Before Steve knew what was happening two of his newfound friends from the fashion shoot were jumping on him. One was a girl named Tracy who barrelled into Steve first, pulling him into a tight hug. She had been the 'plus-side' model but really that just meant she was curvy; models, Steve had learned, had a different sense of what constituted size. Tracy had chocolate coloured hair that fell around her face in tight ringlets, her olive coloured skin dashed with a light spray of freckles. Another guy was with her, Alexis, who was essentially the size of Steve before the serum. He was dressed in slacks and suspenders, a pair of over sized glasses on his face. They were both characters. Tracy already seemed quite drunk.

"It's so good to see you! My Stevie." Tracy reached up to squeeze his cheeks with a grin. "We have to go out again sometime. That was so much fun. Who knew a 90-year-old guy could dance like such a whore, huh?" She laughed, slapping Steve on the ass good-naturedly.

Okay. Tracy was pretty drunk.

"How's it going Steve? The pictures look great, right? Have you seen the ones with you and Trace out on the pool? Stunning!" Alexis beamed, patting Steve on the arm. He was a lot less touchy-feely kind of guy.

"We need to get more drinks," Tracy said seriously. "You won't dance like this. We need to make Steve dance!"

Steve was being dragged back into the house before he knew what was happening.

"Hey! That's my omega!" protested Tony, clambering out of the pool.

"That's right, you better run!" yelled Pitbull as Tony made toward the house, still dripping.

"I'm coming back!" yelled Tony. "You need the break before I beat you up again!"

"Fuck you, Anthony!"
"Fuck you, Armando!

"Don't drip on my rugs!" gasped Banksy as Tony squished into the house, soaking wet. Like Tony's house, Banksy and Boswell's was thoroughly modern, with an open floor plan and lots of accouterments that were probably worth a fortune. Currently, the lights were dimmed except for some colored, blinking lights, and everyone was dancing and drinking and happily making asses of themselves.

Tony grabbed a new martini on his way after Steve and company. Fortunately, Steve kept getting stopped by admiring fans, so he was easy to catch up to. By the time he'd made it up to Steve, Tectonic ("Seriously, man, just call me Trey.") and Danielle from Status Alliance and Tracy and Alexis were all plotting together to get Steve good and drunk.

"Steve!" exclaimed Tony, putting a hand on Steve's shoulder.

"Aw, shit, man!" said Tectonic; Tony's nose was bleeding again.

"You oughta see the other guy," said Tony bravely. A couple of omegas behind him rolled their eyes.

"Dude. You need a towel," Tracy said, looking at Tony with wide eyes.

"Hey! Can we get a towel over here?!" called Alexis. He was one of those people who an amazing ability to project his voice. Steve didn't know how someone so small could be so... loud. Lo and behold about a minute later someone appeared with a tray of towels.

Steve grabbed one with a small thanks and tucked it around Tony's shoulder. "You'll get cold if you don't get dry," he warned him.

Alexis offered Tony the fancy napkin thing from his shirt pocket for his nose. "I get them free all the time," he assured him.

"We need cocktails," Tracy said, watching them try to stop the bleeding with limited success.

"We do! Hey, little bro!" Trey turned around to beckon one of brothers over. The one who'd gotten Steve shit-faced before. "Come on, let's go to the kitchen and make some drinks guys."

"Captain America, drunk?" Danielle tilted her head curiously as they began to walk. "I didn't think such a thing was possible."

"You should see it!" Tracy grinned. "He downed an entire bottle of vodka like it was nothing."

Steve turned a little a pink. Oh God, he had done that, hadn't he? The night after the shoot had been a fun one but Steve really didn't feel like he ought to make a habit of it. Aria would kill him.

Tony stuffed Alexis's handkerchief against his nose. "I totally won," he informed this, his voice slightly muffled.

"Of course you did," said Banksy, patting his arm with another roll of his eyes.

"Least they're not comparing knots," muttered Tracy, and she and Alexis both burst into giggles.

Trey's brothers, both huge Alphas, were dutifully mixing drinks, while Trey perched up on the counter, cracking his knuckles. "Bet you didn't have parties like these back in the old days, huh, Steve-o?"
"Some people probably did, but I certainly didn't. One pint of cider and I was on the floor," Steve said, remembering almost with a fondness. Bucky used to joke that at least Steve's lack of tolerance was cost effective. Whenever they went out to bars it had always been a treat (especially since most bars didn't allow omegas) but Steve had gotten into fights too often... always with Alphas.

Tony grabbed another martini and sipped it awkwardly, trying not to get any blood in it. "Banksy, you should play some old-timey music for me and Steve to dance to."

Banksy pulled out his phone and began looking up the top hits of the forties. Tony looked over his shoulder. "Is that the new iPhone? Let me hook you up with a StarkTech III, it's got a way better interface."

"Sure," hummed Banksy.

"Mine's a StarkTech IV. We're probably gonna roll them out sometime next year."

"Neat. ...is it, like, weird, not knowing who The Beatles are?" asked Banksy, looking over at Steve. One of Trey's brother had handed him a mixed drink; Tracy was simply shoving a bottle of tequila at him.

"Which do you want to be drink?" Steve asked.

Tracy grinned. "Both."

Steve gave her a look. "It's not even midnight yet. And I've heard The Beatles. A friend--(Aria)--insisted I give them a listen. I kind of have this list I keep, for stuff to catch up on...I'm getting there."

"Do you like The Beatles?" Alexis asked.

Steve shrugged. "They're alright."

Banksy looked affronted. "Alright?"

Steve shrugged sheepishly and sipped at his drink. Bands that a lot of people fawned over didn't hold the same nostalgia for Steve. He often found it hard to appreciate why some bands were legendary and others weren't.

"You like Taylor Swift so it figures," Tracy grinned again and poked Steve's cheek. "Guess the serum didn't improve your tastes much, huh?"

Steve rolled his eyes, then tilted his head at Tony. "Do you need help with your nose?"

"No, no, it's fine," said Tony quickly, checking the cloth in his hand. "I think it's stopping. ...his was bleeding way more, though," he added, clearly unable to drop, as Banksy termed it, "Alpha machismo." Perhaps part of it was because of the two omegas in pre-heat. Or perhaps it was the steady stream of martinis.

"Are you throwing one of your crazy birthdays, Tony?" asked Banksy.

Tony grinned a little. "This year, actually, no... Steve and I are going to England for our anniversary in June."

Everyone awwed. Tony slipped a proud arm around Steve's waist and leaned his head on Steve's shoulder, shoving the napkin back against his face so he didn't drip blood on Steve's clean white t-shirt.
"Okay, look, this one was huge in your day, Steve. Number one on the '43 charts: People Will Say We're In Love. I'll get the DJ to play it!" said Banksy excitedly. He scurried off.

"Aww, you guys are so cute. I think it's great how you don't care what people think," said Tracy.

"What do you mean? Everyone loves us, we're a total power couple," said Tony.

"I mean, like, with you being shorter and not very dominant."

Tony's hackles spiked. "I'm not that short! Steve's just really tall! And I'm not the least dominant guy here, Pitbull--"

"She didn't mean it like that," said Alexis quickly, but it was too late; Tony was scanning the room for Pitbull, clearly intent of getting into another scuffle.

"Sorry!" Tracy said, looking a little meek as she sipped at her drink.

"Tony. Tony... hey. Hey. Come on." Steve reached for Tony's arm, pulling him close before he could slip back into the crowd, clearly on a mission. He wasn't entirely sure where he'd put his own drink down. Maybe he'd drunk it already, who knew? He lifted a hand to cup Tony's cheek, trying to keep his mate's gaze on his face. "Fighting Pitbull won't make you any more or less of anything. He already has a dumb name; it's not even a nice dog-- anyway. The point is, don't go make your nose even worse."

"Make my nose worse? I'll make his nose worse!" growled Tony.

Trey was sniggering a little; Tracy mouthed sorry to Steve.

Steve could tell Tony wasn't yet convinced. He sighed. He pressed a kiss to his cheek and then ducked his head down to whisper in his ear. "Don't go beat up the stupid dog man and I'll make it worth your while, yeah?"

Then the song came on, People Will Say We're In Love, and the tone of the entire room changed.

"Come on." Steve squeezed his hand gently. "Don't you wanna dance?"

Tony scanned the room one last time to see if Pitbull had come in yet. He hadn't. Tony sighed a little.

"Okay, okay, we'll dance, but I swear, if he tries to come in here--" His hackles stood up again. Banksy walked back over and smoothed them down.

"Oh my God, Tony, seriously, chill. Go dance with your mate; this is your song!" he insisted.

Tony grumbled but let Steve lead him into the center of the room and slipped his arms around Steve's waist, automatically going to lead. Steve looked a little flushed. He wasn't much of a drinker, but when he drank, really drank, it was... precious. Tony rubbed his thumb on Steve's back, looking into his eyes. Steve could never understand how important it was to feel... big. Or maybe he could. But for Alphas, there was an added dimension. Tony had a mate to protect. The fact that his mate didn't need protecting didn't register to him, at least not instinctually.

But the soft music and the warmth of Steve's body was mollifying. Tony leaned into him, closing his eyes, the two of them swaying idly.

The song, thankfully, calmed Tony down. There was some cooing from the kitchen (probably Tracy
and Alexis). Steve glanced over to see that Banksy had grabbed Danielle to dance with too. "See? Is this so hard?" Steve said softly, pressing a kiss to Tony's forehead. He didn't think about the height difference much...but it probably should have occurred to him that it bothered Tony. He could still feel how wound up his mate was and sighed, closing his eyes too for a brief moment. "Come on. You get to screw Captain America every night, and he doesn't, isn't that enough?"

He didn't know what to say to make it better. It also didn't help that Steve was slipping past tipsy and into something else.

The song ended and the music went back to the poppy stuff it had been before. A few of the omegas in the crowd jumped up onto a table to dance.

They stepped out of the way of some dancers and Steve reached up to wipe up at Tony's face with the napkin again. The bleeding had mostly stopped, but it still looked sore.

"Tequila shots!" Tracy announced from the counter. "Oh my God Steve. Come do the thing where you do ten in a row again; that was so funny!"

"No, I really shouldn't," said Steve.

"Did you recognise the song, Steve?" Banksy asked, appearing with Danielle arm in arm.

Steve paused to think about it. He was pretty sure he had watched Bucky dance with some girl to it once. But he shook his head. "Nah. Sorry Banks," he said. "A lot of my old memories are kind of fuzzy anyway."

Several people awed again at Steve.

"The past's in the past," said Tony wisely. "Steve's been going a good job of getting caught up..."

He reached up to brush a lock of hair away from Steve's face.

"ANTHONY!" bellowed someone.

"ARMANDO!" shrieked Tony, his mood evaporating. He darted off.

"Don't fight on the rug!" cried Banksy, looking alarmed that bleeding might occur in his house.

There was a loud burst of laughter across the room, mostly from omegas; no doubt the two had gotten into another scuffle. Trey got a big, goofy grin on his face. "Man, you know, it's so good to just... be me, you know? Thanks, man." He reached over to hug Steve suddenly, nearly falling over. He was clearly drunk. One of his brother reached over to scruff him to keep him from unbalancing Steve; even though Steve easily weighed twice as much as him, Steve was swaying a little, and it wasn't because of the music. "Like-- like I love-- being me," finished Trey dizzily.

"You're doing good, Trey," said his brother, patting him.

"That's so great. I'm so glad you can be you. You're great," Steve told him. He let Trey hug him, or rather cling to him, but then he quicklyfell back into his brother's arms. He was giggling. Steve realised he was drunk, too.

"See how great it is? Omegas happy to be omegas... yay, twenty-first century!" said Tracy loudly, holding up her drink in a toast.
"To the twenty-first century!" agreed someone else, raising a glass.

"Fuck suppressants!" said Trey.

"Yeah, fuck 'em!" agreed a girl who had just walked up. She was one of the ones in pre-heat and looked wide-eyed and jittery with excitement.

"Fuck 'em!" repeated Trey.

"Fuck Alphas!"

"Fuck the Horseshoe Society!"

"Oppression sucks!"

"Fuck 'em!"

The group around Steve, drunk, was getting increasingly rowdy. Banksy had disappeared, probably to protect the rug he kept worrying about. The music in the background was loud and pounding again; it was after midnight and the party was slowly devolving into something more like one of Tony's parties. Boswell was either an incredibly deep sleeper or he was upstairs with a bunch of pillows crammed over his head; the music was loud enough to drown out all talk except yelling, and the bass vibrations came up from the floor.

Someone pushed another glass into Steve's hand; a small group had begun half-chanting, half-singing "fuck 'em!"

Steve sighed, exasperated as Tony disappeared again. Oh well. He supposed if they had to, they could stop by the hospital on the way home... ER trips with Tony were a fairly common occurrence nowadays.

"I will never get used to how much you guys swear in this century!" Steve laughed, shaking his head.

Tracy peered at him. "Say it. Say fuck. I've never even heard you swear Steve! Do you ever swear?"

"Only really in bed," Steve answered without thinking.

"What's sex with Tony Stark like?!" It was one of the omegas in preheat, her eyes were wide and she smelt awesome. Tracy pushed a half a bottle of tequila into his hand.

"Really good," Steve told the omega, definitely grinning now. "Very... really good."

Before he could be asked anymore awkward questions Tracy started chanting 'chug, chug!' And everyone else joined in too. Soon enough Steve had emptied the bottle like all that was in it was water.

"Okay, there. But that's the last one!" said Steve firmly.

"Come on!" Tracy made a noise of delight as a new song came in and dragged Steve onto the dance floor. "We gotta dance! I wanna see Captain America slut drop!"

"What drop?!"

The song that came on was one that Steve didn't recognise: Hotel Room Service, by Pitbull.
"Hey, this is my song!" said Pitbull, perking up.

Tony took the opportunity to clock him in the jaw, then swear profusely, because punching someone with a hand that had several broken fingers was a sobering experience.

Laughing, Pitbull's crew tugged him away, and several omegas grabbed Tony to separate them. Tony's hackles were spiked and wouldn't go down; he was too wound up.

"Hey, man, chill, chill!" shouted one of the omegas, James, over the music, running a hand over the back of Tony's neck, trying to flatten his hair. "...oh, are you an acer?"

Tony froze. "No!" he barked, and took a swing at James.

James's partner jumped into the fray and a moment later Tony, Pitbull, and both omegas were a mass of flailing limbs.

"Someone should go get Captain America!" yelled one of the onlookers. "They're gonna kill each other!"

"Aw, let 'em, two less Alphas in the world to oppress us..."

"I'm getting the captain!" A small Asian girl shouldered past the crowd toward the main room, where a solid block of bodies was dancing, or at least pulsing drunkenly, to the music. "Steve-- I mean, Captain Rogers-- hey, Steve!"

Steve was smashed between Danielle and the girl in pre-heat.

"You know, I'm not bonded," she was saying to Steve, eyes still bright. "I would love it if you could introduce me to Tony... do you guys ever have threesomes?"

"We...we don't do threesomes," he told her. Although, for a heat, it kind of made more sense. It meant once person wouldn't half kill themselves by keeping the omega satisfied alone. But not right now. Steve patted her arm. "I'm sure you'll find someone great."

"Mr. Rogers-- I mean, Captain-- mister-- Steve-- hey! Mr. Steve!" The Asian girl was tugging on Steve's sleeve insistently. "Your mate-- James-- James is in a fight-- with your mate-- hey!" Over the music, all Steve could really make out was "your mate" and "James" over and over.

"Bucky?" he said in confusion.

Before Steve could give any attention to the girl yelling at him Tracy pulled him into another dance. This was one was too familiar. He didn't like it. "Hey, hey...Steve! You okay?" Tracy asked, half yelling in his face.

The music changed suddenly and abruptly. "This one goes out to Steve Rogers... straight from 1939... Glenn Miller!"

The song was instantly recognizable to Steve, though the DJ had sped it up and put a bass beat to it to jazz it up a bit.

"Wishing will make it so... just keep on wishing and care will go. Dreamers tell us dreams come true. It's no mistake; wishes are the dreams we dream when we're awake..."

Tracy laughed and grabbed Steve's hand; apparently, she knew how to swing dance.

Maybe it was just all of the alcohol but Steve was feeling extremely uncomfortable. He didn't like
how the two centuries were colliding. It was confusing and upsetting.

"That's right, guys, we're takin' it back!" yelled the DJ, and another familiar song was playing, again sped up, mixed to be a bright, poppy dance number, though Steve remembered it as a slow, sad song. One he and Bucky had danced to, slowly, in their apartment, only a few nights before Bucky had left for Europe. It sounded strange and uncanny, being altered into a pop song.

"If I didn't care more than words can say... if I didn't care, would I feel this way? If this isn't love, then why do I thrill? And what makes my head go 'round and 'round, while my heart stands still?"

The girl who had tried to get his attention earlier was back. "Mr. Steve, your mate-- Pitbull-- and James-- and his mate-- he's in a fight!" she yelled. Again, all Steve heard was a fractured babble about "James" and "your mate" and "fight."

Steve really loved dancing. He honestly did. It was the closest you could get to fighting, in a way. A sense of rhythm was key and you had to watch what your partner(s) were doing in order to do it well. A good fighter was always a good dancer, or at least in Steve's experience.

Bucky had been a hell of a sniper. And a hell of a dancer.

The girl from before reappeared and grabbed his hand. Did she say something about a fight? He frowned. "I'll be... I'll be one minute," he told Tracy and let himself get pulled through the crowd, towards--

Oh dear.

They were fighting. A whole lot of them, including some omegas. He could see Tony having it out with the dog guy in the center and they looked like they could seriously hurt each other. Their hackles were up and teeth were being bared. Steve sighed loudly. Let Tony get beaten up, or damage his bravado by intervening...?

Fortunately, when Steve began to weave through the crowd, people stopped scuffling, or at least the omegas did. Steve wore a serious expression; he was one of the only real soldiers in the room. He could have them all on the floor in minutes, possibly seconds.

Steve did the only thing he could think to do without upsetting Tony outright. He stood goddamn right between them. Pitbull's fist hit his chest instead and the man swore loudly.

"Jesus fucking Christ. What are you made of? Stone?!"

Steve ignored him and turned to Tony. "Please," he intoned gently. "Don't do this."

Tony paused, because Steve was effectively blocking the other Alpha and the omegas and he wasn't about to hit Steve. His whole body was quaking with a low growl. His face had a slightly grey pallor and was clammy, like he was about to throw up; the reason was obvious. He clung his right hand to his chest, and it was obviously swollen and painful.

"...that guy called me an acer," he snarled.

"Because you have a scar on the back of your neck!" protested James.

"It's from a lab accident!"

"Okay, okay, Jesus!"
Tony tried to get around Steve, intent on getting in at least one more smack, especially since Pitbull had just punched his omega (though Steve didn't even seem to feel it, and Pitbull was clutching his hand and wincing), but Steve was doing an excellent job of blocking them from seeing each other.

"Ste-eve," whined Tony.

Banksy slid up behind Steve and leaned in to murmur to him. "Why don't you take your Alpha outside to calm down? We should just keep them separate... they're going to keep setting each other off, you know how Aces are."

Pitbull's crew was already dragging him away with the enticing offer of more drinks.

Tony's shoulders sagged a little, and he gave Steve a glare. "I was just about to win," he grumbled. "...that guy thinks he's so dominant... I'll show him... he didn't hurt you, did he?" It was a ridiculous question, but Tony reached out and shoved up Steve's t-shirt to check his stomach. There wasn't a mark on him. Several people cheered at Steve's abs.

"I'm fine." Steve quickly pulled his shirt back down. "Come on Tony," he said, taking his Alpha's hand to lead him upstairs to a bathroom. "James has an omega boyfriend; he probably feels more comfortable bringing that sort of stuff up. I'm sorry. He shouldn't have asked."

He found a bathroom and pushed open the door to see two people making out in the bath. They squealed at the interruption and Steve quickly shut the door before moving along to the next one.

He locked the bathroom door and then lifted Tony up onto the countertop easily. He was a little drunk, sure, but he was coherent enough for this. Steve grabbed a towel, dampened it and began cleaning Tony up.

Steve sighed fondly and kissed Tony's cheek, the least sore looking one. "Well, I certainly wouldn't kneel for Pitbull. God...what a stupid name, okay? So maybe you didn't get to finish the fight. Maybe I don't know anything about being dominant. But I certainly wouldn't be submissive for him." Steve made sure to meet his gaze. "Only you."

Tony let out a deep, exasperated sigh.

"I know, I know, but... but it's not about that. It's hard to explain. Dominance isn't about omega submission, it's about... I don't know. It's an Alpha thing, Steve. Every time I smell his stupid smell, I just want to smack the crap out of him, I don't know why. Like you know how me and you are scent-mates? He's like... the opposite. There's some Alphas I just... fuckin' Euler's ghost, they just piss me off! I bet the Germans have a word for it."

Tony gritted his teeth as Steve looked over his hand. The cool washcloth felt good on his face. But Tony didn't want to admit how much pain he was in. He looked over his shoulder at the bathroom mirror, wondering how many others had seen his neck. His hackles had been raised all night; normally, his hair covered the scar pretty effectively. "You don't think anyone... anyone thinks I'm an acer, right? I mean, it's... it's obviously not a bite mark... and... and I'm bonded to you. You're the best omega. I obviously like omegas." He winced as Steve worked on dabbing the blood out of his goatee. Beneath it was the faint scar from when Justin Hammer had bit him on the lip the previous year; Justin, like Pitbull, was on the same level of dominance as Tony, and thus, the two of them couldn't stand each other. Although Tony was of the opinion that even if Justin were less
dominant than him, he would still hate the guy for being an annoying tool.

"It's no one's business. But yes, obviously you're with me... obviously you're not an acer," Steve breathed. "Maybe you should do a interview with some Alpha magazine about it. Something that will make you feel more..."

Steve had been more present in the media had Tony had. He'd done plenty of interviews where as Tony had only really done the one on Banksy and Boswell's show with them. He hadn't got his 'side' of the story out yet, so to speak.

He smiled a little at Tony calling him the best omega. Obviously his opinion was bias but it still felt good to hear it.

"Can we go home? I can't believe I'm saying we should cut out of a party early, but my hand is kind of messed up," said Tony. As usual, he was making a huge understatement regarding his injuries; the broken fingers were swollen to twice their normal size and had gone from red to purple.

"Besides, George said he wanted to cut out, too. He doesn't handle his booze well and Donner's kind of overwhelmed... I told Georgie that Happy could drive them home with us."

"I'll text Happy; we'll go by the ER on the way back, get you sorted out."

Steve kissed his temple again, texting Happy to meet them outside.

Donner looked awkward as he got into the car next to them. He was staring at Tony, looking down at his hand, but also watching Steve. He peered at his eyes.

"You look drunk," he said and he sounded disapproving.

"It's a party!" George said, speaking a strange high pitched accent. Maybe he was doing an impression of someone... but Steve didn't recognise it.

"I'm fine. Happy, can you get us to the hospital?"

"Sure thing."

Happy looked, well... happy. Least someone was apparently having a good night.

George was tipsy, his head leant against the window. Steve sighed. They hadn't managed to say goodbye to Banksy; the guy had been impossible to find.

"I'm never going to get used to these rich people parties," he muttered.

Steve wrapped an arm Tony's shoulders and squeezed lightly.

The drive home was mostly quiet; Tony was clinging to his hand with a look of forced calm, and George was half-asleep, waking only to hum softly with the radio. Donner, as usual, had nothing to say; he sat quietly, watching Tony discreetly, as he was the only Alpha in the car.

"Did you win?" he asked suddenly, softly.

"Yeah," said Tony, through clenched teeth.

Donner gave a tiny nod of approval.

George had a flat in northwest Hollywood, and after some rather confusing directions, Happy found it and dropped him and Donner off.
When Donner got out of the car, he paused for a moment, looking down the street. It was late enough that there were no people and very little traffic; the night was cool, but not overly so, and the streetlamps glowed resolutely, giving the world a warm hue. The look on his face was hard to read, but it looked like he was suddenly aware of a wider world, one where people didn't shuttle him to and fro places... one that he could run away into.

"Come on, Donnie," said George, putting an arm around him. "Let's get some rest... tomorrow we need to go shopping and get you some clothes..."

Donner's brief moment of possible independence crumbled and he let George take him inside.

"You and Donner ought to find time to hang out," said Tony, his teeth still clenched.

"Maybe someday," said Steve, staring at George's little flat where he and Luke had once lived. "...maybe someday."
Springtime

After they'd dropped off Donner, Happy drove them to the nearest emergency room without waiting for them to ask him to. The rest of the night was sucked up into a series of X-rays and resetting of one of Tony's fingers. One of the nurses brought Steve a coffee and gave an affectionate eye-roll. "...even the great Tony Stark gets into feral fights, huh?" she said. She was also an omega, a tough one. "I swear, you should see the sorts of ridiculous injuries that Alphas come in here with, all the time... and they always say the same thing. 'I won, you should see the other guy.' Like that is all that matters to them... ugh, so glad we don't have to worry about dominance hierarchies!"

It was a Wednesday night, not even a weekend, but sure enough, on their way out, with Tony's hand freshly bandaged, they saw an omega helping a limping Alpha in; he was holding a pack of ice over one eye and had an expression of dazed satisfaction. The omega's eyes widened when she saw Steve and Tony.

"Oh my God! Captain America!" she exclaimed.

Tony and the other Alpha sized each other up, then nodded approvingly at each other's bruises. The omega asked for a picture with Steve; her Alpha waited impatiently, clearly in some discomfort.

"You should see the other guy," he said to Tony while his omega took a selfie with Steve.

Happy drove them home; by the time they reached Malibu, it was nearly dawn. They were greeted with an unpleasant surprise; there was a small SWAT team on their lawn, at least a dozen policemen, and several men in suits.

"The hell?" demanded Tony.

One of the suits shoved a paper at him. "We have a search warrant. There's reason to believe you're unlawfully detaining at least one person here."

Tony gaped at him, all too aware of how lucky they were that Donner was with George. He knew exactly who was behind this.

"...be my guest. Turn the place inside-out," said Tony, opening the door for them. The SWAT team looked disappointed they weren't going to be needed. The suits swept in, paused momentarily at the sight of the hundreds of orchids, then began roaming the house. Tony watched them, arms crossed with annoyance. He was actually getting to the point where he was looking forward to leaving the country for a week, even if it meant Aunt Peggy--Agent Carter--would embarrass him in front of Steve.

Steve was feeling incredibly weary by the time they got home and incredibly fed up with Alphas. That night, he just resigned to the fact that he would never truly understand them and that he would never get why they felt a need to prove anything. Sure, omegas might compete over an Alpha but they wouldn't goddamn fight another omega they met, just prove a point! Okay, maybe that was exaggerating the situation but...still. Tony was better looking, had more money, and had a mate, in comparison to Pitbull. He didn't need to prove anything at all and Steve were already bonded and Steve had never even talked to the guy! And yet he felt a need to fight him.

Yeah. Steve would never get it.

When Steve saw all the men on their lawn he was already past the point of caring.
He stared down at the police officers as they walked past him. Despite mostly being Alphas, they looked intimidated. One woman in a suit was on her phone in the background, saying they'd been 'cooperative.'

Steve headed upstairs, to his drawing room, and shut the door. They weren't coming in here if he could help it. They had no right to see...

He sat down on the floor, cross legged, his phone clenched tightly in his shaking hands. Steve realised he was angry. Probably for a lot of reasons. He didn't care about stupid Alphas and their egos, or people invading their house. But he did care that Gideon wouldn't, he just fucking wouldn't--

Steve pressed dial and then held the phone to his ear. His voice trembled in anger.

"Why won't you just leave him the fuck alone?"

Gideon had the decency to sound tired. "Are you aware what hour it is?"

"Do you think I fucking care? Do you think this is a fucking game?!" Steve sounded angry. He sounded serious. "This is a man's life and you've already taken way more of it than you have any right to. So back the fuck off Gideon."

"If you'd just let me speak to him, Rogers, this could all have been avoided," said Gideon, who still sounded half-asleep. "You're the one meddling in his life... I paid a fair amount for him, he belongs to me, not you. Now, honestly, let me go back to bed. Unlike you, I'm not having my house searched."

"You can't buy people, you goddam--"

He hung up.

"Asshole!" Steve made a noise of anger and threw his phone against the wall. It didn't break. Small mercies.

Downstairs, one of the policemen was trying to get into Tony's shop.

"I keep it locked," said Tony. He punched in the code and let her in. Her eyes widened a little at the mess; suit components were scattered all over the floor of the garage and every available surface was piled high with wires, circuits, bolts, screws, tools, and the occasional empty bottle.

"Donner?" she called, peeking around.

"I told you, no one's here 'cept me and Steve," said Tony wearily, watching her poke around his shop. She took her time, pausing to examine the Mark III, which was splayed out on a work bench. Finally, determining that there was no one there, she let Tony escort her back upstairs.

Because of the sheer size of Tony's home, the search was taking a while. Tony kept checking his watch impatiently; he was tired and drunk and in pain and wanted nothing more than to collapse into bed.

The shop was the only truly personal space to him; now that the shop was safe, he left the team of police to their work and went upstairs. He had a pretty good idea of where Steve was.

He poked his head into Steve's studio. His old arc reactor was glowing from the wall and Steve was sitting beneath it, clutching his phone. "...hey, Stevie," he said wearily. "...don't worry, they'll leave
once they realize it's just us. Come to bed. ...don't worry about this; he's just trying to mess with us. We'll be in England in a couple of weeks anyway... we kinda need the break, huh?"

He smiled sleepily and walked in to offer Steve his good hand. Steve looked shaken up, but determined; he had that steely Cap look in his eye. The one that meant he wanted to punch something. Tony was honestly a bit surprised he wasn't already in the gym, beating the crap out of a punching bag. Steve went through several week, an expense that Pepper had not overlooked and had found thoroughly amusing.

Steve realized, after the conversation with Gideon, that he should probably call George. He didn't manage to get through to him but left a brief but vague message. No one who listened to it would be able to tell that George actually had Donner.

He looked up when Tony came in. Steve stared at the offered hand and then took it, squeezing lightly with a half smile tiredly tugging onto his lips. He stood with a slight wobble. "Peggy is gonna kill me, with all the shit I've caused," he said, and he was only half-joking. He let Tony lead them into the bedroom. Peggy was protective of him in a motherly sort of way and she was very much used to dealing with Steve pulling shit, but that never meant she became any less exasperated with him.

Steve sank down onto the bed and slowly undressed. Then, once down to his boxers, he helped Tony get out of his shirt. "Maybe we should spar sometime. I could teach you some new moves," he tried to joke before dropping back onto the mattress. Steve just wanted to sleep.

He flopped back onto the pillows.

Tony lay on his left side and put his arm around Steve's waist, treating his right hand delicately.

It was no surprise to either of them when they woke the next morning to find it even more swollen. Tony's first complaint was that he wouldn't be able to work in the shop with his hand so thoroughly out of commission.

Instead, he decided to spend the day hovering around Steve, who had speeches to write, fanmail to answer, and dozens of e-mail from Aria. Tony pointedly ignored his own e-mail because most of it was Pepper demanding to know why there was a viral video of him going around that showed him and Pitbull punching each other.

Tony, who had spent years giving soundbites and speeches, paced around giving Steve suggestions on his commencement speeches, things like "make sure you say the word patriotism, they'll eat that up," and, "hey, why don't you start off with that quote about there being no higher service than service to one's country? Who said that, Nixon?"

Ever-distractible, Tony also periodically would whip out his phone, check something, then inform Steve of whatever he'd just learned. A lot of it revolved around their first-anniversary getaway. Tony would never admit it, but he was looking forward to skipping his usual out-of-control birthday party for a year. His fortieth had been rough, and now that he was turning forty-one, he felt... well, old. Especially next to Steve. Sometimes, when they stood side-by-side in the mornings brushing their teeth, he couldn't help but notice the age difference. Steve's face was smooth and unlined. Tony had some laugh lines, crow's feet, the very beginning of grey hair at his temples... if his father was any indication, he could expect his hair to go silver by his fifties, a prospective that horrified him, because Tony had always been rather vain about his hair.

Inevitably, when he noticed the difference, he thought of Banksy and Boswell. Banksy, who was his age, and Boswell, old enough to be his father, who had to turn in early from parties and who was
retired and had an adult son who was closer in age to Banksy than to Boswell. (Ryan and Banksy were within two years of each other.)

Creepy, Tony thought. At least he didn't have any kids (that was he aware of).

He paused in his pacing. "Steve, I should get that vasectomy. Y'know. Before your next heat," he said. "It's coming up in like, a month and a half, and... the last one was... kind of tough, you know? ...I could schedule it this month, before we go to England."

Steve thought it was nice, spending time together and actually doing stuff. They hadn't done enough of that lately. The rage Steve had felt the night before had quelled somewhat, especially after a quick phone call from George which assured him that everything was going okay back at his. And he liked preparing for speeches; it made him excited. Learning the lines for SNL was harder though, for some reason. Steve found it hard to be funny on cue, although he had a whole day with the cast and he would have time to practice and get things wrong/right. He was still nervous. After all, it was live, and being projected into millions of televisions across the countries. And his personal monologues were getting him into all sorts of messes. So they went back to the speeches eventually; that was what Steve was good at.

But when Tony mentioned the vasectomy Steve's head shot up. Before, kids had been out of the question; Steve was a soldier and a SHIELD agent but now he... what did he have to do with his life? Aside from civil rights stuff and charity work and maybe the occasional modelling gig, Steve had zero real commitments. He didn't own a company like Tony did. So there was nothing stopping him from having the time to raise a child if he wanted to.

He paused and he could see the consequential panic on Tony's face. "You could," he agreed. The timeline matched up neatly. Steve was aware that it was actually quite a minor and a very simple operation. There was almost no risks. He just...

He leaned his head on his hands, fingers threaded together, and tried to school his face into something unreadable. But Tony could feel his emotions. It was pointless. Steve sighed. Sometimes he had this strange fantasy where they had a kid and Tony would suddenly stop drinking because he didn't want to be drunk around the baby and...

But that was the wrong reason to have a child. Steve was aware of that.

On the other hand, heats were already terrible. Remembering to take all the meds and dealing with the risk of pregnancy wasn't fun... especially considering the fact that Steve almost definitely couldn't cope with the emotional side of an abortion.

Steve exhaled. "If you really don't want kids Tony, it's what you should do."

Tony had long suspected that this would be a shitty conversation, because he knew that Steve liked kids. He'd seen Steve's face when the Walkers had handed him the baby. He knew how omegas were.

He let out a long, slow exhale. It would be easy to just say okay, and go and do it, but... he could feel Steve's heart tugging.

"...you're not crazy about that idea," said Tony slowly. He rocked back on his heels. "...Steve... I wouldn't be a good dad. My old man, he fucked me up, and imagine what I'd do to a kid. Besides, I'm already in my forties..." Tony was making excuses now. His own father had been even older when he'd had Tony. Tony backtracked. "...I don't think my lifestyle would be... conducive... I mean... I wouldn't want... I wouldn't want a kid who would turn out like me," he finished, looking
He could have just gone and done it and not asked Steve at all, but Steve was his mate and he felt like it would be underhanded to get it done without telling him.

"I mean-- I mean, you can't really... have planned for kids. You're a soldier, y'know? I mean, not anymore, but-- well, it's not like anyone in your position would have kids. Sam doesn't have kids... Clint doesn't have kids," Tony pointed out. Steve still felt sad.

Tony exhaled again. "It's just-- it's just that heats are really hard, what with you having to take all the drugs, and I don't want any accidents, and I'm not really the nurturing type. And-- and I was thinking about it because of Donner. I know you probably want kids but I just-- I'd be such a shitty dad, Steve. I drink like a fish. My own dad, he drank, and he got mean, as he got older, and-- and you know, it's his fault that my mom-- I mean-- I don't want to--"

He was fumbling. Steve wasn't even saying anything but his disappointment was so strong he might as well have been.

"--maybe we can-- just talk about it later," mumbled Tony finally. Briefly, he felt annoyed at that shitty doctor in Tijuana who had snipped him the first time and apparently not done it correctly. He wondered if he could get a refund after twenty years.

"Maybe," Steve breathed after a beat, a little overwhelmed. There was so much he wanted to say. He wanted to refute so much of it, but he knew Tony wouldn't believe him. Steve could tell him a hundred times over that he'd make a good father but it wouldn't sink in.

"I'm... gonna go to the toilet," Steve said. A bald-faced lie, but he needed to get away.

Clint was on a lunch break and was currently consuming an entire pack of rainbow chocolate chip cookies for lunch. He was leaning against a balcony rail outside and then he felt his phone buzz in his pocket.

"Yo, Steve? What's up? Ha, were you there for the Pitbull thing? Man, that was funny. This isn't about Bucky, right? Because I can't--"

"Clint." Steve sounded serious. Uh-oh. "I need you to tell Tony."

Clint frowned. "Why?"

Steve sighed. He sounded tired... not physically. Nothing ever tired Steve out physically. It was an emotional kind of weariness. "He wants to have a vasectomy."

"I mean, if the guy doesn't want kids..."

"He just keeps going on about how he'll be a terrible father!"

Clint remained silent.

"Clint, come on."

"I'm not saying he'd be terrible," Clint sighed. He chewed thoughtfully on a mouthful of cookie. "It's just... as he is right now, I can't really imagine it. But I guess, when some people have kids, it makes them turn their lives around. ...I don't know Steve. It's a joint decision. A big decision, sure. But you
are super young, you know, to be deciding if you never wanna have kids..."

"It's the heats too," Steve sighed. "Because of the... high risks. It would be easier."

"So, what, you want me to talk to him? Why do you think I can change Tony's mind?"

"Well, you're not really... a conventional dad, either--"

"Hey!"

"You're a great one. I just mean... you consume a lot of coffee and you swear a lot and you're--"

"Not a conventional dad, yeah, I get it. You're not asking Tony to have kids now, you just want him to understand that there could be a possibility for it. Whatever."

"I know I'm asking for a lot right now," Steve murmured. "But I just... he's so sad about it. Like he doesn't want to do it. Like he feels he has to not do it. But I'm only twenty-five, and--"

"Jesus Steve. Fine. Just... hand him the phone."

"You sure?"

"Yeah... yeah, I'll talk to him."

Steve could tell Tony looked puzzled as he returned. He held the phone out to his Alpha and told him: "Clint wants to talk to you."

"What'd you want?" asked Tony suspiciously, taking the phone.

"Well, hello to you too," said Clint.

"Are you eating?"

"No," lied Clint, who hastily swallowed a mouthful of cookie. "Well... Steve wanted to me to talk to you about... family planning."

Tony groaned loudly and dragged his hand down his face. Steve was sitting across from him, pretending to read his SNL script, even though his eyes weren't moving across the page.

"I get it," said Tony. "You're omegas, you want kids..." Clint tried to speak, but Tony cut him off. "It's different for us, Clint. You and Natasha can't get pregnant. Me and Steve... we already had a near miss."

"Stark," said Clint, more seriously. "...Steve's young. Steve's young and he doesn't have any family. A permanent procedure--"

"I mean, it's not that permanent... I think you can get it reversed," interrupted Tony. "And he's got family! He's got a cousin... and he's about to have another cousin! A... what... cousin three time removed? Two whole cousins!"

"Stark," repeated Clint. "Just because you're not ready for kids now doesn't mean--"

"You don't have kids," interrupted Tony. "You and Nat don't have to worry about this, do you?" Omegas couldn't get Alphas pregnant. That was just biology. "Question: how does that work? Like, does she wear a strap-on, or--"
"What if Steve wanted to be a father?" interjected Clint suddenly.

Tony laughed, then realized he was serious. "Oh... oh, no. No, we wouldn't-- I don't think--"

They'd never talked about it. Tony looked at Steve in alarm. Technically, Steve could sire a child, if he wanted to. Knock up another omega or a beta. "--no. No, we don't want kids," he finished lamely.

"I know it's hard for Alphas to... not feel in charge," said Clint slowly. "It's your body and your choice, so if you want to get a vasectomy, go ahead. But if Steve wants kids, he shouldn't be denied that, either. How okay are you with a donor or a surrogate mom?"

"No," said Tony immediately.

"Well... what about storing your sperm in case you change your mind later?"

"Gross. I like it," said Tony. He looked over at Steve, whose ears were pink. He could feel Steve's tension and he felt a pang of desire for his poor, sweet omega. "...I..." He dropped his voice, trying to be discreet. "Listen, Clint, I'd be a shit dad. I had such a shit dad myself, and--"

"Well, so did I," interrupted Clint. "My dad hated me for being an omega. He was a drunk. He used to beat me and my brother, both of us, 'cause we were both omegas. But I don't regret existing. ...pretty sure you'd at least be better than that, right?"

"...probably," said Tony slowly.

"Just because you're kind of a mess now doesn't mean you should say no forever, right?"

"I don't know, Barton. Life changes when you have kids. I mean, obviously, we don't know..." said Tony. Clint was silent, not quite willing to trust Tony yet with what Steve already knew. "...I just feel like I'd suck at it," said Tony.

"Eh... well... the thing is... yeah, maybe just... don't close any doors permanently," said Clint lamely, who was trying to wolf down the rest of his cookies in a hurry. His break was nearly over. "Steve's still practically a kid... like I said, you could always get a donor, or a surrogate, or freeze your sperm or something, I don't know. Just don't..."

"You ever want kids, Clint?" asked Tony suddenly. He knew Clint and Natasha had bonded in unusual circumstances, one not dissimilar to his and Steve's. They were scent-mates, compatible on an instinctual level, but biologically infertile. It was nearly impossible for omega men to impregnate Alpha women, and, of course, Alpha females had no way of breeding an omega for whelps.

Clint paused for a bit. "...yeah, actually," said Clint, "...I wouldn't mind one."

Tony didn't bother mentioned that he found the sight of pregnant male omegas to be creepy as fuck. Alphas and betas both did; according to Frond's psychology books, this was a natural reaction, since the male Alpha and male beta were only capable of siring children, not bearing them. Tony couldn't imagine Steve pregnant, couldn't imagine his broad-shoulder, iron-muscled, sleek male form with a baby bump. It was... uncanny. But he felt like admitting that would make him sound prejudiced against omegas. Traditionally, pregnant omegas didn't go out much. It wasn't until the mid-twentieth century that a pregnant omega would venture outside the home; in Steve's day, it was unheard of.

"I'll... put it off. For now," mumbled Tony unhappily. He looked over at Steve, who glanced up at the same time, and their eyes met. "...maybe you could... talk to Gleason about one of those implant things?" he suggested awkwardly.

"I gotta go, Tony," said Clint. "You two... take it easy, okay? Just... don't close any doors. There's
not really a right way to be a parent, you know, you just try your best to love the hell out of your kids, and guide them, and--"

"Aw, shaddup, Barton," said Tony affectionately. Like Clint knew anything about kids. Ha.

He hung up.

Oddly, the thing that stuck with him was Clint's mention of his own father.

Would Tony love an omega child? Yes, of course he would. Tony had been born an Alpha and had spent a brief and unhappy childhood, particularly post-puberty, feeling like he had to live up to his father's dominance, and always falling short. It had been stifling. Tony felt that, as an Alpha of very low hierarchical standing, he was more than capable of accepting a child that was an Alpha of equally low standing, or even an omega. It was a new generation, after all. Omegas weren't second-class citizens anymore, at least in theory. Omegas could get educated, get jobs, be independent, be fulfilled, be happy, productive members of society... Tony knew that even if he failed as a parent in every other sense, at least status and gender wouldn't especially be an issue for him.

He walked over to Steve and ruffled his hair.

"Steve. I won't do it, yet, if you're not ready, okay? I... I don't want kids. But I don't want to lock the door and throw away the key either, if you're not ready for that. You're still young. I get it," said Tony, even though he didn't. "We'll just weather our heats the old-fashioned way." He realized he'd said "our" heats, something older bonded couples said, and the corner of his mouth twitched. "...I'm just throwing this out there, but we could hire a beta or an omega to help us out with the pill situation. Kind of a... medication nanny, I dunno," suggested Tony awkwardly. "Neither of us can think straight when you're in heat and we need a better system. Shit, I mean, literally, last time, we forgot to eat, let alone take your meds. We only have about, what, six weeks before your body goes haywire? Maybe less, with your metabolism and all. I... I can agree not to make any permanent decisions right now, if you can agree not to have a surprise baby on me any time in the immediate future. Deal?"

Tony stuck out a hand glibly.

The conversation on the phone lasted a while and Steve sat by nervously. He was nervous about what Clint was saying and wished he could hear it himself. Although, it was obvious that he hadn't told Tony about his own family, from the half of it that Steve was hearing. If Clint had, Tony would have no doubt reacted in a rather noticeable way. Even when Tony lowered his voice to try and be subtle, Steve could still hear him because of his superior senses, but he ducked his head down, nose into the SNL script with him as president, and tried to pretend he wasn't listening.

But he totally was. Despite not being able to hear Clint, it was obvious that he'd said the right thing to Tony, who appeared somewhat mollified. Steve smiled at what Tony said, and looked between the hand and his face. In a flash, Steve stood up and kissed him. He leaned his forehead against Tony's. "Deal," he murmured.

"Although, we should definitely get a beta. An omega would probably try to join in." Smelling other omegas in preheat certainly made Steve excited. But he didn't understand the want for a threesome with one. Regardless of his whole jealousy issues (which he was talking about in therapy) the thought of having sex with someone else who was... submissive did not appeal to Steve. It was why he was attracted to Alphas; they were 'in charge.' Steve was aware not all Omegas like to be submissive in bed. James and his boyfriend must have some kind of preference to make it work. He should have asked at the party; he was almost curious now. Whoever they asked to be a 'medicine nanny' would have an enormous of trust put upon them. They would see Steve in... quite a state, and
probably naked. Steve couldn't afford for there to be a second sex tape with him in it this time. His 'Cap' image wouldn't survive it.

The rest of the day passed easily, like a weight had been lifted off their shoulders. An important conversation had been had. To say thanks, Steve ordered a chocolate hamper to Clint's house for the kids. Steve practically had his scripts nailed by the end of the day. He'd always had a decent memory. It wasn't memorizing that was the problem so much as the delivery of it.

The week passed quickly after that. Steve did one out of three of his army base speeches. He'd felt weird dressing up in 'Cap' uniform again, almost like an impostor... but it was what the graduates wanted to see. And once Steve was there with them, it was almost like he'd never left. The crowd was all betas and Alphas, and he was used to that. Back in the forties he could go a months without seeing a single omega at all. It was war and it appeared they had just... vanished. When Steve had gotten home after the speech he'd stripped the uniform right off and hung it up perfectly at the back of the closet, making sure there were no creases, aware he'd need it again for the next speech.

Then it was SNL. And Steve did okay! Or at least, Aria told him so. "You did awesome. You nailed it!" she said as they stepped out and into the car to be driven home. It was late. Steve had hung back to talk with some of the cast. "Everyone loved it Steve. They got just the right amount of politics in... it was awesome."

"You're not just sayin' that?" asked Steve.

"No, no. You really were dynamite. I swear." She was on her tablet the whole time, working Steve's Twitter account for him, drumming up positive attention.

As a congratulations a few days later Aria brought in a framed picture of Steve sitting in a pretend Oval Office in a fancy suit. She stuck it up on one of the walls without asking. Steve remembered spotting it for the first time when he was eating his breakfast and tried to imagine Donner's face if he saw it himself.

Donner was apparently content to stay at George's for now. Although if Gideon found him there Steve didn't know what he'd do.

Another military base speech and a few days later and Steve was packing for their trip to England whilst Tony was in his workshop. He was so engrossed in it he hadn't heard Tony coming up the stairs until he was in the doorway. Steve quickly shut the suitcase. "Nothing to see here," he told him, smiling a little despite himself. "Er...how's the suit going?"

Tony peeked in; Steve whipped around almost guiltily. Tony smiled. "Suit's going great. Haven't broken any more hands yet," said Tony cheerfully. "Nothing makes a man feel alive like rocket boots! ...you look eager, beaver." He sauntered in and ran his fingers through Steve's hair lovingly.

He couldn't quite believe it had been a year. A year that he never should have had; his last birthday, he had thought he was going to die. That it was over. And now he was healthy again and he was bonded; he'd slept nearly every night in a bed with Steve and the thought of living without him, of being alone, of not feeling his emotions, was a foreign concept now.

"Tomorrow's my birthday," he said, grinning at Steve. "...I was thinking we could go to the Mile High Club... you know what that is? I'll show you on the plane. Didja pack my stuff, too?" Tony was determined to have a good time, especially since he knew in about a month, the shit was going to hit the fan with 84. When they came back, they were hosting a gala in New York to finally sell off all the orchids; the proceeds would come pouring in just before the crack-down. The lawyers were putting together the last bits and pieces. Tony was more anxious about it than he'd admit; the
idea of sixteen hundred Donners and Tys was horrifying to him.

He was also, admittedly, a little nervous about seeing Peggy; it had been such a long, long time. She had made an effort to reach out to him, after Afghanistan, but Tony had avoided her, feeling too embarrassed to talk to his dad's old pal, an Alpha female who was so much more powerful than him. She'd tried to reach out after Obadiah's betrayal, too, but Tony had been too paranoid then. He doubted he'd ever completely shake that off.

"Pepper printed our itinerary but the only thing I really wanna do is go see the locks exhibit at the British museum," said Tony. There was a big exhibit on locks and Tony liked locks, felt like he might find some inspiration there for the suit, which he was going to go without for the next ten days. Tony rarely unplugged completely but for Steve... well, he was a sucker.

He offered to take Steve's suitcase gallantly, even though Steve hardly needed any help at all.

"Yep, all packed. For both of us, but no peeking in the suitcase, mister," Steve warned him playfully. "Tomorrow's your birthday, not today." He kissed Tony on the cheek and let him take the suitcase. It was just clothes, or mostly clothes... there was nothing heavy inside. Steve grabbed both their coats (it was England, after all) and followed Tony downstairs.

He was excited to go back, terribly so. It would be nice to see England when he wasn't in the middle of a goddamn breakdown. That, and he loved spending time with Peggy. She grounded him. She was both the connection to his past and his future. He loved her and he knew that she loved him back, but it wasn't a romantic sort of love. It was old and precious and it meant loyalty and trust. It was an unspoken connection. She understood him; she always had...even when he was little Steve Rogers, trying to drive a tank and getting stuck in the mud. She'd laughed at him, arms wrapped around her middle and it had been a warm, not mocking, sound. Even before the serum, when he was the lone omega on the base and he was failing at every task set to him, he felt that she had respected him.

Happy was waiting for them outside. He was smiling. "Happy early birthday boss," he said, opening the boot for Tony to toss the suitcase into. Steve was excited to go now. Although he wasn't the fondest of plane rides, it would be worth it.

"Loved you on SNL," he told Steve, who blushed a little, because, God, he'd put a lot of work into it. He had no idea being funny was so... well, hard.

"Thanks," Steve said. "It was kinda scary. Never wanna do acting live again."

"Kinda scary? ...you fought in World War Two!" said Happy.

"Didn't you do a whole bunch of USO tours back in the day?" asked Tony.

"Yeah but... but those were different," said Steve. (He didn't want to admit he'd stuck all of his lines, neatly written onto note cards, on the back of his prop shield with bubblegum.)

Tony eyeballed the suitcases as Happy slammed the trunk shut. He was so, so curious why he wasn't allowed to peek. He expected no presents; Tony already had everything, so he was intrigued.

His hand sought Steve's and he found it, gripping him.

Happy grinned a little.

"...what?" asked Tony.
"Nothin'. I just think it's cute how in love you are."

Tony pushed his up sunglasses a little, trying not to look embarrassed. Part of him wanted to correct Happy. Bonding was more than just being in love; it was about having a connection. But Happy couldn't get that; he was a beta.

Tony decided to change the topic as they clambered into the back of the SUV. "What're you doing while we're away?" He'd managed to convince his detail that he didn't need a bodyguard for their vacation by pointing out they would going to spend a lot of it in the hotel room anyway, which had caused hearty matching eye-rolls from Beth and Pepper.

"Oh, ah, me and Ginny got some tickets to go see a show," said Happy.

Tony's mouth twisted a little. "So... things are going good."

"Yeah," said Happy, carefully.

Tony had briefly considered asking Pepper to hover over them during their next heat, but he knew his emotions toward her were too complicated. He had precious few people in his life that he trusted to be around him and Steve in heat; he'd come to think of Steve's heats as "their" heats. It was a tricky thing, heats... it left them unusually vulnerable, something Tony disliked being.

Oh well. At least they still had a month to figure it out.

He was most vulnerable during heat. That much was obvious. Wanda and Pietro were lying on the beach, wearing sunglasses they'd stolen from a sidewalk vendor, their heads touching. In moments like these, out of his heats, he liked to pretend he was beta like his sister.

"Have you thought about what we'll do afterwards?" asked Wanda idly. They'd done an ample amount of studying. Tony was reclusive, but Steve wasn't. They were able to figure out his last heat. Pietro cycled every four and a half months, a result of his ridiculous metabolism. Steve might cycle in, say, five. On the other hand, he had a lot of omega friends, and omegas who were close cycled together. In any case, they knew it was coming up soon, in June or July, and they knew that was the best possible time to attack.

Pietro turned his head to look at her. "Afterwards?" he echoed in confusion.

"After we avenge our parents. After we kill Stark. Then what?"

Pietro considered. He'd never really thought of it.

"...we could try to find James."

Wanda cocked an eyebrow. "You still think of him?"

"...sometimes," said Pietro cautiously. He turned his head back to stare at the sky. "But our first goal really must be Stark. He needs to pay for what he's done."

Wanda hummed. At times her brother could be dark. "I heard there's a school in the east for... people like me," she offered tentatively.

"Probably only a myth," said Pietro dismissively. "Once Stark is dead, we should return to Sokovia."

Wanda made a noise of protest. "Sokovia! ...but it's terrible there."
Pietro sat up angrily. "It's our home!"

"Why can't this be our home? Look, look how happy all the omegas are here." She gestured. Farther along the beach, a couple of young omegas were laughing and running around after a beach ball. One was in post-heat but she seemed unbothered by it.

Pietro made a derisive sound. "We'll never be like that, Wanda. Forget it." He flopped back into the sand moodily. Wanda continued to watch the omegas playing. They were probably their age, in their late teens, and Wanda envied them. She would have loved to join but she'd probably only end up popping the ball. Pietro was right. They weren't normal and they'd never live carefree little lives like that.

In the bright blue sky above them, a jet moved eastward, and Wanda wondered if it was carrying Stark and his mate (it was too high up to tell), and if he ever felt guilty for all the destruction he'd caused and lives he'd reaped, and if they would ever be forgiven by Steve for killing his Alpha. She found she didn't care; forgiveness was a luxury she'd long since given up on.
They had food on the plane (Tony always kept his plane as well-stocked as any of his residences, because he spent so much time there) but for once Steve wasn't devouring sandwiches at lightning speed. He didn't like flying on a full stomach; it still made him nervous. When he'd been undercover with Tony he'd had had to get used to flying pretty quickly. But Steve had hated initially. It was probably because he'd sort of died in a plane that one time and had crash landed it into the ocean... so Steve didn't really think he could do anything about the negative connotations that came with flying. He'd never like flying as much as he once had. That was just another small thing the war had ruined for him.

Once they were in the air Steve managed to nibble down on a couple of ham sandwiches, knowing he'd feel worse later if he didn't. He flicked through some important files George had sent him and checked out the SNL responses that Aria had forwarded to him. Steve could feel Tony's own excitement in his gut, bubbling away. He looked up and smiled.

It was so weird to think of where they were a year ago; Steve felt like such a different person. He'd been so cynical and narrow-minded in his own way... so absorbed in his own moping and problems that he didn't notice anyone else's. Despite all the shit he'd been through, he knew now that that didn't entitle him to anything. The culture shock of the 21st century had put Steve in a bad place, and it was only in the last year that he felt like he was really, truly becoming integrated, and taking charge of his own destiny again.

"Do you remember the plane to Monaco?" Steve breathed, stretching his legs out onto the seat in front of him (because yes, they were long enough to reach; Tony's plane had great leg room, for a regular person, but Steve was not a regular person and he often had to arrange himself into bizarre configurations to get comfortable). "You slapped my ass and it took every fiber of my being not to turn around and tell you where to stick it."

Tony's mouth quirked up into a smile. "Oh, yeah. Yeah, if looks could kill..." He laughed.

It seemed an eternity ago. He'd already determined that he was very likely dying, that the palladium cores were dumping toxic amounts of rhodium into his blood. He'd already signed over the company to Pepper, who seemed like the most capable person to run it, which is how Steve had come into his life in the first place. Steve had sauntered in looking sharp and young and fresh, and the CV he gave to Pepper was ridiculously perfect. Tony had briefly said he didn't want a new PA (since he'd be dead soon anyway), but Pepper had insisted, and after he saw Steve deck out Happy, he had decided he liked the omega. He'd never had a male PA but as Pepper pointed out, his credentials outshone all the other candidates by far.

Within a few days, though, it had become apparent that Steve's personality wasn't what Tony had expected. Steve was helpful, yes, because that was his job. But he acted... not like the omegas Tony was used to. Tony was used to omegas being quiet little shadows, shoe-elves; Steve was big and bold and acted like he expected to be treated with respect.

In retrospect, Tony guessed that a huge reason Steve had made him so uncomfortable and that Tony had, early on, provoked him so much, was because even before Steve's heat Tony felt a pull toward him, an attraction, and he was all too aware that Steve was male. An omega male, yes, but a male nonetheless. Tony had slapped his ass for two reasons: to deliberately irritate him, and, perhaps a little subconsciously, because he desperately wanted to feel that firm fucking ass. Wanted to grab the globes of Steve's buttocks and squeeze him, tenderly. And those thoughts scared Tony, so he'd doubled down on his efforts to annoy and provoke and be unpleasant, as if this would make up for
his attraction to the uppity blond.

Then Steve's heat hit and all those misgivings were out the window.

"I had never, ever felt anything like what I felt when you went into heat, Steve," said Tony, still smiling nostalgically. "I wanted you so bad... you know there's still a dent in his plane from you trying to pull down that door? I was obsessed. I mean, I still am, but-- but before we bonded, all I could think about was you." He remembered moodily wandering around after Pepper, every third thought about Steve, the way he smelled and moved and spoke and looked. "I dunno what I did to deserve finding you," he said, with uncharacteristic sincerity. He stretched out to pat Steve's arm.

Steve's expression softened and he reached out to catch Tony's hand before he pulled away. He tangled their fingers together and let their shoulders press together too. "I'm glad I did," he murmured.

Sometimes Steve did think things would have gone differently if he'd known Bucky was alive. Not that he would have chosen him, necessarily, more that he could have never knowingly pulled Tony into this mess. He didn't deserve all Steve's baggage; he didn't deserve to literally have his life under threat all because he'd chosen to mate Steve.

If Steve had known Bucky were alive, he would have reconsidered bonding Tony. He would have made a more mindful decision.

But the choice had been made and here they were.

"Before all this I didn't understand why I was here. Why I hadn't died," Steve murmured. "But this... this made it all worth it."

"That heat," said Tony.

"And that heat! Jesus. That was awful. I hadn't one before in this century and I had forgotten how shit they are with the serum. Before they'd lasted like a day or didn't even start at all. I got to spend a whole week in preheat. It was awesome," Steve recalled fondly. He would paint fanatically in preheat, his imagination completely boundless. He'd never produced such raw and honest art work outside of it. Preheats, like postheats, could be fun. It was the heat itself that was crippling.

"I think I kind of got frustrated with you because I liked you. I wasn't used to liking people. Especially people who I disagreed with."

Tony's goatee twitched and his smile widened. "I have that effect on a lot of people... being a charming asshole," he said, bringing Steve's hand up his hand to nuzzle it.

He snuggled up against Steve, enjoying the smoothness of the plane ride. He knew Steve wasn't an enormous fan of planes, but Tony was. He loved flying. And his plane was rather nice... he'd designed it himself.

He pulled out Pepper's itinerary to look it over; he had no major investment in any of the various things she had planned for that and frankly planned to hit up the hotel spa as soon as possible. He knew he didn't have to go to London to that, but whatever; it was his vacation. Well. His and Steve's. They were definitely going to visit Peggy; that was one commitment that couldn't be broken.

He must have dozed off because when he woke up it was in a completely different time zone; it was morning and the Atlantic was sparkling beneath them. The flight had taken nine or ten hours, but also shoved them forward in time, so that they'd lost nearly a day.
Tony realized suddenly he was forty-one now.

"It's my birthday!" he said groggily, getting up and stumbling. One of his feet was asleep; he shook it out. "HEY, CHARLIE! IT'S MY BIRTHDAY!" he hollered at the cockpit.

"Happy birthday, boss!" she hollered back.

Tony looked out the window. Surely they were nearly there. He was starving; he hadn't realized how tired he'd been. While Steve was off making speeches and wooing the media, Tony had been in the shop, diligently trying to perfect the Mark VII without breaking any more bones. His right hand was out of commission for at least three months and he couldn't afford another setback like that.

"Good morning, my star-spangled honeybear," he said to Steve, smirking at him. Occasionally Tony liked to try to embarrass him, which wasn't hard, actually.

"Good morning to you too," Steve grinned as he stood. He pressed a noisy kiss to Tony's cheek, and then ducked his head down to kiss his mouth.

Tony smiled at Steve's stage kiss and leaned in to the real one.

"Happy birthday," Steve murmured, a smile tugging at his lips. He could feel Tony's excitement which in turn made him feel almost hyper.

For most of the flight Steve had slept or drawn. He was bad at being especially productive on planes; the anxiety of flying was too distractable.

Honestly, Steve was pretty excited in his own right. He couldn't wait to see Peggy again. That wasn't for a few days though. They had some solid time blocked out for bed and that lock exhibition thing at the British Museum, which Tony seemed overly interested in. Plus, Steve had prepared a present for Tony's birthday.

Of course, Tony wasn't getting his present just yet. He'd have to wait till the hotel.

"You want something to eat? You were asleep a while," Steve said, already getting up to head to the bar to find sandwiches.

"Yeah, I'm starving," he said gratefully, letting Steve start handing him food. "We've gotta be there, nearly... CHARLIE! HOW MUCH LONGER?"

Charlie poked her head out of the cockpit. "Less than an hour, and you don't need to yell."

Tony ignored her, only because his mouth was full of turkey and he couldn't have gotten out a retort if he wanted to.

It had taken a fair bit of arm-twisting to convince SHIELD to let them go on a ten-day vacation, since they were supposed to be checking in weekly, but it had been allowed in the end because, after all, it was their first anniversary and the nation expected them to go on a getaway. Pepper had booked them a suite at the Langham, which was near Hyde Park. Tony had insisted on a hotel with a spa, and had also insisted they be near the park because he knew Steve would want to go running, little cardio bunny that he was.

When they landed it was early morning and the first thing Tony noticed was that it was overcast, drizzling, and horribly cold. Well, in the forties, which he, a long-time resident of Malibu, considered uninhabitable. He tugged his coat on, grumbling.
"If they weren't restricting our travel, we could've done the Bahamas," he groused.

His mood improved noticeably when they got to the hotel, though. The Langham had been a good choice; the building was old, had probably been around in Steve's time, but the interior was thoroughly modern, with sleek white-and-black minimalism, as if Tony himself had designed it. They'd barely gotten out of the car, a tinted-window SUV, when the concierge rushed over to meet them and take their bags and ask about their flight.

Tony held Steve's hand and let them be dragged up to their suite. The penthouse offered a nice view of the park; the furniture was all upholstered in a style that was both modern and timeless, as if WWII-era London had clashed with their own time.

There were vases of fresh roses on the coffee table. The drapes looked heavy; Tony peeked out the window, then zipped off to the bathroom. He had a habit of checking every room whenever he went to a hotel, as if there might be someone hiding in the bathtub for him with a knife. Steve was used to Tony's paranoid checks by now.

"Well, she did it again," said Tony. "This place is nice," he concluded after making sure the bar in the living room was stocked and giving one the pillows on the bed a test-punch. He put his hands on Steve's waist and beamed up at him. "God, we needed this."

He didn't add his secret gladness that he was spending his birthday just with Steve. Turning forty hadn't been hard; he felt like he'd only just exited his thirties, after all, and was still young... but now, at forty-one, he was in his forties and he felt a bit uncomfortable about that. He didn't want to throw a big party with people much younger than him. He'd already gotten that from Banksy's party. Besides, Tony liked to flirt when he was drunk, and he always had a few old flings show up, and he knew Steve got jealous.

Steve curled his arms around Tony's shoulders comfortably. He always liked it when Tony put his hands on his waist, the touch was warm and firm. And his waist was still small, trim, 'omega-like'. It meant his shoulder-to-waist ratio was insane. Steve ducked down and nudged their noses together, a small tugging lazily at his lips. He hadn't slept much during the flight, but the serum would easily keep him going until the early hours of the morning.

"Have I ever told you that I hate being big?" Steve murmured. "I mean, I obviously love being healthy...that's awesome. And I liked being able to fight, to contribute...but I'm aware I'm not 'normal.' Sam said it must have given me confidence but it didn't. I was always confident; it was just that everyone suddenly started listening to me for a change..."

Tony looked up at Steve. Poor guy. "...nothing wrong with being big," he said. "...I hardly even notice anymore." That was a partial lie but also a partial truth. He noticed; Steve was impossible to miss. But he'd grown accustomed to it and it was no longer the shock it was. When he had first seen Steve he'd been absolutely amazed; Steve might as well have been a bearded lady. Tony had never seen an omega as tall or muscled as him before. He probably never would.

"But anything is worth being able to breathe," Steve hummed, closing his eyes briefly.

He used to wheeze and cough through every winter night. Bucky was always worried sick. Every Christmas Steve had to entertain the idea that he might not make it through to the new year.

He ducked down to kiss Tony's bottom lip.

"Do you want your birthday present now, or later?"
"What is it?" he asked. "Do you want to give it to me now?" He could honestly not think anything Steve could have packed that Tony would want. Tony had everything and if he ever needed something, he could just buy it himself. Plus, Steve no longer had money to just toss around. Well, he had Tony's money, but still.

His phone chimed a few times; he ignored it because it would be chiming all day with birthday wishes.

"Well, it's not a thing I can give to you...well, I could technically give it to you but it wouldn't have quite the same effect. It's a surprise. But probably for more... night time activities," Steve said, trying and failing to be both subtle and to hide his smile. His eyes glinted with something mischievous, like he already knew he had Tony hooked. "I'd happily give it to you anytime you want, or show you...however you put it," Steve said, not wanting to give it away. He knew Tony wouldn't guess it. No way.

Steve leaned down, nudging their noses together. It was a familiar gesture now. He smiled faintly, but the gesture was genuine. "So, do you wanna sleep now, or later?" He nipped at the edge of Tony's jaw, his tone teasing. "Old man?"

Tony's eyes lit up. "It's something sexy? ...I want it now. I slept the whole plane ride, I'm not tired. Show me now," he insisted. The idea of starting off his day with some wild sex and then spending the rest of it getting every spa treatment known to man sounded perfect to him.

He was a bit concerned about what Steve might think of as sexy. Steve had a lot of old-timey sensibilities and Tony couldn't imagine what Steve was possibly going to show him.

Then again, it wasn't like Steve was stupid. He had the internet, after all.

"Show me now," repeated Tony. He was going to die of curiosity now that Steve had alluded to it being something sexual.

Steve laughed gently. "Alright. Alright." He gently curled his hands onto Tony's shoulders. He was grinning at him, clearly proud of himself. He leaned down to kiss Tony firmly, a hint of tongue before he pulled away.

"I love you," Steve told him, suddenly serious for a brief moment.

Then he stepped back. Steve put his hands on his hips, looking cheeky. "Close your eyes or no surprise. And no peeking. Also...no super high expectations. It's just something little."

Tony groaned a little and closed his eyes. The temptation to peek was almost unbearable. "Okay, okay, my eyes are closed," he groused. He was unable to comply with Steve's other request; his expectations were already through the roof.

"Sit tight," Steve told him, and kissed Tony's forehead.

Tony could hear Steve getting into the luggage.

"Oh my God, could you go any slower?" whined Tony, eyes still shut. "When can I open 'em?"

His phone rang. Tony reached blindly into his back pocket and turned it off. Tony had a lot of well-wishers but really, there were only a precious few he gave a shit about, and right now, his attention was thoroughly fixed on Steve. He hated when Steve was coy. Well... loved it and hated it.

"Can I look yet? You're not unpacking everything, are you? I want my gift," said Tony stubbornly;
he could still hear quiet movements from Steve and he wondered if Steve was drawing this part out on purpose. If he was, then he had no right to tell Tony to keep his expectations down, because every second of anticipation gave Tony more than enough time to picture every crazy thing imaginable, from Steve having a tattoo on his ass to Donner popping out of one of the suitcases or something.

Once he was done rustling through the suitcase, more sounds followed, sounds that sounded suspiciously like Steve shedding his clothes. He was actually a little nervous now but it was too late to back down Steve. Tony had expectations.

Steve remembered Phil's face when he'd handed the outfit over, mumbling something about how it really was Steve's by right... of course, he wasn't wearing all of it. As far as Steve was aware bright blue tights were not considered sexy in this century. Probably not in the forties either.

Steve placed a hand on Tony's shoulder to guide him to the bedroom and warn him before he moved to straddle his waist. He leaned down to whisper in Tony's ear. "Surprise. You can open your eyes," he murmured. Steve was clad in nothing but a navy pair of shorts, the material soft and leaving very little to the imagination. "And yes. They are the original pair."

Tony stared for a moment, then a slow smile began to spread across his face.

"O Captain, my Captain," he breathed, reaching out to slide a hand over Steve's buttocks. The last time he'd seen these shorts, it had been on a poster. The outline of Steve's genitals was clear and well-defined. Tony grinned, running both hands over the slippery material. "How in the hell did you get ahold of these?" he asked, his hands exploring Steve's body. The curved outline of his erection on his stomach was practically begging to be touched, but Tony was too busy sliding his hands over Steve's legs and ass. When his hand ran over Steve's cock it swelled a little under him, straining for more.

Tony nuzzled Steve's neck. It was so weird to see him, the familiar Captain America from the posters... yet also to smell him, undeniably omega, not the dominant Alpha Tony had always assumed. It was paradoxically strange, seeing Steve as his childhood hero, as opposed to his mate.

Tony reached up to run his fingers over Steve's jaw and lips. Steve's skin had only the lightest hint of down; like most omegas, Steve couldn't easily grow a beard. His body was well-suited to the shorts; they probably hadn't even needed to shave him.

Steve sighed sweetly as Tony's hands explored contently. He ran his hands up to curve over his shoulders, settling up a little higher and arcing his back into Tony's touch. "Phil had the outfit. He gave it to me a month after I woke up, said it was rightfully mine... he was pretty big fan. There's a lot of memorabilia floating around out there but the original outfit, it was with the USO 'til the sixties and then passed through a few collectors before coming to Phil."

"I knew he was a fan, but wow," said Tony, shaking his head. His hands caressed Steve's inner thigh, brushing the bulge between his legs. The outfit left very, very little to the imagination; it was designed to show up the "super soldier," after all. And to sell war bonds. And nothing quite sold like sex.

Steve was blushing a little at Tony's hands. He let out a pleased sound when he touched his cock. "So, it's your birthday..."

Steve shifted a little, reaching down to undo Tony's belt with a wicked glint in his eyes, deft fingers working quickly. "I packed it, if you want me to wear it," he whispered, dropping Tony's belt onto the floor.
Tony watched Steve undoing his belt with interest. His shorts were so tight that they might as well have been painted on.

"...please," he asked softly, almost hesitantly. He loved the idea of Steve dressing up for him, of getting to have the exclusive privilege to undress and bone Captain America. He was so used to Steve being Steve that sometimes he forgot about Steve's persona, the one with the costume and the deep sotto voice and the all-American soldier-next-door thing. But he also didn't want to be someone like Gideon, who got his kicks from it.

The thing is... the costume did not leave much to the imagination. It had been designed that way, to show off his muscles, to highlight how perfect he was. The perfect soldier. The perfect Alpha... if not for the fact, of course, that Steve wasn't an Alpha at all. The paradox was erotic in its own way, Steve's body being so well-muscled, but also lithe, the movements of his hips enticing, contradicting the flex of his muscles and the girth of his dick.

"Whatever you want." He rocked his hips forward. Steve's tone dropped to something lower. "I wanna be good for you."

Tony settled back onto the bed, hands behind his head, watching Steve lovingly. "You are good for me. I love this. This is amazing, Steve. You're amazing."

Steve nodded, trying to push down any nerves he had. He was relieved Tony had liked it. Steve hadn't been sure but he'd only been too shy to ask anyone else for their opinion on the matter. He thought about asking Aria, but she thought so much of him and he didn't think she could deal with him defiling the 'Cap' image quite like this. Clint would never drop it and Natasha would be too smug about it. Sam would have given him so much shit...and he already had too much dirt on Steve.

Some of the things they got up to in the bedroom felt intimate not just because of the sex itself but because of the trust they put in each other. They had both done and said things that would ruin them if it was put out in public. Steve in heat was not a pretty sight, certainly not that of strong, independent omega. And Tony had done his fair share of dirty talking; if anyone ever heard half of the things he said to Steve in bed, they'd probably tear him to pieces.

It was a unique experience to Tony, to put this level of trust in anyone. Aside from Pepper and Rhodey, he lacked that with just about everything else in his life. Perhaps even only with Pepper, who was (un?)fortunate enough to see him drunk very often.

"I can't believe you have-- wait, Phil doesn't know why you wanted it, did he?" asked Tony, suddenly worried Phil might know what they were going to do.

"No," he laughed gently as he stood and walked back over to the suitcase, bending down to search through it with a shit-eating grin on his face, ears red with embarrassment. "He gave it to me before I even met you. Said he felt weird having my clothes, because when I was dead they were collectibles or whatever... but once I was alive they were rightfully mine. I think he thinks they're hanging up in the closet. Pretty sure if he saw this he would bury us both alive."

"Didn't the original outfit have tights?" asked Tony, lifting his head just enough to eyeball Steve.

"I don't have the tights," Steve shrugged. "Don't think they would have lasted 70 years. I went through about one pair a performance." Steve was always told off for moving around too much, or sitting with his legs too wide. 'Don't sit like an Alpha' they used to tell him. Ha.

He pulled the rest of his old outfit (he couldn't bring himself to call his stage costume a "uniform") out of his suitcase, minus the tights. The stupid little boots felt weird without any socks on but they
were party of the whole 'look' and Tony seemed to keen to appreciate it in its entirety.

Steve always remembered Lucy, one of the dancers (all omegas too), when she saw him in the outfit for the first time. She laughed, thrown her head back, and said: *It's not really bonds they're selling, is it?*

Steve turned back around to face Tony, tilting his head in an almost coy sort of manner. "So, where'd you want me?"

Tony stared at Steve, drinking in the site of him. He couldn't help but grin. Steve might as well have been wearing a French maid outfit.

According to history (or at least, according to history before Steve had been found and thawed), Captain America, aka Steve Rogers, was a real person, an Alpha who had been denied admission to the army due to medical problems, and following his use of the serum, had been sent overseas to lead an elite team of total badasses to liberate POW camps. The "Captain America" who performed the USO shows was merely a body double and of course an omega, because who didn't like seeing a pretty little omega prancing around? Historians had disagreed about how many Captains there were and about whether or not the "real" Steve had ever performed in any shows.

Steve had been advised that the "real" Captain America, the one overseas, was an Alpha; the one they portrayed in newsreels and spoke about on the radio was a strong, dominant, boy-next-door type. It was good for people's morale, they said. Steve should never tell anyone the truth, they said; it would be too much of a shock to the American people to think that an omega was fighting their war. He was kept away from most social functions stateside, because the knowledge that Steve was not really an Alpha was privilege, secret intelligence and they didn't want anyone sniffing out his true status. Steve remembered being escorted to the White House, where he'd had to use a different bathroom than the other Howlies. He remembered being barred entry to a bar in England because of his status. He remembered being told he couldn't leave military bases to socialize with citizens because it would devastate them far too much to discover his real status, and spending long nights alone while the other Howlies painted the town red without him.

Steve coming out had been an utter shock to everyone.

Tony remembered when they'd found him; he had watched the news, watching the president give his famous "Welcome back, Cap" line, and seen Steve smiling onstage, looking tall and straight-backed and muscular. No wonder they had quickly swept him into an undercover mission; Tony had an idea that, if SHIELD had had their way, they would have kept Steve's true status a secret for as long as possible.

"Turn around for me?" asked Tony hopefully. Steve's ass in those shorts. *God, I love my country,* he thought. He was trying not to actively drool, but...

...it wasn't dissimilar to seeing a stripper dressed as a sexy cop or something.

Tony wondered if Steve appreciated how good he looked.

He bet Steve had managed to get people to buy a shit-ton of war bonds. And talk about propaganda... watching a sexy omega smack Hitler was probably a fucking show-stopper. Vaguely, Tony wondered to what extent his father had ogled Steve like this, had purposefully used Steve's sex appeal to get people involved in the war effort. He pushed those thoughts away because it was creepy to think about. Plus he was already sporting one hell of an erection and Howard was among the last people in the world he wanted to think about right now.
He reached down to pull his stiff cock from his boxers, against which it was straining uncomfortably; he watching Steve, stroking himself slowly, enjoying the sight. He definitely could have been convinced to buy a war bond or start a liberty garden or something.

Steve had never talked to Tony much about his experience before he'd joined the war, but after he'd had the serum. The serum worked but its creator had been assassinated immediately after Steve had received it, meaning he was the only one. No one seemed sure of what to do with him. Suggestions ranged from sending him to medical labs to try to reverse-engineer the serum to simply sending him home to carry on with civilian life as if nothing had ever happened. Steve remembered when they'd considered selling him. Ha. That had been a brief conversation, and Steve had been there for it, listening furiously while generals, scientists, and politicians bickered over his fate like he wasn't even in the room. Auctions were a lot less taboo back in the forties and Steve was a 'pretty one.' If he was sold off and bred, maybe they could get super soldiers after all, through natural means, they said. But the idea was thankfully dismissed early; it would take forever and the war would be over by then. Eventually they decided he could more money on a stage and shoved him up there instead. He'd given his all into every single performance. He exceeded the war bond quotas almost every time. One of the performers had once asked him 'why do you try so hard, Steve-o?'

Steve hadn't answered, not properly. He had nightmares of being sold off. The serum had erased the mark on his neck (all marks, everywhere; it had healed every scar and even his bellybutton had gotten more shallow) and after a while he couldn't even feel Bucky anymore. Being an unbonded horseshoe in his time was a hell of a liability and he didn't want to go to an auction. He didn't want to be with an Alpha he hadn't chosen himself.

He did turn around for Tony, trying not to blush as badly as he would have usually done. Turning bright red certainly wouldn't do him any favors right now. Steve looked over his shoulder to see Tony stroking himself and felt a sharp tug of arousal in his belly. The way his Alpha was looking at him was...

Good birthday present, he thought smugly to himself.

And Steve was meant to look good in this; it was meant to be tight...it didn't feel wrong to wear it in the bedroom. But Steve had made it very clear, from day one, that his actual uniform was a no-go.

Steve watched Tony stroking himself, his own tongue coming out to wet his bottom lip. His Brooklyn drawl crept back into his voice. "You just gonna sit there 'nd watch all day?"

"Maybe," said Tony, a grin spreading on his face. "I want to enjoy this before I unwrap you."

It had taken Tony longer than he cared to admit to get used to Steve's physique. It wasn't just that he was a guy. It was that he was more muscular than Tony, and having an omega who was taller and bigger and stronger felt... wrong. Like having a girlfriend who was a head taller than him. (Tony had always dated women 1-2 inches shorter than him, though not consciously.) Worse, when they went out, it wasn't uncommon for people to come over and want to touch Steve. Some asked, and others just grabbed. Usually it was his biceps, but sometimes it was his chest or stomach. Tony felt both enviable at how people squeezed his arms and ooo'ed and ahhh'ed, and also had to resist the nature Alpha urge to protect his omega, to slap anyone who touched him and then throw Steve onto the ground and cover him.

Tony climbed out of bed and approached Steve instead to get a better look at him. He ran his hands over Steve, down his arms and down his sides, drinking in the sight of that uniform.

He almost asked Steve to swear he'd never tell a soul, then realized Steve wouldn't, not in a million years. The only thing more embarrassing than Tony being turned on by this was probably anyone
knowing that Steve had willingly put on the uniform for him.

Tony leaned in to catch Steve's lips in an affectionate nip, sucking briefly before letting him go.

Steve almost reached out to Tony, resisting the urge to lean down and steal a second kiss. He felt an odd sense that he should... wait. He would wait to be prompted before he did anything. And it would often go that way when they were in bed together. It went without saying that because of his 'omega instincts' Steve liked being 'good' and doing what he was told. Whilst, in real life such a concept was demeaning, in the bedroom it didn't have to be. Steve could just enjoy himself and not worry about how he came off to anyone but Tony.

"Okay, America the Beautiful... hands on the bed," commanded Tony, still touching himself. Steve's cheeks were tinged pink but he also looked thoroughly pleased with himself for getting Tony so wound up.

He couldn't help but look down at Tony stroking his own erection, blue eyes dark as his throat went Steve. He hesitated, clearly wanting to touch Tony, please him in some way, but he complied. He wasn't entirely sure what Tony would want them to do, but he was excited to find out.

Steve moved to place his hands on the bed, bending forward a little in the process, his ass in the air. He gave it a little wiggle as if to silently tell Tony to get a move on. Steve's smugness had put him in a cheeky mood.

Tony bit his lip when Steve gave an impatient squirm. He walked up behind him and put his hands on Steve's hips, putting out a foot to get him to spread his legs. Steve obeyed the hint, automatically.

"I'm going to fuck Captain America," murmured Tony softly, leaning down to nuzzle his neck. He reached around Steve to pull down his shorts, only just enough to let his cock spring out and to reveal his ass. Tony slid his shaft between Steve's legs; Steve left a trail of slick on his member. Tony laid his head on Steve's back, rubbing himself between Steve's legs teasingly, arms wrapping around his waist. "Captain fucking America. Oh my God," said Tony. He let out a breathy laugh and let go of Steve, briefly, with one hand, just to move aside the cloth from his neck, to reveal his mark.

He put his arms back around Steve and put his mouth over his neck, still rubbing himself against Steve's wet little slit. "If you want me, put me in," he whispered against Steve's neck, his words slightly muffled. Tony had every intention of biting down the moment he was inside of Steve; his teeth had already found their grooves. Tony had grown used to ignoring the other mark. Sometimes, rarely, he'd accidentally try to fit his mouth into the wrong scar, which was a very disconcerting experience. Both his bite-mark and Bucky's were equally present, slightly overlapping each other, giving Steve's mark a weird sort of 3D look, like one mark was the shadow of the other.

To any other person, the marks were indistinguishable; they were simply bites. But to Tony, the difference between which was his and which wasn't was obvious, as obvious as telling apart two different people's handwriting.

Not that he was thinking about the other mark at present; he was already gripping his own mark and was going to bite down as soon as Steve sheathed him.

Steve's breath hitched softly when Tony spread his legs. The shorts were tight against his thighs and would effectively keep in place. He swallowed.

At the first glide of Tony's cock against him Steve squirmed and let out a needy, pleased sound. He was already goddamn wet. He was turned on, he couldn't help it, his cock curving nicely against a
short clad thigh. He was aware that Tony had had posters of Steve up since he was little, that this moment might well be fulfilling some kind of fantasy for him...Steve certainly understood the appeal of it.

He was soon let out quiet little whines as Tony rubbed against him, his hole twitching as Steve wasn't given what he wanted. The brush of teeth against his neck made him shiver. He moaned softly and nodded, taking a moment to actually register what Tony had said. He was trembling a little in anticipation.

It was hard like this (pun not intended). Steve had to go slowly to make sure Tony didn't slip out which meant he felt every inch of him. He grunted, low in his throat, as the head squeezed inside

His hands fisted in the sheets as he slowly moved his hips back and up, taking Tony in until he eventually bottomed out.

Steve wriggled back against his mate, and Tony growled against his neck when he felt his head nudging against Steve's puckered, expectant entrance. He sighed slowly with satisfaction as Steve eased himself onto Tony; when he felt the knot getting squeezed in, he bit down automatically with a groan of delight, tugging at the skin on Steve's neck.

Steve let out a ragged breath.

"Fuck," he whispered.

Steve whined loudly when Tony bit down, a tremor running down his spine. The feeling was almost overwhelming and his cock twitched where it was curved against his thigh. His entrance clenched around Tony. Steve felt almost too hot, especially in all the clothes.

It took Tony a moment to be willing to relinquish his grip on Steve's neck, but he did so that he could straighten up and look down. Steve's elbows were on the bed and he was bent over, still in the uniform, Tony's cock buried up to the hilt. Tony put his hands on Steve's hips and began rutting into him, looking down at him, in awe because he was fucking Captain America and it was undoubtedly the best ego trip he'd had in recent years. Beneath him Steve was giving weak little cries at each thrust, his hands balling up into the sheets, and Tony was somewhat glad they weren't facing each other because he was sure he had a big stupid grin on his face.

Tony's hands on Steve's hips felt warm and firm. He let out a whelp when he was tugged back onto Tony's cock before his Alpha began to fuck into him in earnest. Steve whimpered and groaned beneath him, his back arching up as he squirmed beneath him. "Tony-- Tony-- ah!" Steve pressed his forehead into the sheets, panting. "A-alpha...please..."

Tony let out a sigh of satisfaction, rutting into Steve with short, sharp, quick thrusts. "Yeah... oh, yeah..." he moaned, looking down at Steve longingly. Steve was bucking up into him, massaging the knot, tugging at Tony with his body, and it was incredibly satisfying to see Steve-- no, Captain America-- bent over and whimpering and begging and taking it like a fucking porn star.

"Oh... Oh, God, Captain--" blurted Tony without thinking. "Yes-- Captain-- oh, fuck, yes, God-- you gonna take it-- you gonna take what I give you?"

He was already trembling, on the very edge of coming undone. He was pounding Captain America. He felt like he was eight feet tall.

Without any prep before Steve was probably going to be sore later on. But he didn't care. He would revel in it. Fuck. Sometimes turned Steve on about being taken like this...the whole of America
thought he was some pure golden boy. Something tickled Steve the right way about being the opposite of their expectations. He also reveled in the rebelliousness of it all.

"Yes. Yes--" Steve moaned, trying to nod even though Tony couldn't really see it. His thighs trembled with need, fingers digging into the sheets tightly. "I need it. Please. Give it to me. I need it--I'll take it. I'll take it." Steve panted. "I'll be good. P-please...."

"G-good boy," Tony managed, shoving Steve against the bed. His body spasmed and if he wasn't half-leaning onto Steve his knees probably would have given out; his hands were gripping Steve's hips, holding him, his cock stuffed into him, and he twitched as he felt the sweet release... the thought kept spinning through his head that he was cumming into Captain America, that Captain America was taking his seed, was begging for it, and it took him several long seconds to come down, giving Steve a couple of last sporadic thrusts, emptying the last little bit of jizz into him.

Yes. Good boy. Steve groaned, eyes fluttering shut as Tony emptied into him. He trembled and squirmed. At some point, during the knotting process, he came. Steve was distantly aware of his ass tightening around Tony and his stomach getting wet and warm. Fuck. It was like he was floating and he was aware of nothing other than Tony and the place where they were connected.

As was often the case when watching porn or indulging in a weird fetish, Tony felt slightly dirty afterwards; Steve was lying rumpled up in front of him, still dressed in his old costume, and Tony felt like he'd just desecrated an American flag or something.

Steve also felt a little bad at coming over the outfit himself. But then, the people who had shoved him up on that stage were assholes, so fuck 'em.

Tony leaned forward and licked the back of Steve's neck tenderly. They were knotted; somewhere, Tony was sure, George Washington was probably rolling over in his grave.

Steve smiled at the drag of tongue on his neck.

"So..." Steve exhaled heavily. "Good birthday present?"

"Fucking great birthday present," said Tony, draping himself over Steve's back, looking down at the bright blues and reds. He brought one leg up, trying to shift into a more comfortable position; he was swollen to a ridiculous degree. "You're the only person I ever really knotted," said Tony contemplatively, reaching up to find Steve's hand and hold it. Tony had kinda-of sort-of knotted two other people, ever, but he'd gotten the knot out with a bit of force, not liking the sensation of being stuck to someone. With Steve, it was always pleasant. Plus, he doubted he could even really force it right now. When they fucked, really fucked, Steve got so tight post-orgasm that they ended up pretty committed to being knotted for at least a half-hour.

Awkwardly, Steve wiggled up the bed so they could get more comfortable. He brought his arms under his chin, forearms settled under his head comfortably. Tony was warm and thick and pleasant inside of him. The kind of calm that washed over him when they were knotted together was like nothing else. "Good," he hummed sweetly. "I'm glad."

"...after this you're really gonna need a spa treatment," he added jokingly, smiling and nuzzling against his mate. "Ever had a couples' massage? It's nice. ...we gotta loosen you up. It's only morning and you better believe I'm going to be cashing in on that sweet birthday sex all day." He kissed the back of Steve's neck, lips brushing over the familiar mark.

"Mhm. Definitely." Steve didn't really have to deal with post-sex soreness all that badly. The serum always dealt with it within the first twenty-four hours. He smiled. "Don't gotta worry about me
struggling with keeping up," he pointed out with a playful wiggle. "But I'll try a massage. I've never actually had a massage in my life," Steve admitted. During the Depression, shockingly, the opportunity had never come up.

He felt a sudden lurch of emotion. It was from Tony.

"I'm-- I'm so glad you got my mark back," said Tony above him, voice cracking a little. "I'm so glad you wanted me for your Alpha."

He let Tony take his hand when he reached for it, squeezing their fingers together gently.

"I'd already chosen you," Steve whispered. "Don't forget that Tony. I've been yours for almost a year now..." Their anniversary was only a few days away.

"I know, I just mean-- mean that it's good to have my mark there," said Tony, fumbling a little.

Steve could never appreciate the feeling of seeing Bucky's mark, and only Bucky's mark.

He had grilled Natasha after Yemen about him. She'd been up close and personal and Tony had had questions.

"How dominant is he?" he'd demanded. He did not have to specify who.

Natasha, stirring her coffee, had contemplated his question for a moment, regarding him coldly, then finally said, "Very."

"One to ten scale."

"...eight, maybe."

"More or less than you?" demanded Tony. He considered Natasha to be an eight. It was a rude question but Tony had needed an answer, and Natasha, also an Alpha, could appreciate Tony's concerns.

"...slightly more than me," she'd said, and Tony could have sworn he saw a glimpse of sympathy in her eyes.

Tony was probably like a two or three on his own scale. Maybe a four, on a good day. His father and Obie had both easily been nines.

He hadn't really expected Steve's body to accept his mark again, not once Bucky had forced-bonded him, so he'd been ecstatic when his had resolved with equal clarity on Steve's neck. If someone were to look at Steve's neck and see the two marks, they might even think he and Bucky were equal in dominance, which was obviously not the case.

He nosed behind Steve's ears lovingly. Steve's body had chosen both of them as a mate, even though Bucky was clearly a better choice, evolutionarily. That meant a lot.

"...we'll get you a nice massage... you'll like it," he said softly against Steve's skin. Steve was still in his ridiculous costume and Tony was still partially dressed but neither of them was moving. They lay there in peaceful silence for forty minutes before they were even capable of pulling apart, and then they went to shower before getting dressed and going to find the spa. Steve put his old costume, freshly desecrated, back in his suitcase, worried someone from housekeeping might espy it on the bed.
Tony reassured him he didn't have to worry and they'd be taking it out again soon, but Steve didn't want to chance it.

He let Tony drag him into the spa, which Tony booked in its entirety so that they could have some privacy. "Privacy" was subjective; the staff was still there, watching them, ever-attentive. Steve looked around self-consciously, unsure of how he felt about getting undressed in front of strangers. It took some elbowing from Tony for Steve to pull off his clothes and climb onto a massage table.

Okay. So... Tony was right. Massages were the shit. Steve groaned, loudly, as some old woman poked and prodded at his back. The sensation was heavenly; he should have done this sooner. Hell, Steve thought, he should do this every week. Tony was next to him, having the same thing done but he was only distantly aware of it...it was just him and Josephine's hands, as far as Steve was concerned.

The bite mark on the back of his neck was evidently fresh but Josephine, his masseuse, was far too professional to comment on it. In fact, Steve was about 99% she had zero idea who either of them even were. It was refreshing, actually.

"You are very tense," she told him, tutting at him like a mother. "You should ask for time off of work."

Steve smiled against the massage table.

By the time Josephine was finished, Steve was no longer worried about strangers looking at him, and he let them drag he and Tony to and fro, fussing over their skin and nails and hair.

Tony was feeling thoroughly refreshed. He'd never had a calm birthday and so far it had been nothing but relaxing. He soaked his feet, got a massage, got a mani/pedi, and was currently lying with a couple of cucumbers over his eyes, letting someone else wash his hair and trim his beard, while he sipped on a martini and listened to some Enya. It was blissful to not worry about Iron Man or SHIELD or Project 84 or any of the other crap in his life.

"This is actually one of the best birthdays I've ever had," he said to Steve. Steve was sitting next to him, also with cucumbers over his eyes. They were holding hands. Steve had been informed he didn't really need a face mask ("Your skin is already so youthful!") but Tony had insisted just because he liked seeing Steve treated.

"Another martini, sir?" asked one of the women currently kneading his shoulders.

"That would be fantastic, Cindy, thank you."

"Phone call for Mr. Stark?"

Tony pulled off one of his cucumber slices and opened an eye, frowning. A woman in a neat pantsuit was holding a white phone out to him. He realized that Steve had left his own cell upstairs, and Tony had turned his off.

"...this better be an emergency," he said, taking the phone.

"Hi, Tony. Happy birthday."

"Ty? ...isn't it like the middle of the night over there?"

"Mm-hm," said Ty. "But you told us to call you immediately if we found Ashtray or Trickshot, and I think we did. We've been trying to call all evening but both yours and Steve's phones are dead."
Tony sat bolt upright, the other cucumber slice dropping from his eye. "Wait, what? You found them?"

"Possibly. We've tracked an Ashtray, given name Matthew Rooney, to an estate up in Wisconsin, and we have no reason to believe he's not still there. Unfortunately that estate is private. I assume he'd living there as a houseboy. As for Trickshot, his given name's Charles Barton, and he'd switched owners a few times. We tracked him as far as a place in South Carolina called the Institute for Omega Reproduction, which was shut down by the federal government in 2002, and who had a C. Barton for a 'patient' who we think might have been passed off to a camp in Texas called Boulder Valley Ranch. Anyway, they acquired a couple of omegas in 2002, most likely from the Institute. One of them, Bullseye, matched Barton's description and was later sent to northern Alabama, to a camp called Zephyr Hill, in 2007. Apparently he was a trouble-maker. But if he's still alive, he's at Zephyr Hill and has been for the last three years."

Tony looked over at Steve. He assumed Steve had gotten most of that. Super-hearing and all. "Do you-- do you think he could be alive?"

"Beats me, Tony," said Tiberus wearily. "He lasted for five years at Boulder Hill, so clearly, he's a fighter. I can't exactly call up Zephyr Hill and ask about him, can I? Anyway, we don't know if he's still Bullseye or if they would have renamed him. The trail ran dry at Zephyr Hill. But I think there's a chance and that's certainly better than no chance."

"Oh my God," Steve whispered. "He's alive." He knew one thing, if there was a chance that Clint's brother was alive then he would be. If he was anything like Clint, then there was no doubt. Everything they'd endured...

"You don't know that for sure..." Ty said, trying to sound gentle.

"We know," Steve said, with startling optimism in contrast to when they'd been after Donner. But he didn't feel wholly responsible for Charles like he had Donner. He looked excited. The cucumbers had fallen down into his lap.

Steve was grinning.

"Anyway, I hope you have a good day Tony. I just thought you should know," Tiberus said, sounding a little tired.

"When we break open the camps we'll find him," Steve whispered and turned to Tony with a smile. "We'll find him for sure, Tony!"

Tony patted Steve's hand. "Thanks, Ty," he said, and hung up. He was glad Steve was excited, but he couldn't help but feel worried. The guy had been in and out of camps since 2002, and before that, had been exchanged between private owners... he'd spent, what, twenty years being tortured? Who the hell knew what he was like after that? Tony hated himself for thinking it, but part of him wondered if it would be better if he were dead.

He didn't really want to think about it right now, though. He was trying to relax.

"...can we get some more cucumbers over here?" demanded Tony, leaning his head back.

He'd almost forgotten about Project 84 for the day, but it was one month until the shit hit the fan and he didn't know how to feel about that.

"...Steve," he said suddenly. "...Steve, I just thought of something. Remember how I sort of joked we needed a medication nanny? ...what about Ty? He's your friend, and my friend, kind of, and we
know we can trust him, and he's an omega but he's not an omega who goes into heat... I doubt I'd ever be able to smell him while you were in heat.” Ty's unsettling smell always caused people to lean unintentionally away from him. But when Steve was in heat Tony doubted a tire fire could have bothered him.

"That's a really good idea,” Steve said as the woman came around with more cucumbers. She set the tray down bedside them and left. Steve stole a glance at her and waited until she wasn't looking to eat several.

Tiberius certainly wouldn't take advantage and try to take photos or get information or anything like that. They could trust him.

"We should mention it to him when we get back. Might be better explained in person," Steve said, popping a few more slices into his mouth. He was worried about them coming across as insensitive, especially considering that a normal heat with his mate was something Ty could never have.

Tony gave his hand a light smack. "Stop eating those. Put 'em on your eyes. If you want something to eat, just ask. CINDY! Bring Steve some snacks before he starts eating lotion."

Steve blushed crimson. "So...what's after this?" Steve asked, trying to sound casual, inspecting a piece of cucumber with a smile. "More spa stuff? Dinner? ...bed?"

"Mm... well... I was thinking lunch, bed, maybe a little bit of sight-seeing, bed, dinner, bed," said Tony as one of the women placed new cucumber slices over his eyes. "My end goal is to break my dick."

One of the girls tending to them accidentally giggled.

"--she knows what I'm talking about!” said Tony enthusiastically, grinning. He knew Steve was probably blushing even more beside to him.

By the time they left the spa, Tony was feeling sleepy with relaxation, not to mention tipsy (he'd had five martinis) and more than a little hungry.

"Let's just cuddle in bed and order some room service," he said, holding Steve's hand as they wandered sleepily into the lobby together. The time zone change and overly-long nap on the plane had muddled up Tony's internal clock.

He lowered his voice a little. "I thought, maybe, since it was my birthday, you might, ah... wear the collar for a little bit? Just around our rooms?" He gave Steve's hand a squeeze. He didn't want to make any demands, especially since earlier Steve had let him fuck him in the costume Tony knew he loathed... but he also recognized the power of a birthday to beg for sexual favors. (Case in point: it was the only time of year he could wheedle Beth into anal, back when they were together.)

In any case, he figured they had to go back to their rooms to grab their phones. As much as he didn't want to be bothered, he would rather get a phone call on his cell than have people bringing phones to him like in the spa.

"Once we've got lunch," Steve murmured, pressing a kiss underneath Tony's ear. He squeezed his hand lightly as they headed back into their suite.

Tony gave Steve free rein over the menu; Steve went overboard, promptly ordering nearly everything on the menu and then some.

Steve wanted to take some time to try some British classics. They brought the food in on a silver
trolley, because there was so much of it, but Steve could easily clean about half of it away.

Steve sat cross legged on the bed as he picked his way through fish and chips, and a prawn cocktail.

Tony watched him wolfing down food with an odd sense of fondness. Poor Steve. He ate like a guy who had never seen filet mignon before.

"At least fish and chips hasn't changed since the forties," he said through a mouthful of fries, covering his mouth with his hand.

He grinned up at Tony when the other was staring. Steve was clearly very hungry (they had skipped breakfast). At the back of his mind he was admittedly thinking about the collar in the box at the bottom of the suitcase.

Tony went at his food in his usual manner: scientifically. Tony's eating habits had long been a source of grief for Pepper. A decade ago, she had thought Tony's diet was only to annoy her. It was not uncommon for him to call her up at 1 in the morning and demand a tamale, or to suddenly decide to eat nothing but ramen for a week for no reason whatsoever. Aside from having very specific demands and a very bizarre schedule (or lack of a schedule), Tony had a habit of pulling apart his food. Every omelette, layer cake, and sandwich was subject to inspection, as if he were in a prison cell and desperately hoping someone might slip him a shiv. On top of that, Tony occasionally went through various healthfood crazes. Every one of his bad eating habits had gotten worse after Afghanistan. The fact that he was neither thin nor fat was nothing short of a miracle.

Tony was currently peeling apart toad-in-the-hole as if concerned it might actually have toad in it.

"What sight seeing were you thinking of?" asked Steve.

The two of them were sitting cross-legged on the bed, plates of food scattered around them, like a pair of kids left alone in a hotel with their parents' credit card.

"Well, Pepper basically gave me a list of like twenty-five places, but there's only a couple I really care about," said Tony, reaching for some sort of dessert that looked good. "There's a lock exhibit at the British museum I gotta see, and I'd like to check out King's College... lemme see..." Tony chewed on some strawberries, pulling out Pepper's rumpled list. She always wrote things down for him in addition to e-mailing them because Tony often didn't bother to check his e-mail. "...oh... Fury wants you to check in with MI-13. You also have a meeting with some guy named-- Peter Wisdom. For the love of Lorentz, why does everyone have such a fake-sounding name? Do they like, assign you a dumb name when you get to a certain level in an intelligence agency?" Tony shook his head, then turned back to the paper. "Oh! And I-- I, uh, really want to see Churchill's war rooms. But if that's too intense for you... I mean... I know you fought in the war. And... and were probably also there," fumbled Tony awkwardly. "And, y'know, we're going to see Aunt-- I mean, Agent Carter."

He dusted his hands off on his pants and picked up a piece of fried fish. Tony, Pepper had once told Steve with annoyance, ate everything with his hands that couldn't be sucked through a straw. She said it was a combination of Tony being a tactile person and also liking to bother other rich people with his refusal to act posh or snooty. As could be expected, Tony began peeling away the fried part to check out the fish, eating the batter separately.

"That's a lot of stuff. Peg's caretakers-- she's got a few nurses who visit her throughout the week-- said the weekend would be best for her, though, so we should probably wait a few days." Steve said, inspecting his apple crumble with a pinch in his brow. He tried a bit of the topping with some of the custard. It was weird. It seemed like quite a humble dessert and yet the hotel was desperate to try and dress it up.
Tony watched Steve poke at his dessert, unsure of how to address the elephant in the room. Peggy was an old woman.

Steve changed the subject abruptly.

"I think I can cope with an old WWII place Tony," Steve said with a fond sort of smile. "I don't think I'll get any flashbacks from old rooms with tables and maps in them. If anything, I'd get PTSD from boredom. They'd make me sit through so many meetings... God, it damn near killed me some days, I swear."

He was confused about Fury wanting him to make contact with anyone in MI-13. Steve thought he was out of the game? Why was SHIELD telling him to do anything anymore?

"Why don't we go see the lock thing today? You seem most excited about that," Steve said. "Then we can... stay in for the rest of the evening."

He had to admit, the massage had worked a dream. Steve had never felt so relaxed in his life. And he'd never realised, before, just how goddamn tense he'd been. He finished devouring a terrifying amount of food and then moved to get dressed so they could go out. It was just a museum so Steve stuck with jeans and a t-shirt. And a coat, because England was freezing.

England had banned the camps they were looking into with Project 84 back in the nineties. It seemed America had some catching up to do on that front. And stuff like conversion therapy still existed for homosexuals and acers and the like. Again, it was banned in England. Although they did seem to have some gross old Alpha groups, like the 'Bullingdon club'. They weren't perfect. And they were tiny. (Peggy was never impressed when Steve gave her shit (teasingly) for how small the country actually was. "Two hundred miles, that's a long distance for you guys, huh?" Steve had once said teasingly after a particularly rough rendezvous. "Two hundred years is a long time for you, isn't it?" she had shot back. She'd always had a rapier wit.)

Steve wrapped his black wool coat around himself as they stepped outside, hand automatically finding Tony's as they stepped outside and got into the taxi the hotel had called for them. A traditional 'black cab' apparently. To Steve it just looked like a slightly blobbier looking car. Tony, used to limos, immediately leaned into the front seat to stare at the dashboard, much to the driver's discomfort.

The museum staff was grinning as Tony and Steve entered; the museum had refused to close itself down for just them (much to Tony's dismay) so there were other patrons milling around, but not many. Steve didn't really get the exhibition but Tony was clearly delighted. Steve was happy to follow his Alpha around. The smile on his face and the light in his eyes was totally worth it. Steve noticed a few people staring but most people seemed to be leaving them to their own devices. They passed one corridor and there was a kid who looked about ten who was practically staring at Steve. He gave the boy a little salute and his face lit up. Then Steve had to march on ahead to find Tony in the part about keys...wherever the hell he was.

Tony had let Steve lead the way through the museum lobby... but when they got to the exhibit, he'd instantly become single-mindedly fascinated.

Tony had procured a pad of graph paper within seconds of entering the lock exhibit and moments later was completely immersed in drawing the designs. He wasn't an artist, like Steve, nor especially talented. Tony couldn't shade or produce a portrait. However, when it came to mechanical details, he was second to none. Tony had been called a great programmer and a great electrical engineer and a great aerospace engineer, but staring at the simple details of locks from the 1800s, Tony began completely engrossed. If he had not been born into the Stark family, he very easily could have
become a regular car mechanic or a machinist. He liked to work with his hands, liked the hardware of things, and always seemed happiest when he was in the shop bolting something down or welding something to something else. In the year they'd been together, Steve had watched Tony cheerfully disassemble various devices, from the dishwasher and coffee maker to entire cars in the garage, clearly enjoying seeing the interaction of the pieces.

In the next hall, Steve found Tony was talking eagerly with a docent about a completely unremarkable piece of metal.

"...a triangular cross-section with the face plates soldered together and secured by a C-shaped binding strip," the docent was saying.

Tony pressed against the glass case, ogling the metal. "Soldered together with gold?" he asked.

"Yessir."

"Cool," breathed Tony, obviously delighted. He peered into another case. "Oo, this one has splitting springs instead of tumblers! What is it, Chinese?"

"Yes, this one dates to the Tang dynasty," said the docent. He looked over Steve and tried to suppress a smile; clearly, he recognized them. "You know, most people don't bring historical artifacts into the museum," he joked.

"It's funny 'cause you're a fossil," said Tony affectionately, reaching backwards for Steve's hand while trying to take notes, one-handed, about another case of skeleton keys.

Steve laughed quietly, letting Tony take his hand. Tony was practically vibrating with excitement. He didn't get why locks were so fascinating but Tony was obviously engrossed in it all.

His note-taking paused abruptly at a case with an extremely wide, ornate collar.

"This collar is one of the first examples of a pin lock," said the docent. "It's from 1861. This is an example of a posture collar... very popular in the Victorian era."

Tony's grip on Steve's hand tightened a little.

The collar looked brutal. Not deceivingly beautiful like all the gemmed and shiny collars at the conference. It looked heavy and oppressive and... inescapable.

"It's illegal to put locks on collars here, right?" Steve said, glancing over at the docent.

"Since 2000," the man replied quickly.

"How did they get it through?" Steve asked curiously, turning a little so Tony could still hold his hand and sketch.

"I believe they were linked to too many abuse cases," the docent shrugged. "If you want to know the details, you can just Google it."

Steve knew he was still on Project 84, but there was no harm in thinking about the future...

Tony tucked his notepad into the waistband of his jeans, looking sobered by the existence of the collar in the exhibit.

He had mixed feelings about locked collars being made illegal. Tony had a strong libertarian slant; he generally felt everything should be legal, including drugs and weapons. He disliked that
handguns were illegal in London and disliked the idea that collars could be made illegal, too.

"...must suck to be in the BDSM scene here," said Tony.

The docent gave him an indulgent smile. "It's not something we regulate in private. It's simply illegal to buy or wear one in public."

Tony frowned. He still felt conflicted.

But staring at the ugly, uncomfortable-looking collar in the case, he felt slightly ill. It looked so heavy and unpleasant, and if it was locked on... was the omega whose collar this had been had to wear it all the time? Had he or she been made to sleep in it?

Tony had some firsthand experience with the sensation of being trapped. In Afghanistan, for a little over a week, he had been hooked up to a car battery. The thing had weighed probably thirty-five or forty pounds and the wires trailing from his chest had been a literal life-line. He had carried that fucking battery around like some sort of grotesque lunch pail. When he was being dragged around by his captors, he'd clung it tightly to his chest, terrified it might be yanked away and that he would die an agonizing death. Anytime the wires got accidentally snagged on anything and tugged, aside from the sharp physical pain to his ruined chest, he'd suffered a mild anxiety attack, convinced he was imminently about to die.

The palladium-core arc reactor had not been perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but the freedom from that car battery had made all the difference.

Now, a year after replacing it with the badassium-core RT node, Tony felt like a new man. So far, there hadn't been any ill effects. He still needed to clean out the chest socket once a week; it produced a discharge, as any power source would. But there didn't appear to be any toxic effects and the discharge wasn't radioactive or anything. That being said, he was still a long way off from ever commercializing the technology. It was still too new, and the reactor that powered his heart was tiny, compared to anything needed to power, say, a car, or a building.

Tony gave Steve's hand a tug. The collar had ruined the experience for him.

"Hey, let's go for a walk," said Tony. He needed to go outside. Musing over locks and captivity and being trapped was making him feel claustrophobic. The museum was airy but it didn't matter. He needed to be outside, weather be damned.

Steve could feel something was wrong but he didn't question it. He kept their fingers threaded lightly together, leading the way out of the museum for Tony. They said polite goodbyes and exchanged thank yous with the reception on the way out.

Steve spotted a park nearby. He didn't know it but he was sure it was probably a semi-famous one. The weather was mild, or at least, it wasn't raining. Sunlight tickled through the clouds but it was still a little cold for Steve's liking.

He knew something was wrong but that it had gotten better once they were in the park. Steve glanced sideways over at Tony, an odd sensation tugging uncomfortably in his gut that wasn't his own. Steve stopped, turning around to face Tony properly. He reached out to beaten the lapels of his jacket.

"Are you okay?" Steve asked softly. "Anything I can do?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," said Tony, brushing Steve off. "It's just... gross. The collar thing. ...I feel like there's something wrong with me. That thing looked like a medieval torture device." He sighed a
little. He should have known there would be collars in an exhibit about locks.

At least he'd gotten a lot of good notes on locking mechanisms. They might be useful. Tony had gotten at least twelve pages of careful diagrams on his graph paper. It had been a productive visit.

"Let's just go back to the room... I'm okay with spending the rest of the day just watching TV and ignoring my e-mails," said Tony. Steve already knew that when Tony said "watch TV," he meant "tinker." The television was nothing more than background noise while Tony took things apart or examined schematics. When the television was on, it usually meant Tony was feeling moody; he was more inclined to use hand tools instead of power tools when the television was on.

"If you're sure," Steve said softly. It was Tony's birthday, after all, and therefore it was totally his call. Steve was honestly happy to anything. "But there's nothing wrong with you, okay? It's incomparable." He stole a quick kiss before he let Tony tug him along to keep walking.

Tony brought Steve's hand up to his mouth and kissed his knuckles before giving him a little tug to keep walking. He was wearing a leather jacket but he was still cold. He wanted to get back to the hotel, maybe get a Hot Toddy at the bar to warm up. "...you gonna text Clint and tell him about his brother?" he asked, trying to change the subject. "Or should we wait? ...if the guy's... you know... not there after all, it'd be a pretty big let-down."

The Clint thing was a tricky one. Clint had essentially told Steve to drop it...he wasn't sure how he would handle this new information. Steve was almost tempted to call Nat. But he knew that if say, Sam, went around his back to Tony before telling him something important that he wouldn't like it. "I'll Clint later. He's an adult. We don't need to protect his feelings."

It was an omega thing. People often tried to protect your feelings. Steve and Clint had ranted about it in more than one sparring sensation before.

"It's up to him how involved he wants to get," Steve said decisively. They went to go find a taxi to take them back to the hotel. They could have just walked but they both wanted to be warmer already.

Once they were back in the hotel room Steve spotted his sketchpad at the bottom of the suitcase, admittedly thrown in as an after thought. He glanced up at Tony and could already see the gears turning in his head. "You mind if I draw you while we... 'watch TV'?" He asked.

"Knock yourself out," said Tony. "Do you mind if I hold you, though?" He wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around Steve and hold him in his lap. It was a position that was tricky for them because of the size difference, but a year of being together meant they'd figured it out.

Steve slouched onto the bed with his sketchbook, his back against Tony's chest, his pad balanced on his left knee. Tony set his diagrams on his right knee, his phone beside him on the bed; while Steve began doodling, Tony annotating his diagrams, scribbling crammed equations into the margins, his attention only half on the television, which was some British drama show that had a stunning woman involved in a love triangle with two men who were both Alphas.

Tony set his chin on Steve's shoulder, his goatee tickling Steve's skin. He often used Steve as a pillow while he was working. His handwriting was both messy and tiny, making the graph paper in front of him give the appearance of having been thrown up on by a calculator. Tony's bow furrowed with its usual, faraway look of concentration, the one that meant he was deeply invested in whatever problem he was working on, the one Steve knew meant that nothing short of a bomb blast could tug him away from it. He'd seen that look many, many times before.

They sat like that for hours. It was comfortable and calming and Steve could have sat like that
forever. He drew everything and nothing. He did lazy sketches of Tony's face but it was hard to complete them at this angle. He drew the gorgeous view from outside the windows and made building-like shapes with smudged up graphite when he got bored of just drawing with fine lines.

He could feel Tony's steady breaths under his own and they were comforting.

Steve felt oddly serene, in that moment. Odd, because he never would have guessed that he, Captain America, would find peace in the cold, dreary, overcast city of London, England.
As the sun was dragged down into the sky, Steve felt hungry. He always felt hungry, even on lazy
days like this one. He polished off leftovers from lunch before curling back up with Tony again. He
didn't draw anymore, just lazily watched the drama on screen with semi-interest.

"You wanna order dinner?" he asked Tony around seven. Steve looked up and trailed his fingers
along his Alpha's jaw. "Your work going well?"

Tony looked up, blinking, trying to reorient himself to a world that wasn't pure mathematics. Unlike
Steve, he was capable of long fasting periods; he often forgot to eat when he was absorbed in
technical things.

"What? ...oh. Oh, yeah, work's going good," said Tony. He felt stiff from sitting with his legs and
arms around Steve. He stretched. "Did you say dinner? Yeah, let's do it."

Tony had already picked out at least one restaurant he wanted to eat at. It was a pub located on
Frying Pan Alley and Tony's interest in going there largely had to do with the name of the street it
was on, which sounded delightfully whimsical, like something straight out of Harry Potter. He
figured Steve would get a kick out of it.

But he wasn't sure whether Steve just wanted to order in or not. He was fine with that. It was
difficult to pull himself away from the bed when he was with his mate.

He leaned forward and nosed the back of Steve's neck, then reached up to trace his mark. Steve
shivered a little; Tony paused, his finger still on the outline of the scar, then traced Bucky's, too.
Another Alpha's mark on his omega was grotesque, but it was a part of Steve as much as anything
else was. And Tony had grown used to it, the same way he'd gotten used to Ty's weird smell or the
way Pepper always got up infuriatingly early even on weekends.

Steve sucked in a soft breath as Tony's fingers explored. He swallowed thickly. He knew he was
touching Bucky's mark. He knew it on instinct. And he felt gross, for a moment, before he pushed
that doubt away. Steve felt dizzy, almost, and let his eyes slip shut.

For a brief moment he was seated in the cell, the cage,, the blood hot as it trickled down his neck. A
thin streak of it made its way to the drain in the center of the cell, the floor tilted downwards...

He opened his eyes and stared at a fixed point on the blank wall.

"Would you have still wanted me if I was still smaller?" he asked, finally speaking after a pregnant
silence.

It was a weird question. Tony's fingers paused, still touching the overlap of the two marks.

"...that's not really a fair question, Steve," said Tony carefully. If Steve were small, Tony wouldn't
have looked twice at him, probably. Part of Steve's initial appeal had been his muscles, had been
seeing him totally demolish Happy in a boxing ring. It wasn't until Steve's heat that they had reached
the conclusion that they were scent-mates. But when Steve was small, he'd never gone into a proper
heat, so if he were small, they might not have even discovered it. "That's like me asking you if you'd
still want me if I'd never been through that shit-show in Afghanistan. You getting the serum... it's
what let you come into my century in the first place, and it's what let you be involved in the army,
and SHIELD, and end up with me. If you were small, we would've never crossed paths to begin
with."
It was an unsatisfying answer, Tony knew.

He also knew exactly why Steve had asked it.

"if by some magic, you lost the serum's effects and you were a little sick guy again, I'd still want you now," offered Tony. "We're bonded and that means that I love you exactly how you are... even if..." He trailed off and began tracing Bucky's mark again.

There were plenty of things about Steve that Tony didn't like or agree with. But that was because they were fundamentally different people.

He turned the question over in his head, wondering why Steve had asked. The conclusion he came to was an upsetting one. Steve was comparing him and Bucky. Bucky had bonded Steve when he was small, had for some reason wanted him. Tony didn't know what Bucky's motivations were. By any standards, but especially by 1930's standards, Steve was a fairly useless omega, pre-serum. He would have been a lot of work, always sick, unable to keep the house or bear children. In bonding him, Bucky had made a commitment to a certain lifestyle. Tony sort of hated him for that.

Bucky had marked him in this century. But he'd also marked him in the last one, and in the last one, Steve had been nothing special. Steve hadn't had the Captain America persona, the one Tony had so recently defiled.

Tony had only ever known Steve as a big, healthy, drop-dead gorgeous icon of perfection. He'd seen a few pictures of Steve, pre-serum, and obviously, did not find Steve as attractive in those pictures as he did now. But now that they were bonded, did it matter? Steve could be completely disfigured Phantom-of-the-Opera-style and Tony would still love him because that's just how pair-bonds worked. Once you were pair-bonded, it was usually for life. That was why omegas whose Alphas had distanced their bond were so shunned by society; it was an unnatural and upsetting thing to think about, a bond being broken.

"Sorry, I just..." Steve huffed out a soft breath. He always wondered. People treated him so differently as soon as he got abs and was over six feet tall. Sometimes a small niggle of paranoia ate away at the back of his mind. "Sometimes I hate feeling like everything good was from the serum, and not really me," he murmured. "Sometimes I'm terrified it's not really... me."

Tony frowned. "Steve," he said. He scooted around to face Steve on the bed. "...the whole reason they gave you the serum was because they saw something in your that none of their Alpha army pukes had. They wanted someone who embodied a bunch of moral ideals and that's you. You're the most obnoxiously righteous person on the planet. That's all Steve Rogers. Not the serum." He gave Steve's hand a squeeze before reaching over to flip Steve's sketchbook closed.

Steve felt a strange sense of relief when his sketchbook was closed.

He nodded, still feeling self-conscious and anxious. He had no idea where this coming from. But it was Tony's birthday and it wasn't the time for it. Steve swallowed and then lifted his head up to kiss his cheek. "Sorry. Drifted off a bit there. Sometimes drawing makes me... weird. So," Steve squeezed his hand. "What are we doing for dinner?"

"Dinner." Tony considered. "I was thinking of eating out." He gave Steve a quick, devilish grin, then ducked between his legs, tugging on his waistband. A moment later Steve felt his tongue.

Steve yelped when Tony dove between his legs, turning bright pink very quickly. God. He didn't like to admit it out loud but he had loved it the first time...and he was actually very down for Tony doing it again. His throat went dry and he was definitely disappointed when Tony pulled back.
Tony would have liked to continue but he couldn't help laughing at Steve squeal of surprise, and also he had to pull away because Steve had nearly kicked him in the face. Steve's reflexes made it damn near impossible to ever really surprise him, and even if Tony managed to, it often ended in Steve going full soldier on him; Tony had been shoved against a wall a couple of times when he jumped out at Steve.

"Sorry--" said Tony, laughing. "I couldn't help it-- maybe for dessert." He laughed harder when Steve's ears went pink. "--okay, okay, okay-- seriously-- dinner," said Tony, trying and failing to keep a straight face. Steve was still blushing indignantly.

Tony reached out gently to take his sketchbook and set it gently on the beside table, where it wouldn't get damaged. Steve had rolled onto Tony's papers when he'd reacted to Tony's lunge, but it didn't matter if they got a little crumpled; when they got home, Tony could have them digitized anyway.

Steve moved, crossing his legs on the bed, still blushing.

He reached out for Tony's hand, their fingers brushing together. "Do you actually want to eat out--" His blush darkened. "--like, for real. Whatever you want," Steve said softly, running his fingers along the inside of his wrist. "I mean it Tony."

"I'd feel weird not going out... it's my birthday, after all," said Tony. He paused and looked down at his hands. He picked at a hangnail, then put his finger in his mouth. Tony was a nail-biter, something that his manicurists no doubt found very aggravating.

"...I feel old, though," he said after a moment. "I can't believe I'm in my forties. I don't feel like I'm in my forties. I feel like I'm still in my early thirties. Maybe thirty-four or thirty-five, tops." He stole a glance at Steve, then said, a bit more confidently, "Yeah. Yeah, let's go out to eat. I want some bar food. And when we get back..." He trailed off, giving Steve another devilish smile.

He planted his feet on the floor and got up, moving his right shoulder to give it a pop. Tony could crack his right shoulder like normal people could crack knuckles and he did so frequently, mostly because it always made Pepper wince.

The pub Tony had chosen, King's Stores, turned out to be the most remarkably old-school pub in the world. The windows were all closed against the cold, but it was still lively, with the bottom half painted black and the top part brick. The floors were wooden and so was the furniture. Tony looked pleased with himself for accidentally selecting a good-looking pub. (He had made the cab driver drop them off at the entrance of Frying Pan Alley, where Tony had taken several selfies with the street sign, prompting one annoyed passerby to mumble, "Bloody tourists.")

Tony slid onto a bar stool, grinning. "This is fun." Tony was all about bright, loud atmospheres. A gaggle of college students was playing darts across the room; on the television, a proper football game (with a checkered ball) was playing.

"Hi, what can I get you?" asked the bartender, then she did a double-take. "You look exactly like Tony Stark."

"Yes," said Tony. "I am him."

She laughed a little. "Oh, so you and Captain America are on holiday, are you?"

"No, I'm really him," insisted Tony. He pulled down his t-shirt to show the arc reactor. The bartender's eyes got wide and she stopped laughing. "And I am on vacation with Steve Rogers."
Steve was climbing delicately into the seat beside him; Steve always treated barstools gently. In the time Tony had known him, he'd accidentally broken two.

"Oh my gosh," said the bartender. "I-- I-- wow! What are you doing in England?" She seemed to have forgotten she was supposed to be serving them.

"It's my birthday," said Tony.

She seemed even more confused about why Tony Stark and Captain America would be at a dive bar on Frying Pan Avenue for Tony's birthday. "Didn't you blow up your house on your last birthday?" she asked.

"Just the front room," said Tony humbly. "Can I get a black-and-tan?"

She blinked, suddenly remembering her role, and turned to Steve. "What'll you have, Captain?"

"Erm." Steve had been to a few pubs when he'd been here before (but none had been as nice as this). "A pint of Guinness, please."

"Good choice," she smiled, still looking a little dazed at both of them. "I'll back in a moment with your drinks."

From where he was sat Steve could spot a couple giggling in the corner, both betas and both clearly a little tipsy. To their right was a pool table which a group of middle-aged men were currently milling around. "We should try and play pool later," Steve said. He was aware he might well lose (he was never that good) but he'd played it a lot with the Howlies before. (He had broken three cue sticks; the problem was no longer his reflexes but his strength. He had a tendency to launch balls into walls if he wasn't careful.)

He remembered Howard joining them once. He had destroyed them, and made one or two comments about Steve at the time. Dum-Dum always used to be about as terrible as Steve was, so it had been fun. Flasworth always insisted that he 'had' to get drunk in order to play at their level. Steve remembered feeling special, being the only omega in the bar, getting served drinks and being allowed to play parlor games as if he were a normal person.

"You guys want food menus?" the bartender asked when she appeared with their drinks.

"Yes, thank you."

She handed them over and Steve spotted a lot of the food they'd eaten earlier at the hotel. Fish and chips, pie... the one thing he struggled with was British portion sizes. He was aware America had some kind of obesity crisis, but Steve needed that much food. The portion sizes in England, even in the pubs, weren't really enough.

They even had the calorie amounts on the right hand sides of the dishes. Ha. Cute.

"Can I get two double burgers and a lot of chips? Like three servings of chip? And a shepherd pie?"

She blinked. "Er, yep. Mr. Stark?"

"I'll have a burger, too... oh, and this tiger prawn thing, this looks good," said Tony. "And another black-and-tan... just keep them coming. I'll tell you when to stop."
He passed the menu back and followed Steve's gaze around the pub. Aside from the bartender, no one knew who they were (yet). It was nice, sitting here at the bar together, like they were a couple of regular nobodies.

Suddenly Tony found himself wondering how often Steve and Bucky went out to bars together.

"...did you... ah... do you go to a lot of pubs back in the day?" asked Tony casually. "They hadn't changed much, I'm guessing, aside from the flatscreens."

He picked up his beer and took a sip, watching Steve over the edge. It shouldn't matter if he and Bucky went out ever lousy night; Bucky was no longer part of their lives. But Tony couldn't help but compare himself to Steve's other Alpha... it was a natural thing. He wanted to find ways he was superior to Bucky, to combat the ever-present knowledge that Bucky was a lot more dominant than him... that Steve's body, when given a choice, had initially chosen Bucky over him.

"He went to bars, a bit," Steve said with a shrug. "But I didn't go out much. Omegas weren't really supposed to go to those kind of places, you know?"

"Oh. Right. Sorry."

Steve waved him off. "When I did go out it never ended well." It either ended up with Steve getting into a fight with some Alpha that Bucky had to pull him out of, or Bucky shacking up with some girl. Sometimes the girl would even know about Steve, that he was Bucky's mate. He remembered they used to coo over him.

Oh! He's so cute!

It was like Steve was some kind of puppy that had been brought along for shits and giggles.

"Nightclubs are very different to the kind of dancing I'm used to," Steve pointed out, smiling a little. "We used to dance to the beat and with proper moves and everything. Now there's just... a lot of grinding. Not sure it counts as real dancing."

"Proper moves," repeated Tony, lips quirking up in a smile. "...maybe you can teach me some moves, Rogers. I'll dance with you. I should warn you, I am naturally talented in that particular department." (If Howard was any indication, Tony was probably not lying. Howard had grabbed Steve for a dance more than once and he was quite good, though not as good as he obviously thought he was.)

The bartender set another drink in front of Tony, which he took happily. Another bartender had come over with her.

"You know...I don't think I've ever seen you dance," Steve said and suddenly he was curious. But then the moment was broken by the omega woman asking for his autograph.

"Hi! I-- I'm Christine. Can I get your autograph, Mr. America?" she asked excitedly. She was an omega.

"Please, Mr. America was his dad. Just call him Steve," said Tony with a roll of his eyes.

Christine gave a tiny, annoyed glance over at Tony, then turned her attention back to Steve. That happened sometimes. A lot of omegas still hadn't forgiven Tony for his and Steve's two-month separation and Steve's being force-bonded. They probably never would. Steve's interview, the one that had gone viral, was still out there, circulating on the internet, and Tony had seen a lot of nasty comments on it about how everything that followed was Tony's fault. The one that had hurt most
wasn't even the most vicious. Someone had simply stated, "Steve deserves better anyway... he should go back to his other Alpha."

Tony sipped his beer while Christine had Steve sign her shirt with a permanent marker.

Steve made sure to sign high up on her chest, keeping a good level of decency. He didn't really appreciate it when Christine decided to stare Tony down. Steve got that people thought they were being supportive, but it was frankly none of their business. They didn't get to judge all of Steve's and Tony's life choices from the outside; a lot was going on that they had no idea about. And he didn't need their support because he could support himself just fine.

Her attention had gotten the notice of a few other people at the bar and Tony could see patrons being to mill around, craning their necks, trying to get a glimpse, discussing Steve and Tony's presence in hushed, excited voices. He should have known their anonymity wouldn't last long. Steve, after all, had been stirring things up for a year, and Tony had had a couple of tours in the Middle East in his Iron Man suit. You'd have to live under a rock not to know the two of them.

"Our admiring fans have noticed us," said Tony. "...you wanna make someone's night and play pool with 'em? There's a group of four kids over there about your age... we could cut in. Make teams."

"Sounds good," Steve said, smiling a little. "Can we wait for food first though?" He was starving, after all; when wasn't he?

After devouring two double burgers and getting a strangely impressed look from Christine, they moved over to play pool; Steve took his baskets of fries with him, balancing them on his arm with ease. The kids were post-grad students at UCL. One of them did history and was obviously very eager to talk to Steve.

"I was doing my my Masters on omega history, or well...the lack of it. And then you came out, and it was awesome! My entire thesis is about the Alpha myth surrounding you, and where it came from." The woman was named Jane; she was a beta with blonde hair and a terribly neat block fringe. She seemed oddly sweet.

"She's like obsessed with both you guys," Derick (her boyfriend) said, grinning. Jane hit his arm, turning a little red.

"Hey, so I guess Tony Stark's pretty good at pool, right? Like...it's all just maths when you get down to it." Callum wore thick rimmed glasses and was studying something to do with physics and math for his PHD (the title of which had admittedly gone straight over Steve's head.) Callum was grinning, too. All of them were clearly very excited.

Tony cringed a little. "I can calculate the angle and everything, sure, but... when it comes to actually hitting the cue ball..." said Tony helplessly.

He was actually not very good at pool. He looked great doing it, but he rarely managed to sink a ball. He'd already realized that Steve, who was his father's peer, had no doubt played with him and already knew that Howard was great at it.

Tony was feeling a bit bothered; Callum racked up the balls cheerfully. Callum was an Alpha, though not a very dominant one.

"Wanna do Alphas versus omegas?" asked Tony.

"What about us?" asked Derick; he and Jane were betas.
"Pick a team? We could do math versus humanities, but I think we'd mop the floor with you guys," said Tony, elbowing Callum. His grin widened, clearly pleased that Tony was suggesting he and Stark would be on the same team.

"Shirts versus skins," said Derick teasingly; Jane hit his arm again.

"Alphas versus omegas is fine," she said. "Derick and I can be on Steve's team, and Charlotte, you can play with Callum and-- Dr. Stark."

"I don't have a doctorate and you can just call me Tony," said Tony, turning out to look at Charlotte. She was a wispy Alpha with long, straight dark hair. She was perched on a stool sipping a brightly colored drink and when she hopped down she wobbled a little, tipsy. The odds did not look fantastic for team Alpha.

"You want to break?" offered Callum to Steve.

"You know how to play pool, right?" asked Tony to Charlotte, feeling thoroughly anxious that he and Callum were going to get their asses kicked.

Charlotte's eyes narrowed. "Yes," she snarled.

"...by any chance, do you have a long-lost American cousin by the name of Aria?"

Charlotte grabbed a pool stick and began chalking it up with practiced ease. Clearly, Tony had misjudged her. Despite being tipsy, she looked ready to kick some ass. Alphas had a natural tendency to get competitive, which is one reason "Alpha v. omega" was considered a good idea; if all the Alphas were on one team, they were far less likely to get worked up at each other.

The pool game started out good-naturedly but quickly got out of hand. It became clear that Charlotte and Derick did not like each other for some reason as Charlotte began criticising every move Derick made. Jane was awful at it. Callum was okay (about the same level as Steve). Charlotte was amazing, as expected, but she occasionally choked suddenly, which was probably down to the amount of alcohol she was consuming.

Steve was on his third pint of Guinness but he was nowhere near feeling it. Jane kept asking him history questions; he patiently answered them. Most of them were about the Howlies or, ha, the president who had felt him up. But then she asked: "Is it true that you were just the test run, and that they always intended the serum for Alphas?"

Steve hit the ball way too hard and it pinged up, hitting a glass on a table nearby and smashing it. Steve's heart was hammering. They were lucky the ball had not hit anyone, because the force of it would have been enough to cause serious harm if it had.

"What do you mean by...a 'test run'?" Steve asked. Christine was rushing over with a dust pan and brush to clear it all up.

"You know, to see if it worked."

No. They had picked Steve because he was good, right? They saw something in him. It wasn't just because he was an omega and he was expendable... right?

But then, his Alpha was MIA. He had no family. There would have been no one to miss him. He felt a strange sensation in his belly.
"Sorry," Jane squeaked. "I... er, shouldn't have said anything."

"Bit of help?" called Tony, holding up a hand. Christine lobbed the cue ball at him; he caught it and set it on the table, then went over to wrap an arm around Steve's waist. He could feel Steve's sudden unrest in his gut.

"Steve. They chose you because you were the best. You were the only omega in that program," said Tony firmly. Steve had told him all about boot camp, about being surrounded by a group of Alphas a head taller than him, who barely looked at him, who ran faster and jumped higher and threw farther. "They wouldn't have ever let you in that program in the first place if they didn't think you had chutzpah."

Tony already knew the truth, which lay somewhere in between. The serum had never been meant for omegas at all. Yes, they'd chosen Steve because at least a few of them thought Steve's gumption was admirable. But Steve's status had certainly factored in. Steve was a human guinea pig; they never would have given the very first dose to a perfectly healthy Alpha soldier. Steve had been allowed to join the army with the understanding that he was a human test subject, to be treated like an Alpha and to confirm the serum was safe for the "real" soldiers. Once they had perfected it with Steve, the plan had been to give it to the Alphas, but no one had ever quite been able to replicate the extra product a second time. The serum made far too many Alphas go feral, to get overly aggressive, and the project had been scrapped entirely in the eighties (at least in America).

Tony had never stated any of this explicitly. He felt like Steve probably already knew it, deep down, and he didn't want to detract from the reality that Steve really was a guy with a ton of heart, that status aside, Steve was loyal and clever and brave.

"Hurry up, Charlotte," said Derick gruffly. Since Steve's ball had gone off the table, Charlotte could place it where she wanted, and she was taking her time in deciding. She was obviously getting over-competitive. When she missed, she reacted in a way that implied she was taking the game very, very seriously.

"Just because you don't care about winning doesn't mean I don't either," she snapped, pacing around the table, checking all the different possibilities.

"I'm not ready yet!

"I'm really, really sorry, Captain Rogers," said Jane, who looked horrified at herself for upsetting Steve.

"Don't be sorry. It's totally not true," said Tony firmly. "They chose Steve because they knew he wouldn't give up, and that's what they needed. A guy who wouldn't give up. Status had another to do with it."

"Charlotte, just place the damn ball!"

"Shut up! I think I can get two and, y'know, I'm sort of the only one even trying..."

"Hey!" protested Tony. "I'm trying!"

Christine walked over and handed Tony another drink. He'd switched from beers to double martinis.

"I didn't believe it, for the record," Jane added quickly. "About them using you as a test subject. It's just a load of Alpha myths, right? Alphas didn't want to be upstaged by you, that's all."
"Right," Steve said and forced a smile to reassure her. But a strange sense of doubt still niggled at the back of his mind. To people like Howard, he'd never really been more than a bit of fun. He was the amusing, uppity omega who didn't do what he was told and he probably became all the more fun when he was a lab rat too.

"I know they laugh at me," Steve had said to Peggy, a few days into the program. After the whole flag fiasco the Alphas had started making fun of him because they were upset that Steve got to ride back in the car next to Peggy. And that he'd outsmarted him. At first he'd been treated like a sort of mascot; they had obviously not respected him but they had at least been nice. That had changed, recently.

"It's just because they're intimidated by you," Peggy said.

Steve had tried to believe it.

Charlotte hit both balls; she made the shot. Derick huffed out, clearly disappointed she'd made it.

"Who gives a shit?" she said and Steve blinked. "Doesn't matter they thought about you. You kicked ass and now they're all dead."

Blunt but very true. Even Jane didn't manage to hide her smile.

Callum went to take the next shot and fucked it up royally. Charlotte downed the rest of her drink and let out a withered sigh.

"I'm going to kill you," Charlotte muttered under her breath. Callum's hackles went up.

"Maybe we should call it a day," Jane suggested tentatively, a hand on Derick's arm. The male beta looked ready with some kind of retort, despite the 'threat' having been aimed at Callum. "It's been lovely to meet you both," she told them, turning to face Tony and Steve. "And we hope you have a wonderful birthday, Mr. Stark."

"Tony," corrected Tony automatically. "Thanks. You too. I mean--" He fumbled a little. He'd been racking up a rather impressive tab.

The game wasn't over, but it was clear that Charlotte was going to win, even with Tony and Callum not helping very much. (Both had sunk only a single ball so far.)

"I'll pay for your tabs," added Tony. "...have a good one, guys."

He waited until they were done thanking him and had left before turning to Steve. "...I can tell it's bothering you," he said. "...I can tell it's bothering you," he said. "...let's go back to the hotel, okay? It's loud here and I don't want to get any more drunk, I've got a good buzz going."

He threaded their fingers together. There was a flash and a shutter click as someone took their picture. Tony gave Steve a gentle tug toward the bar. He felt the slightest bit peeved that Jane had had to ask that. Jane was a beta; she clearly did not understand the ever-present, looming sense of inadequacy Steve had. He was an omega, one raised in the twenties and thirties, one who had been small and sick to boot. Steve may have been perfect, now, but Steve was still vulnerable to moments like this, where he didn't feel good enough. Tony wasn't an omega but he could relate. Growing up under the influence of two Alphas who were both far, far more dominant than him had given him the same sort of self-esteem issues.

"It's fine. It's stupid. I knew it anyway, didn't I?" Steve said, not wanting to get one of his sour moods. Tony knew them well by now. When Steve got sad, he got quiet, sort of... forlorn. He'd
spend way too much time drawing, or running, or sleeping. Then he'd shower it all away and pretend it never happened. But it was Tony's birthday and he was determined not to sulk. "Charlotte is right. It doesn't even matter."

And, *ha*, they probably *were* all dead.

...everyone he knew was dead.

Tony's touch was grounding. Steve let himself be pulled along, ignoring the camera. They were in a pub for god's sake; couldn't people just leave them alone?

"You excited to see Peggy?" asked Tony as he handed over his card to Christine, trying to shift the topic. Tony himself was nervous; he hadn't seen Peggy for about two decades.

Steve started a little at the question.

Right. *Not everyone* he knew was dead.

"Yes. Of course. She's probably the best person from my past, I mean... she changed the way I saw the world. And she still means a lot to me, you know?" He could sense Tony's nerves and squeezed his hand gently. "She spoke about you, when I met her before...and she asks about you when she calls. She'll be glad to see you," he said, making it sound like a promise.

Peggy was an Alpha. An Alpha who believed in him.

Christine handed Tony's card back. "Have a nice night, boys."

Tony took his card, leaving an ample tip, and walked with Steve outside. It was even colder. Tony hunched his shoulders and shoved his free hand into his pocket, still holding Steve's in the other.

"Tomorrow, you wanna go see Churchill's war rooms?" asked Tony. "I know you've already been there but I think it'd be cool... and then you can choose the next thing to do... as long as it's not Trafalgar square..." (The last time Tony had been there, a pigeon had landed on his head. Tony was not a fan of pigeons, who probably carried all sorts of germs. Pepper had gotten a picture, which Tony had made her swear never to show anyone.)

Tony gave his hand a squeeze and they walked out of the alleyway together. Tony felt like he was the perfect amount of tipsy: not slurring or stumbling, but definitely buzzed.

"Sure, Tony," said Steve.

"You're not upset, are you?"

"Nope."

They hailed a cab to take them back to the Langham. Even though it was late, there were lots of couples strolling through Hyde Park. Tony looked out at them and it occurred to him that he and Steve were now one of those couples. It was odd, to Tony, to think of himself as a bonded man. He had always enjoyed being a bachelor, bouncing from floozy to floozy. He hadn't touched a woman in a year.

He looked at Steve. His face was... perfect. Flawless.

"Hey, Steve? I wanna change my answer. I would've chosen you even if you were little. I would've wanted to bond you. You're the best mate a guy could ask for," said Tony.
"Thanks, Tony, but you don't need to try to make me feel better. I'm already over it," said Steve unconvincingly.

Tony didn't have the heart to tell him that he wasn't just trying to make Steve better for Steve's sake, but his own, too. Tony felt guilty because he wasn't sure he really believed what he was saying, and besides, he needed Steve to feel confident in himself. Because when Steve didn't, he got reckless in his attempts to 'prove' himself. Tony had always thought of it as a sort of Napoleon complex, a throw-back to the days when Steve was short and thin and weak. But from that day on, Tony found himself thinking of it as guinea pig syndrome, and carried with him the shame of knowing it was his father who had probably suggested testing the serum on an omega in the first place.
Why would Tony, an Alpha, kneel for Steve? Oh, I can think of a reason... >wink<

Steve and Tony headed back into the hotel and the people at the reception desk gave them an enthusiastic welcome. Steve offered them a polite smile and a wave. They stepped into the elevator; it was empty.

"We should probably go see that Wisdom guy tomorrow," Steve suggested. "We don't want Fury on our ass by the time it's our anniversary. That'll suck." Sometimes it felt like Nick was the father he'd never had (because Steve had literally never had one; he could not even remember Joseph Rogers' face). Nick nagged him, asked him to do things he didn't want to do but... he had his best interests at heart. Steve truly believed that. The fact that Nick had been born after Steve did not make Steve see him as any less of an authority figure. Even though Steve was technically in his nineties, he couldn't help but see anyone older as thirty as a person worthy of the title "sir" or "ma'am." He still thought of himself as about twenty-six years old.

He and Tony were still holding hands, their fingers threaded together.

Steve sighed softly. "So," he kissed Tony's temple. "Good birthday?"

"...it was dece," said Tony as the elevator came to their floor. He and Steve made their way to their suite. It had been a surprisingly tense day, for both of them. Tony felt like one of the drawbacks to being bonded to a civil rights leader was constantly being aware of civil rights. The locked collars, Jane's innocent remark... all of it gave Tony an unsettled feeling. And since he and Steve could feel each other, every time one grew bothered, so did the other. One of the drawbacks to having that link.

"Don't supposed it's too late to fool around a little?" asked Tony hopefully, closing the door behind them.

He wrapped his arms around Steve's waist and rested his head on Steve's chest, listening to the slow thump of his heart. Tony closed his eyes and sighed a little. Steve's arms sometimes felt like the safest place in the world.

Tony had given some thought to their anniversary. He'd already made dinner reservations at a nice restaurant and gotten Steve a gift. He wanted Steve to know that, despite their rocky beginning and a few major speedbumps along the way, Tony was happy. This wasn't what he'd expected, but that was okay. It was working.

Steve curled his arms around Tony on instinct and tilted his head down to kiss his Alpha's hair. He let his eyes slip shut briefly as he just appreciated the closeness. "You know I'm almost always up for it Tony," he murmured with a half smile. "And it is your birthday... but one of our nights here I am going to get you to dance, just so you know," he warned him playfully.

Steve had, of course, packed the collar. He knew Tony would have wanted him to. He felt weird about it, still, but Tony got so turned on by it that once they were down and dirty it was no longer a
problem. Steve had heard people used handcuffs in sex now; it couldn't be all that different to that. He'd packed in a small discreet black box.

It wasn't just that Steve would be embarrassed if people knew. It was more that he was worried that it would make omegas like Christine hate Tony even more. They would probably accuse him of oppressing Steve or some shit.

Steve ducked his head down to whisper in Tony's ear. "Do you want me to put it on?"

Tony's arms broke out in goosebumps. He looked up at Steve, locking eyes with him. Steve's eyes were so clear and sincere... Tony often felt like a terrible person, next to Steve.

Of course he wanted him to put it on. But seeing that heavy Victorian collar in the museum had bothered him deeply.

"I... I want to put it on you," said Tony. It was almost a question. Because Tony was pretty sure he'd always feel guilty for liking it, no matter how many times Steve assured Tony he wasn't at all like "the others."

"Okay," Steve said softly. A shiver ran down his spine. The thought of Tony putting it on for him...it was appealing, he couldn't deny it. Maybe if he made it clear to Tony that, in his own way, Steve enjoyed this too...then the Alpha would feel less bad about it, even though there was no real need to. Steve enjoyed being submissive for Tony and this was about as submissive as it dammed got.

"...kneel for me? On the bed? I'll get it," said Tony. He felt the tiniest hint of discomfort, as well, asking. He wanted to be a strong Alpha that issued commands, not one who tentatively asked his omega for permission for everything. His instincts were deeply confused, conflicted with his rational brain's desire to be respectful. Not to mention the back-and-forth rules for how they behaved in public and how they behaved in the bedroom. Steve, Tony had come to appreciate, would probably never kneel for him in public.

When Tony asked him to kneel Steve's breath hitched a little. He nodded and moved over to the bedside. Before he moved onto the mattress Steve hung up his coat and toed off his shoes and socks.

He watched the dip and rise of Tony's shoulder as he rummaged in the suitcase and produced the sleek black box.

Steve moved to kneel on the bed, head tucked downwards in the correct sort of position. Like this he always felt vulnerable, exposed even. But it was all about Steve showing respect to his Alpha through the trust he put in him. But he could feel that Tony was holding back. Maybe it was the museum thing; Steve wasn't sure.

But he needed to reassure him. "Please, Alpha," he said, voice seductively soft. "Tell me what to do, how to be good for you."

Tony got small lump of excitement in his throat at Steve's suddenly soft, velvety voice. This was the side of Steve Rogers very few people-- in fact, only two in history-- had ever gotten to see.

Tony's instincts kicked in. "Clothes off," he said, firmly. He wasn't asking anymore.

He strode over to Steve, kneeling on the bed. Steve's head was down, neck exposed, posture perfect. Tony reached out to run a hand down his neck, briefly, an approval, then he waited for Steve to obey. He hadn't asked Steve to pack the collar but Steve had and Tony held it gently in his hands, warming it, waiting for Steve.
Outside of the bedroom, they rarely used titles. Tony sometimes affectionately called Steve "omega," but in the bedroom, it took on different connotations. Steve called Tony "Alpha" never failed to make Tony feel... big. Powerful. Like he truly was a dominant Alpha, one who could fulfill the role he was expected to, the role of a protector. In the bedroom Tony was no longer an Alpha but the Alpha, Steve's Alpha, which carried with it a sort of respectfulness that made Tony feel like a big man.

Funnily, for Steve, it was the opposite. Steve, who was a big man inside and out, who was assertive and strong and courageous, turned into putty in the bedroom, was happy to give up power and be protected and coddled and ordered around. Steve had told Tony more than once that he missed being smaller, and in the bedroom, he was able to regain at least some of that feeling. His actual size didn't matter; when Tony pinned him down and bit his neck, they were both probably away that Steve was mentally incapable of shrugging Tony off.

Steve slipped down off the bed and unbuttoned his shirt with deft fingers before he slid his jeans down too, putting everything into a neat pile on a chair before he finally slid his boxers down too. There was something about him being naked and Tony being totally dressed that thrilled Steve with the imbalance of power.

Tony waited for Steve to undress (with his usual military speed and precision) and kneel again before he touched him. Another soft hand down the neck, over his mark, down Steve's spine. Steve's skin twitched in response but his posture remained perfect.

"Hands down on the bed. Bow," ordered Tony.

And now that Tony was ordering him, and not asking, Steve was definitely getting more turned on. The fingers down his spine made him shiver but he resisted the urge to squirm. When Steve had said he wanted to be good for him he'd meant it.

He admittedly wasn't entirely sure what Tony meant by 'bow' like this but Steve had an idea. He moved to place his hands flat on the bed, his forearms pressed down too. His fingers bunched lightly in the sheets. And then he leaned down, his forehead pressed against the mattress but his ass still in the air.

Like this Steve was even more vulnerable, even more exposed. He swallowed, listening to Tony's movements intently to try and predict what was coming next.

Tony watched as Steve prostrated himself-- downward dog-- and he felt a surge of something like pride in Steve. He could tell Steve felt it in his own gut, because Steve shivered again with clear excitement in himself for obeying correctly.

Tony kicked off his shoes but left the rest of his clothes on. He didn't need to be naked for this. Only Steve.

He climbed onto the bed, the mattress depressing very slightly under him, Steve's body tensing up with expectation.

Tony leaned in and slipped the collar around his throat. He hesitated for a split second before fastening it; the click of the lock seemed loud in the silent bedroom.

Tony ran his hand down Steve's neck and back again. "Mine," he stated, softly.

Yours, Steve thought back. He didn't say it out loud, he didn't have to. His body language spoke volumes.
Tony eased back a little, taking a moment just to admire Steve, his forearms and head down, his body smooth and well-proportioned. Unimaginably fit and also unmistakably omega. Or maybe that was just Tony smelling him. Pheromones had a pretty extreme effect on a person's perception, if they were statused, anyway. A beta probably wouldn't have been able to tell, would have assumed that those muscles meant Steve was a dominant Alpha, even though there was no real correlation between dominance and physical appearance.

The longer Tony waited the more Steve began to anticipate what was coming, his mind racing with possibilities. The collar was still a little cool on his neck despite Tony warming it up, almost pleasantly so. And the weight around his neck was familiar and possessive. Steve exhaled softly, feeling the press of metal against skin.

Tony put his hands on the globes of Steve's ass, kneading the firm skin. He spread Steve's cheeks and leaned in to lick a stripe up Steve's backside. Steve's whole body clenched and Tony heard a whine, but Steve didn't move position. Tony settled in and closed his eyes, lapping at Steve's entrance, stroking his hole with his tongue, tasting the first hints of arousal.

As soon as Tony touched him Steve let out a quiet sound and then his breath hitched as his ass was spread apart and exposed. And then the wet touch of tongue followed and Steve did whine, loudly, the noise only slightly muffled by the sheets. He let out a soft huff of air and fought the urge to push back into it, to wiggle. No. Steve would be good for Tony.

Last time Tony had done this Steve had practically cried because it had been too much. He had a funny feeling that round two wouldn't be all that different. He hissed softly, feeling himself getting wet from more than just Tony's tongue, his body responding eagerly.

It had taken Tony a year to get comfortable with this but now that they were doing it again he was unsure why in the hell he hadn't tried it sooner. Steve's reaction alone was enough to get him uncomfortably hard. He kept one hand on Steve's skin, flicking his tongue over his inviting little slit, and reached down with his other hand to undo his pants and ease out his erection. He stroked himself slowly, hungrily licking at Steve's entrance, which was getting wet and juicy and quivering with an unspoken desire to be filled up. Tony's other hand continued to massage Steve's ass; Tony heard himself growl quietly with satisfaction. Steve was a bundle of nerves; his muscles were coiled up with the effort of not moving and Tony liked the feeling of Steve's desperation under his fingers.

He gave his tongue a wiggle, pressing against Steve's hole tempting, pushing at it, then going back to licking it; Steve's body shuddered with a suppressed desire to move back into Tony's tongue, to have something inside him.

"Mmmm... good..." murmured Tony against him, letting his lips brush over Steve's skin when he spoke. "Good boy... so tasty... so well-behaved..." He pressed his tongue against Steve and dragged it up firmly. Steve shook.

Steve let out a broken sound as Tony's tongue pushed inside of him. He choked, his hands fisting tightly in the sheets with the effort of keeping still. It took everything inside of him not to push back onto his tongue, seeking out more. Steve would accept what was given to him.

Steve gasped out as Tony murmured and licked against him. The way called Steve good boy made him tremble. He was practically vibrating with pleasure and the effort of staying still. Steve's cock was hard and curved against his stomach but he made no effort to try and touch it.

"T-Tony..."

Tony pulled away at the mewl of his name.
He looked over Steve, clenching the sheets, face pressed into them. His cock was hard and a fine string of precum was dangling from the tip. Tony's own cock twitched in his hand.

He got off the bed to unbutton his shirt. Steve didn't move, awaiting orders.

Tony took his time undressing, watching Steve hunched up on the bed, tense, refusing to budge. Tony wondered, idly, how long he'd stay like that if Tony just walked away. An hour? Two hours? Longer?

He peeled off his clothes and then climbed back into the bed, lying down, putting his hands behind his head. "Steve," he said, and Steve glanced up, face still squashed into the sheets. "I want you to ride me. Take care of me, and you can cum after I'm done." There. Tony relaxed, feeling a little smug and more than a little turned on. He and Steve were both fully erect.

Although being bonded meant they were sensitive to each other's bad moods... it also meant that they were sensitive to other emotions, like arousal. They were feeding into each other's sense of excitement and anticipation and the build-up was amazing. Tony had never had this with another partner; with Steve, Tony was capable of getting right to the brink of orgasm without ever even touching himself or being touched. No one had ever mentioned to him that being bonded meant amazing sex. If they had, he might have considered it sooner.

Steve eagerly moved to straddle Tony's hips as soon as the instruction was given. His Alpha looked gorgeous, seated there with his shirt open and his dick hard and waiting just for Steve. His brow knotted a little in concentration as he made to line himself up. Steve curled his hands onto Tony's shoulders, gaining a firm purchase before he rocked his hips back and let the head of Tony's cock slide against the cleft of his ass.

Then Steve felt it catch against his hole and his entrance twitched. He made sure to hold Tony's gaze as he slid down. Steve loved this position. He could always angle his hips down just right and like this he got to watch Tony's face as he came undone beneath him.

It would be hard not to climax before Tony though. As Steve bottomed out he cried out too, a soft and gentle sound. For a brief moment he savoured the feeling before he began to move his hips, steadily picking up the pace and clenching every time he slid down.

Tony's breath hitched a little when Steve gripped his shoulders and slowly sat on his cock. Steve was a slippery mess but still a satisfyingly tight fit. He reached out and put his hands on Steve's hips, arching automatically when Steve squeezed himself down onto the knot. Slowly, delicately, Steve began moving on top of him; despite Steve's size, he was always surprisingly self-aware in bed. Tony wasn't sure whether that was on purpose or not. But Steve had never handled him roughly... though when it came to being fucked, Steve loved it rough and could take it like no other.

Tony groaned, meeting Steve's eyes; they locked on his, bright and eager, then flicked down briefly in submission. Tony's cock throbbled in response. The jewels on Steve's collar sparkled, matching his eyes perfectly, and Tony reached up with one hand to hook a couple of fingers into the collar, to tug Steve down for a brief, sloppy kiss before letting him continue. Leading Steve Rogers around by a collar on his neck... Tony was willing to bet a hell of a lot of Alphas, both in Steve's time and his, had dreamt of this, and Tony felt smugly superior in getting to be the only one who was allowed to.

"F-fuck, good omega... good Steve... Steve," repeated Tony, savoring the taste of his name in his mouth. He was straining not to cum right away, in part because Steve looked desperate to cum himself and Tony liked seeing him squirm. Steve wouldn't because Tony had instructed him not to, and Tony had always been fond of teasing his partner.
Steve let out a high pitched noise in surprise as Tony tugged him in and kissed him. He trembled when their tongues met after lips parted and his hands slowly moved behind Tony to grip the headboard. Things were about to go up a notch. When Steve had first rode Tony he'd broken his goddamn bath...and he would hate to think that his alpha had felt he'd gotten lazy.

Steve moaned, low and thick in his throat as he snapped his hips forward and fucked himself down onto Tony good and proper. He let out a pleased sound as he squeezed around the top of his knot before he rose back up, the head only remaining inside him, before he plunged back down again. Steve desperately wanted to be touched, wanted to ejaculate-- but he would wait for his Alpha. He was a good omega after all.

"F-Feels so good," Steve stuttered, sweet and breathless as he rode him, his blue eyes darkened with lust and something more. His fingertips were definitely leaving cracks in the wooden headboard (that was no doubt very expensive) but Steve didn't care. This was about Tony and making Tony feel good. That was all that mattered.

"Good," echoed Tony breathlessly as Steve worked the knot. "So good... good omega... my omega... my good boy..." He moaned as Steve finally pushed down over the widest part of the knot, legs trembling, and raked a hand down Steve's back. Steve's erection was weeping with precum and Tony, who couldn't say he'd ever been especially turned on by the sight of another man's penis, found it deeply erotic, found himself fighting the urge to grab Steve and jack him off. He wanted to, but there was something about their current power dynamic, denying Steve, that was really getting him off. And he had a suspicion that Steve was getting off on it, too, on earning his reward by riding Tony like a fucking porn star.

He wasn't wrong; Steve was enjoying it. It almost hurt, to fuck himself onto Tony's cock so thoroughly and yet deny himself such a simple pleasure. Steve wasn't just shaking from pleasure, but also frustration. His cheeks were flushed a reddened pink and he was gasping at the smallest shocks of pleasure up his spine. Steve whimpered, loudly, as he squirmed on Tony's dick and knot. He would be sore in the morning, even with the serum, after fucking himself onto Tony's cock so goddamned hard. Steve probably would have felt the soreness in the moment if he hadn't been so aroused.

His hands were behind Tony's head, gripping the headboard to brace himself, to fuck Tony harder, to force the knot in over and over and--

"Fucking omega slut," gasped Tony, and promptly spasmed, digging his fingers into Steve and jerking his hips up as he ejaculated.

He wasn't sure where the hell "fucking omega slut" had come from but in the moment it was incredibly, over-the-top sexy to him.

He wasn't quite done pumping seed into Steve before he began feeling bad.

"S-sorry," he gasped, still clinging to Steve's hips and twitching up into him. "D-didn't mean it-- you're good-- sorry-- oh, fuck, God, my dick-- cum for me--" He was going to have to probably give Steve a proper apology when he wasn't actively spurting jizz into him. In Tony's opinion, it was a testament to his incredible brainpower that he was able to form any coherent thoughts at all; he was mostly focused on draining his balls into Steve, who was flushed pink and still clenching his knot and making all sorts of sweet little noises that no one would ever dream Steve Rogers capable of making.

"Shut up," Steve mumbled and kissed him, not wanting to hear an apology when he was so close to coming undone.
It had turned Steve on too, even if he was ashamed to admit it. There was something about Tony calling him a slut that made him feel hot all over and definitely horny. It certainly wasn't something to be said in public, however.

The feeling of Tony filling him up with hot spent was almost enough to tug Steve over the edge. He wrapped a hand around his own dick and stroked twice before he came with a cry. Steve spilt over his hand and clenched around Tony's knot as he did so, dragging out even more seed into himself.

Steve came, hard. Hard enough to cover Tony's chest and face with it.

He trembled as the tension left his body, both hands down from the headboard now.

He went limp on top of Tony, nuzzling his cheek. "That was amazing," he murmured.

Tony ran a hand down his back shakily. "There's semen on my face," he stated, voice cracking slightly. He cleared his throat, then added, "...that was... really good, Steve." He laughed quietly and reached up to wipe Steve's cum from his beard. God, if anyone had told him a year ago he would think this was normal, he would have thought they were insane.

"...fuck... I liked when you told me to shut up," said Tony, slightly dazed.

He tilted his head up to check the headboard.

There was a large crack down it. Tony didn't remember hearing it crack but they were definitely going to have to foot the bill for that.

Steve looked a little sheepish when he noticed the headboard too... oops? Right when he thought he was used to his own strength, he ended up breaking something.

Steve ducked his head down and kissed Tony's jaw and chin, a wickedly mischievous glint in his eyes as he cleaned up the rest of Tony's face by licking his own spent off of him. "You had no reason to start apologising," he said simply, sounding so characteristically sure of himself. He looked back up at the crack on the hotel bed's headboard.

Tony looked back down at Steve; they locked eyes. Tony smiled at him. "I fuckin' love you, Steve, you all-American, star-spangled army puke, you," said Tony, cupping Steve's cheek in his hand. He stoked the skin with his thumb, feeling a strange sense of tenderness. Tony was rarely one for gooey moments but this moment was definitionally already pretty gooey.

Tony's hand on his cheek dragged his gaze back and then Steve's expression softened. "Hey." He pressed a kiss to Tony's bottom lip. "I love you too."

When the Alpha moved to take the collar off Steve caught his hand gently. "Leave it on for now," he told him quietly. It wasn't exactly uncomfortable; the damned thing was designed for him. "You wanna sleep now?"

Tony grinned as Steve stayed his hand.

"...yeah," he said softly. "Sleep. ...it... it looks so good on you, Steve. I mean, it really does." He brushed his hand over the back of Steve's neck, playing with the collar, with his-- their-- bonding mark.

He realized, too late, that the thing was locking and that he couldn't really take it off even if he wanted to; he'd need to get the key, which was probably buried in their luggage, and the two of them were stuck fast together.
Tony thought of asking Steve if he'd packed the matching collar, if he ought to wear it too, for equality or something, but he ended up falling asleep under Steve instead.

He had a vivid, disjointed, slightly unsettling dream that he didn't quite remember when he woke up the next morning. Sunlight was streaming through the high windows and the heavy white curtains. Steve was lying partially on top of him, his body heavy and warm, his breathing even; his penis was lying flaccid against Tony's thigh and one hand was curled over the arc reactor. He was naked except for the collar.

Tony studied him carefully. It was rare indeed that he'd wake up before Steve. Steve's face was young and unlined and pure and peaceful in sleep. Practically cherubic. Naked except for the heavy, jeweled collar, he was a living work of art, and Tony felt something not dissimilar to arousal, a sense of fierce pride and possessiveness. He put his hand over Steve's on his chest, admiring his omega and the quiet stillness of the moment. If Tony were artistically inclined, like Steve, he might have liked to try to draw Steve. But Tony wasn't and anyway, he had a good memory. He was content to lie there with Steve curled into him, on arm around him protectively, basking in their pair-bond.

Steve was woken up by a pang of arousal that tugged low and deep in his gut. His Brooklyn drawl crept back out when he spoke. "Why don't you take a picture? It'll last longer." Then his eyes fluttered open to land on Tony who was watching him. A sleepy smile found its way on Steve's lips. He had actually used that line a hell of a lot in the forties. People would stare at him now; people were stared for different, better reasons.

He pressed a kiss to Tony's shoulder, the nearest available spot. Steve could feel a slight twinge between his thighs but the ache would be gone by dinner time at the latest. And it would be fine if all they were doing today was paying Churchill and this Wisdom guy a visit.

Steve had slept well and was in a good mood, all the drama from the day before forgotten. He was practically glowing.

He nuzzled against Tony's neck. "So, all in all, good birthday?"

Tony looked down at Steve and beamed. "Great birthday," he confirmed, petting Steve's hair. Steve looked so sweet in the collar. Tony ran a couple of fingers along the edge of it, brushing Steve's neck lightly. "...the, uh... the Captain America get-up... that was inspired, Steve. My teenage self is very, very happy." He gave Steve a kiss on the top of the head. "You want me to take off that collar so we can get the day started?" he offered.

Tony had very few things he actually wanted to do on this vacation. After seeing the war rooms, he was content to let Steve take the lead. Steve probably knew London better than him, anyway. But it didn't matter where they were, not really. They were here for their anniversary, which Tony was still trying to wrap his head around; it felt surreal, having been bonded for a year.

Of course, they were also here for Peggy. Tony was just hoping it wouldn't be too embarrassing for him.

"Well, I can't really buy you anything. So I thought I'd give you an...experience," Steve said with an easy kind of smile. He tilted his head into Tony's touch, admittedly enjoying being sprawled over naked on top of him. He had first got the idea when Clint made a joke about Phil probably dressing up as Cap in the bedroom. He hadn't quite meant it the way Steve had done it with Tony but...it had certainly been a success.

He was hungry (sex and sleep always made him hungry), but Steve didn't get up quite yet. It was also evident that Tony wanted to be the one to take the collar off of him, not for him to take it off
himself.

Steve leaned up to press a kiss to the corner of Tony's mouth. "You want the day to start yet?" he asked in a murmur.

"Yeah," said Tony, smiling down at Steve. "You need breakfast." He wiggled a little to sit up, still playing with Steve's collar. "...kneel for me and I'll take this off for you," he said quietly. He smiled. Steve made him feel like an Alpha, one who didn't feel the constant, pressing need to prove his dominance.

Tony slid out of bed and walked over to the luggage to search for the key.

He paused suddenly, pulling out a small red box.

"Hey, what's--" He turned it over. There was a tag on it, in Pepper's handwriting.

He opened the box; a pair of bracelets fell out.

"...the heck?" Tony shook the box; a note fell out. He plucked it up.

_Dear Tony,_

_Happy birthday. These Colantotte bracelets supposedly improve blood flow using alternating north-south polarity orientation to maximize magnetic field flow. I thought you might enjoy them._

_Love,_

_Pepper_

Tony re-read the "love, Pepper" line several times, then picked up the bracelets and turned them over in his hands. "...huh," he said thoughtfully. Tony liked alternative medicine regardless of whether or not it worked, and he definitely liked magnets. Not a bad gift.

"Look, Steve, Pepper packed me a gift. Co-- Colan-- well I dunno how to pronounce it, but these are neat," said Tony, holding up his wrist to show Steve. ":...now where the hell's the key?" He began unpacking, tossing clothes onto the floor. Steve packed neatly, everything folded. Typical.

Steve walked over to see the bracelets in Tony's hands. Whether they worked or not, they certainly looked pretty. It felt like a very Pepper present. For his birthday last year, Pepper had bought him some meditation stones to help him relax. Steve had admittedly never used him but he'd appreciated the sentiment.

"They look lovely," Steve said and pressed a quick kiss to Tony's cheek before he knelt down to rummage through the bag. He produced a small black box with a key in it. He handed it to Tony before kneeling down in front of him.

Steve ducked his head a little, offering up the lock at the back for Tony to reach.

Tony stepped forward for a moment and put a hand on Steve's head, drawing him over to his thigh. For a few moments he just stood, the weight of Steve's head on his leg, enjoying their position.

Then he pulled away, gently, and undid the lock on the collar.

"There you go," he said, pulling off the collar. Steve's neck looked bare without it. "Now let's get dressed before you starve to death." Tony was only half-joking; he knew Steve well enough to know that after the night's exertions, Steve was probably dying for some food.
They went downstairs to the restaurant in the hotel. Steve debated between a full English and waffles; Tony took the helm and ordered both for him.

They went to see Churchill's war rooms, the museum having perfectly preserved his underground bunker.

It was oddly perfect. Steve liked England. He enjoyed he and Tony finally have time to themselves, and even if people were asking for photos and trying to talk to them, they essentially just had each other and no one else. It was nice to think that, in their very busy lives, they could make this much time for each other. When they were in the war rooms Steve was practically vibrating with excitement. He had so many memories in that room (not all of them admittedly that fun) but it was good to be back there.

Steve could remember them all playing footsie under the table to try and pass the time. Falsworth would nudge Timothy and Steve's feet until he got their attention. Peggy used to watch on wearily. Once Steve kicked back too hard and hit Falsworth's chair, knocking him to the floor. But no one told Steve off, no one in England dared confront Captain America. Except for Peggy, who was constantly giving him shit for everything he did.

Steve distinctly remembered walking out after that meeting and finding Peggy shaking her head slowly at him.

"You just can't stay out of trouble, can you?" She'd said, voice fond as she sighed quietly.

Steve grinned at her. "God forbid."

To both Tony's and several other tourist's delight, Steve pointed out a little carving on the underside of one of the tables, Falsworth's initials (JMF) and a Howling Commandos insignia. There had been a lot of rather long, boring meetings here, in Steve's day.

The discovery of the graffiti that was still there got Steve feeling nostalgic. A quick search on Tony's phone led them to his grave. Falsworth had lived a good, long life and had gotten quite a few accolades: Order of Burma, Africa Star, Defence Medal, and the War Medal. It was strange to think of him dying as an old man. The way Steve cheerfully told stories about Dum Dum and Falsworth and the rest of them made them sound like they were still young men, not even yet thirty. But most of them had long since passed away and the ones that remained with in Boswell's age group, and they had grand kids and even great-grand kids. Tony kept a firm hand on Steve's shoulder as they stared at the gravestone.

Seeing the grave had made Steve go quiet. He didn't like thinking about Falsworth so alive and then so not. He'd had children but it would inappropriate to go visit them. Steve hated being reminded of how much time he'd lost. Steve felt like someone who'd almost been...left out. So many who he'd cared about had lived and died whilst he'd been sleeping. It made him feel both frustrated and selfish.

Their afternoon sight-seeing was cut short by the meeting with Peter Wisdom. He was a well-dressed man with dark hair who spoke in a clipped British accent. Tony found him immediately likeable. They chatted about politics over a late lunch in a posh restaurant across the street from MI-13 headquarters.

Finally Tony had to ask. "You know we're decommissioned, right? SHIELD wants nothing to do with us anymore. We're too unstable," interjected Tony.

Wisdom smiled. "Oh, I wouldn't say that they want nothing to do with you. They might yet find a use for you."
"Fury's Avengers Initiative went belly-up... the World Security Council nixed it," disagreed Tony.

"It's easy to nix a program in peacetime," said Wisdom. "Under the right circumstances, I have no doubt in my mind that they might call on Iron Man or Captain America again."

Tony decided to let it go, even though he doubted the program could be resurrected.

Wisdom, apparently one of Fury's buddies, insisted on giving them a brief tour of the MI-13 offices and introducing Steve to a young omega named Joey Chapman, code name Union Jack. (Tony had been unable to repress a groan, to which Joey had pointed out that "Union Jack" was no more or less ridiculous than "Captain America.") Joey was young and had a mop of sandy hair, not quite blond and not quite brown. He was unbonded, thought Steve's omega rights campaign was brilliant, and had apparently known Falsworth up until his death.

Tony wasn't sure why the hell they were meeting these people because, as he tried to point out, fruitlessly, he and Steve no longer worked for SHIELD or Fury. Wisdom seemed thoroughly unconcerned. Maybe he knew something they didn't.

Peter had been friendly but had clearly been holding something back, Steve thought. Steve was unsure what was going on, unsure if they would ever find out...but he knew Fury always had something up his sleeve. Joey was more than friendly; he'd essentially jumped on Steve and shook his hand for over a minute.

"We think that what you're doing in the US is amazing," he said enthusiastically. (He was so enthusiastic Steve actually wondered if he might be close to preheat.)

Steve cocked his head, frowning a little. "You know about...that?"

"Of course. Mum's the word though," Joey held a finger to his lips and winked. "You need any help over here, anything we can do... you just let us know."

After getting the meeting with MI-13 out of the way, they were left to their own devices. Tony let Steve take over the rest of their itinerary, having already seen all that he really cared about seeing. They spent long, cold, rainy days in Piccadilly Circus, taking pictures with groups of Japanese tourists, and went to view the Crown Jewels, getting accosted by more fans and signing autographs. It was lazy and relaxing; they spent most of their time holding hands.

On the day of their actual anniversary, June first, Tony took Steve out to eat and set a small black box on the table between them.

Steve had already worked his way through an entire bread basket; they hadn't gotten their meals yet. Tony was on his second drink.

The restaurant they went to on their anniversary was easily one of the fanciest Steve had ever been to. Even the bread tasted like nothing he'd ever had before. He didn't even know how, but the bread was amazing. Steve had eaten the whole basket before he'd even realised it. He often consumed entire bowls of stuff and didn't even pay attention until it was too late. But before Steve could feel sheepish about how much he'd eaten Tony set down a box between them. It was small, innocent looking. But Tony looked nervous.

"So, I got you something," he said, unnecessarily. "Uh... I don't know if you'll like it. But I... y'know... got you something." He looked embarrassed as Steve picked it up to open it. "...it's, uh, you know... bands," explained Tony. "Matching bands, y'know... betas wear bands and... I guess it's trendy, pair-bonds getting bands, too, so... uh... I got two, y'know. If you wanted to wear it and..."
have me wear it, too. Y'know. 'Cause we're bonded.” Tony was terrible at being overly sappy. He took a sip of his champagne, obviously uncomfortable. He wasn't sure if Steve would like the idea or not, but Pepper had suggested it. Pair-bonds didn't really need to wear bands to indicate they were paired; anyone who was statused could smell it. But at least for betas, wedding bands were the only way to determine if they were bonded, and Tony thought it was a nice gesture. Something possessive, but also equal, and certainly a hell of a lot smaller and more subtle than a collar.

As Tony explained Steve's stomach flipped. The bands were simple but classy, maybe even made out of vibranium, he realised (that would be oddly appropriate.) He looked up at Tony and then back down at the bands. He reached out to take Tony's hand to stop him stammering about it and squeezed his fingers lightly.

"Tony," he said softly, encouraging the Alpha to look up at him. His voice was raw, open and honest. "They're perfect. It's perfect."

Tony's goatee twitched with a smile.

He hadn't known whether or not Steve would appreciate the gesture. He knew lots of pair-bonds who wore bands; Banksy and Boswell, for example, had matching ones. But if there was one thing he'd learned over the last year it was that a lot of things had oppressive connotations and he hadn't wanted to accidentally insult Steve. He'd even consulted with Pepper before getting the bands, just to make sure.

"I got the idea from King T'Chaka. How he called his mate his wife," said Tony. "...incidentally, yes, this is Wakandan vibranium. And I laser-engraved them myself. Mine's got your initials on the inside and yours has got mine, see?"

Tony picked up one of the bands and put it on the ring finger of his left hand, then opened and closed his hand like he was testing it out. "...welp. It took me a year, but I'm finally gonna make an honest man outta you, Steve," said Tony glibly.

He gently took the band from Steve's hands, got out of his chair, and knelt, holding it out to Steve.

If anyone had ever told him he would be pair-bonded only a few years ago, Tony would have laughed. He had never considered either bonding or marriage for him. And if anyone had told him that the mate he would end up with was a male omega, not a beta female, he would have thought they were nuts. And if anyone had ever told him he would kneel and ask a male omega to wear his ring, he'd tell them to get their brain checked.

He took Steve's hand and slid the ring onto his finger. "...not too bad for our first anniversary, huh?" said Tony, kissing the back of Steve's hand.

A few people around them started clapping and whooping as Tony got onto his knees. No doubt many of them recognised him too. Steve felt oddly breathless. The band looked strange on his hand. Strange, but good. Definitely good. He'd admittedly never expected or predicted this. Marriage felt unnecessary for people who had bonds but this… this was a lovely gesture.

Tony ducked his head a little, uncharacteristically bashful at the people around them applauding when he put the ring on Steve's finger.

And despite people watching Steve, who was usually polite and reserved, pulled Tony into a firm kiss. Which only earned them more whoops. "Not too bad at all," he murmured in agreement, a dopey smile pulling at Steve's lips.
As Tony stood back up a waiter brought them champagne and assured them that it was on the house.

"Peggy will certainly approve," Steve told him, trying to ease Tony about the looming visit tomorrow. He could feel that the other was nervous, even if he didn't entirely understand why.

Tony sat back down, looking to meet Steve's eyes, and raised a glass of champagne. "Well... good," he said. He wasn't sure what to say about her. She'd always been Aunt Peggy to him when he was a child, but they'd fallen out. The loss of his parents, followed shortly by the death of Edwin and Ana Jarvis, had shaken Tony to the core. After graduating college at seventeen, he'd spent the next several years alone, drinking from his father's extremely well-stocked bar and fiddling around with rocket designs in his room. Aunt Peggy had tried to be there for him; she had tried to be sympathetic, and then, when that hadn't worked, had tried tough love. But Tony had only wanted to be left alone and in the end, Obadiah had been the one to shoo her away and "let the boy mourn how he likes."

Tony had never quite stopped, not really. He just lost himself in booze and drugs and parties and women and work. He distanced himself from Peggy because she had had too much of a maternal sort of aura and Tony didn't want to feel pitied. He had a worry that he might break down crying, something he didn't want to do in front of anyone. He never ended up crying for his parents. Obadiah, who had always been like an uncle to him, let him reshape their relationship as business partners and equals, and Tony had felt safe talking shop with him, never being asked how he felt. He didn't know how he felt. He just didn't want to explore it.

"...I haven't seen her in twenty years," said Tony, sipping his champagne. "...she and Dad were close. United in their love for you, I guess." He gave Steve a small smile as if he were teasing, but Steve knew well enough he wasn't. Howard and Peggy both had searched for Steve after he'd been lost, and Peggy had told Steve, softly, more than once, how much Howard had mourned him. Howard had not, perhaps, respected Steve... but in his own way, he had cared about him.

"I think you'll be glad to see her again," Steve said encouragingly. And he meant it. Even if Peggy was mad at Tony for something buried in their past...she wasn't a spiteful woman. Peggy was one of the most forgiving people he knew. She would be glad to see Tony, although she might give him a stern talking to about Yemen. But Steve was certainly in deeper shit than Tony over that. After all, he'd promised her he'd stay out of trouble then walked straight into HYDRAs arms. Steve still wasn't entirely sure why he did that.

A deep, dark part of him knew it was because he thought he could turn Bucky the moment he saw him. But Steve didn't like to think about that.

Their food finally came, courtesy of their soft-spoken omega waiter. He grinned a little at Steve. "Congratulations," he said, jerking his head toward Tony. Tony tried not to look smug, even though it gave him a sense of pride... maybe there were lots of omegas, like Christine, who would never forgive him for the separation he and Steve had had back in January and February. But maybe he wasn't completely a lost cause. He was trying his best, at least.

The food was amazing. Steve had seafood linguini with a terrifying amount of garlic bread on top. After dinner they shared a dessert (which Steve consumed most of) and then they headed to the nearest park for a walk. It was colder out tonight so Steve had pulled his coat collar up against the chill. Apparently it was summer, but someone had forgotten to inform the English weather.

They held hands as they walked through the park, the space mostly empty. It was quiet. Peaceful.

"What do you think that stuff with Wisdom was--"
But before Steve could finish his sentence his phone started ringing. He pulled it out to see it was Fury.

Steve frowned and then answered, still holding Tony's hand. "Hello?"

Nick actually sounded a little stressed, which was new for him:

"I really hope you don't have anymore plans for this evening, Captain."

Tony looked over at Steve in alarm. He'd seen it was Fury and he doubted they were getting a call to wish them happy anniversary.

"...tell him he's lucky we're not in bed already," said Tony. "What's he want?" He tried not to sound resentment and failed completely. Considering they were no longer employed by SHIELD, SHIELD still had an annoying degree of presence in their life. Case in point: they were spending their anniversary freezing their asses off in England when they could've been fucking on a beach in the balmy Bahamas.

"Is it about Clint?" pressed Tony, who hated being left out of conversations and could think of no other reason Fury might be calling. They had not called Clint to inform him of the possible discovery of his brother. Fury shouldn't know about that, but Fury had a way of finding things out. Tony was willing to bet money he knew all about Project 84 and that it was entirely possibly he knew about their search for Trickshot. Clint, blissfully unaware, was currently stationed out in the southwest, guarding the Tesseract, which, he had assured Steve, was a very boring, stable position. He had not asked for any more info on his brother. Perhaps it was just too painful, or perhaps he didn't realize they'd found out more.

"Steve?" Tony tugged Steve's arm impatiently, leaning in to try to hear what Fury was saying.

"Hey, Nick, I'm just gonna put you on loud speake-r-"

"Do not goddamn put me on loud speaker. You can explain everything to your boyfriend later. I need you to listen very carefully, Rogers; this is important."

"Okay? What's up?" Steve asked, shrugging at Tony to say he had no idea what was going on.

Nick exhaled loudly. "I need you to do something for me."

"But we're not SHIELD anymore."

"I'm going outside of SHIELD. I can't trust SHIELD with this. You know as well as I do, Captain, just how riddled with rats we are."

Steve frowned a little. "This is why you got us England, isn't it? You had planned this all along. Well, you should have let us know, Nick, because Tony doesn't have his suit and I didn't bring shit with me. We came here to celebrate our anniversary. I hope you realise this is the worst possible day of the year for this."

"Do you think I would be asking if I could help it?" Nick actually sounded frustrated or...unnerved. "You were sent there as backup. I was hoping I wouldn't have to call on your. But our primary SHIELD agents were decommissioned due to circumstances outside of our control, and we need the two of you to step up to the plate. It's a matter of international security. Trust me, we wouldn't be calling on you as our first choice."

Steve sighed, loudly. "What do you need us to do?"
Tony only got to hear Steve's side of the conversation but he wasn't especially enthusiastic about it. He shook his head at Steve as Steve asked what Fury needed them to do.

"No way, Steve-- no! Tell him we're not his puppets... I'm not doing anything, I'm on vacation!" protested Tony loudly enough for Fury to hear him.

"Just to be clear, Captain, I'm asking you for a favor," said Fury. "You know, considering all the things I've kept under wraps for you, I kinda think you owe me one. I can think of eighty-four different reasons for you to help me out."

So he did know.

Tony was still whining loudly. He did not appreciate having his anniversary interrupted by business. Even Aria and Pepper had been giving them space; why wouldn't Fury just leave them alone? Besides, Tony loathed anything undercover, any missions he wasn't going to get acknowledged for. Tony's style was loud and public and he expected to be cheered on afterwards. His was the exact opposite of Natasha's; Tony had made it evident that one of his major driving motivations was praise and attention. Once that was removed, Tony became far less interested in whatever favor was asked of him.

Of course, he understood, even as he whined, that it wasn't really a "favor" and Fury wasn't really "asking." Iron Man didn't get "asked." He got burdened. And Tony knew that despite his protests, he and Steve weren't going to be going back to the hotel that evening; he, like Steve, had something he prove, and he, like Steve, wouldn't have been able to say no to Fury's favor even if he'd thought Fury would accept no for an answer.

Both of them understood that, bond or no bond, Avenging would always come first. Perhaps it was this understanding, more than anything, that solidified their bond.
Steve had not really expected to spend his anniversary on the phone with his boss, but since he was a soldier, he wasn't surprised, either. He twisted the new band on his left hand; the metal was cold in the chilly London air.

"I know we owe you," Steve huffed and ran a hand over his face. He sent Tony an apologetic look. "What do you need us to do?"

"I'm going to send you an address," said Fury. "There will be a man at the address with his own security detail. He has a hard drive on his person, and I need it. It has critical intelligence on HYDRA operatives. It won't be far; he's within your reach. You could be back in bed by midnight."

"Who is this guy? What does he do?"

"It will be easier for you if you don't know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means it's classified, Rogers. I need you to trust me."

"Trust you?" Steve echoed, sounding unconvinced.

"You trusted me with James."

Wow. Low blow. Steve's jaw tensed.

"Are you going to expect us to kill people?"

"It might be necessary."

Steve paused.

When Tony heard Steve ask if they were expected to kill people, he panicked slightly.

"No. No! Steve, tell him no, we can't--" protested Tony. He didn't have a suit; he was unarmed; he was basically useless. That's why Fury was calling Steve, not him. Steve was a living weapon. Steve could swoop in and kick ass if necessary. But Tony wouldn't be able to protect him, wouldn't be of any use, and if Steve got hurt...

"Fine, we'll do it. Fine! Just send me the address."

Steve glanced over at Tony. "Are you at least going to arm us?"

"Legally, Captain, I can't arm you," said Fury gruffly. "If you read all those papers you signed, you'd know that. But I believe you might have recently made the acquaintance of a couple of new friends. They might be able to help you out."

Fury had clearly planned all this out. Tony and Steve had both been naive for thinking that Fury had given them clearance to go to England to visit Peggy... as usual, he had another agenda. The meeting with Wisdom had obviously been more as well.

"How come you need us? Why can't someone else do it?" asked Tony loudly.
Fury heard him. "I need someone I can trust. We both know SHIELD is at least partially compromised, that there are spies within it. And I don't know a damn thing about MI-13... I trust Wisdom but I don't want this mission on either of our records. It involves exposing some HYDRA agents, which means if HYDRA has infiltrated MI-13 as well, then they're damn sure going to corrupt or alter the files. They'll protect their most important moles. I need to ensure that that drive gets to me without anyone interfering with or copying it, and if you're the one who holds onto it, I'll know it doesn't get messed with. Oh, and happy anniversary."

Fury hung up and a moment later Steve's phone pinged with an address.

Tony was shaking his head. "Steve, we don't work for him. We don't have to do this. We can just walk away. He can't make us... we don't owe him anything..."

An ugly lie. Tony knew they both owed Fury, big time. They had their freedom, sort of. Tony had his suits. Steve had Project 84. And Tony suspected that Fury was probably the mastermind behind keeping Bucky somewhere safe.

Steve was strangely flattered that Fury trusted them with this, but that certainly didn't stop him from being annoyed. He gave Tony a weak smile and squeezed his hand. "The only reason I ever ended up in your lap in the first place was because of Nick," he said quietly. He'd actually never thought about that before this moment. But Fury had sent him undercover; it had been his suggestion. So for their anniversary, in a very strange way, this was oddly fitting.

He received another text moments later: use the south exit.

They left the park via said instruction to find Wisdom by the park's south end, smoking against his car. He looked older now, somehow. He exhaled slowly and then dropped his cigarette as they got near, stamping it out with a very shiny looking shoe.

"I'm just here to give you guys an anniversary present!" he said and moved around to the boot. And from that, he produced a hamper, which, for all intents and purposes, looked entirely innocent. Steve wasn't sure what he'd be given. Guns, knives? He sort of hated using both. He hoped they were would give him some kind of blunt weapon...but there definitely wasn't space for a shield in that thing.

Also, a shield would hardly be very subtle.

Steve wasn't sure what they'd give Tony, either. Any tech they could give him would barely be able to rival Tony's own goddamn phone. The hamper was heavy when he was handed it. Wisdom gave them a toothy smile. "And congratulations, of course."

"Right," Steve deadpanned. "Thanks." Just because they were agreeing to do this didn't mean they had to be enthusiastic about it.

Tony didn't bother offering to take the large crate of supplies Steve had heaved up. It looked heavy. Steve was handling it with ease, but Tony was willing to bet it was at least a hundred pounds.

"If you two are planning to go down to Limehouse, I'd recommend taking the tube," he said casually. "It's just due east of here... Oxford Circus station's about two blocks south."

"Well, that's great, because me and Steve were actually planning to go to Limehouse right now, instead of going back to our room for some mind-blowing anniversary sex," said Tony sarcastically.

"No rest for the wicked," said Wisdom, winking and moving to get back into his car. Tony loathed him a little.
He looked at Steve, whose expression was one of grim determination. It looked like they were doing this, whether they wanted to or not. Tony wasn't going to let Steve go alone, that was for sure.

They went south to to the Oxford Circus subway station, as Wisdom had instructed them, Steve hauling the box and Tony minding the gap. He took Steve's phone and checked the address Fury had sent them. "...we'll get off at Shadwell station," said Tony. The two of them were standing, swaying with the car; it was crowded even though it was late. Steve was taking up quite a lot of room in between his body and the hamper he was still holding. "The warehouse is right around there."

They got off and walked a few blocks before slipping into an alley to open their "anniversary present."

Tony lifted out a gun with a silencer, examining it closely. "...I'll be damned. This is from the Freedom line," said Tony, sounding flattered and disgusted. The Freedom line had been commercially available for barely over a hundred days before Tony had halted all production. The few weapons that had been sold were collectibles of the highest caliber, only used in elite teams; the United States only had enough to give out to the SEAL teams and even then, the SEALs sometimes fought over them. "This is a Mediator II," said Tony, turning it over. "This is one of the best goddamm guns I ever-- oo." Tony's love of tech was quickly overriding his misgivings about getting Shanghaied into this mission. There were dark clothes and night vision goggles and weapons of every imaginable sort. "It's like Natasha sent us a care package," joked Tony as he pulled on a dark jacket and a black cap.

"She does always give me weapons of some kind," Steve hummed in agreement. For his birthday it had been knives, and for Christmas it had been a special kind of grappling hook. Despite being decommissioned, it seemed that Natasha had chosen a theme and stuck to it.

He pulled on the dark coloured gear, the night vision goggles sticking his hair up as he pushed them up to his forehead. Steve took a lot of weaponry (he had a tendency to throw stuff and then lose it). He took two knives at each hip, daggers at his wrists and then a pistol which he didn't really want to use but... Steve took it anyway.

It was better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it. That was what he told the other Howlies anytime they went out into the field. He remembered tucking spare clips into Bucky's pockets, murmuring the same phrase, tenderly. He remembered how they'd avoided looking into each other's eyes. Bucky had clearly been embarrassed to be ordered around by an omega. His omega. His ex-omega.

Steve was a little nervous about Tony going in with no suit, but he thought it might be insulting to ask if he'd done this kind of thing before. If Bucky was any indications, Alphas were too proud for their own good.

"You ready?" Steve asked, moving to nudge the bag of gadgetry under a dumpster so they could fetch it later.

Tony sighed heavily. "As ready as I'll ever be," he said. Being Captain America's back-up had to be about the most pointless position in the world. Tony understood, inherently, that Steve was being asked to recover the thing, not Tony. Tony was there by pure coincidence. Fury had called Steve, asked Steve, and had no real need for Tony, who, without a suit, was really nothing more than a guy with above-average intelligence.

Tony took some comfort in knowing, at least, that he was the brains of the operation. Hopefully maybe something would need hacked into or something.
He followed Steve out onto the street. The area they found themselves in was not really a tourist area and because of the cold mist that was falling, no one was out. The street was silent. The address Fury had given them was a warehouse, and the warehouse stood dark and silent on the street. There were a few lights but nothing to indicate anything illicit going on inside.

Steve crouched on the opposite side of the street. There were a couple of cars parked outside... Mini-Coopers. A bit stereotypical, in Tony's opinion, but whatever.

"How do we know which guy has the thing?" whispered Tony.

His question answered itself; eight men walked out of the building, shaking hands. They were well-dressed. Several were holding briefcases... but only one was handcuffed to his. That had to be the guy.

Tony looked over at Steve in alarm. Were they supposed to just... run over and shoot everyone in the head? These guys looked pretty harmless but if they were, Fury wouldn't have asked Captain America to intervene. They must be armed. Or perhaps even mutants, though at a glance they all looked perfectly normal.

Steve was fast and all, but was he fast enough to run across the street and take out eight guys without getting shot once? Tony doubted it. Steve was human. He wasn't invincible. His reflexes were good but they weren't dodging-a-bullet-good. Maybe they could try to snipe these guys but then, once the first once dropped, wouldn't the rest scatter? Tony was at a loss to know how he and Steve-- really, just Steve, he was useless-- were supposed to get the thing without getting injured themselves.

Nick wasn't a simple man so Steve had expected something like this. It was evident why he couldn't have sent Peter Wisdom. Alone, a normal man would have struggled to do this without simply murdering all of them. And whilst Steve was prepared to kill them (goddammit, he thought he'd moved on from this) he didn't want to if he could help it.

Steve knew Tony had good aim even if the rest of his combat was currently more dubious. He pulled down his goggles. He was going to need them in a moment. "Aim for their legs," he told him in a whisper. Steve had to act quickly. Once they were in the cars they were screwed. Nick hadn't provided them with any kind of transport.

Slowly, Steve produced a smoke grenade from his pocket. He sent Tony a small nod, waiting for one in return (Tony gave Steve a small, tight nod.) before he lobbed it across the street.

The grenade smacked into the ground and then hissed loudly, engulfing all eight men in a cloud of grey that put London's fog to shame. Steve was up on his feet in seconds, the goggles allowing him to see through it better then they could at least. It was still fairly opaque and he relied on his super-hearing to navigate more than his sight. The speed at which he appeared at the other side of the street was alarming. (If Steve wanted to, he was capable of breaking multiple world records, though many organizations had ruled him ineligible, since the serum was technically a performance-enhancing drug).

Despite being technically out of practice Steve worked efficiently. The first guy he elbowed in the throat then kneed in the temple before he snapped around punched another the jaw, the impact of which was apparently enough to put him down. Bullets flew but there was smoke everywhere still. Steve dropped another grenade. He was better at fighting blind than most people were with full senses. For him this was as simple as breathing. It was what he was made for. In a bad way it felt good to finally be back at it.

_God damn it_, thought Tony as he closed one eye and lined up the sight... this wasn't how he'd
envisioned spending his anniversary...

He let off four rounds. *Pop-pop-pop-pop.* He saw two guys go down but wasn't sure if he'd gotten the other two targets before a moment later they were engulfed in smoke and Steve was charging in, and Tony couldn't fire if Steve was in the middle of that.

He let off two more rounds when he could, then there was more smoke and Tony gave up trying to hit anything. He knew he'd gotten at least two and that Steve had taken down plenty. He heard an engine start, then cut.

Tony squinted; he thought he saw Steve, the outline of him elbowing a man at the base of his neck. The man dropped limply.

A man went for him just as Steve heard a car engine starting. He twisted around and caught the guy in the jaw with his foot before slamming him into the ground. Then he jumped onto the car, bullets still flying. It was chaos. If anyone could see anything, it was only outlines, and clearly, they were afraid of shooting each other. They were no STRIKE team, that was sure.

Steve smashed through front mirror with his foot before leaning down and ripping out the steering wheel and slamming it into the man's face. He had the special brief case attached to him-- good to know. Said man was now unconscious, blood dripping out of his nose as his head slumped forward.

The smoke had cleared and Steve rolled down behind the car just as a new volley of suppressing fire began. Regretfully, he pulled out his own pistol.

Tony scrambled out from his vantage point and darted across the street.

Steve looked up and Tony realized, too late, that it wasn't Steve. It also wasn't one of the HYDRA guys. It was some guy in a black suit, a heavy belt on, bristling with knives and guns and ropes and tasers. On his chest were eight dark red lines, a cross and an X, and through the smoke, Tony got a whiff of unbonded omega.

"...Joey?"

"Hey mate. It's Union Jack when I'm in the uniform. Secret identity and all that."

"...you can't possibly expect me to take you seriously," said Tony. Joey's uniform was dark and covered every bit of him except the eyes. He looked like a ninja. ...an English ninja with a fucking flag on his chest.

"Captain America wears a great big star on his chest," replied Joey breezily. He loped over to the car; Steve had his back pressed against the side of it, holding a pistol aloft. "Oy, Steve! I took care of the snipers."

"Snipers?" repeated Tony, horrified.

"Two," confirmed Joey, pointing upwards.

Tony's stomach lurched. Steve had charged in there and he'd no doubt been shot at... what if he'd been hit? What if Joey hadn't been there? Tony hadn't realized there were snipers... when the smoke had cleared, Steve would have been a sitting duck.

Bucky had always handled snipers. It wasn't as ingrained into Steve's instincts as it should have been. And he had been out of the game for a year now. "Thank you," he said to Joey.
"So is that him then?" asked Joey, opening the car door and dragging out the limp form of one of the bed, his wrist shackled to the metal attache case. "Great. I've got shears."

Tony examined the case carefully. "I don't think anything'll cut through this... it's adamantium."

Joey gave Tony a pitying look. "We're not going to cut through the chain. Hold his arm out, Rogers."

"Do we have to?" Steve said. He sounded like he was a child wanting to skip church on a Sunday, not cutting off a man's arm.

Joey's outfit was... about as ridiculous as Steve's. But at least when he'd woken up in this century they'd toned his new uniform down a little (sadly only a little) where as Joey looked about as bright and lively as his forties get-up had. Steve supposed he should be 'seeing himself' in Joey or something but right now the guy looked far too... laid back. Steve had always thought a reluctant soldier was the best kind. He took no joy in his work, even if he was good at it.

Sure, Steve got that during a fight, people slipped into certain mentalities. Steve himself was guilty of it. But the guy in front of them now felt like exactly the same man who'd been all shoulder pats and smiles around Steve during their tour a few days ago. And Steve didn't... like it.

Being able to compartmentalize Steve Rogers and Captain America was a critical part of Steve maintaining his sanity.

For a moment he thought about how young Joey was and then realised the man looked about 25. Steve's age, or thereabouts. Ha.

"We could probably squeeze it out if we just cut his thumb off," Steve pointed out as he lifted up a limp arm.

"Would take too long," Joey hummed and unceremoniously pulled a knife away from his belt and hacked the man's hand off.

Tony's brain, usually quick to comprehend, took several seconds to appreciate what Joey and Steve were talking about.

Tony's brain, usually quick to comprehend, took several seconds to appreciate what Joey and Steve were talking about.

He didn't even realize what was happening until Joey had pulled out a blade and begun sawing at the guy's wrist.

There was a crack of bone; Tony leaned into the gutter and vomited. It was like Cuba all over again, when Tony had watched Steve effortless break a guy's leg, his face hard and remorseless.

Joey seemed unconcerned with Tony. He pulled out a length of cloth and tied a tourniquet onto the man's forearm; the man stirred, let out a weak cry, realizing what they had done to him.

There was a lot of blood. As Joey collected the suitcase Steve had to deal with the man jerking back into consciousness because of the pan. "Sorry," Steve winced as he knocked him out again, knocking his head down into the dashboard as 'gently' as he could muster. He found it harder to be mean when it wasn't HYDRA (or he didn't know it was HYDRA). With HYDRA Steve could be cold, merciless and not feel bad. He felt a little bad about all this. The man was unarmed and unconscious and wearing a suit, as if he were a normal person.

When Steve smashed the man's head against the wheel again, it was unclear to Tony if the man was dead or not. Steve's version of a "gentle" whack was probably like being punched by a gorilla. Tony retched again.
"Are we done now?" Steve asked.

Joey shoved the case into his arms. "Director Fury wants it. I just came to help out."

Steve stared down at the case. It was covered in blood.

Joey grinned. "You guys want a lift back to your hotel?"

Tony looked up; Steve was holding a case, the empty cuffs dangling from it. At Steve's feet was a hand. A human hand, pale and limp, ending in a stump.

"It's no trouble. But no vomiting in my car, alright?" said Joey pleasantly, wiping his knife off and placing it back into its sheath on his belt. "Come on, I'm only a few blocks this way. You don't want to get on the tube looking like that."

Steve was clutching the case to his chest and it had bloody handprints on it.

Tony staggered after Joey, only because he felt so completely numb and didn't know what else to do.

"Hey, you alright?" asked Joey. "...you want to go get a cuppa or something? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"You cut off that guy's hand!" said Tony.

"Well, we couldn't very well have dragged him off with us," replied Joey, tugging his mask off as they walked. His face was young and fresh. "Sometimes it's about the greater good, isn't it? When you're a soldier, sometimes you have to do nasty things you'd rather not do."

"We're not soldiers!" protested Tony.

"Steve is," said Joey. "Once a soldier, always a soldier. ...come on, it's this one." He pulled out a key fob and clicked it; a little electric car parked on the curb chirped.

"You went to war?" Steve asked, surprised when Joey referred to himself as a soldier.

"Well, not like your kind of war, mate."

In hindsight, Tony shouldn't have come along. They'd already concluded that he didn't enjoy watching violence (unless he was in a suit and viewing it through the safety of a digital HUD screen), and now he'd just thrown up (although, that was Joey's fault, not Steve's). But Steve knew that there was no way he could have convinced his Alpha not to come along for the ride. He was only grateful Joey had been there. Steve would not have admitted it aloud, but if Joey hadn't shown up, Steve would have probably reached the same conclusion, that the only way to retrieve the briefcase and the intel it contained quickly was to cut off his hand. And Steve would not have wanted to do it. But he would have, if he'd had to.

"We'll shower when we get back," Steve told Tony quietly. He would have reached out to rub his back but he wasn't sure if his touch would be quite welcome right now.

Their anniversary was officially ruined. Least they had gloves on so no blood would have gotten onto the bands.

They got into the back of Joey's car. Steve dropped the case down by their feet. It was heavy, but that was probably due to the adamantium lining the whole goddamn thing. Joey got into the driver's seat and was humming to himself as he started the engine up. Steve reached out to squeeze Tony's
shoulder gentle, feeling a little sympathy queasiness in his own gut.

Then Joey flicked the radio on. The station introduced itself as *Classic FM* and started playing soft, soothing music.

Tony sat down, still feeling numb. "Today's our anniversary," he said weakly.

"Oh, yeah? Congratulations," said Joey. "You're staying at the Langham, right?" He pointed the car west.

Tony stared out the window, watching the dark, crowded stone buildings pass them by. How long, he wondered, before anyone found all those men? Or would one of them wake up first? How many were dead? Was the guy with the missing hand going to die, too? Would that perhaps be better?

"You can't afford to let it bother you, you know," said Joey over his shoulder at Tony. "It's a bit messy and all, but you know, the information on that drive... it might save lives later down the road. You have to look at the big picture."

"That's what I told myself when I made weapons," said Tony.

"Needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few," said Joey with a shrug. "Me, I don't lose any sleep over it. HYDRA's done a lot of bloody damage, haven't they, committed a lot of murders and even worse. Either of you ever hear of Project Guiding Star? They had men so brainwashed that they'd drown themselves if their handler told them to. Yeah, I'd cut off a guy's hand to stop them. The things they'd done to omegas and mutants and people from third-world countries... they need to be stopped." Joey gave a small, curt nod.

Tony didn't reply. He didn't need anyone to tell him HYDRA was evil. It was just that he didn't like seeing men get their fucking hands cut off.

"I think Union Jack is a stupid name," he said after a moment.

"Well, at least it's not Captain Britain," said Joey cheekily.

He pulled up outside of their hotel. Tony peeked out nervously. He wasn't sure how they were supposed to walk through the lobby without being noticed. Sure, their clothes were dark, but on the silver case, the bloodstains were obvious.

Joey turned around and offered Steve a handkerchief, clearly thinking the same thing.

Steve left all the tactical gear in the back of the car to make sure nothing would grab anyone's attention. Then he grimaced before spitting on the case and wiping the blood away. There was still a pair of handcuffs attached but there wasn't much Steve really could do about that. It was nearing 11 pm, however, so the hotel staff would be the night shift. There would at least be less people around.

It made Steve feel better when Joey said this was to do with HYDRA. But it obviously wasn't enough to ease Tony's conscience.

"You got some good one-liner now?" Joey asked. In the comics about Steve he'd apparently been full of them; Captain America was always ready with a quip in the fictional accounts. According to Bucky he'd always been a 'little shit' and Steve had been snarky from the day he was born, but he was hardly profound on a regular basis.

"I'm tired and I want to be in bed already," Steve said and opened the car door. "Thanks for the ride, kid."
"Hey! I'm a year older than you."

"I couldn't tell," Steve replied, tone matter-of-fact and not intentionally mean.

He shut the car door and then walked around to Tony's side as they walked in. The night staff fortunately paid little attention to them as they were caught up with some elderly guest who had lost her keycard. The ride up in the lift was quiet. When they got into the hotel room Steve dropped the case down and went straight into the bathroom to turn the shower on.

Tony followed Steve into the hotel and they crept up to their room. The bed was freshly made and the headboard had been replaced already. There were fresh flowers on the table in the living room. For some reason it all felt very perverse, how neat the room was, and the two of them standing in it after what had just happened.

Steve dropped the case at the foot of the bed; the handcuffs that were still attached clacked against it.

"Do you want to shower together or separately?" Steve asked, not sure if Tony wanted the space.

"...together's fine," mumbled Tony awkwardly. "Just... just I'm not, y'know, in the mood for anything... y'know." He doubted he needed to say it but he wanted to be clear.

So much for the hot anniversary sex he'd been imagining all day.

He wondered if Steve did this sort of thing with any regularity in the 1940s. Did he and Dad and Aunt Peggy all cheerfully maim other people and then go out dancing? Tony couldn't imagine it.

"I wanna burn these clothes," said Tony. In the airy hotel room, he swore he could smell smoke and blood.

"We can leave them in the bathroom for now," Steve said. He could smell it too. The smoke didn't bother him but the tangy stench of blood would never be something he got used to.

Tomorrow they were going to see Peggy in the afternoon. It would be a good focus for the day, Steve hoped.

He stripped and folded the clothes into a neat pile before shoving them into the corner of the bathroom so the smell wouldn't bother them whilst they slept. He stepped under the spray to find the water was hot. Steve offered Tony a weak smile when he stepped under too. Gently, he washed and rinsed out his Alpha's hair before cleaning his own. Despite Steve having been in the fight more he felt a need to mother Tony right now. His Alpha felt...delicate right now.

Tony let Steve wash his hair, pampering him. He got the sense that Steve needed to do it, that Steve, as an omega, got some comfort from it.

He pulled out his arc reactor and did a quick swipe of his socket with a couple of fingers. When Tony was stressed he always began to worry there might be something wrong with the reactor; after all, only a year ago, it had nearly killed him. There was a little discharge but it was clear and didn't smell. Tony double-checked all the wires and connections, then pushed it back into his chest. Steve, who had gotten used to seeing the RT node come out and Tony dig around in his chest, didn't react.

Tony let Steve towel him off and the two of them curled into the massive bed together. Steve snuggled up to Tony.

"We can have a lie in," Steve murmured, trying to sound positive after they'd towed off and crawled under the covers. Gingerly, Steve tucked his head against Tony's shoulder. He had to curl
his legs a little, else his feet would have stuck off the end.

It was quiet for a moment.

"You don't have to like it Tony," Steve whispered. "Accepting it, and emotionally dealing with something...they're very different things."

"...it's fine. It's just hard. Brings back bad memories or something. I don't know," said Tony to the ceiling, staring up into the dark, quiet room. "I don't like it," he added, firmly. "What separates us from them, anyway? I like to think we're different but at the end of the day, the blood looks the same. That's the thing I remember most from Afghanistan. The blood." Tony lapsed into silence, then said, gruffly, "We should've put the hand on ice."

He had nothing else to say. For some reason, leaving the hand on pavement had been the worst part. Like it was already garbage or something.

"Happy anniversary, Steve."

"Happy anniversary, Tony."
Tony didn't sleep well.

He dreamt of the cave, of the coppery taste of blood and the sounds of men being tortured, of the small, neat stitches Yinsen made when he closed wounds.

He woke up early, with a headache, feeling ill and shaky. The whole night before felt like a bad dream, except that the heavy metal suitcase was still on the floor at the end of their bed.

Nothing a drink couldn't fix.

Tony had a couple of White Russians for breakfast while Steve watched disapprovingly.

"I don't want to talk about it," said Tony firmly. He just knew Steve was probably thinking up some speech. "Let's just move on, okay?" Tony had always preferred to deal with things by crushing them into boxes and then burying those boxes deep.

He definitely planned to chew Fury out, though, as soon as the opportunity arose.

"Let's just go see Aunt--I mean--Agent Carter. Peggy," said Tony. "It'll be a good way to end our little vacation, huh?" Tony suspected Steve was going to be busy as hell in the foreseeable future. They had the dinner auction in two weeks and then Project 84... Steve might not get to see Peggy again for months. With a chill, Tony wondered if this might be the last time. She was old, wasn't she? In her nineties? How much longer could she have, anyway?

He had prepared himself for the worst-case scenario, so he was pleasantly surprised when she greeted them at the door of her house. She was wearing a skirt and a sweater and, yes, although she looked old, she didn't seem especially sick.

"My two favorite boys," she said, beaming, giving Steve's arm an affectionate squeeze. "And just in time, I just put on the kettle..."

"Hi Aunt Peggy," said Tony awkwardly.

"Tony! Oh my goodness, you really are the spitting image of your father. Doesn't he look just like Howie, Steve?"

Tony cringed. "I knew you were going to say that."

"Well, what good is being your godmother if I don't get to embarrass you in front of your mate? ...I found some old baby pictures--"

"I'm in hell," said Tony to himself.

Peggy made everything better. She always had and she always would. Steve always thought this must be weird for her, especially so. She'd watched Tony grow up, known Steve many decades prior and then had seen them get together in the modern day. But if it was, she never commented on it. The image of Joey hacking off some random guy's hand felt a world away in her house. Homey was the one and only word for it. Steve remembered spending days and days here before the Yemen incident and Peggy parading around with him in the park nearby to make a grouchy neighbour jealous.
When she said Tony looked like Howard Steve tried to push the thought away. Howard had been charming, sure, but Steve had never wanted to go there. He knew what a chauvinist looked like when he saw one.

"Baby pictures?" Steve said, perking up. Now *that* was something he wanted to see.

Peggy ushered them into the house and led them into the living room. She disappeared momentarily and then returned with a tray that held a teapot on it along with three sets of cups and saucers. There was a small jug for milk and a little bowl full of sugar cubes. Steve liked the way the British sat down and enjoyed tea 'properly' (as Peggy constantly insisted).

She waved Steve down when he tried to get up to help and poured them all cups of tea, putting two whole cubes into Steve's cup with an eye roll.

"So, what have you been up to whilst you've been there?"

Steve was eternally grateful that she wasn't bringing up Yemen.

"We went to see Churchill's war rooms."

Another eye roll. "I remember the time you all decided to play sardines down there. It was a nightmare. We didn't find Pinky for *six hours!*"

Steve smiled at the memory.

"Oh! Yes, baby pictures," Peggy said, the thought suddenly returning to her. She reached for a very large box and opened the lid to reveal it was full of photo albums. "For you." She handed Tony a photo album from WWII, which was in fact full of pictures of Steve. And then she handed a different album to Steve himself. "Baby photos," Peggy affirmed, grinning.

"No-- Aunt Peggy-- please," protested Tony weakly, but Steve had already opened the album to a picture of Tony and his father, Tony no more than five years old, holding a Captain America action figure.

Tony wanted to crawl into a hole and die.

"Why are you doing this?" he demanded as Steve turned the page to a picture of Tony eating a snowcone, his mouth red with syrup. "Is this punishment for not calling?"

Peggy's eyes softened; she reached out and cupped Tony's cheek. "I was never angry at you for not calling, Tony. I was worried."

*That* shut him up.

He tried to look at the photo album in his hands but it was impossible to focus because Steve was giggling at the wealth of pictures Peggy had of Tony's family.

"Now, here's Tony's first horseride. He's dreadfully afraid of horses, you know..." said Peggy. In the photo, Tony was clinging to Edwin Jarvis's leg, shielding his face from the world's most adorable and unthreatening-looking pony. It wasn't even a horse. Just a miniature pony, with a pink ribbon in its mane. Ana was holding an apple, probably trying to convince Tony that the pony was friendly, and both she and Jarvis were laughing. Peggy was in the photo in riding boots, also laughing, a hand on Tony's back.

"I'm not scared of--" began Tony.
"Yes, you see, we got him in the saddle but he cried the whole time--"

"Aunt Peggy, please--"

"--even though Edwin never even let go of the reins--"

Tony stared at his teacup and wondered if he might be able to drown himself in it. He had not realized such photos of him even existed.

"Oh! And here's Tony with his bunny. Tony, do you remember Bunny?"

"No, please, Aunt Peggy--"

She tapped a photo smartly; Tony, aged 2, was sitting on his mother's knee with a large, brown stuffed rabbit with floppy ears. One of the ears was in Tony's mouth.

"You know, that was the original name of his robot? The one he built in college? Bunn-E. Because it had two antennas, remember, Tony? Like rabbit ears."

"Oh, God..."

"This is actually adorable," Steve said, who currently couldn't stop smiling. It was so sweet to see Tony like this. He was a pretty adorable baby. Tony getting so embarrassed over the photos was also... pretty adorable.

The only thing Steve couldn't help but notice was his distinct lack of Howard. Maria featured more than her husband but even then, in his younger years it was apparent that Jarvis, Ana and Peggy were around more than anyone else.

Steve knew that Peggy hadn't had any children of her own. She'd married an American beta man and had an omega woman by the name of Angie who had passed almost eight years ago now. Peggy seemed fine by herself, of course; she was managing. Peggy had always been fiercely independent.

Steve pulled out his phone and snapped a photo of the bunny toy one. If Pepper hadn't seen this already then it was a goddamn travesty.

Peggy, who looked awfully proud of herself, pushing Tony's up towards him. "Come on dear. Drink up."

"I don't want--" began Tony.

"Ah! Here's Tony's graduation. I wasn't able to attend, but this is the announcement he sent me."

A picture of a teenaged Tony, smiling wryly for the camera. It didn't quite reach his eyes. He was in a black robe, holding up a diploma.

Steve turned the page and Tony felt briefly confused. He was standing there, grinning, holding a loaf of bread.

"Oh! This is his birth announcement!"

Tony blinked. It wasn't him; it was his father. The loaf of bread was Tony.

Below it was another picture, one of his father and Jarvis grinning in front of Big Ben, arms around each other. They looked playful, not a word Tony would have used to describe either of them.
"There's Howie and his mate on their... let's see, fifth anniversary, I want to say?"

"You never told me they were bonded." Tony's tone was accusatory.

Peggy looked startled. "Why, of course they were. They were terribly in love. Your father doted on Edwin."

"He was our butler."

Peggy looked thoughtful, the worn lines of her face knowing. "Ours was a different generation. Especially for Americans, omega equality was simply not thought of. Even if they hadn't been mated, I'm sure Edwin and Howard would have fallen very naturally into those roles. After all, Howard was always so dominant, and--"

"What about Mom?" challenged Tony.

"Oh, he loved Maria very much, too. No, there was never any doubt about that. But it was different, you know. Her being a woman and Edwin being an omega."

"And how come you never told me Steve was an omega," growled Tony, who suddenly felt like Aunt Peggy had duped him for his entire childhood.

"You never asked," retorted Peggy.

"Why didn't you tell me?" repeated Tony plaintively. In the photo album, open on Steve's lap, a cheery-looking Tony was sitting on the lap of his nanny, hugging a Captain America action figure. The action figure was second only to Bunny. In every photo of Tony before the age of five, he was clutching the rabbit, and more often than not, an ear was in his mouth. In another photo, Tony was celebrating his fifth birthday—no, fourth, there was no Howard there, which meant it must have been 1974, he must be at the Expo—and, oh God, it was a Captain America cake. Bunny was sitting on the table beside Tony, a birthday hat on his head. Tony had no memory of that and felt something akin to betrayal that Peggy Carter had these photos; if they ever leaked, it would ruin him. They were... precious.

"Well, why would I? Steve was a good role model for you. He's strong, courageous, candid... his status doesn't really matter," said Peggy easily, sipping her tea.

Tony disagreed but he thought it would be rude to say so in front of Steve, who was still grinning like a loon over the pictures.

"Dad never told me Steve was an omega."

Peggy gave a tiny shrug. "Steve meant so much to Howie. He didn't talk much at all about him, did he?"

"Yeah, he did," snapped Tony grumpily. "Whenever he got drunk, which was all the time, it was Captain America this and Captain America that. 'He's the best thing I ever made, the only good I ever brought into this world.' Great thing to tell your only son."

Peggy's eyes were tender. "Howard was terrible at appreciating the things he had, Tony. He loved Steve because he lost him. It doesn't meant he loved you any less."

Tony sulked. He was remembering now why he hadn't wanted to talk to Peggy after his parents' death. She had too many fond memories of Howard, someone Tony would probably always resent. Obadiah had known about Howard's drinking, how angry he'd been later in life. Peggy's memories
were kinder, gentler, and they didn't mesh with Tony's view. He had no fond memories of his father
and even if he had, they wouldn't have made up for the fact that Tony held Howard personally
responsible for the car accident that had killed him and Maria. Tony was certain he'd been drunk and
that it was Howard's selfish self-pity that had made Tony lose his parents.

Perhaps Peggy appreciated the simmering resentment because she dropped talking about Howard
and went back to taking Steve through a photo album of Tony's early childhood.

She had saved the best (for Tony, the worst) for last. On the last page was a photo of a naked Tony,
age three or four, running through the living room of their house.

"These documents need to be burned," said Tony.

"Look at his little bum!" giggled Peggy; in Steve's presence, she always seemed younger, more
girlish. "Oh, he was such a little explorer... no sense of anything but his own curiosity..."

"Yeah, that's enough photos," said Tony, trying to yank the album away from Steve.

Peggy reached out and grabbed Tony's hand. "Oh! You have bands! That's so lovely... oh, Steve..."
She beamed at them.

Back in the army, in the SSR, Steve and Peggy had both been outcasts. He was an omega, and she a
woman, and they'd had to be strong, have a constant wall of professional up. They were always on
guard. They did not talk about men or Alphas or children or mating or marriage, ever. Things had
changed, for the better.

Peggy had had a proper wedding because her husband was a beta. She'd shown Steve the pictures.
Angie had been her maid of honor. At the time it had been controversial for an omega to be present
for a their Alpha's wedding ceremony. But that was Peggy. She loved ruffling feathers and breaking
all the rules. The pictures of the ceremony were beautiful and the photo of them laughing over the
cake (the top of which fell off onto the floor) were downright adorable.

Steve was glad Peggy had made it. That she'd been happy. And now he could see in her eyes that
she was happy for him too. When she'd seen him before Yemen it had been a different time. Steve
had been in a very bad place and the future for him and had Tony had been bleak or practically non-
existent at the time. But now Peggy was smiling and there was a kindness in her eyes that Steve
recognised.

It was the same look she gave him when Steve walked back from the camp with an arm slung
around Bucky, the man half dead from whatever Zola had done to him, but still breathing.

"Oh look, we have some early ones of Steve in here."

Peggy reached over to flip the over album over and the first picture was on Steve on stage, in the
same get up he'd worn for Tony only a few nights ago. Steve tried very heard not to turn bright red.
Now he almost felt bad for using the Cap image like that. Almost.

"Oh you did look so silly with those little wings on your face. Did Philip ever give you that outfit
back?"

"Yep," Steve practically squeaked out.

Peggy sighed fondly. "He wore it to a Halloween party once, you know."

Tony's mind, without warning, conjured up an image of Phil in the outfit, and he cringed. "Stupid
sexy Coulson."

Peggy's eyes had a hint of mischief. "Oh, those Howling Commandos... the only outfit with an omega leader... everyone thought you all must be insane. Well, you were, weren't you? Always volunteering for the most dangerous missions... a bunch of regular little daredevils." A shadow passed over her face suddenly and she looked down at the photos. She flipped the pages for Steve and found one of him and Bucky. It was a posed photo; Steve was holding Bucky's helmet aloft and Bucky was on his tip-toes, straining to reach it comically, and both of them were grinning.

"Poor Sergent Barnes. He was such a sweet fellow. I do imagine he and Tony would have been friends... he was very much like you, Tony."

"Selfish, demanding, and sarcastic?" asked Tony, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, yes, very much," said Peggy without missing a beat. "But he was funny, too, and quite a charmer."

Tony's scowl deepened. "...you know Steve got force-bonded in Yemen?"

Peggy's face twisted a little. "Yes," she said, cautiously, guard already up.

"You know who did it?"

"HYDRA."

Tony looked over at Steve, accusingly. "Tell her. Tell her. Show her your neck." Tony was not going to sit here and let them fondly remember poor, sweet Bucky.

"Steve?" Peggy frowned at him.

Oh shit. She didn't know, not about the Winter Soldier at least. (Well, she probably knew of him, but not who he really was or that he'd been in Yemen). Steve had always had a sneaking suspicion that Peggy was always kept in the loop, that nothing would really surprise her ever. When he'd first woken up SHIELD had given him her details within days of his rehabilitation. But he guessed he'd been wrong. Peggy had known Steve had been mated before (she'd seen his neck before the serum) but she had been the first to tell Steve that the bonding mark was actually gone. He'd never explicitly told her that his mate was Bucky but when he'd returned to camp when the man in his arms he hadn't exactly had to. Once Steve had rescued Bucky Peggy must have been aware that a relationship did not strike up between them. That their bond was broken and had remained broken.

"The man in that photo didn't do it, Tony," Steve disagreed softly. "He's been dead a long time."

"What are you talking about?" Peggy sounded sterner now. She wasn't going to look at Steve's neck without permission, however; she had her manners still. She put a hand on his arm. Her fingers felt too cold. "Steve?"

Steve sighed. Why did Tony have to bring this up now?

"The Winter Soldier did it," he said reluctantly and something dark passed over Peggy's features.

"Barnes isn't dead. He's the Winter Soldier," clarified Tony. He felt a mean, ugly sense of pride when Peggy's hand flew up to her face.

"But-- but how?" she managed.
"Same way Steve's here," said Tony. "He fell into ice."

"Those experiments Zola did on the men at Azzano. He... he had some sort of serum, like me. He didn't die when he felt. They took him and froze him and they only woke him up to use him. They... they practically turned his head inside-out. Mentally he's just--" Steve couldn't continue.

Peggy reached out and placed a hand on Steve's arm. The skin was soft and cool and loose. "Steve... I'm so sorry," she said softly.

Tony's sense of "winning" was quickly fading into guilt. Was he really this petty? The short answer was yes, of course he was. Steve's neck was sharing his mark with Bucky's and it infuriated him. But Bucky was out of the picture now.

"...he's with SHIELD, in cryo," added Tony, before Peggy could start planning a rescue mission.

"Steve, why didn't you tell me?" she asked, and she moved over to envelop him in a hug. Tony watched, feeling left out. No one had ever hugged him over the whole Bucky debacle. Granted, pushing Steve was had been his fault, but... well, he'd thought Peggy, as a fellow Alpha, might at least understand some of the hurt there.

Steve hugged her back, wanting to reassure her more. An himself. He'd never meant to make her feel like this. Steve was instantly feeling bad. "I..." he sighed and pulled back, squeezing Peggy's hand to try and ease the shock. She'd clearly never seen this coming, but then who goddamn had?

"I knew you'd feel responsible, because it was just after I left you. That's why I didn't tell you," Steve said and Peggy lightly tapped his arm.

"Oh stop trying to protect my feelings! You were the one who..." She went quiet for a moment. "He didn't, did he--"

"--no," Steve finished quickly. "He didn't. Just the bite."

Peggy nodded, staring at the floor for a moment before she looked straight up in Tony's eyes. There was something hard in her expression.

"Well," she breathed. "I'm glad you boys... worked thought it."

Tony's smug sense of triumph had worn off.

"...me too," he muttered quietly, reaching for Steve's hand.

Peggy put away the albums, closing the cover on Bucky's goofy smile, and they spent the rest of the evening chatting. Peggy wanted to know all about what Tony had been up to. She and Steve reminisced about the past. It was strange, her role: to Tony she was a parental figure and to Steve, a peer. Tony unbuttoned his shirt to show her his chest.

"Oh... it's sort of lovely, isn't it?" she said.

"Yeah and the arc reactor is pretty sweet, too," quipped Tony.

Peggy laughed and rolled her eyes.

Tony insisted they take a selfie before leaving.

"See, this button flips the screen," he explained to Peggy.
"Oh, look, there we are!"

"Okay, guys, smile, I'm putting this on Twitter," said Tony. For a split second he was aware of the strangeness of the picture. Peggy looked old enough to be his mother, and he looked old enough to be Steve's father.

But all three of them grinned, holding up peace/victory signs, and Tony took the picture.

"Please don't let it be another twenty years, Tony," said Peggy gently as he and Steve were getting ready to leave.

"...I won't," said Tony. "Thanks for embarrassing me in front of my mate." He hugged her delicately.

"Do you still have Bunny?"

"I'm not answering that."

She grinned wickedly. "I thought so."

Peggy pulled Steve into a fierce hug before she let him go. She gave him a good squeeze and then finally released him, raising a hand to cup his cheek tenderly before reluctantly pulling back. "I will always be grateful that our paths crossed again," she said in a murmur, a smile tugging at her lips. Then she looked between the two of them. "Now you two look after each other. It's a mean world out there."

Steve ducked down to kiss her cheek, a proper gentleman. "Good night Peg."

"Na-night you two!"

She waved, standing in the doorway until they got into their taxi and the doors were shut. Steve's heart panged in his chest. He was annoyed at Fury for manipulating the whole situation but he was also eternally grateful that he could still see Peggy again in this century.

They got back to the hotel quite late. The suitcase from the night before was tucked under the bed for safe keeping, out of sight.

"It's gonna get kind of crazy when we get back, isn't it?" Steve murmured as he sank down onto the edge of the mattress.

"You mean Project 84? Yeah," said Tony. He propped himself up on his elbow. "I talked to George about being there, at Zephyr Hill. To see if... you know. Trickshot's there."

They knew Trickshot's real name, of course, but it was hard for Tony to think of him as anything other than Trickshot.

"Even if you're at home, in heat, I can be on the phone with you, tell you what's up," offered Tony. He doubted the camps could be any worse than he'd already seen in the Middle East. And he knew Steve would be unhappy to miss it.

They came back from England with Steve holding the heavy metal briefcase under his arm. Nick Fury and Maria Hill were waiting for them at the airport.

"Thanks for ruining our fucking anniversary," snarled Tony.

Maria handed Tony a magazine. On the glossy cover was a picture of Tony kneeling in front of
Steve, putting the band on his finger. Tony flipped it open. "After a rocky first year, the Stark-Rogers bond is looking as strong as ever... aw."

"Don't read The Northern Star," advised Maria. "They're saying some nasty things about an Alpha kneeling for his omega."

"But betas always kneel when they do the ring thing!" protested Tony.

"Just letting you know," she said.

"Thank you, Captain," said Fury, taking the briefcase. "This information is invaluable."

"Don't ask us for any more favors," snapped Tony. As if he or Steve had any say in the matter.

"You gonna tell me what's in it?" Steve asked after the handing the briefcase over. Fury gave him a dead-set look.

"No."

Well, that answered that then. Steve should have known better than to expect any sort of transparency from Nick, who was, after all, a spy. But then, Peggy had been, too, and so was Natasha. If Steve was honest, he'd always had a bit of a soft spot for spies.

He held Tony's hand as he watched Nick turn, his long, black coat disappearing into the crowd along with the suitcase. Steve doubted he'd ever see that suitcase again, but as for Fury, well... Steve did not think it was outside of the realm of possibility.
About a week after their return from England, in mid-June, Tony woke up one morning and walked downstairs to find all of the orchids gone. He had been so used to the house being blanketed in plants that it looked oddly empty, and his voice echoed slightly. Pepper had gotten all but the few they’d decided to keep off to the gala, leaving in their place a pair of tuxes for Tony and Steve to wear.

That night they’d gotten ready together and they had a good routine going by now. Steve would make sure Tony made it out of the shower with no suds left on him, and once they were dry, Tony would tame his hair, which seemed determined to poof up for every formal event he ever tried to attend. Tony knew his way around a bottle of hair gel, something Steve was eternally grateful for.

Aria and Pepper had gotten to the gala early to get everything sorted. Steve and Tony were actually due to arrive about ten minutes after everyone else so they could have a ‘proper’ entrance. It didn’t really sound like it was Steve's thing but it was for charity and with Project 84 due in about a month, they needed all the help they could get.

When they arrived at the gala cameras were flashing from every direction, something Steve was used to now.

When they actually stepped inside it intimidating as hell. Steve barely recognised anyone. He spotted Pepper and Aria in matching dresses, the former blue and the latter turquoise. He thought it was cute. He was glad that Aria had Pepper as a sort-of role model.

There was a great round of applause when they stepped in and Steve tried to steel himself for the many countless conversations he would have to endure that he would probably have very little interest in.

"Hey." Steve squeezed Tony's elbow gently and ducked down to whisper in his ear. "Before this night is up, I want a dance, mister."

"I'm not nearly drunk enough," said Tony. "Put a few martinis into me and then we'll talk-- Oh, hi, Richards!" A man with dark hair and a hint of salt-and-pepper around his temples had come over to shake Tony's hand. "How's that big Project 42 going?"

"You mean Seagate? Not bad."

"I'd love to come tour it sometime, considering I'm the one who drafted half the designs," said Tony.

"No can do, Tony. I've got to attend a conference on geothermal energy this weekend, so I'll be out of the country until next month," said Reed, stretching across the table to shake Steve's hand. "Although I was actually hoping to pick your brain about troubleshooting an AI program. Have you been checking your e-mails?"
"Nope."

"Is it true you built a particle accelerator in your basement?"

Tony's eyes narrowed. "Who's asking? I don't want SHIELD all over my ass on this one."

"Erik told me. He was extremely interested in talking with you and Banner about it. Thought we could have a little think tank together."

"Erika from Natick?" asked Tony in confusion; he worked closely with Natick on the development of fire-retardant fabrics.

"No, no, Erik Selvig, the physicist. He's doing some dynamite stuff on dark matter, you ought to check it out-- right now he's on sabbatical in Tromsø. Could be a nice little getaway for you."

"Eh... I'll think about it," said Tony, who didn't feel like it was the time to tell Reed he wasn't allowed to leave the country. "Flag down that waiter, I think he's got some sort of fancy shrimp thing, I want that." He turned to Steve. "Ten thousand a plate. No pressure, but by my estimate, you'd need to eat over fifteen hundred shrimp for us to break even."

Reed laughed. "Or a hundred and sixty lobsters."

"Or twenty-six filet mignons."

A woman in cat's-eye glasses and springy hair suddenly shoved between them. "Hi, Mr. Stark, my name's Annette with Vanity Fair. Can I borrow you for just a sec?"

Tony eyeballed Annette thoughtfully. "Yeah... yeah, just for a sec. 'Scuse me Reed, Steve..." He rose, smoothing down his suit, following Annette toward the bar. Tony often got claustrophobic at black-tie affairs and he wasn't really kidding about needing a drink.

"Really not your scene, huh?"

Steve evidently looked lost around a load of men who apparently spoke science. Whilst he didn't usually think he was stupid, being around a load of Tony's friends and colleagues never made him feel great. Steve only had a high school education (from the thirties) and two years of art school. He couldn't keep up with people like Dr. Richards. And Steve hated hovering on the edge of a conversation. It made him feel so **awkward**. While they weren't exactly nerding out just yet (Tony usually took a few minutes before he started whipping out a mechanical pencil and drawing electrical designs and mathematical equations on the backs of napkins), Steve could feel it coming.

Steve turned around to see Haley. She was dressed in green, her neck totally collar-free and her hair swept back from her face.

"Hall?" he said in surprise.

She pulled him into a one armed hug, her other hand holding a glass of wine. "It's good to see you. Her smile was bright, genuine. "My mate insisted we come. You know, big history geek and all that... she is getting one of those orchids, or else she might kill someone." Haley laughed then winked. "This is kind of insane though, huh?"

"Just a little," Steve hummed, spotting Aria laughing with a group of people he didn't know. "Have you been getting on okay? I know that the end of the conference was a little..."

"Awesome?" Haley filled in.
Steve sighed fondly. "I was gonna go with 'chaotic'."

"You know I haven't spoken with any of those guys since," Haley said, sipping at her wine. As a waiter passed she grabbed a glass of champagne off of a tray and handed it to Steve. "They were all kind of assholes."

"They were," Steve agreed and it felt good to have another omega point it out first. "Also, super boring."


Steve smiled a little. "Mine too."

"Well come on then!"

She dragged Steve off, just as Tony had been dragged off to the bar with Annette.

"...I guess I always knew, deep down, that this would have to come to a head eventually," continued Tony, relaxing against the bar. "Because, you know, my experience in Afghanistan was so humbling and it really put so much in perspective for me. It was an easy choice to make."

Annette had been joined by two other reporters, both blondes. With the two blondes on either side of Annette, Tony was struggling not to refer to them as a Reverse Oreo, even though he was thinking it loudly.

"And how has this changed your perspective on the world's current nuclear arsenals?"

"Well, as an ex-weapons designer-- oh, hi, Christine! This is... uh... well, she's from the New Yorker and she's from... did you say Huffington, darling? This is Christine-- from-- from Vanity Fair? Right?-- as I was saying, changed is a strong word, I think this just demonstrates what I already--"

"Tony!"

"--shit." Tony set his drink down and smiled. "Pepper, hi, oh my gosh, look at you, you look stunning... ladies, the CEO of my dad's old company, Virginia, this is Annette and Christina and Jessica and Christine, ladies, Miss Potts..."

"Charmed!" said Pepper with a winning smile, managing to sneak in a murderous glare at Tony. Tony edged over, trying to block his drink from view. Pepper snagged Tony by the elbow. Still smiling, she hissed under her breath, "How many of them have you slept with?"

"Two, maybe three. You know you're an amazing ventriloquist?"

"How many drinks have you had?"

"Five, maybe six. Seriously, you should get an act together."

"Where's Steve?"

Tony scanned the crowd, relieved when he finally spotted Steve waltzing with some woman, followed immediately by a pang of jealousy. The women looked vaguely familiar. Was she a
"Who's that?" he demanded, eyes narrowing at the woman in the green dress.

"This dinner is supposed to be about your anniversary and you're over here getting drunk and flirting with four random women!"

"They're not random! I've slept with two of them! And maybe Christina!" Tony turned around. "Christina, have we slept together?"

Christine looked alarmed. "No. Are you propositioning me?"

"No," said Tony, but all four reporters were already scribbling away.

Pepper dug her nails into Tony's arm and forcibly dragged him away from the bar. "Tony, there's a lot of media here tonight, can you please try to behave? And I mean really behave, not just your version of it. Go cut in."

Tony heaved a world-weary sigh; he would much rather chat with Dr. Richards about dark matter or flirt with Annette, but Pepper was right. The trick would be finding an opening; a lot of people were on the dance floor.

Steve and Haley were swaying along easily. Haley let Steve lead since he was taller. "Honestly, I owe you a huge debt... I don't think we'll be allowed back next year, and I'm fine with that," she said happily. "All the other omegas are just so boring, you know? Every time I ended up in a room with the popular ones, I wanted to stick a knife into my gut. You know, the popular ones: DeSoto, Waffles, Donner, Vix, Shimmer... Ashtray used to be in that group until Mike dumped him..." She shook her head a little. "Absolutely barbaric. At least I don't have to work alongside any of them. My mate, she's got the patience of a saint." She let Steve dip her. "How have you been holding up? I saw in the paper you and Tony are wearing bands now."

"Good. We went to England for our anniversary and Tony's birthday. And we watched a guy chop a man's hand off. Donner is okay, for the record. We found him."

Haley's grip tightened a little. "How?"

"I've got connections. They were... renting him out, essentially. We paid a lot for him but we got him out of there."

Haley paled a little. "Is he holding up okay?"

"He's still head over heels for Gideon, so no."

"Jesus," Haley muttered. "I'm sure he's a good person, deep down, but that guy is an idiot. It's not his fault he's an idiot, but he's an idiot."

"Agreed."

The song ended and they stepped back, not committing to another dance. Haley walked back and grabbed her (it could have easily not been hers at this point) wine up from the table. Steve didn't blame her. He couldn't imagine an auction was actually all that interesting. There was a flash of a camera somewhere; he did his best to ignore it.

A man stepped before them. An Alpha, who Steve could instantly tell was a reporter. He was
smiling too wide and his glasses were too big on his face.

"Steve Rogers! Hi! I was wondering if I could ask a few questions."

"Um, sure? Who are you with?"

"First Alpha." Not familiar to Steve. Oh well. "What's it like being bonded to Tony Stark?"

"Awesome," Steve said, though he felt like he sensed worse and more awkward questions on the horizon. Why would an Alpha magazine want to interview him?

"Tony's a pretty reclusive guy... and we're love to hear your take on him," said the reporter, smile broadening. "He's a bit of a different sort of Alpha, isn't he? Wore a collar to the conference, knelt for you on your anniversary... how does all that make you feel? He seems happy to let you take the lead... is that accurate?"

Tony approached Steve, saw he was talking to someone else, and wandered off instead to find Richards and another martini (not necessarily in that order).

Dr. Richards was chatting it up with a woman Tony recognized from Natick labs.

"Hey, did you say earlier a think-tank with Banner?"

"Sure did," said Richards easily.

"...you don't meant Dr. Robert Bruce Banner, the famous nuclear physicist and biochemist?"

"The very same."

"The one who went totally berserk, turned into the Jolly Green Giant, and destroyed half of Culver College?"

"Mm-hm."

"...where the heck is he?" asked Tony curiously.

"Oh, somewhere in India or something," said Richards with a wave of his hand. "You know, laying low. But he's still just as brilliant as he's ever been. Still answers e-mails, which is nice."

"Hmm," said Tony, who would love to pick the brain of a renowned nuclear physicist regardless of if they had a perchance for destructive bouts of rage. If anything, that was sort of a bonus. "...well, the thing is, I've been trying to lay low, too. You know, let Steve do his thing."

"I'm guessing you two are planning something big," said Richards, cocking an eyebrow.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss it, but yeah, it's huge. It'll blow your socks off," said Tony. "All the flower proceeds are going towards our project."

"Ugh. Sue wants me to buy one... I just can't justify spending four figures for a plant, though."

"Aw, c'mon, treat the lady," said Tony encouragingly. "You've got the money and we've got some pretty rare ones. And it's all going to charity. You love charity!"

"...I forgot what a businessman you are..." said Richards, rolling his eyes.

Tony beamed and excused himself to go bother Jeff Bezos.
Steve was still chatting with some reporter.

"He wore the collar so we would be equal, because the conference wouldn't let me in without one," Steve explained patiently. "So if you mean he's an Alpha who treats me like a person and not a subordinate, then yes, I guess he's different." Steve's smile was faultless but anyone who knew him well would know it wasn't genuine. "And he knelt down because that's tradition. He wasn't inferring anything by it."

"Oh, so you kneel for him too?"

Steve hesitated, visibly. "I'm not here to discuss what I do in my private life."

"Oh, so you do? People said they saw you kneel at the conference."

Goddammit.

"It's really none of your business," Steve said, his smile faltering.

"Don't you think it's a little hypocritical?" the reporter pressed. "Captain America, kneeling?"

"I think that modern day omegas should be free to make their own choices. I'm free to make all of my choices."

"Aside from when you were force-bonded, of course." Steve's smile fell. "How did that affect your relationship?"

Steve frowned. "How do you think it affected our relationship?"

"Aaand why don't I cut in here?" Aria appeared, practically pushing between them. "Sorry," she said to the reporter. "Steve has to go."

Steve looked about ready to murder him.

"Steve, what do you think you were doing?" hissed Aria. "That guy's from First Alpha." Steve gave her a blank look and she sighed. "They're a conservative magazine with a very large Alpha reader base. And they've hinted before that Tony's an acer. The last thing we need is for them to get you to say anything that could be twisted... you know how sensitive he is."

"I stood up for him!" Steve insisted. "Now, if anything, they going to talk about how I kneel for Tony in public." Aria gave him a confused look. "It happened one. At the conference. It was an accident."

"An... accident?"

"I'll explain later."

"I'm not saying you didn't stand up for him," Aria sighed. "But it doesn't matter what you say Steve. They twist it. To make one or both of you look bad. You should just avoid Alpha magazines like that."

"Okay, okay, fine," grumbled Steve.

Aria paused, glancing around, and lowered her voice. "That scar on the back of his neck... it wasn't a lab accident, was it? ...make sure he keeps his dander down. I don't want any pictures they can use against him."
She didn't say anything else, because Banksy came bouncing over. "STEVE!" he shrieked, throwing his arms around Steve. "I was looking all over for you! Well, of course, first I went to check out the flowers... I notice mine and Boswell's weren't up for sale. Did Tony kill it or are we that special? OH! Boz isn't here, he was feeling a bit under the weather. But I got everyone from SA together! You already know Danielle, of course, and here's Wendy Germaine and Remi St. Laurent... Ty didn't come, he didn't want to make anyone feel uncomfortable in close quarters..."

"You're that special," Steve assured Banksy, a smile tugging at his lips as Banksy squeezed his arm in delight.

Wendy and Remi both shook Steve's hand. Like Danielle, neither of them were bonded. Wendy and Danielle were wearing blue dresses, while Remi's was a soft pink with an elegant floral pattern. Banksy was in a tux, his sleek blond hair tied back. It was the first time Steve could ever recall seeing him in black and not something bright and loud.

"These three gals are our fearless leaders!" exclaimed Banksy happily. "Really, we can not wait until July, it's going to be so fabulous-- oo, is that champagne? Excuse me darlings, that glass has got my name on it!" He flitted away.

"That man was a hummingbird in a past life," said Wendy, watching him scurry off.

"Steve, it's so good to finally make your acquaintance!" said Remi, shaking Steve's hand. "We at SA are so very proud to have you on our side... our membership has skyrocketed. It's such a wonderful thing to see people excited about omega rights again."

"We're still got a long way to go," said Danielle gravely. Her eyes narrowed. "...is that guy over there from First Alpha?"

Aria cut in again. "It was open admission. Anyone could buy a plate. Since all the proceeds go directly to charity, we didn't bar anyone. If they had money to spend, they were more than welcome to come. So, yes, there are some... Alpha-oriented reporters."

The three SA leaders looked peeved by this knowledge.

"They're giving money to a cause," Steve pointed out. "And once they find out how it's been used... then they really won't be happy." There was a strange sort of satisfaction in knowing that the funds of Alpha conservatives were going to go straight towards undermining the establishment they were so desperate to protect.

Danielle put a hand on one hip. "I suppose you have a point."

"Careful," Wendy said to Steve. "Assholes like will try and get a photo of your neck."

"As sure as hell hope not," Steve breathed. "Has anyone seen Tony?"

"The last I saw him, he was in the hall with all the flowers... writing in bids under fake names to drive the prices up," said Aria, mouth quirking into a smile.

"He's by the bar," said Wendy, pointing. Tony was chatting with another man in a tux and he was holding a glass of champagne.

As if sensing he was being watching, he looked over, caught Steve's eye, smiled, and gestured for him to come over.

Danielle reached out and put a firm hand on Steve's shoulder. "Steve. If you ever need to get away
from him, you know we're here for you, right? Just letting you know." She let go.

"I know," Steve assured her. "But it's okay Danielle, really." He said but she didn't seem to believe him. Oh well. That wasn't exactly Steve's problem.

Aria frowned a little and hooked her arm through Steve's. "...Status Alliance isn't one of Tony's biggest fans," she said, unnecessarily. "If it weren't for Ty and Banksy, I think they'd be out for blood... listen. Steve. You and Tony might want to consider doing something a piece for a more... Alpha-oriented 'zine. Nothing like First Alpha or The Northern Star, but maybe just something more neutral. It's important for us to have allies. I've gotten a few calls from Now magazine. They might be a good fit."

"We can slip it in after 84, maybe? It's gonna get pretty busy after this week," Steve breathed. "I'm filming the video tomorrow, right? The one we're releasing the day of?"

"Right," Aria nodded. "We'll have an edit done with a few days. You can have a look over it before it makes the final cut. You'll do great."

She deposited Steve over by the bar, where Tony was talking animatedly with another man about rockets. "--what I'm saying is, yeah, I get it, the inlet needs to be low pressure so that you don't need a separate drive system, and obviously, you don't want a thrust vectoring control failure... but I don't see any reason why the dual impeller turbopump has to-- oh, hi, Steve! This is Elon. Elon, Steve. Listen, let's talk Merlins some other time, okay? I promised this guy a dance," said Tony, standing up and swigging the last of his drink.

"I'm gonna hold you to that, Tony!" called Elon, pointing; Tony pointed back cheekily and then offered Steve an arm.

"Shall we?"

Steve offered him a small but very real smile. He could tell he was tipsy but nearer tipsy rather than drunk. Hopefully Steve could get him to slow down after this.

He took Tony's arm and they moved onto the dance floor, slipping through the couples as a new song started. Steve let Tony lead, curling one hand over his shoulder.

"You talking science with a lot of people then?"

Tony slid an arm around Steve's waist. "...sure. A lot of eggheads are here. Reed and Elon are both brilliant. But neither of 'em are as good of a dancer as me." He grinned, he and Steve stepping in an easy four-step waltz. "Does this bring back memories to the swingin' twenties, Steve? ...or at least the swingin' New Year's party we had... I hope you're not expecting another blow job after this..."

Tony was teasing, lightly, but the music and the rhythm of their swaying, not to mention the champagne, made him feel drowsy, and he lapsed into silence. He reached up to put a hand on the back of Steve's head, to bring it down to rest on his shoulder. A slightly awkward pose for both of them, because Tony had to stretch and Steve had to bend his knees a little. Still, pleasant, holding Steve like this, feeling the warm weight of his body.

"I haven't seen Ty," said Tony mildly after a moment.

"Ty didn't come; something about not wanting to make people feel uncomfortable," Steve said regretfully. It saddened him, really. And how many more kids like Ty would they have on their hands after 84... hundreds? It was an awful thought, to think that their lives had been ruined with such a burden. Steve wished that Ty had turned up, just to say a big 'screw you' to men like the
"And in the twenties, we all danced better than this," Steve said, evidently teasing, his blue eyes glinting with something akin to mischief. Before the serum Steve had gotten too breathless to ever dance for long. Now he could go for hours.

Tony spotted Pepper swish past in a gorgeous blue gown. "...would you get jealous if I danced with Pepper?" he asked curiously, pulling away to twirl Steve briefly. Steve, despite his size, could be graceful under the right circumstances.

His therapist had talked to Steve a lot about this sort of thing. When the song came to an end Steve ducked to kiss the corner of Tony's mouth. "Doesn't matter if I am," he told him, because I shouldn't be.

Tony caught Steve's hand. "It matters to me," he replied.

Another song started up, and Tony grabbed Steve again. He glanced over; Pepper and Happy were dancing with each other, talking and smiling. Tony frowned a little.

"If I grabbed Pepper, you could grab Happy," he said with a forced, wry smile. He maneuvered them around so he wouldn't have to watch her dancing. The last time they had danced was after he came back from Afghanistan. His shoulder had still been stiff, and he'd been weak. She had been nervous, wearing a backless blue dress, and they had gotten so, so close to kissing... and then the moment had passed and they'd gone back to drinking. Tony would probably regret that for the rest of his life.

In the cave he'd had so many fantasies about returning to her. But the reality was that, once he returned, they fell easily into their usual, platonic roles.

Tony leaned his head on Steve's chest to listen to his heartbeat. This was a more natural position for them.

"I'm not sure I'm Happy's type," Steve pointed out softly, tone edging on teasing.

The dance was lovely. That was the only word for it. And when they parted Steve felt a little sad for it. Or maybe he was feeling Tony's feelings; for some reason, Tony felt oddly nostalgic.

He had to get Tony to dance with him more often, even if it was only in pajamas in their living room.

When the song ended, Tony gave Steve's hand a gentle tug. "Let's get some overly-expensive food in you, Stevie. Ever tried foie gras? ...Pepper wouldn't allow it, said it was cruel or something. God, she can get preachy." Tony's tone was affectionate. "Fortunately I had last say on the food and I felt like it was a good compliment to the monkfish so... ta-da!"

Steve let Tony take his hand and lead the way, arriving at one of the many tables laden with food. The spread was impressive but Steve was trying his best to be polite and not devour it all.

When Tony held up the foie gras it looked... yellow. Steve frowned as he peered at it. "What is it? Is that a bird?"

"Yes," Wendy said, appearing at his left and reaching for something with avocado in it. "Don't they force-feed them alcohol, or something? It's not very pretty."

Steve looked mortified.
"It's duck liver," said Tony. "And they feed them corn, not alcohol. And it tastes delicious."

Wendy wrinkled her nose.

Tony shrugged. "More for me," he said, unconcerned. Personally, he thought the idea of being force-fed alcohol sounded like a glorious existence, but based on the expression of Steve's and Wendy's faces, he decided to let it drop. He didn't want to ruin the evening by getting into a debate about food, of all things. Tony ate pretty much whatever he wanted and didn't think very much about where it came from.

All the same, he got lamb chops instead of foie gras.

The evening was a quiet, gentle one, one that Tony hadn't realized he needed. There was a string quartet and a massive ice sculpture, all the trappings of a life Tony had been used to before Afghanistan, before Iron Man, before SHIELD and Steve.

In lieu of a traditional auction, they had opted for a silent one, with people penning in bids for each of the plants. Tony had had "Richard Emmett" bid for a few of the fancier ones to drive up prices. At the end of the night, the winners were announced; Haley and her mate got a small yellow one, which they both cheered loudly for when they names were called. The whole process took nearly two hours because of how many plants there were.

"And, finally," said the announcer, a woman whose name Tony had forgotten but who Pepper had strongly recommended, "we'd like to close out the evening's festivities by announcing the tentative amount raised tonight for charity... again, all proceeds are benefiting omega education and the advancement of omega civil rights... thanks to all of you for your support and generosity. The combined proceeds from the dinner as well as the flower sales is three point two million."

Everyone clapped politely, except Steve, who as white as a sheet.

Tony elbowed him. "Steve, snap out if it. Come on, the average going price for those stupid flowers was like, two thousand, and we sold nearly nine hundred. Do the math."

Steve still looked shocked.

"...someone's never been to a charity gala before," said Tony, rolling his eyes a little and clapping along with everyone else.

Steve had been shocked when they gave him his bank account details after waking up; since Steve had not technically died and had been serving as a soldier on ice, he was owed backpay by the United States government, and because of his age, he was also owed social security. Adjusted for inflation, he'd ended up with over three hundred thousands dollars. For Steve that had an insane amount of money.

"That's...that's amazing," Steve said finally, looking pretty stricken still, like the number wouldn't register in his head.

Aria too was grinning from ear to ear. "This was an awesome idea," she hummed, sucking the straw of her gin and tonic into her mouth.

"Tony thought of it," Steve said, sounding proud as he reached for his hand under the table.

The rest of the evening passed in blur and a confusing amount of people were carrying around orchids. Some people offered their congratulations as they went. Haley pulled Steve into a tight hug and told him to call. Steve looked stunned for pretty much the rest of the evening.
Steve was terribly hyper when the reality of what they'd just achieved hit him on their way back on the drive. Steve was practically bouncing in his seat.

"Three million! Wow!" he kept saying. (Tony rolled his eyes every time Steve emphasized "million.")

"It's like you're high." Aria peered at him, checking his eyes, just to be sure, before she got out by her apartment.

Happy dropped Tony and Steve off, leaving Pepper in the front seat as they stepped out. Pepper was practically glowing. She'd evidently had a very good evening.

Steve didn't sleep that night; he was so goddamn giddy. He started drawing in his room and got carried away, grabbing a stool from the kitchen so he could move up to the ceiling and draw up there too. Steve tended to channel his positive energy into art now, and his angrier energy into running or the punching bag.

He was drawing a tree, the leaves stretching up across the white ceiling. He drew a moth on top one of them that was so vivid it almost looked real.

Around three in the morning he looked up to see Tony in the door way. Steve smiled almost bashfully.

"We're really gonna do this, aren't we?" he whispered.

Tony grinned and walked over to offer him a hand. "Yeah. We are. It's the future, Steve. We can do anything we want to. Now come to bed."
Pre-heat Interview

Sorry for the day-late update. My schedule was thrown off this weekend due to a leather title contest. That is now over (I WON!) and can return you to your regularly scheduled updates. Don't worry, Project 84 is coming SOON! - Tony

Tony woke up on a Wednesday in late June with an erection so hard it was painful.

He rolled over, groggily; the sheets were soaked with sweat. Steve had kicked off the blankets and was lying spread-eagle, his skin flushed and gleaming.

Oh, shit, thought Tony.

Steve's pre-heat interview wasn't scheduled for another week. They had all made the assumption that Steve probably cycled every six months.

"Steve... Steve, wake up," said Tony, giving him a shake.

If Steve's last two heats were any indication, the full heat would come on hard and fast, in less than a day. If Steve wanted to do his pre-heat interview, they'd have to arrange it immediately.

"Steve. You're in pre-heat," said Tony.

Steve opened his eyes and reached for Tony immediately, clearly still half-asleep.

"JARVIS! Call Aria and Pepper, tell them Steve's cycling... if he wants that interview he'll have to do it today," hollered Tony. "...and call Gleason about medications!"

He grabbed a glass of water from the bedside and dumped it over Steve's head; Steve shook himself out, sputtering.

"Hey, buddy, you're in heat," said Tony. "Also, congrats... looks like we'll be able to do 84 after all." He offered a smile. His cock was aching. Tony couldn't exactly say he was looking forward to this; Steve's last heat had been rough on both of them. At least for the next twelve hours, they would be semi-lucid.

Steve was rudely woken by a glass of water being tipped over his head and he was about to get annoyed but then, oh--

Oh Shit. Tony was right. He stared down at himself, as if he required some sort of physical proof and the strange hot sensation in his gut wasn't enough. But then, Steve was still getting used to heats, proper ones. He'd only had a handful of them.

He sweaty and naked and flushed all over. Goddammit.

"I'm in heat," Steve repeated. He was a little wet between his legs but when he looked down and noticed Tony's hard-on it certainly got worse. He swallowed dryly. "Pre-heat," he corrected himself, although he already knew his pre-heats were short due to his body's enhanced metabolism.
"Aria says the documentarians will come to do the interview at one this afternoon," JARVIS supplied usefully from above, but Steve wasn't really listening to him. He was already moving to straddle Tony's waist, letting his cock nudge between Steve's arse cheeks. He let out a quiet sound. "Gleason will arrive at lunch time to provide medication."


"Condom," Tony managed, reaching for the drawer of the nightstand. Steve was already wiggling against his shaft, his entrance slippery and inviting; Steve was rubbing them together eagerly, arms around Tony. Tony let out a whimper; he was so painfully, achingly hard. "Condom," he repeated, trying to get Steve off him, but Steve was heavy and insistent and Tony could feel his head nudging teasingly at Steve's entrance.

"Steve--" Fuck. "Omega," said Tony, sharply, and Steve froze. "Get a condom and put it on me," demanded Tony. There was at least one benefit to his status; when Steve was in heat, he became easy to boss around.

Tony liked the idea of Steve giving an interview in pre-heat and all, trying to dispel myths and everything, but... he wasn't sure how Steve was going to manage it. Steve's heats were intense and he couldn't imagine Steve sitting still for two hours, especially if there was an Alpha in the room.

Steve let out a groan of frustration. "Fiiine," he muttered, sounding almost petulant. He leaned over and fumbled around in the jaw before he produced the appropriate box. He grabbed a condom and then ripped the thing open with his teeth before ducked down and sliding it onto Tony's dick. Steve was half shaking with anticipation and frustration. It was evident he really wanted this. That he needed it.

When Steve finally sank down onto Tony, he moaned in relief, rocking his hips forward a few times before he bottomed out with a whimper. "Tony--" he whispered, eyes slipping shut. He always felt good inside of Steve, but the heat brought with it a new sense of relief that was like no other.

Steve clenched around him as he slid down further, and smiled at the noise Tony made. "Feel good?" he asked breathlessly even though he clearly already knew the answer. Steve just wanted him to say it.

Tony watched the whole thing unfold passively: Steve protesting but obediently getting a condom; Steve rolling it down Tony's erection, wasting no time in mounting him; Steve bouncing on his dick, stroking it longingly. Tony let out a sigh of relief and then a whine of pleasure, flopping back luxuriously, when Steve pulled the knot in.

"Oh... ohh yeah... that feels good, Steve," he groaned, closing his eyes and putting his hands behind his head. He rolled his hips upwards with relief. Steve's arousal had gotten him erect to a painful degree and having his cock milked had to be the most satisfying feeling in the world. "Here... here it comes... sit on it, omega, take it like a good boy..." grunted Tony, reaching forward to grab Steve's hips. He arched, twitching with a gasp at the sudden release.

Steve whimpered, still riding him.

"Steve-- Steve, stop-- ow... Steve, stop, I'm too sensitive-- get off," protested Tony, tugging. His knot pulled him back and Steve whimpered, wriggling on top of him. "Steve, c'mon, stop... I'll give you more later... you have to go do that interview today before you're in a full-blown heat," said Tony, reaching down to try to shimmy his knot out of Steve. Steve had a vice-like grip on it; Tony's
fingers were soon slippery with Steve's fluids. "Let go... I promise you'll get more later..."

Steve let out a pained and frustrated whimper, his thighs trembling as he sunk back down and finally remained still. His own cock was hard and curved against his abdomen still and he was practically trembling with the effort not to move.

His blues eyes were glazed over and Steve looked distant. He certainly wasn't going to be with it for the interview but then he supposed that was the point.

After about two minutes of Steve staying still and trembling with the effort he just managed to slip off Tony with a small wince, collapsing back down onto the sheets. He suppressed a strange urge to giggle. "Tony--" he sighed sweetly; flexing his legs against the sheets. "Tony, you gotta..." he was touching his own erection. Steve was trying to be good. "I need something inside of me. Please."

Tony winced. "Okay, okay, okay..." He shoved a few fingers into Steve and reached around to grasp his erection. "You can cum and then you gotta do this interview... blah blah blah, omega rights. Remember?"

Steve was giggling and squirming under him; the moment Tony grasped his dick, he began thrusting with eager moans. Tony had no clue whose bright idea it was to have a pre-heat interview, but he felt like it was a bad idea. Steve was child-like and desperate; he was not himself during his heats.

"Mhm. Feels good," Steve hummed and arced up, pressing into touch and seeking out friction. He let out needy little sounds, his hands bunching up in the pillows around his head.

Tony leaned down to nose behind Steve's ears. "Yeah... that's it... get it out, baby... good omega..." he encouraged, pumping Steve's dick. He rubbed his thumb over the exposed head, smearing precum over the foreskin and shaft. "You want to cum in my mouth? You want me to swallow?"

Wait. Where the fuck had that come from? Steve's pre-heat was making Tony stupid. But he was already bowing down, still wiggling his fingers inside Steve. "Be a good boy and show me you like it..." Oh, God, what the hell had gotten into hm...

"Yes! Yes, please... wanna feel your mouth Alpha, please. I'll be good. I'll be good I promise." Steve was evidently thrilled at the idea and wriggled even more, letting out a low whine as Tony closed his lips around the head of his dick. Steve happily groaned, working his body between Tony's mouth and fingers.

Steve didn't last long. One final grind against Tony's fingers and he came with a shudder into the other's mouth.

Tony gagged slightly but gulped down Steve's ejaculate, licking away the last drops from his head. "Fuck." Steve's eyes fluttered shut and he slumped against the sheets.

Steve was still for about five seconds before popping back up.

"I'm gonna go for a run!" Steve announced, like the idea was groundbreaking, his eyes wide.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah!" protested Tony, scruffing Steve's neck. "No running... you gotta come downstairs. Remember? Interview? Come on..." He was already hardening again. He hoped that the interviewers were betas, otherwise it was going to look like a fucking Renn faire, what with all the swords and tents.

Woo boy.
"Steve. Steve, focus. You've got that interview--" Tony was starting to think the interview was a crappy idea. He was all for dispelling myths, but there was no myth to dispel here. In pre-heat, omegas were bonkers. Maybe not as bonkers as they were in full heat, but still. "--so go get dressed in something comfy and go downstairs and grab a glass of OJ, okay? You can run later."

Steve was fidgeting.

"You're my omega, and I love you," concluded Tony, kissing Steve on the temple.

Steve grinned goofily.

It was going to take some rather creative editing to make Steve seem lucid.

"Interview. Right. Interview. Who's it with again?"


"I love you too," Steve told him, voice strangely serious as he reached forward to grab Tony's hand.

It took two attempts for Steve to make it downstairs. He seemed to forget about the clothes thing and almost headed down there naked. Tony grabbed him and re-directed him, knowing that Steve was naturally modest and would be mortified if he let others see him naked. Or at least, he would be once his heat was over.

In the end Steve was dressed in yoga pants and a soft white tee, his usual yoga get-up; clothes that were conveniently designed to get a bit sweaty in. Downstairs they found Aria at a table; surprisingly enough Maria Hill was sat opposite her, sipping on an espresso. In the living room a film crew were milling around, setting up lighting and cameras. All of them betas.

Steve was bouncing on his feet and looked practically high.

"SHIELD sent me," Maria explained when she met Tony's eyes. "We're aware that, in this state, Steve could accidentally disclose sensitive information. Therefore I am going to observe filming and ensure that anything that isn't supposed to leave this room, doesn't." She was a beta, so it made sense for her to be here instead of Phil, even if it was more awkward.

"She let herself in," Aria supplied, in other words. "You okay there, Steve?"

"Amazing. So good. Can we make waffles? We should make waffles."

"Sit down," Aria put a hand on his shoulder and Steve moved easily into one of the bar stools. "I'll make waffles." She fetched him a glass of juice first and placed it in front of him. Steve downed it in one gulp.

"They'll try and get the interview done in two hours. But you know how it is," Aria glanced over at the living room. "They should be set up soon..."

But Steve wasn't listening. He'd gone to raid the fridge for more juice.

Tony grinned at Maria. "You like what you see?" he asked, slouching down in his chair. He was wearing sweatpants and his erection was obvious.

She wrinkled her nose in disgust at him. "Being statused doesn't mean you're allowed to sexually harass people, you know," she said coldly.

"I know, but I'm a renegade like that," said Tony breezily, pulling out his phone. "I'm going to go
make a quick call... can you make sure Steve doesn't--"

Steve was unloading the fridge, clearly intent on making himself breakfast.

"--take his clothes off or destroy my kitchen?"

Aria swept over to help Steve. "Steve, stop-- stop, I told you I'd make you waffles, calm down."

Tony slipped out the back door, sliding the glass door closed. It was already warm. California summers tended to be fairly unforgiving.

Tony dialed Tiberius.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ty. It's me. I got a... sort of weird favor to ask."

There was a distinct pause on the other line. "What's the favor?" asked Tiberius warily.

"Okay, look, if this is too much, just tell me to fuck off, okay? The thing is, Steve is in heat and...the last time it was sort of a disaster. He needs to take all these meds to keep from getting knocked up but both of us are so completely out of our minds that we can't really... follow the schedule very good."

"Uh-huh?" prompted Tiberius.

"...and we... need someone we can trust... you know, to... make sure Steve take his medicine. And it can't be an Alpha, and... well, I'm attracted to Pepper, and Sam and Rhodey are Alphas, and... and we need someone who can, you know. Help us."

There was a long pause. "I'm flattered that you trust me, but I wouldn't want my smell to ruin your heat."

"What? No! Ty, neither of us would even notice it. You're an omega who can't go into heat. You're perfect for this. Your smell won't bother us at all."

"I don't know, Tony."

"Seriously, I barely even notice it anymore."

Tiberius sighed fondly. "That's a lie. But I'll come over. ...where's Steve now?"

"Inside, ruining my kitchen. He's got an interview... I guess to dispel myths about pre-heats or something. The problem is, Steve's pre-heats are pretty intense and he's fulfilling basically every stereotype. At least he's not a nester."

"Okay, well... I'll be there soon. But if my smell does bother you, let me know, and I'll leave. I know it's unsettling."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. Thanks, Ty," said Tony.

He walked back into the kitchen to find Steve running his head under the sink, clearing overheating. In the living room, several people were arguing over where to put the lighting.

Gleason appeared remarkable quickly, with a large bag under his arm, as Steve was tearing his way through the waffles Aria had made. He didn't have the patience to put toppings on. He just ate them
as they were but he seemed delighted with them anyway. "I'm too hot," he whined.

"You're not getting naked," Aria told him flatly.

Steve looked at her like she'd just said no to getting a puppy.

"Right. I've labelled everything and put the right pills into boxes," Gleason said, setting everything out on the breakfast bar. "How are we doing?"

"These waffles are dry," Steve said, staring down at the plate with what seemed to be genuine concern.

"I offered you syrup!" Aria huffed fondly.

As they spoke a man stepped forward. He was a beta but his body language was almost timid. From his appearance and demeanor he could be mistaken for an omega. He was in baggy jeans and a flannel shirt and he had a small but friendly smile. "Louis, I assume?" Maria said, getting off her chair to shake his hand. "I hope you understand SHIELD being here. Of course, you'll have to sign confidentiality agreements. Steve, say hello."

"Hi," said Steve without looking up from his waffles.

"Yes, yes. That's fine," Louis nodded and shook her hand. He turned to Steve. "It's good to finally meet you, Captain. Thank you for letting us into your home, both of you." He said, turning to face Tony. "Pleasure to meet you too, Mr. Stark."

"We should probably start as soon as possible," Aria said. Steve had wandered off and was beginning to search for more food. His actions had a compulsive sort of hint to them. A cameraman followed him.

Tony shook Louis's hand. "Well, we couldn't have really done it in the studio. Steve's heats come on fast. Sorry 'bout my dick," he added.

"I wish I could say that was the first time I've ever heard him say that," muttered Pepper under her breath; Aria chuckled.

"So... mostly, we'll just be filming things as they come to us. This is a very candid interview and a few other omega celebrities are being featured in this documentary. But I understand Steve would also like an independent segment that's a bit more formal. So we'd like Steve on the couch here," said Louis, gesturing toward Tony's sleek white sofa, "with one of the orchids on the side table there. I think it'll be a nice back-drop, a little reminder of your being bonded and all. Ah... would you rather wear something less...?" He trailed off. Steve was in work-out clothes.

"Jeans," said Tony firmly. "Jeans and white tee. Classic, very Steve. Pepper, go get Steve's clothes." He snapped his fingers at her, the ones on his bandaged hand. Pepper glared at him but got up to go upstairs.

"Steve, here..." Tony reached over to pour some syrup on Steve's waffles. (Steve wandered back to the table and seemed excited to discover a few uneaten ones.) Tony leaned in too close; his mouth began watering and it had nothing to do with the food. He felt his cock twitch.

Steve was tugging his shirt over his head.

"Steven Grant Rogers, you put that shirt back on!" hissed Aria.
Tony got up and went to the kitchen to fold some coffee ground into a napkin and put them over his face. Natasha was right; the smell helped clear his head.

"You're going to clean this up in post, right?" asked Tony through the handkerchief, all too aware of the camera crew drifting around.

"Yes, yes, absolutely," said Louis.

"I'll have to approve it before you can air it," warned Aria. Maria was nodding along with her. Clearly, both were feeling protective of Steve, and no wonder. He was currently sipping syrup straight from the bottle, looking wide-eyed and wild.

Louis laughed awkwardly. "It's quite alright. We've done this a few times now with a few different omegas. It's usually pretty... intense, when we do this stuff. We're used to it now. Most people actually make us sign confidentially stuff. A lot of people say things they don't mean to."

Steve would only let go of the syrup bottle when Pepper returned with the clothes. She'd chosen a softer pair of jeans in hope that he would be comfier.

He pulled his shirt over his head then before pulling the white tee on. Aria sighed. The breakfast bar offered him semi-decency as he chucked off his pants and made to pull on the jeans. He was clearly eager to be naked, if only briefly. "Steve!" Aria huffed and had to reach forward to button up his jeans for him when he became distracted by the grapes in the fruit bowl.

"When Steve's ready, shall we get set up?" Louis said, sounding positive. Steve walked over with a bunch of grapes in one hand, eating the fruit like popcorn.

"Let's do this," Steve said, sounding as hyper as he looked.

"Right," Aria said. "Is everyone staying in the room?"

"As long as Steve doesn't mind," Pepper said.

"Pretty sure he doesn't mind anything right now," Aria mumbled, watching as Steve sat down on the sofa, legs crossed. Once he'd eaten the grapes he tried to eat the grape stalks and then pulled a face at the taste.

"Fantastic," said Louis. "Alright... we're going to do this pretty free-form and then edit later. Sound good? We might need to do a few segments a couple of times. Go ahead and start rolling, Em." He nodded to one of the camera operators, then settled down into an armchair, crossing his legs and placing his hands on his knee. "So, I'm sitting here with Captain Steve Rogers in his Malibu home, where Steve's here to dispel some of the prevailing myths that follow omegas even into the twenty-first century. Steve, you're in preheat now, correct? Why don't you tell us a bit about the experience of an omega from your generation?"

"...I gotta go rub one out," said Tony, shifting his crotch.

"Ugh," said Pepper.

The front door opened and Tiberus walked in, directly onto the "set."

"Cut!" called Louis.

"Hey, Ty!" said Tony enthusiastically. "...hey, check this out!" He pointed to his crotch.
Pepper put her face into her hands. "It's like he wants to get sued..."

"Very nice, Tony," said Tiberius with a roll of his eyes. "Hi, Steve." He kept a respectful distance. "Hello, David."

Dr. Gleason raised a hand in greeting. Despite all of them being familiar, Ty's smell still kept most statused people at an arm's length. Like a disfiguring scar, it was disturbing and impossible not to notice.

"Steve! Drop the grape stalks!" Aria called out. Steve did so immediately, looking sheepish.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to stop you," Ty said and side stepped towards the breakfast bar but kept to the opposite side of Gleason.

Steve watched him but soon turned back to Louis who was saying something to a camera guy. Louis wore the sort of glasses that reminded Steve of the forties. They had thin metal frames and looked too big for his face. He'd actually Googled Louis before all this, surprised that a beta would take this kind of initiative. It turned out he had a wife was an omega, so it kind of made sense.

But right now Steve was mostly just thinking about his glasses. He was about to reach for them--

"Right, shall we try again?" Louis said, with a warm smile. Steve dropped his hands back down into his lap. "As I was saying, Steve, you're in preheat, yes? What was your experience of this kind of thing in the forties?"

"Oooh we didn't talk about it. No we didn't. I didn't have proper heats, anyway. Only lasted a few days."

"When you say 'we', do you mean omegas?"

"Yeah, I mean... we weren't supposed to talk about sex. People like to think of you being all pure and stuff, which is pretty stupid. Because everyone knows I'm gonna be having a lot of sex in the next few days, they just didn't like to think about it. Like you don't wanna think about your significant other taking a shit."

Louis laughed warmly. "And do you enjoy your heats?"

Steve gave the camera the most shit-eating-grin imaginable.

"Okay, can we maybe tone down the sex--" began Aria, but Tony cut in.

"The sex is amazing. Steve rides me like a pornstar."

He reached for Steve's hand, and Steve took it, and the two exchange a gooey-eyed look of pure love. Or at least, lust.

"Nope, cut, we're not having him say that," protested Aria. "Steve, try not to say shit, please-- put the grapes down."

"I'll get him more grapes," said Tony quickly, darting into the kitchen. There was the sound of a crash.

Louis smiled patiently. "Okay, let's start over. I'm sitting here with Captain Steve Rogers, better known as Captain America, in the Malibu home he shares with his mate, engineer Tony Stark. Steve, thank you for giving us access to you at this rather special time. You're in pre-heat right now,
correct? What sort of myths--"

Tony darted into the living room with a bowl of grapes, still sporting an incredibly obvious erection.

"Cut!" yelled Pepper. "Tony, so help me God, I will tape your penis to your leg."

"Is it weird that I'm turned on by that?"

"Get out of the shot!"

Tony scurried out of the way. Tiberius was grinning. "...I have to admit, this is going to be a lot of fun to watch," he said.

Gleason began pulling bottles out of his bag. "One of these every hour, one of these every ten, and they really should be taken with food..."

Tiberius nodded, examining the bottles.

"Okay, take three. I'm here with Steve Rogers, aka Captain America, the current face of omega civil rights, in his Malibu home, where Steve is currently in preheat. Steve, what sort of myths about heats do you find are still prevalent here in the twenty-first century?"

"That we can't consent! Yes, that's a big one. That's garbage." Steve said, slowly eating the newly delivered grapes. He'd written a list of important things to bring up because he knew he'd need a mental list. Right now all he really wanted to think or talk about was sex. And he wasn't supposed to do that... why, exactly?

"I've been in preheat before and I was running home. And I broke this guy's nose to keep him away from me," Steve said, looking incredibly proud of himself. "Bucky was so mad.""

"Was this back in the forties?" Louis clarified.

"Yes. What I'm trying to say is, you still know what you want. Like if you don't like spinach, if you're drunk or something, you're not gonna suddenly want spinach. And even if you do eat some, you'd wake up the next day and be like ew, I hate spinach, why did I eat that? You know?"

"What sort of precautions were there in the forties to help protect omegas in heat?"

"Absolutely none," Steve said, blinking. "Now they have special hostels and stuff, which is awesome. I wish we'd had them. Once during the war I had to go through a heat in an old broken down pub in France. The only reason I was left alone was because Timothy Dugan guarded the door with a shotgun. Men like him proved that Alphas could goddamn control themselves if they want to. Dum-Dum was a real Alpha. A real man. He was-- really--" He reached up to wipe his eyes.

"...Steve?" asked Louis gently after a long silence.

Suddenly, Steve was no longer so serious. "Can I have more waffles? And syrup? Actually, I'll take syrup."

Tony grabbed the syrup and offered it to Steve, ruffling his hair.

"Cut-- Tony, you're still--" began Pepper.

"No, it's fine, just keep rolling. We can cut that out," said Louis quickly. "Steve, as an omega who served in the military, how did heats--"
"Oh, Lord, he's going to get syrup all over the couch," moaned Pepper.

"We're going to do so much more to that couch than just get it sticky," said Tony, grinning, then paused. "Actually, no, we're basically just going to get it sticky."

"Anthony!"

"--as an omega in the military, what sort of advice or insights can you offer the next generation?"

Tony poured himself a glass of champagne; he was sweating.

"War sucks and it's stupid and no one really wants to kill each other," Steve said, sipping at the syrup.

"So... are you saying you regret going to war?"

"No. I mean, it was kind of important, right? Nazis had to be stopped and all that. But Germany, they didn't really want to go to war. They didn't want to die. What I'm saying is... I think we should talk more and fire guns less, because... um... killing people is horrible. And I never want to wish that anyone. You know?" Steve was kind of rambling. "Sure, the army is necessary. You make awesome friends. Doesn't make it a good thing. I mean the killing. Not the army. I love the army. I love America."

"Perfect," whispered Aria, nodding approvingly.

"And I was surprised at how much hatred people still have in this century. The best advice I can offer is that people need to listen to each other more. There's nothing wrong with having your own opinion. But if it never changes, even when you're faced with new information, then you really need to take a good hard long look at yourself. I met so many Alphas at that conference who had no idea what kind of sacrifice and what kind of horrors a man like has endured as a soldier and they didn't give a shit. They had no respect for me. They thought I belonged on my knees and in that collar and they didn't change their minds about. They will never listen. Alphas like that are the reason omegas are still being vulnerable. How can we stand up for ourselves if people won't even listen?"

There was a glass of water on the coffee table. Steve reached for it and downed it in a single gulp.

"You mentioned collars? What's your opinion on stuff like collars? I imagine it was very different back in the forties."

"Well, I could never have afforded one. For me, back then, they more represented luxury than anything else. And you know, I grew up in the Depression." Steve snorted. "Didn't have much. I think...people should always wear what they wanna wear. I personally don't get why you'd wanna wear a collar on a street. In the bedroom it makes sense but going to get your groceries, bit much, right?"

"Cut!" yelled Aria and Maria at the same time. "Steve, don't say you wear a collar in the bedroom--"

"He even doesn't do it that often," said Tony, sounding pouty. His eyes lit up a little. "Actually, Steve, would you mind--"

"It's fine, we'll edit it," insisted Louis as Aria gave Tony a gentle but commanding slap. "So, Steve, your experience at the conference--" He paused; Steve was reaching for his glasses again.

Pepper swatted Tony away; he'd sidled up to her, grinning ear-to-ear.
Louis rearranged himself and gestured to the one of the cameras. "Okay, let's start over-- Steve, what do you have to say to the Alpha defense that being around an omega in heat can cause ferality... that often, Alphas should not be held accountable for their attacks on omegas? You discussed safe space hostels... let's explore that."

"Don't forget to talk about 84!" hissed Aria loudly from just behind out of the camera operators.

Tiberius propped an elbow onto the bar. "This is really fascinating," he said in a low voice. "You know I haven't had a heat in over twenty years?"

Tony nodded solemnly. ";Cause of the gland," he said, wisely.

"Oh, because of everything. The arvicolinectomy, the hysterectomy, the hormone treatments... it's not as bad for the omegas they try to make into betas. They just cut out the arvicolina and the scent glands and that's that. ...but my parents wanted an Alpha. So I got the special treatment." Tiberius was unable to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

Tony reached out and put a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Ty. I should've done something, I should've called or--"

"No. No, you're right, Tony. I was mad at you but you couldn't have done anything. We were only teens. The important thing is that we're finally exposing the camps once and for all, and having them shut down."

Tony paused, then ventured, hesitantly, "At the conference, DeSoto mentioned the camps keep omegas... for... practice?"

"Mm," said Tiberius with a short nod.

"So it's not just the ones they're converting... there's more?"

"Yes. Though it's rare for them to stay there long. At Pine Hills a lot of them ended up 'bonded' by the 'converted' Alphas. Not that they were really bonded, of course. But they don't just alter your body. They get into your head, they try to brainwash you... you spend every waking moment being taught, coached...."

If Tony weren't currently slightly manic from smelling Steve, he would have had the grace not to ask. But he blurted out, "Did you ever...?"

Tiberius gave a wry smile. "I never fucked an omega, if that's what you're asking. I had them kneel for me... they would induce heats and then, well, we were supposed to... but there was just no attraction. I remember smelling behind their ears and all I could think about was what was for dinner. They simply held no appeal for me at all. Besides, they all found me revolting... you know, my smell... in my whole life I've only ever been with one woman. A beta. And to be frank I was only with her because she had been with an Alpha I liked and... it was a way to get close to him, I suppose."

"I'm glad Steve's heat is now so that he can be around for Project 84," said Tony. "...you gonna be there?"

"Absolutely not," said Tiberius, shaking his head. "Even if my smell weren't so upsetting, I don't want to be anywhere near those camps. Too many bad memories."

Tony nodded slightly. He hadn't asked Steve yet, but he was wondering if it would be a good or a bad idea to invite Clint to Zephyr Hill. If Trickshot was there...
Now, of course, wasn't the time to ask. Steve had gotten an erection and one of the camera crew was artfully placing a couch cushion over his groin in an attempt to hide it.

Clearly fed up, Aria had lit a cigarette. Tony was too distracted by Steve's smell to even notice.

"This is stupid," Steve said, sounding childish. He'd a smear of syrup on his chin which Louis pointed out. With no disregard for his own decency Steve pulled up the edge of his shirt to wipe his chin, flashing a good amount of six pack before Pepper told him to pull it back down. He was clearly unimpressed about something, hands kneading at the pillow in his lap.

"Why do you still want me to pretend I'm some kind of prude?" Steve huffed.

Aria sighed. "Steve. It isn't--"

"No! It is. If I was an Alpha you wouldn't be trying to hide all this. This is stupid. They're here to talk to me in heat and I'm supposed to pretend I'm not gonna have sex for the next couple of days?"

"I'm an Alpha and they're trying to hide how aroused I am," protested Tony.

"So, about Alpha ferality--" began Louis.

"Having a justification or a reasonable motive doesn't stop a crime being a crime," Steve said, turning back to Louis. "It's still goddamn assault. I don't care what they say. They don't have to live with being a rape victim their whole lives. The omegas they jump do. If Alphas can't control themselves they shouldn't leave their damn houses. And safe spaces are something the government should provide. For an omega a safe space during a heat should be a goddamn human right," Steve said, letting out a ragged breath. He went quiet for a brief moment then swallowed. "It's when you're at your most vulnerable. And as long as Alphas think they have no culpability for their actions, stuff like this is necessary. God, I wish we'd had heat hostels in the forties! Can I have more water?"

One of the crew passed Steve a full glass, which he downed immediately. He was swaying a little, like he was drunk. Louis clasped his hands in his lap.

"So, Steve, do you think it's because you're from the forties and representation an old form of omega stereotypes that people like to think of you as virtuous?"

The question seemed to half go over Steve's head. "I mean that's why everyone got upset when I was force bonded, wasn't it? Because 'Captain America' got fucked over by Russia."

"That's classified!" Maria announced.

"He didn't fuck you," protested Tony suddenly, head snapping up, hackles rising.

"Classified!" barked Maria.

"And it wasn't Russia, it was HYDRA, and Yemen, and Bucky's not even Russ--"

"What part of classified don't you understand?"

It was too late; Tony has gotten up, crossed the room, and laid down on top of Steve protectively, a low growl in his throat.

Gleason got a funny little smile and rose. "Well, I'll take my leave. Have fun and make sure he takes the levonorgestrel with food."

"Thanks, David," said Ty. "If you see Richard, give Rex my regards."
"Absolutely."

They nodded; Tiberius didn't bother offering his hand for a handshake.

Louis's posture remained submissive. "Steve," he said, his tone even and measured. "We absolutely don't have to talk about your being force-bonded if that's too uncomfortable. This interview is all on your terms, okay? You may say anything you like and review it later after your heat."

"As long as it's not classified," amended Maria.

"Steve, your image--" began Aria with forced patience.

"Steve's a good omega," growled Tony, pressing Steve down into the couch.

"Oh, God, the syrup!" shrieked Pepper, who was watching the brutal murder of the white couch through her fingers.

"--people judge omegas. It's not fair, it's not right, but that's reality," said Aria, gesturing grandly with her cigarette. "We can't just have you talking about sex all the time right away, we have to ease into that. Giving an interview in pre-heat is already frankly very provocative. I know it's unfair, I know better than anyone the kind of shit people expect from omegas! But you hired me to manage your image and that's what I'm gonna do. We're not asking you to pretend you don't have sex. We just want you to be... a little bit tasteful about it. And this, right here? This is not good for your image."

Tony was lying across Steve, both of them were covered in syrup, and Tony was humping Steve idly.

"We can take a break," suggest Louis, as unflappable as ever.

"No, Steve's heats come on fast. The sooner you get this interview over, the better," said Pepper, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Tony, please stop humping him."

"I'm not hump-- oh, I'll be damned, I am."

"Come on, get up so we can clean the syrup off Steve--"

Tony didn't move, not quite willing to leave Steve yet. The mention of his force-bonding had hit a nerve and Tony's desire to protect Steve was overriding most of his rational thoughts.

"JARVIS, can you turn on the air conditioning?" called Pepper; Steve was sweating even though everyone else in the room had doned sweaters. The air conditioning was already on but it wasn't doing much good.

With some persuasion (Pepper pouring a glass of water over his head) Tony got off of Steve. Steve himself sat up woodenly, looking a little forlorn with syrup staining the corner of his top. Pepper tugged the cushion up to try and hide it. If he was aware of the fact that he had a hard-on, he didn't show it.

"Steve?" Louis tried to meet his gaze. "Are you okay to carry on?"

"Nothing's fair," Steve whispered, sounding terribly sad all of a sudden.

"You mean... how you were treated, because of your status?" Louis asked tentatively, trying to bridge the gap between Steve's words. Steve trembled. His eyes looked glazed over.
Steve tilted his head at Louis, slowly, the gesture almost sinister, then said, "Am I dead?"

"What?"

"Why did I have to die?" The question was so sincere it was almost heart breaking. Steve's brow pinched together with, what appeared to be genuine confusion and hurt.

"Steve," Aria was standing up, stubbing out her cigarette. "Someone get him water, something..."

Steve's gaze drifted off. This was typical of his heats, mood swings and strange PTSD flash backs. One moment he was as high as a kite, the next all his happiness was just... gone.

"Steve?" Louis waved a hand in front of his face, his voice gentle. "Are you... with us?"

Steve didn't respond to the movement of his hand.

"Is he okay?" Louis said, looking to Pepper. "Is this... normal?"

"This is normal for anyone with PTSD," Aria supplied as she walked over with a glass of water. She held it in front of Steve. "Here."

He didn't respond.

"Steve. Come on. Drink."

"I..." Steve pressed his lips together. His frown hadn't gone away. "I don't think I can see," he whispered. "He dropped me. He dropped me and I'm dead."

"What are you talking about, Steve?"

Tony shoved past Pepper and Aria, sitting on the couch beside Steve, cuddling up to him.

"Steve. Hey. You can see. You can see me, hear me, smell me. I'm right here." Tony reached over his head and pulled off his shirt (Pepper made a noise of protest), then guided Steve's hand to his arc reactor. "Feel that? See it? It's warm, isn't it? Blue, like your eyes."

He guided Steve's fingertips over the arc reactor slowly, tracing it. "Steve, you're a total badass. You're a soldier. You're giving an interview and it's going to help probably ten thousand omegas. You're alive and warm and you're with your friends, and you're about to have a great heat with your Alpha. Steve."

Steve was still staring off.

"Steve. The war's over. We won," said Tony. Steve sometimes needed reminded of that. "Everything's getting better, every day. Listen, you gotta talk to Louis, you wanted this, remember? Once you finish your interview we can go make a nest together. ...you want me to stay here with you? Would that make it easier?"

"...I had no idea Tony could be..." murmured Tiberius.

"Human?" said Pepper, smiling a tiny bit. "...Steve's been good for him. They've been good for each other."

A ghost of jealousy crossed Tiberius's face. Pepper reached over and laid a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Ty."
"It's fine, Miss Potts. ...I'll go make Steve some iced tea." Tiberius got up and left for the kitchen.

On the couch, Tony was stroking Steve's hair with one hand, the other holding his and guiding it over the arc reactor.

Steve curled into Tony's touch on instinct. Aria still looked concerned behind the couch. Steve's gaze was distant, like it truly was focusing on nothing. In Steve's head everything was dark, greyish in colour. There was a blurriness to everything but he couldn't really see. He was shaking in Tony's arms. The confident man who'd been talking about Alphas and collars and public heat hostels was gone. With every passing minute Steve appeared to be withdrawing into himself, tucking his face against Tony's neck.

"Warm?" Steve echoed, voice soft. He sounded confused. He splayed his hand out over the arc reactor, still trembling. "I don't..."

"Is he shivering?" Aria asked abruptly. "Tony feel his forehead, is Steve cold?"

Steve was never cold. His serum made it almost impossible. And now he was going into heat. He'd been sweating no less than ten minutes ago and now he was shivering, his face pale.

"Maybe we should call Gleason. He can't be far," Maria murmured.

The sweat from before wasn't helping. It made Steve's shirt stick to his skin and now the dampness was making him even colder.

"This... isn't normal, right? He shouldn't have cold flushes. That's not a thing, is it?" Aria asked. "Someone Google it!"

"Already Googling it... this is definitely not normal... JARVIS, call Gleason," said Pepper.

"He doesn't feel cold," said Tony. Steve was shivering against him, hard, but his skin felt, to Tony, at least, quite hot. But Tony wasn't a good judge of that. Steve always felt feverish to him. "It's okay, Steve... I've got you, omega... you're with me, you're safe..."

Louis got up with a small sigh. "It's okay, I've seen it all. Everyone, take a break..." He gave Aria an almost apologetic smile. "My wife's heats are terrible."

Aria was obviously more concerned with Steve than the interview; she'd sat down on the other side of the couch. Tony snarled at her. She ignored him.

"Steve. Steven Grant Rogers, come on, snap out of it! Tony, has anything like this ever--"

"I mean, he has flashbacks sometimes," said Tony with a small shrug. "Normally he's more responsive but it's probably just the heat... he's just gotta work through it... he'll be fine... back off, Aria, don't touch him, he's mine."

"Tony, I'm a beta!" She was trying to wipe sweat off of Steve's face, but Tony was blocking her, practically crawling over Steve in an effort to hide him, growling quietly. "Okay, okay! I'll get him a blanket... stop it, don't bite me--"

"I-- I can't feel my fingers," Steve whispered, flexing his left hand with a frown, the movement stiff. "Did-- did someone turn off the lights? Guys?"

"No. Steve, the lights are on, I promise," Aria said as she threw a blanket over both of them. Steve barely reacted to it and it was Tony who had to pull it around him.
"Who turned off the lights?!" Steve demanded, voice louder now. No one knew what to say.

"Steve," Aria said patiently. "The lights are on. I promise."

"Why... why is it so cold? Why did you... why did you leave me here?" His voice was small

"No one's left you anywhere," Pepper supplied gently. "We're all here Steve."

Maria was stood with her arms crossed over her chest, her mouth twisting in thought. "Do you think maybe he thinks he's... drowning?" she said, voice quiet. "There was the plane incident. I know he's had flashbacks to that."

Aria stared at the floor, swallowing. "But... but no one left him there," she breathed. "Steve flew himself into the ocean."

Steve was barely moving. He'd shut his eyes. Seeing nothing was less distressing than seeing almost nothing.

"Why..." His hands twisted up in the sheets, his words directed at no one in particular. "Why did you-- what did I do wrong?"

Tony, already attuned to Steve's feelings, could feel his gut wrenching. His eyes were actually watering.

"No... no, no, no, Steve, I love you, I love you more than anything... you're my good boy, my perfect omega... you're right here with me, Steve. I haven't left you. I love you."

Tony was trying to hold his shit together, but he was panicking, not sure of what Steve was going on about. The plane crash? A memory from the war? Or... something more recent? Yemen? Tony's breathing was fast and shallow with the fear that he was causing this, somehow, and with the guilt of being unable to alleviate it.

"Steve. Steve, talk to us, please. Where are you?" asked Aria. "Who hates you? No one hates you, Steve, all your friends are here with you."

The door open and Gleason waltzed in. "I'm back-- where is he? Ah. Hello, Steve. Steve?"

Tony bristled a little when Gleason knelt, but didn't snarl. After all, Gleason was an omega, too.

He shined a pen light in Steve's eyes. "Well, he's not having a stroke. His reflexes are working just fine."

"Oh, how comforting," snapped Aria, arms crossed.

Tiberius walked back into the room and froze. "...what the--"

"You all know this is fairly normal for someone with Steve's experiences... I think he'd do best with a sedative right now."

"Is that safe to do, while he's in preheat?" asked Pepper with alarm.

"I wouldn't recommend it if it wasn't."

While the rest of them chatted, Tony was still trying to get Steve's attention. "Please, Steve, talk to me, why do you think I left you? I love you so much. Can't you feel me? Can't you smell me?"
Steve was shaking his head where it was still tucked against Tony's neck. "No. No... I'm not good. I've done terrible things. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. I'm so sorry." He sounded so sincere it was gut wrenching. Aria looked about ready to cry. She knew Steve could get bad, but she'd never actually seen him in this sort of state before.

"I can... I can see glass?" Steve's eyes fluttered open and he frowned. He reached out, as if he was touching something, but his fingers met nothing but air. "It's steaming up." Then he almost smiled before he was back to frowning again. His gaze shot up as Tony's fingers brushed against his cheek. Steve's gaze didn't focus on Tony's face but instead hovered over it. "You left me here. It's cold here." He clutched Tony's hand tight. Steve's voice broke a little. "I don't want to be alone anymore."

"Steve," Aria said firmly. "You're not alone."

Gleason was preparing the sedative on the coffee, getting a scarily long needle out and filling it with a clear looking liquid.

"No, no, I swear, I won't leave you alone, you're home, Steve, you're home in Malibu, not Kunar," babbled Tony.

Gleason reached over and plunged the needle into Steve's arm.

It didn't have any immediate effect, not a noticeable one, anyway; Steve's gaze was already too distant.

A moment later he was drawing up another syringe.

Pepper turned to Louis. "Well," she said, tone a bit dry, "welcome to heats in the Stark-Rogers household."

"I wouldn't say it's the worst I've ever seen," said Louis calmly, as Gleason drew up a second syringe for Steve, "but I won't say it's the best, either."

"Shall we go over the non-disclosure agreements again?"

"...yes," said Louis, glancing down at the tangled, sweaty mess of limbs on the syrup-covered couch. "Yes, I think that would be for the best."
Attack on Stark Mansion

Steve lay on the floor, shivering, mumbling; Pepper and Maria Hill had grabbed Louis and were going over the ample contracts they had all signed for the interview, all too aware of how bad Steve's current state was and how it would look on camera. His publicist, usually on top of non-disclosures, watched as Dr. Gleason depressed the plunger on a second syringe of sedative.

"That's a bit much, isn't it?" asked Aria, sounding alarmed.

"Not for him," said Gleason flatly.

Out of the blue, Maria's phone started ringing in her pocket.

Tony wasn't crying, exactly, but tears had started to fall and he was clutching his mate and reassuring him that they weren't in Kunar. Gleason stuck him, too; he was too busy reassuring Steve to notice.

Maria turned away, not wanting to witness this particular scene. Being in SHIELD often meant seeing a side of people you'd rather not.

"Hello?" she said into the phone.

"You got company."

Maria blinked in alarm. "What? Who?" she demanded. Her hand moved to her side holster automatically. "Where are you at now, Nick?"

"I'm outside, on the PCH, pretending to be bird watching. A couple of kids just hopped the fence."

"That's impossible. This place is a fortress. And why the hell are you watching us?"

"Are you kidding me? After what happened with Steve's last heat? HYDRA knows he's vulnerable and they got that mutant who can get into his head, the one they call The Witch. Her and some other kid are making their way toward you now."

"Shit. We just sedated Steve."

"So tell Stark to suit up and blast the two of them back to the hole they crawled out of."

"...Stark's sedated, too."

"What the hell, is this National Fuck-Up day? Why would you sedate both of them at the same damn time?"

Maria whipped around; the camera crew, Gleason, Pepper, and Aria were all far too involved with Steve and Tony to notice anything amiss. Yet.

She turned to Tiberius. "What do you know about Stark's defense systems?"

"...nothing," said Tiberius, cocking his head. "What the hell's going on?"

"Shit! Virginia!" yelled Maria.

Pepper's head whipped around to face Hill. "...why do we need defense systems?"
JARVIS answered for her. "Two unauthorised guests have been detected on the property."

"Gleason! Maybe hold off on Steve's third sedative," Maria said, phone still pressed to her ear. Steve was muttering something in Russian incoherently. He clearly wasn't going to be much use in a fight either way.

Aria stood up straight, a little shakily. "Are... are we gonna have to fight them?" She asked. The idea was laughable. Only Maria was professionally trained. She turned to the SHIELD agent. "Please tell me you have back up. Or something."

Maria gave her a long, hard stare. "I would ask the camera crew to leave."

Aria nodded and rushed through into the kitchen to tell them; they'd taken a break to allow Steve to collect himself.

"Are the defense systems active... JARVIS?" Maria asked, evidently finding it weird to be talking at the air.

"Yes."

"Are they working?"

"No."

"No?! What do you mean, no?"

"Unauthorised guests are now by the poolside."

Steve tried to stand up; Gleason pushed him back down. "Steve, try to stay still, please--"

Steve cocked his head at him, his gaze finally landing on the doctor's face like he was seeing it. "желание," he whispered. "печь, рассвет..." He was reaching out to touch Gleason's face, his eyes misting over with something... red.

"Gleason!" Maria snapped. "Sedate him!"

"Ah-ah-ah," said Gleason gently; a moment later he was jabbing Steve with another syringe.

"Are Louis and the others going to be okay?" asked Pepper in alarm.

"They'll be fine. It's either Stark or Rogers that they want," said Hill coldly. "Does he have a panic room or something? Fury's already aware of the situation; we need to get somewhere safe."

"No-- I mean, yes! The garage, Tony's shop, it's-- it's the safest place in the house," said Pepper, wringing her hands.

"But why would anyone want to kill Tony?" asked Tiberius.

Everyone took a precious second to stare at him.

"He designed weapons, you moron. Overseas, they call him the Butcher, the Reaper, and the Merchant of Death," said Hill.

"...oh. Oh, wow, yes, that would do it."

"Stone, you help me carry Steve. Aria and Gleason, take Tony." (The two were both flopped on the
couch limply, happily riding the effects of Gleason's sedative.) "Virginia, I assume you know the code... get us into the basement."

The seven of them made their way toward the stairs; the camera crew was clearing out, looking desperately curious.

"We'll reschedule!" hollered Pepper.

"Oof-- he weighs like a million pounds," said Tiberius. Not completely unconscious, Steve was having trouble staying on his feet and was being half-carried by Maria and Tiberius.

"Two-twenty five," mumbled Tony, head lolling. He looked blearily over at Pepper and smiled. "I like your freckles."

"Yes, I know Tony, thank you," said Pepper distractedly. Her heels clipped down the stairs and she punched in Tony's code: 1009.

The keypad flashed red.

She tried again.

Red.

Pepper stared at it in alarm. "It's always been his favorite prime number. Tony! Tony, did you change the code? What's the new code? Tony! Tony, look at me!"

Tony beamed at her.

"What's the code, Tony?"

"Uhh..."

"You don't remember your own code?!!"

"Steve..." mumbled Tony.

Pepper began punching in numbers. 1917, 1918, 1943, 2011... nothing. She tried his birthdate and their anniversary, 0704 and 0601. Still, nothing. "Tony, we need the code! Now!"

"Steve," repeated Tony. He rolled his head over. "The... the last four digits of the tags."

"54985870!" said Maria quickly.

Pepper punched it in. Nothing happened. She tried again. Still, red.

"Tony, it's not working!"

"It's from the tags!" protested Tony weakly, half-asleep.

Pepper's eyes widened. "The tags! I'll be right back!"

She tore up the stairs and returned a moment later holding a pair of dogtags. "Not Steve's!" she said excitedly, holding up a pair of dogtags. She punched in 7038; they keycard flashed green and all seven of them stumbled inside, slamming the heavy, bullet-proof door behind them.

"You moron," said Pepper affectionately. "...they have Barnes's name on them... how on earth could
"He was probably drunk," said Maria with annoyance.

"Tony prefers numbers over names. I doubt he bothered to read the name," supplied Tiberius.

They had unceremoniously deposited Steve's and Tony's limp forms on the poured concrete floor; Tony was attempting to drag himself over to Steve, still compelled to breed him.

"So do we just... stay down here?" asked Tiberius, who was watching with concern as a half-conscious Tony tried to wiggle across to Steve. Steve, having taken three whole doses, was essentially gone. His head moved occasionally but he didn't speak, or at least no noise that came out of him was a recognisable word. Feeling pitying, Tiberius went to grab cushions from one of the sofas. He shoved them under Tony and Steve's head. If they noticed, they didn't react.

"Please say you have back up coming, or something?" Aria asked, looking stressed.

Gleason looked rather distracted by everything in Tony's workshop (of course, he hadn't seen it before).

"Director's Fury's gone quiet," Maria hummed. "I can only hope he's handling it. Are you sure that door will hold?"

"...depends what's coming, right?" Aria whispered.

They all stared at the door uselessly. Of course, there was only a sliver of glass they could see through and the only thing that was visible was the metal staircase.

"Cameras!" Pepper said suddenly. "JARVIS, can you pull them all up?"

The next a large group of monitors all flickered to life. There was a lot of different cameras, each screen encompassing a different part of the house or outside.

"There! Look!" Aria pointed to a screen. Outside on the grass near the pool was a boy and a girl. They looked young, seemingly harmless, and nothing like HYDRA. Or at least, nothing like how Aria had imagined them to be. "Who are they? Are they SHIELD?"

"No," Hill grit out, holding her phone to her ear in the hope that Fury would pick up soon.

They don't seem to have guns," Tiberius pointed out, trying to sound positive.

Gleason let out a withered sigh and turned around to see Steve trying to push himself up. His mind was still fogged over and his vision blurry but whatever strange episode he seemed to be going through before had passed. Now it was just sedatives.

"I gave him enough to knock out a horse," he muttered.

"Dooon't call me a horse," Steve grumbled, forehead pressed to the cool cement floor. Mhmm. That felt nice. "S'rude."

"I thought this would be harder," admitted Wanda as the two of them approached the door of Tony's back deck. The pool gleamed, placid and blue, behind them. It was a lovely day.

Pietro tried to door; it was locked. He gave it a kick, but the glass didn't break. "Wanda?"
Her brow furrowed and she put her hands together as if she were squeezing an invisible ball. Cracks appeared over the door; a moment later, it shattered.

The two walked in gingerly, looking around the huge main room. It was at least two stories tall and had an open plan; the "living room" area, with its sleek white leather furniture, melted into another room with a bar and a piano. The decorations on the walls were abstract; there were a few large stones placed around, perhaps for artistic reasons. The glass coffee table had a couple of glasses and magazines on it; there was a white orchid on a small table beside the couch. To their right, a spiral staircase ensconced an indoor waterfall and led up to the second-story mezzanine.


"They're gone," said Wanda.

"Impossible. They're simply hiding."

"In a house this big, they could be anywhere."

"Greeting, intruders," said JARVIS cheerily.

Both of them froze.

"Who's that?" demanded Wanda.

"I am JARVIS, Mr. Stark's automated personal assistant. Please be aware that your unauthorized entry to Mr. Stark's private residence has forced me to alert the authorities, and that further actions may be taken to ensure Mr. Stark's safety, pursuant to California Penal Code Section 198.5."

"Where's Stark?" demanded Pietro.

"Do you really expect me to tell you that?" said JARVIS, who sounded amused, even for an AI.

Pietro and Wanda looked at each other and nodded; Pietro strode over to the stairs, looking up, then down. "I think this is the garage," he said, loping down. He was rewarded with a small landing without any decorations at all. There was a pane of frosted glass that he couldn't see though, and a keypad. He gave the door a test-yank anyway.

"Wanda! Here! ...open it!"

Wanda raised an eyebrow. "I can't hack computer systems, Pietro."

"Well, then, break the glass!"

Wanda's brow furrowed and she made the same crushing motion with her hands, as if crumpling up a ball of paper. Her muscles quivered with effort; between her hands, sparks of red electricity crackled.

Her shoulders slumped and the light faded. "I can't. It's too strong. It's not regular glass, it's something else."

Pietro slammed a fist suddenly against the door. "STARK!" he bellowed.

Inside Tony's shop, Gleason and Area were admiring one of Tony's half-finished Iron Man suits, which was hung up by the shoulders by some chains and was absolutely dripping wires.
"Really, it's fascinating," said Gleason.

There was a thump on the other side of the door.

"...they just look like teenagers," said Pepper.

"Don't let appearances fool you. The girl's a mutant. Her HYDRA code name is the Scarlet Witch, and she's deadly," said Maria.

A pause. "...and... the boy?"

"No clue, actually. ...it looks like they're operating alone. Actually, I'm surprised they don't want Steve. Maybe they've deflected from HYDRA?" Maria was loading a taser with leads; she popped the cartridge in with the heel of her hand. "I think we should try to just neutralize them. Nick's already aware of the situation."

"But we don't know what the boy does," said Gleason.

"Are they statused?" asked Tiberius suddenly.

"Girl's a beta," said Hill.

"And the boy?" asked Tiberius. On the screen he was watching, the boy looked blond and he was slender. He fit the stereotypical appearance of an omega.

"...not sure," said Hill flatly, digging through one of Tony's desk drawers and pulling out a gun already fitted with a silencer. "As much as I'd love for SHIELD to come get us out of this one, if it's only two teenagers, I think we should go on the offensive. They won't be expecting it. If I can bring the girl down, then it's game over. Once we neutralize them, Nick can come pick them up."

"But we don't know about what the boy's capable of," pointed out Pepper.

"Is he statused?" repeated Tiberius.

"Christ, Stone, I don't know!"

Tiberius tented his fingers thoughtfully, then gave a sharp nod. "You take the girl. I'll take the boy."

"Guys." Aria announced. "I don't like this. I think we should wait."

Gleason was moving to help Steve sit up. He was still swaying, only half with it and was entirely unaware of what was going on. "You're not a horse, Steve," he kept assuring him at the other's protests.

"I'm opening the door in five..." Maria stepped towards it.

Pepper reached out and grabbed a wrench off one of the tables.

Then Maria opened the door and all hell broke loose.

There was a blur of movement and Maria was knocked down onto the floor. Wanda stepped into the room and Aria watched in horror as she reached a hand out, her eyes flowing a ferocious sort of red.

"Fuck," Aria whispered.

Steve tried to stand but his legs gave away beneath him. He stretched out to Tony on the floor. He
could hear fighting. Or rather, he could hear Maria shouting and Tiberius grunting. Steve reached out with fuzziness in his eyes, his fingertips brushing against Tony's shoulder.

"T-Tony...."

His Alpha. He had to keep him safe.

Steve looked up and he could see the shape of a man-- no, a boy-- standing over them. He did the only thing he could think to do. He tried to kick out his ankle.

Pietro glared down at Tony and there was no mercy in his eyes. He side-stepped Steve easily.

The sedatives must have taken away Steve's agility, because he barely tapped him. His blue eyes were wide and unfocused and afraid as he looked up at the other omega.

"D-don't..."

Maria, still on the ground, swung her legs; Wanda went down. Wanda swiped at Maria; Maria's gun skittered across the floor; Aria lunged at it; Pepper threw her wrench into the fray, cracking Aria's elbow.

"Ow! Fuck!"

"Sorry! Sorry!"

All four women went down in a tangle of limbs. All had long hair and there was an ample amount of yanking; even though all four were betas, more than one of them resorted to biting.

Pietro picked up a screwdriver from the table; Tony looked up at him like a lamb about to be slaughtered.

Suddenly Pietro froze. A hand was on his shoulder.

Pietro turned, wide-eyed, terrified. Tiberius was staring at him. And his smell, which Tony and Steve and Gleason had all grown unaccustomed to, ever-present, ever-horrific, was enough to stop Pietro for just a second.

"W-what the fuck?" managed Pietro.

"That man's my friend," said Tiberius simply, and a moment later he'd clocked Pietro in the jaw.

Pietro staggered, caught entirely off-guard. Tiberius swore, shaking his hand.

The door beeped and Happy walked in with a bag of McDonald's.

"Hi, guys, just heard about Steve's... heat..." he trailed off, staring.

Tony and Steve stared at him from the floor; Pietro had a hand on the wall to steady himself, and was clutching his jaw; Tiberius was clutching his hand; Gleason was standing protectively over Steve; the four women were all on the floor. Wanda had a fistful of Pepper's hair; Maria's hand was shoved into her face; Aria had somehow gotten ahold of one of Pepper's shoes and had been hacking away at Wanda's shoulder with it.

"What the heck?" asked Happy.

"Happy! The kids! They're trying to kill us!" managed Pepper, the struggle almost immediately
"Oh! Oh, geez! Oh my gosh, Beth and Daston are upstairs, should I--"

"Help us!" shrieked Maria as Wanda racked her nails over his face.

"Right!" said Happy. He did a quick scan of the room, found an empty spot on Tony's desk to set the take-out bag, and then shoved his hands into the tangle of women to separate them.

Tiberius lunged again at Pietro; Pietro was still clutching his jaw, half-blinded. He let out a squeak of surprise when Tiberius threw an arm around his neck; he was a head shorter and far less muscular. He struggled, clearly in a panic. "What the fuck is wrong with you? What did they do to you? Wanda! Wanda! Help!"

Maria yanked away, rolled, grabbed her gun, and stood. She pointed it at Tiberius, eyes red. "Drop him!"

"No!" said Tiberius.

"Drop him or I'll shoot!"

"Do it!" challenged Tiberius, clinging even harder to Pietro. "Do it; I have nothing to lose; are you willing to put his life on the line? Huh? Are you?"

"Wanda, please, there's something wrong with him-- don't--" begged Pietro.

Tiberius's eyes were steely, almost murderous. "She's a beta. She can't tell. Go on. Tell her." He tightened his grip a little; Pietro gasped in pain.

"Wanda, p-please, he's-- he doesn't smell right, there's something wrong with him--"

"Are you a mutant?" demanded Wanda, hovering behind Maria, who was still holding the gun. Pepper and Aria were huddled together off to the side.

"Want to find out what I can do? Do you? Try me. I've got your brother and I've got nothing to lose," snarled Tiberius.

There was a sudden loud thump and Wanda dropped to the floor. Gleason stood behind her, his briefcase aloft. "Oh my goodness... you really are one of my more high-maintenance patients," he said to Steve, peering down at Wanda through his glasses.

"Not a horse," mumbled Steve in protest.

Maria's gun dropped; she swayed and blinked. "Wh-- what?"

Pepper and Aria lunged together, shoving Wanda to the ground, pining her hands behind her back. "Gleason! Sedate them!" demanded Pepper.

"Let her go!" screamed Pietro.

"Shut up."

"Let me go, you freak!"

"I said shut up, you cunt-faced spade!"
"Whoa, Ty," said Tony weakly.

"I think they're allowed to say it," said Happy, who had retrieved his fries. "So... who are these people and why were they trying to kill you? How come everyone's shooting up heroin?"

"This isn't--" began Gleason, then gave up. He dosed Wanda and then Pietro; Maria had flopped into a chair and was holding her head in her hands while Aria tried to comfort her. Pepper had taken over phone duty and was trying to get SHIELD on the line. Gleason looked over at Ty, who was massaging his bruised knuckles. "Tiberius? ...are you... okay?"

Tiberius shrugged, eyes still hard. "I've been called a freak before. It was a useful bluff. I suppose having a botched arvincolectomy serves a purpose, after all."

"You saved our lives," said Pepper, looking over at him.

"I don't want to talk about it," said Tiberius sharply. They dropped it. Pepper, at least, couldn't smell him, didn't know what the big deal was. But Pietro's reaction to him had been an unpleasant reminder of just how unsettling his biology was to the statused.

Steve was aware of nothing going on around him. He heard a lot of voices but he didn't take notice of much else. He reached blindly for Tony. Aria knelt down beside him and helped him find his Alpha's hand for him. He mumbled out a thank you.

They set Pietro and Wanda down on the floor leaning against one of the walls. Happy handed out the McDonald's. Aria started stress-eating fries, and feeding Steve the occasional chicken nugget. Even sedated, Steve's ravenous super soldier hunger made him crave food.

"That was fucking mental," Aria whispered.

"Is anyone hurt?" Gleason asked.

Maria waved a hand. "Just give me a Big Mac."

SHIELD arrived not twenty minutes later. Nick stood stoically in the lab as Pietro and Wanda were carried out. Every agent that walked in and out was a beta. They calmly explained to everyone that they would have to sign confidentiality wafers (after all, they had seen mutants).

"We should get Tony and Steve upstairs. The sedatives will be wearing off soon," Gleason said, hands on his hips. "Do you think some of your boys could help Steve up?"

He was goddamn heavy. No one wanted to carry Steve again.

"Sure thing," Mac said, appearing out of the crowd that had taken Pietro and Wanda away. "Where do you want him?"

With a lot of huffing they got Steve up the stairs. He could sort of walk himself, but Mac had to tug Steve's arm over his shoulders in order to get him up to the bedroom. Tiberius carried Tony up with Happy, and then they left the mated pair in their room whilst a significant group of people congregated downstairs.

"Mac will be staying with four other agents," Nick explained to them. "If this is HYDRA, or another organization, they might try again. Those two are vulnerable for the next three days at least."

"What's going to happen to those kids?" Aria asked, looking a little shaky. They were calling them 'kids' but really they barely looked younger than her or Steve; they were likely in their late teens, if
not their early twenties.

"That's classified," Mac cut in, clearly trying to keep his voice gentle.

Aria mumbled something about stepping outside to have a smoke.

"Director, we've been getting in some reports from project Winter--"

"Not now," Nick waved away the agent trying to get his attention. "Hill, with me."

Maria nodded, pushing herself away from the wall wearily. "Yes sir."

She hovered by Tiberius before she left. "You've got a good right hook," Maria told him and then she pulled away, hands behind her back as she followed Fury out of the house.
Even though Steve had been given more than thirty milliliters of ketamine, he woke before Tony, who had had only eight.

He and Tony were lying in the bed, their hands tangled together. They were alone, except for Tiberius, who was sitting beside the bed gently wiping sweat from Steve's forehead with a wet washcloth.

"Hi there," he said. "...don't try to get up, you're probably still woozy. Everything is fine. There's some SHIELD agents downstairs for your protection, but no one's going to interrupt you and Tony. You're both fine. Gleason sedated you. There was a very small attack but it was neutralized. No one was hurt and everything's okay."

He wrung out a washcloth and pressed it to Steve's head.

"Would you like some water?"

Tony let out a small moan and moved his head a little, then was still.

"...he won't wake up for a little while longer. Doesn't have your metabolism," said Tiberius with a little smile.

Steve's pills were on the bedside stand, but since neither of them were mating yet, Tiberius hadn't touched them. It was a moot point; they could hardly mate while both of them were half-unconscious.

Steve grunted, blinking slowly. An attack? Did Ty just say there was attack?

"...W-Who?" His voice was raw. Steve sat up a little so he could drink the water Ty gave him greedily. He let out a shaky breath.

"This girl and boy. The girl...I think they called her a witch. And the boy, an omega, was very, very quick on his feet," Tiberius said. "They weren't after you--"

"After Tony. I know," Steve said, a little shaky as he put the glass back on the side. Ty grabbed a pillow and placed it behind his head so he could lie back against the headboard. "Jesus," he whispered. "I know they wanted Tony dead but I...I didn't think they'd come this far to do it." Steve dropped his hands back down in his lap. "Christ. ...I told them they had to start anew. That killing Tony would achieve nothing. But they just wouldn't goddamn listen, would they?" Steve's hands curled into fists. "Did SHIELD take them?"

"Yes."

"So now they've just ruined every chance they had at a normal life too."
"You're worrying an awful lot about some kids who just tried to kill you."

Steve shook his head. "They're angry and hurt. They don't know any better. But it's a good thing I was knocked out."

Tiberius frowned. "You really think so?"

"If I was awake and I saw them trying to kill Tony, I probably would have tried to kill them."

"Well... they're in custody now. They're not dead and they're no longer a threat to your mate. So there's that, at least," said Tiberius, picking up a pitcher to refill Steve's glass. "Better not to think about it. Focus on your heat and then there's Project 84... I don't think we'll be seeing those kids again."

He reached over to adjust Steve's pillow. Steve's movements were still clumsy from the drugs.

Tiberius offered him a small smile. "I... I want to thank you. For... letting me be here for you two. It means a lot to me. I know that my... my pheromones are... revolting. Having your trust and everything is... it just means a lot, that's all. I'll never experience another heat or a bond but being asked to... help you two. Well. It's nice. It's the closest I'll probably ever come. Thank you."

Tony groaned again, fidgeting. He was still mostly unconscious, although he'd gotten a reflexive erection from Steve's scent. Tiberius was pointedly trying not to look at it.

Steve reached for the glass again, hating the way the rim shook as he brought it to his lips.

"Of course we trust you," Steve said, like it was obvious, like the alternative to that was terribly confusing. He tilted his head, following Tiberius' gaze. Steve turned a little pink and couldn't stop the amused smile curling onto his lips as he looked away. "And I gotta be honest. I really can't smell shit right now."

Steve was riding a very unique type of high. Nothing could really bring him down right now, even if he was worried about what was going to happen to Wanda and Pietro. His emotions were all mixed together: he felt angry at them, and scared for them. He felt sympathetic and furious. He wanted to kill them, and protect them. He knew, logically, it was his heat that was making him feel so mixed-up and strange.

"You're thanking me now, Ty. But you're probably gonna have to hear some stuff you don't want to. Or see something awkward, so...I'm sorry about that," Steve mumbled. "I hope we can still look each other in the eye after all this."

Tiberius laughed gently. "I'm sure it won't be anything I haven't seen before."

Steve was getting fidgety, his giddiness creeping back up on him.

"Can...can you get me some pen and paper? Something to draw with?"

"Sure," said Tiberius, rising. He hesitated, then added, "Steve, I hope this doesn't some presumptuous. But... as far as hearing things and seeing things... I really want to emphasize that, well, I'll never have this. And living it vicariously, through you two... it's the closest I'll ever have. It's almost like being in a trio. It's nice. I hope that doesn't make you feel strange. I know I'm not part of your and Tony's bond. I just... I want you to understand that this is far from only a favor. It's an honor."

He got up and let himself out of the room to fetch Steve some paper.
Steve blinked in surprise, watching Ty go with a strange feeling in his chest. Huh. He felt giddy and strange. He was glad he could something back to Tiberius, he guessed...even if it was like this. Steve didn't still quite get why the man didn't try to date betas. But it wasn't Steve's place to ask.

Tony groaned after a few moments, but this time, his eyes flickered open. "Oh dear, sweet Turing... what did I take... what happened?" He struggled to get up with a whine of frustration. "Steve," he added, firmly; Steve's smell was screaming for his attention. He rolled over weakly, reaching for Steve. "Omega," he demanded. How the hell he expected to mate was anyone's guess, because he had the groggy post-anesthetic floppiness of someone who was still feeling the effects of sedation. But the "how" was not important to him; mating Steve was. His groin was aching with desire.

Steve's head shot down as Tony rolled over to him. Instantly, his mind was on his Alpha. He reached out to Tony, helping to tug him up so Tony's head rested against his thigh. He ran his hand through his mate's dark hair.

"Pietro and Wanda came," Steve whispered. "They wanted revenge still. It seems they ignored my advice. SHIELD have taken them in now." He sighed and the noise was half a whine.

"...who? What?" asked Tony.

"Those kids from Yemen. The Sokovian ones."

"The what-what ones?"

"You still half asleep, hm?"

"Nuh-uh, I'm awake," mumbled Tony against Steve's thigh, reaching between his legs and stroking the fabric longingly. "Totally... totally awake." Tony sounded like he was sleep-talking. His head was fuzzy but Steve's thigh was warm against his face, even though the fabric of his sweatpants. And his smell was so close. Tony tried to shift, clumsily, trying to nose between Steve's legs at his hard-on. "Omega," he begged.

Whatever Steve had said about Pietro and Wanda had gone over his head. He didn't even really know who the hell those people were. So they had a vendetta against him... big whoop, lots of people did, he was a high-profile billionaire and ex-weapons designer. Plus, kind of a jerk.

He was far more interested in Steve, who was, frustratingly, clothed. As was Tony. He didn't remember how he'd gotten into bed or why he and Steve were both still clothed. He kicked weakly, intent on shucking off his own sweatpants and mating the hell out of Steve.

"Tony. Tony-- hey." Steve nuzzled against his cheek. His Alpha smelt tempting to him; of course he did. But Tony was also half awake still, or at least dopey. "Give it five more minutes," he mumbled, sliding down on the bed to wrap his arms around Tony and tug him against his chest.

He kissed the top of his head. The sedatives had left Steve feeling a little mellowed and he didn't quite feel the rush he had been feeling before. "Just... five minutes," Steve hummed.

He did want to get his clothes off, though; he was feeling far too hot.

"Juuust five more minutes," Steve murmured and squeezed Tony's shoulders gently.

Tony let out a whine of frustration, nuzzling into Steve's chest. "Nnn..."

There was a soft tap at the door and Tiberius walked in. "Your paper and a pencil," he offered to Steve. "Is Tony awake?"
"I tol' you I'm awake," slurred Tony, giving another kick. "Who designed these stupid pants?"

"Thom Browne," supplied JARVIS.

"Fuck him! ...eh... eh..." Tony squirmed.

"...do you want me to help... or...?" asked Tiberius, not willing to touch another omega's mate without permission. "...also do you... do you want me to just wait outside and poke my head in whenever it's time for you to take your medication?"

"Ty," said Tony suddenly, struck by a vague, dream-like memory. "Did you say we were friends?"

Ty smiled faintly. "Yes. I did. When you were being attacked."

"I was attacked?"

"...yes. It's been a very big day for both of you. But you're both fine now. Steve, Pepper and Aria are going to reschedule for a post-heat interview."

"But we're friends?" asked Tony, lifting his head up and looking at Ty. "You're not mad at me anymore for what happened?"

"No, Tony. I'm not mad anymore. We're friends," reassured Tiberius.

"...okay, then help me get these godforsaken pants off!" demanded Tony, with renewed squirming.

"Oh my God. Tony, do you even have underpants-- oh!" Steve became distracted when Tiberius handed him the pen and paper. Steve immediately began scribbling something.

Fortunately, Tony did have shorts on underneath his trousers (red silk boxer-briefs), and once his pants were (finally) off, Steve had finished drawing.

"Look!" Steve turned the sketchbook around to show Tiberius a portrait of himself. "See?" His blue eyes were a little glazed over. "Friends draw each other."

He was still in a lot of clothes and terribly hot. Steve was trembling with a strange sort of excitement. He handed the sketchbook to Ty, clearly desperate for him to take it.

Tiberius took the sketchbook and looked down; his eyes widened a little. "Steve... you're actually... rather good. This is great. Can I keep this?" He looked up. Steve was beaming. Tony had his arms around him and was humping his leg insistently. "...you should probably take your first pill, Steve," he added. He offered Steve a small blue pill and the glass of water.

Tony nosed behind Steve's ears, seeking out his scent glands instinctively, nibbling his neck. "Omega," he said with delight.

"Gleason said one of these every hour and then ten of the white ones every twelve... dear Lord, that's a lot..."

"Omega."

"...I suppose if it works..."

"Of course!"

Steve took the pill and downed the whole glass of water. He nearly dropped the glass but Tiberius
caught it in time. He shivered a little at the graze of teeth near that sensitive spot on his neck. Steve swallowed.

"Omega!" Tony shoved a hand beneath the waistband of Steve's sweatpants, writhing against him, lapping at his neck.

Tiberius looked up at the ceiling, suddenly fascinated by it.

Steve squeaked when Tony shoved a hand into his pants.

"So, I'll see you in an hour then?"

"Yep," Tiberius said. He turned on his heel and walked out.

The minute he was gone Steve was pushing his pants down. He was soaking between his legs, quivering with a hot and a familiar sort of need. He thought about the fact that Wanda and Pietro had tried to kill Tony again, take away the source of Steve's happiness... but then a hand pushing up his shirt distracted him.

Steve tossed his shirt on the floor and then flopped down on the bed, spreading his legs wide and tugging Tony up between his thighs.

"Come on. Come on Alpha. You know where you belong. Come on."

Tony climbed clumsily over Steve, eager to get inside him, turning the phrase where you belong over and over in his head. There was no foreplay and no preparation; Tony pushed himself into Steve's wet, inviting entrance with a groan of satisfaction, finally getting exactly what he wanted. He settled down on top of Steve, still woozy but compelled to pump his omega full of his seed. Within only a few minutes, Steve was wet and stretched enough to take the knot. Both of them relaxed a little with the fulfillment. Steve was only in preheat still, but in a matter of hours his heat would be full-blown and then the two of them would both be out of their minds for days.

"Such a good fit," mumbled Tony against Steve's throat, rolling his hips lazily. "Feels so good... my good omega..." He sighed contentedly.

At least at the beginning, it was always nice. No doubt within a few days both of them would be exhausted and sore and feel gross and want it to be over. But at least for now, Tony was feeling deliciously high and sinfully aroused, and the way Steve's body gripped him was heavenly.

"T-Tony... ah-- ah...yeah. Fuck. Oh fuck." Steve threw his head back, his eyes rolling back as Tony's knot stretched inside of him. He clenched around his dick greedily, his arms curled around Tony's shoulders as he fucked into him in good, thorough thrusts. "I need it. Please. Please, come on. You gotta-- you gotta..." He was breathless, panting and trembling underneath him. Steve's legs came up to curl around Tony, the heels pressing into the small of his back only during him in deeper.

When Tony came inside of him Steve did too, without being touched. He cried out and threw his head back, rocking his hips down in languid motions to milk Tony's cock inside of him.

"Perfect," echoed Tony, nuzzling Steve, rolling his head with the motion of Steve's pets.

They remained knotted for a half-hour; by the time Tony's knot had subsided enough to pull out, he was able to get erect again, and the he went right back to pounding Steve into the mattress.
They came again together, Steve's cum coating both of their stomachs as well as the sheets, but neither one could be bothered to care much. By evening Steve was firmly and undeniably in heat, and greedily begging for more, even as Tony bit his neck and stroked his cock and filled him up, even after Tony doubted he had anything left to give.

Tiberius slipped in and out like a ghost, pushing pills into Steve's mouth and occasionally offering them water when they were between orgasms.

Sometime after midnight, with a tentative knock, he peeked in. Tony was lying sprawled on top of Steve, shiny with sweat, not moving, his knot buried into Steve.

"I brought you some food," said Tiberius.

Tony grunted weakly.

"Just some fruit and bread, you know, light... I'll just leave it here. Steve, you should eat. Those pills on an empty stomach'll make you ill."

Tony grunted again in response, waving a hand weakly at Tiberius. It was unclear if he was shooing him away or thanking him. Tony's breathing was heavy; Steve was thrusting up slowly, occasionally. Tony had learned from the last heat that after about 24 hours he was nothing but a dildo for Steve's insatiable appetite. Normally he'd be okay with that idea, except that it was literally physically taxing on him. And the reminder of their age difference was somewhat unsettling, too.

"You need anything else?"

"An old priest. And a young priest," said Tony, turned his head. His hair, soaked in sweat, was plastered against his head. "Bring me someone to read me my last rites..."

"You never struck me as a religious man," said Tiberius.

"I'm not. Bring me someone to read me Maxwell's dirty limericks, then."

Tiberius laughed lightly. "Have fun, you two. Let me know if you need anything else."

Steve was only semi-aware of his surroundings. All he was really focused on was Tony, and Tony being inside of him. Every moment he could he got on top of Tony or coaxed the Alpha between his legs. He ate a few pieces of food via Tiberius's instruction but really, he was only interested in one thing.

The first day was a blur of Tony, pills and occasional slices of fruit Steve had managed to swallow. They slept deeply the first night, making it a whole eight hours before Steve woke up and made to sit on Tony's erection, waking him up too. The second day was harder. They were both sore and physically tired. Steve kept dozing off through out the day and waking up to find Tiberius had left him a little bucket of ice chips. Ty was nice like that.

On the third day Steve woke up with Tony inside of him, their sticky bodies pressed together on equally gross sheets. And fuck, he really needed a piss. With a little wiggle Steve slipped off him, kissing Tony's cheek at his noise of protest before he reached for the light switch. The blackout curtains meant it was always very dark in their bedroom. But Steve knew the layout well and wobbled into the bathroom easily before reaching for the light switch--

He clicked it. Nothing happened.

Steve frowned. "JARVIS? Are the lights not working?"
"They are, Captain Rogers."

"Oh, no," Steve whispered. "Not this again."

Despite wanting to panic, Steve still made it to the toilet. He was pretty sure he managed to pee in the bowl but it was hard when he couldn't actually see it. He made a mental note to leave Tony's maids a nice tip.

With his hand on the wall he made his way out without into anything. Steve was tempted to call for Ty but he couldn't really do anything about it, and Steve didn't want to scare him.

He was halfway through the room, heading back to bed, when his sight returned to him in an instant. Steve almost doubled over from shock, his eyes blinking wearily at the bright light that bled in from the bathroom.

"Goddammit," Steve muttered. He saw Tony on the bed and felt a renewed sense of need. He should really, probably be worried about this, the odd episodes of blindness during his heat, but right now all Steve wanted to do was straddle his mate.

Steve crawled into the bed and nuzzled at the side of his neck. "Tooo-nnyyyy," he murmured, drawing out his name. Then he bit down on the shell of his ear softly. "I need you."

Tony's eyes snapped opened immediately. His movements were fluid and instantaneously; he grabbed Steve's hips and pulled him into the bed, and rolled onto his back to position himself.

He leaned down and sank his teeth into the back of Steve's neck. He'd done it probably a half-dozen times, mating Steve the proper way, his teeth fitting comfortably and naturally into their mark. Like any omega, Steve's mark became prominent during his heat because of his mate biting on it over and over; it would be open and fresh by the time his heat was over.

This time was different.

Tony bit; immediately, he tasted something sharp, astringent, and bitter.

He yanked away like he'd been burned. Steve's pheromones were pleading to be mated, but the gland on his neck was more discerning, and it had made a very clear decision on Steve's behalf: not you.

Tony spat on the floor, pushing Steve away. "It's-- pbth -- I'm sorry, it's so bitter-- pbth -- oh, God, it's so bitter." He grabbed a corner of the sheets and dragged his tongue over it, desperate to get the taste out of his mouth.

No. No. No...

This couldn't be happening. Not again. Steve curled up naked on the bed, arms wrapped around his legs with wide, fearful eyes. He watched Tony spit onto the sheets, pulling a face at the awful taste. Why wasn't this working? Wasn't Steve being good anymore? Did he screw up?

He'd thought they'd fixed it.

He felt betrayed and dirty, like his gland was betraying him.

"Sirs," said JARVIS suddenly. "Excuse my interruption of your carnal--"

"Cut to the chase, bot," snapped Tony.
"--Agent Hill is on the line for Captain Rogers."

"But we're in heat!" said Tony, his speech a little garbled, as he was still trying to wipe off his tongue. It wasn't working. The taste refused to budge.

"Yes. It concerns Captain Rogers' heat and some new SHIELD intelligence."

"Fuck," said Tony.

"Nice to speak to you too," Maria replied dryly, having heard Tony swear. She sounded tired, like she hadn't slept since they'd taken in Wanda and Pietro. "Steve, there's something I should tell you. Phil wasn't sure but..."

"What-- what is it? Is this about Wanda and Pietro? Are they gonna be okay?"

"We're not going to hurt them," Maria said, sounding a little perturbed. "But no, this isn't about that."

...Steve knew that meant this was about Bucky.

"It occurred to me something might be up, when your eyesight went and you said you were cold... so I checked up with the doctors. And really, it's quite remarkable. This has never happened before."

"Just tell me!" Steve said, hands fisting in his hair.

"The Winter Soldier has woken up in cryo for some unknown reason. This has never happened before. It's kind of a scientific miracle."

Steve sucked in a breath and curled his arms tighter around himself. A lump formed in his throat. He was pretty sure he was going to cry.

*Why did you turn off all the lights?*  
*Why did you leave me here?*  
*Did I do something wrong?*

He could still remember seeing a pane of glass in the darkness, his breath steaming it up. Steve had seen the *inside* of Bucky's cryo tube. He'd felt Bucky, his emotions, his fears. His confusion and his loneliness. He'd seen inside his cryo tube, the sarcophagus where Bucky was being held because there was no one else to put him.

"S-so are you telling me that every time I have a heat, Bucky is going to wake up?" Wake up disoriented, alone, and scared.

"Until they find a solution that isn't cryo sleep, yes, probably."

Steve stared straight ahead at the wall in front of him. And then he said, abruptly: "I'm getting sterilized."

No heats. No problem. Right? Fuck having children; Steve couldn't do this to Bucky two times a--

"...weah, Steve, you can't do that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you technically signed away your right to do that. You need permission from SHIELD."
Which they won't give you."

Steve felt cold inside. Of course, when he'd signed his rights away all those years ago, he hadn't been thinking about stuff like that. It made no real difference to Steve who owned his reproductive organs, so long as he got to fight the good fight. He would have signed away his very soul to be part of Project Rebirth; everything he'd done was to become a soldier. He'd gotten his wish.

It had never occurred to him that documents he'd signed back in the forties would still have any bearing in the 21st century.

"Why not?!" Steve demanded, sounding upset now.

Maria sighed, quietly. "You know why, Steve..."

"I'm so done with you people! JARVIS. Hang up!"

"Steve, wait--"

Steve flopped down on the bed, curling in on himself impossibly further, his head tucked against his knees.

A childish yet whimsical thought passed through his mind. Steve suddenly ached for his mother, a woman over 75 years dead... but least she would know what to do. And that, in some strange way, was a comforting thought.

Tony stared at Steve, a mass of emotions roiling inside of him.

Steve's body wanted his other Alpha. His more powerful, dominant Alpha. Bucky, even-attuned to Steve, had woken up because of Steve's heat.

Tony felt small and sick and useless.

And more than a bit angry. Steve had jumped to sterilization without even consulting him. Tony had wanted that, earlier, and Steve had fucking vetoed it... oh, but if it was for Bucky, that was different, huh?

Tony sat on the edge of the bed, unable to comfort Steve properly. He put a hand on his shoulder but that was it. He couldn't fucking believe this.

There was a tentative knock at the door and Tiberius poked in. "Hi, pill time." He looked at Steve's curled body, at Tony's sour face and slouched shoulders. "...is everything okay? What's wrong?" he asked.

"Steve wants his other Alpha," said Tony, unable to keep the snarl from his voice. His dander spiked. "Fortunately, it turns out the real owner of Steve's uterus was the United States government all along. So it doesn't matter what I want because that's between Steve, Bucky, and Uncle Sam."

Tiberius looked both alarmed and confused, but he approached the bed and sat delicately beside Tony. His smell was almost-- almost-- masked by the stink of sex and sweat in the room. Tony felt, suddenly, like he had a newfound appreciation for Tiberius's hormones; they smelled the way Steve's gland tasted.

"Steve," said Tiberius, gently. He reached over and touched Steve lightly; Steve's body shuddered involuntarily. "You're nearly through your heat. Only one or two days to go. Right now you're very sensitive... I'm sure both of you will feel better when this is over."
"Steve'll still be bonded to Bucky," snapped Tony.

"Tony, he's chosen you, he's here with you, what more do you--" began Tiberius with exasperation. He paused. Tony's hackles were still up and there was a shiny pink mark on the back of his neck.

Tony realized, too late, what Tiberius was looking at. He reached up to smooth down the hair on the back of his head and neck. "...lab accident," he said, a little too quickly.

"He wants what I can't give him," Steve whispered, sounding miserable as he pushed his hands over his face. He sniffed, wanting to be stronger than this. But in that moment he just felt overwhelmed with guilt. He felt sick with it.

"I'm a bad person," he said, abruptly, and then started crying. It was a silent sort of crying that made Steve's shoulders shake. He wanted to be small. He wanted to be able to curl under the sheets and hide. But he was big and he was bulky and there was no fucking hiding for Steve. He was stuck here. He couldn't go back; the serum was permanent.

"No. No, Steve--" Tiberius patted his arm. "That's not true. You love Tony so much; I can see it, and you've been so good for him."

"But it's not good enough!" Steve snapped and batted Tiberius' hand away suddenly. "Don't you get it?! It's not good enough! I'm supposed to be a role model, I'm supposed to help omegas to take control over their own lives, but I don't even have a fucking say in mine. I'm a goddamn joke. I'm a hypocrite."

"Steve, in a week's time you're going to save over a thousand kids. You're not a joke. You're serious business. Once your heat is over, you two will see what you can achieve together. And it's going to be incredible."

Steve stared down at the sheets, his eyes a little red around the edges. Tiberius sighed.

"It's not your fault you were force-bonded Steve. And it's not yours either Tony. It's only one person's fault--"

"HYDRA's," Steve whispered, hands curling into fists.

"You mustn't let them get between you two. I know it must be hard, and white I don't really know anything about this... 'HYDRA', I'm sure they want to drive you two apart. You can't let them win."

"They were bonded before," said Tony suddenly. "That's why Bucky did it, isn't it? He didn't rape Steve. He bonded him, and the reason why is that he already had a claim. Because they were already bonded. Everyone keeps talking about Steve being force-bonded. But it was his old mate. Bucky was just... reclaiming him."

Tiberius's face was unreadable. "Oh," he said. He considered this. "Well. What matters now is what's happening now. You two love each other. You're bonded. And... and Steve's old mate is being kept safe, yes?"

"SHIELD has him," said Tony. "...they probably noticed he was awake when they were stuffing the Wonder Twins into some black site jail cell a million miles underground."

Tiberius winced a little. "I think you should both just take a nap. It's difficult to think rationally when you're in heat. Here, Steve, take your pill..." Tiberius offered Steve a pill and a glass of water. "This will all be better soon, once you come out of heat."
"...Bucky did it because that Russian man told him to, not because he wanted to," Steve disagreed and then realised how stupid that had sounded. But he genuinely believed that if he hadn't been sent into preheat, and that if Bucky had been his own mind, that he wouldn't have done it. Sometimes Steve wondered if Bucky had asked before he...

But Steve couldn't remember. He could always ask Sam, but he was afraid of the answer.

With a shaky hand he took the pill and swallowed it dry, not wanting to sit back up.

Tony looked up, eyes watery. "I can't even mate him right. His neck tastes bad again. It's like Russian roulette with this guy's gland... half the time it's perfect and half the time it's like biting into a fuckin' aloe plant."

Tiberius smiled sadly. "I know what it's like to have an unpalatable neck, believe me. Just mate him without biting him, Tony. Take him from the front, look into his eyes. Relax. Steve chose you. The gland doesn't have a brain. Just ignore it."

Tony huffed, reaching out and thread his fingers through Steve's hair. "I'd like one heat that didn't involve Bucky and nearly being killed."

"Well... you have the rest of your lives for that," said Tiberius. Tony nodded miserably.

Tony's fingers felt good in Steve's hair; they felt grounding. Instantly, Steve was calmer. He sniffed, rubbing a hand over his nose. It was time to pull himself together.

"Just remember, Steve. It's not your fault," Tiberius said, trying and failing to meet the other omega's eyes before standing up. There was a strange weight in Ty's chest; he felt an odd sense of sadness for them, but there was also nothing he could do about it. He hovered by the door a moment, his fingers curled around the edge of it. And then he slipped back out, closing the door softly behind him.

Steve exhaled shakily. "Please don't hate me, Tony."

Tony let out a long, slow breath. "...I don't," he said grudgingly. He pulled himself onto the bed and lay down next to Steve, then laughed sadly. "I still want to mate. Even through this total shit-show, I'm hard as diamonds. Heats are so fucking stupid." He pulled Steve against him, one arm around him and the other hand still gripping his hair. He rubbed himself against Steve's thigh, just for some relief.

"...Steve, about Bucky... I'm sure... look, he's fine. They can sedate him and... and he's too far gone to know what's happening anyway," offered Tony awkwardly. "He'll go back to sleep when this is over and probably not even remember. Let's just get through this, okay? I won't... I won't leave you again. You mean too much to me."

He kissed Steve on the temple.

Steve closed his eyes as Tony curled around him. "I'm just sick of hurting people I care about," he murmured. Tony deserved better. Bucky deserved better. Steve would always be failing both of them, both his Alphas. He would never be good enough for both, or either. Life was being cruel to him. There was constantly going to be a sense of expectation in Steve that he could never fulfil.

He let out a shuddering breath. "Okay," Steve whispered. He rolled onto his front and then slid down between Tony's legs, taking his erection into his mouth. Steve sank all the way down to the hilt straight away before drawing back to tease at the head with his tongue. He was well practiced at this by now; he knew what made Tony squirm and what made him moan.
Right now he just really wanted to get his Alpha off. Steve wanted to prove he was good at this. He was a good omega. He really was.

Tony tilted his head back, closing his eyes and gripping the sheets as Steve went down on him. "O-oh... oh... yeah..." He arched upwards, moaning appreciatively as Steve licking the head, ran his lips over the knot, teased up the underside. His deep sense of annoyance and inadequacy because of Steve's other Alpha evaporated with Steve's ministrations, the smell of Steve's pheromones and the sensations of his tongue. "All for you... all for my omega..." said Tony, straining. "Take... take it, omega... good boy... my little cumslut... sweet omega..." He gave a half-cry, half-whine as he came undone beneath Steve, weakly twitching. Three days of sex had left him drained in every sense of the word, and his ejaculations were small and painful, his body desperate for a break.

Only a few more days. Two at most, probably.

"Gaaad," sighed Tony, both hands gripping Steve's hair, holding his mouth down over his cock. "God, Steve, you suck cock so good..." He gave a shuddery sigh. "We're nearly through it," he added, more for his own benefit than Steve's.

Steve swallowed Tony down with a hum, a strange thrill trembling down his spine as Tony held him there with his spent cock in Steve's mouth. He stayed there, determined to be good for Tony. When his Alpha's fingers eased away Steve slipped off, nuzzling against Tony's thigh before he straightened back up.

Steve was wet and shiny between his thighs again, his dick half-hard against his thigh. But he made no move to touch himself just yet. He was quite happy just to observe Tony all blissed out on the bed in that moment. He also looked tired and Steve knew that everything had to be sore at this point. Not that it wasn't for Steve too, but the serum certainly helped him.

"You know..." Steve flopped down on the bed next to Tony. He pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "If you're, um... getting tired, there are toys we can use instead."

Tony smiled sleepily. "...how did Captain America end up with toys?" He assumed Steve meant dildos. Tony had a wide variety of toys at his disposal, as well. After all, he was rich and led an opulent lifestyle. But many of his toys-- the floggers, the handcuffs-- had lost their appeal after Afghanistan.

"Captain America lived alone for over six months and discovered that sex toys were a lot more widely available than they used to be," Steve told him with a soft kind of smirk playing at his features. "The serum makes me horny. Can't help it." He leaned down to steal a quick kiss, sucking at Tony's bottom lip briefly. Suddenly they felt okay again, intimate, like nothing could burst their bubble. Heats heightened emotions but also made them fleeting and volatile. Steve could go from crying to laughing to feeling furious in a matter of minutes. He hated how heats twisted his brain up.

"...if you want me to fuck you with a toy, I will," said Tony. "Bring me the biggest rubber cock you have, Captain." He grinned lazily. "And I'm not tired, but you did just... I'll be ready to go again in thirty or forty minutes, okay?" Tony didn't want Steve to think he was losing his edge.

But the fact remained that Tony had trouble keeping up with Steve's heats. A five-day, continuous fuckfest was something that was a bit much, even for him.

"I know. I couldn't help myself," Steve said, a mischievous kind of glint in his eyes before he slipped away off the bed before he headed into their walk-in-wardrobe. He returned which a box, which he deposited on the bed before opening. There wasn't a huge range. A couple of dildos and a vibrator (one of which Clint had bought him. Steve had turned bright red, embarrassed; Clint had reassured
them that, omega-to-omega, he would not tell anyone Steve was using toys).

Steve pushed the box towards him. "You choose."

Tony burst into giggles at the sight of Steve's box. "Oh my God. This is so cute." He picked up a large silicon penis and wiggled it at Steve. "...they're all knotted," he observed with a small smirk. "You wanted Alpha cock." He examined the dildo in his hand. It had to be about eight and a half or nine inches. "...dear Lord. This thing is ridiculous." He looked at the other dildo in the box. It was even bigger, girth-wise. "Are you insane, Steve? ...you're gonna give me a complex. Bend over," he added, still holding the one he had been earlier. "I want to see you take this whole thing. I want to knot you with it and then jack you off." He laughed, running a hand over Steve's thigh.

For now, at least, Bucky was off their minds, and they were more than halfway through Steve's heat. Armed with a dildo that put his own cock to shame, Tony was pretty sure he'd make it through this. He gave Steve a push and Steve flopped readily down, as compliant as ever. Tony pointed the dildo at him. "You want this?"

Steve burst out laughing and rolled onto his side. "O-okay...sorry. Just. You pointing a dildo at my face is pretty funny," he said, grinning. It was hard to take Tony seriously with a bright pink dildo in his hand. He was glad they were laughing again. Laughing meant they were okay, or that they were gonna be okay. That's how Steve saw it, anyway.

"Why would you ever not have a knotted one? That doesn't even make any sense," Steve mumbled, turning a very pretty shade of pink. He rolled back onto his back and tried to pull a serious face. He failed. He couldn't stop smiling. Steve giggled, cheeks rosy and blue eyes right.

"Well, maybe you'd want a beta cock, I don't know. Do you want this huge dick or not, Steve?"

"Yeah," he said, trying to sound sexy but repressing a laugh only just. "I want that."

"Hips up," commanded Tony. He ran his tongue over the silicon to moisten it, not that it was really necessary, and then gently put a hand on Steve's thigh to spread his legs. He nudged against Steve's entrance with the head of the toy; Steve wriggled sweetly, expectantly. Tony's mouth watered as he pushed it into Steve, watching the length disappear into Steve's glistening hole.

"...oh, man," breathed Tony quietly, slowly moving the toy in and out. It came out wet; Steve whimpered above him. "Hold on, baby... hold on, I'll get you your knot soon..." He didn't want to just shove it in. Besides, it was so much fun to watch Steve squirm.

It felt different than Tony (duh) but not necessarily in an unpleasant way. It wasn't his Alpha, so it wasn't quite as satisfying, but it did feel goddamn good. It was longer, thicker and its smooth surface was oddly pleasing in its own way. Steve let out a stuttered breath as Tony moved it inside of him, his hands fishing in the sheets as he moaned.

Tony pressed the base of the knot against Steve and Steve whimpered again, angling himself to take it. Tony pushed; it resisted.

He leaned down and began licking the knot and Steve's entrance; above him he could hear Steve making a series of undignified noises of pleasure. He drew back (Steve's balls brushed his face) and gave it another push. Slowly, achingly, he could feel Steve's body giving, the knot easing into him.

When Tony began licking at him, mouthing at where he was stretched over the toy, Steve cried out, his whole body going tense as he trembled with a sweet kind of pleasure. "Fuck. Tony. Ooh my God. Fuck, yes, fuck--" When Tony pressed the knot in, too, Steve practically wailed, his cock
hard and leaking against his abdomen. He whimpered loudly, his blue eyes glazed over and focused on nothing. Steve rocked back on the toy with small undulations of his hips. "A-alpha...please..."

"Oh, good boy," praised Tony, who could see how taut Steve's muscles were. "Good boy, taking it all in for your Alpha...yes...just like that...the whole thing, Steve. Let me fill you up. Let me see you take this whole dick, just for me..."

There was a knock on the door.

Tony blinked. It couldn't have already been an hour?

He looked down at Steve. Steve was hard as a rock; Tony was half-hard himself, still pushing the dildo into Steve. Oh God, what the fuck was wrong with him.

Tiberius poked his head in and immediately looked up at the ceiling. "Sorry. Pill, Steve," he said.

Tiberius might have spoken but Steve did not, could not, goddamn hear him. He wasn't aware of anything that wasn't Tony or the dildo in his ass and he wasn't going to stop rocking into it either.

Steve needed release so badly; he felt so full...

"Tony," he whined, throwing his head back. "Please."

Tony practically purred at seeing Steve plugged up, writhing against the sheets, his cock arched over his stomach. "Yeah...good omega...good boy..."

"Glad you two worked it out," said Tiberius, inching in. He grabbed the bottle of pills, opened it, fished one out, and hooked a finger into Steve's mouth. "Swallow," he commanded, popping the pill in. Steve's eyes were glazed over like a man on drugs.

"Steve, please...please..." Tony rutted the toy into Steve; Steve whimpered, then coughed, probably due to the pill in his throat.

Tiberius disappeared like a ghost; Tony had already gone between Steve's legs and was sucking on his dick, licking at him eagerly, one hand moving the toy inside of him.

Steve swallowed the pill. In that moment he would have done about anything anyone asked of him. He was too far gone to even feel embarrassed at Tiberius seeing him like this. God, he didn't have a care in the world. Heats were funny like that.

The moment Tony's mouth was on him Steve arched up. "Shit, Tony!...not gonna last like this. Oh-oh G-God..." Steve's eyes rolled back in his head and he stiffened, clenching around the toy before he came into Tony's mouth. He rode out his orgasm with small thrusts of his hips.

Tony swallowed eagerly, gulping, drinking. Maybe if Steve weren't in heat he would have been more embarrassed but he'd forgotten everything except for his immediate desire to please his omega.

"Ah... Alpha." Steve trembled, slumping down on the sheets. "Mhm. Thank you..."

Tony drew away, licking Steve's cock clean, the large silicon toy still firmly buried into his mate.

He looked up; he was turned on again, wanted to fuck Steve again, but also liked Steve like this, filled up, stretched out impossibly with the--

"Keep it in." Tony's voice came out rough, a growl. He was still rocking into Steve's thigh, rubbing his erection against Steve's slick, pale skin. "Steve I-- I want a threesome. I wanna see you with
another person. An omega, or a woman. I won't touch them, I just-- I want-- I want you to be a slut for me." Tony felt like he was going slightly insane. "I want to suck you off again." Where the hell was any of this coming from? "You can call me Bucky if you want."

Jesus Christ. Tony realized as he was saying it that Steve was having another burst of pheromones. Heats ebbed and flowed; at times, Steve was (almost) rational, and others, he was doubled over with cramps, begging to be fucked.

The reason for their abrupt reconciliation following that call from Maria was apparent now. Steve's body was dumping pheromones into the air and Tony was an insatiable, lustful mess.

Even knowing that, Tony didn't have the wherewithall to keep himself from leaning down again and lapping longingly at Steve's flaccid cock. "Please... omega... omega..." Tony was desperate. Fuck. These were the worst moments, the ones where nothing was ever quite enough.

Steve trembled, whining and shaking as Tony licked at his sensitive cock.

The thought of being with a woman did make Steve curious. But he was only really attracted to Alphas and he was pretty sure that Tony couldn't deal with another Alpha in the bed--

Steve's eyes flew open when Tony said he could call him Bucky. Fuck. What the actual fuck? Where the hell had that come from?

Steve squirmed as Tony ducked down to mouth at his cock again. His thoughts going offline again. Even though he had had the serum, he couldn't get hard quite that quickly, not considering how many times he'd already come undone in the past few days.

"T-Tony...please. I-I..." Steve was shaking, his fingers digging into the sheets. "You gotta...you gotta do something. I c-can't--"

"F-fuck, sorry--" gasped Tony, reaching down to jack himself off. He lay his head on Steve's stomach, staring greedily at the flaccid penis lying across his stomach. "Fuck these heats-- fuck 'em-- let me cum on your face--" He groaned in frustration. He hated the feeling of not being in control, of being such a sad, gooey, organic, sex-driven mess. Tony had always had sex on his own terms and also felt superior in his intelligence.

When Steve was in heat, that all flew out the window.

"Please, I wanna cum on Captain America's face, I wanna do it while you're all knotted up for me--" Tony was literally panting. "I want Tiberius to watch, I want to fuck your mouth, I want you to call me by your other Alpha's name--" Tony was discovering a lot of weird desires he wasn't consciously aware he had. At least he hadn't mentioned-- "I wanna call you Pepper, I want you to put one of your dildos in me--"

Welp, couldn't get worse than that, at least.

During their last heat, they'd ended it with a mutual understanding not to mention anything that had happened. Not that they didn't have regular, aggressive, dirty sex. It was just that during heat, it cranked everything up to 11.

Steve laughed breathlessly, knowing this was one of the moments they would never speak of again.

He slid down the bed as Tony crawled up, his knees just slotted above the dip of Steve's shoulders as he continued to jack off on top of him. "Do it. Fucking cum on me Tony. I want you to," he panted, his entrance twitching around the toy inside of him. Fuck. He felt so fucking full. "Do it. Do it!"
Tony barely managed to straddle Steve's chest before cumming all over his face.

Steve's mind slowly began to register what Tony had just said, about being called Bucky, about calling him Pepper. During his heats Steve laughed at everything and nothing. He would start giggling from eating a banana, or because he was taking a piss. Anything could set him off really. And Tony just had. The moment he came on Steve's face, he started laughing so hard he began wheezing.

Steve tapped Tony's thigh playfully. "Oh. Oh my God. Fuck. Sorry. I just... I started thinking about Bucky and Pepper--" And then he was off, laughing again, tears in his eyes. "She would eat him alive. Ha."

Tony, who almost never blushed, turned red and began laughing too. "Oh-- oh my God. I didn't mean-- I meant-- oh, fuck, man." He bit his lip. Steve's laughter was contagious. He flopped down beside Steve, who was crying with laughter, shaking with uncontrollable giggling. Tony was laughing too, a bit more nervously, uncomfortable with all the things he'd said.

But he knew he could trust Steve.

Besides, Steve hardly had the upper hand. He was covered in ejaculate and had a nine-inch dildo shoved up his ass.

"I love you, Steve," said Tony, kissing the corner of Steve's mouth, trying not to get a taste of his own spunk. Steve was still red with laughter. "...happy second heat together," he added, closing his eyes. His body was shutting down, at least for an hour or two. He knew he'd wake up later, ready to go again... but for now, at least, he was satisfied.

Steve grabbed the corner of the sheet and wiped the spent off of his face with a small grimace. He leaned his head against Tony's shoulder as he began to settle down. He hummed contently and then pressed a kiss to the skin there. "Love you too," he murmured, letting his eyes slip shut. Steve didn't want to sleep that much, but he knew Tony was drifting off, so he might as well catch some sleep whilst he could.

His dreams were confusing, nonsensical and incoherent. Steve woke up feeling restless hours later, his dick hard against his thigh and his body sweating. Fuck. Steve rolled over onto his back and felt the dildo inside of him. Oh, hello. He grunted and looked over to see Tony still asleep.

Then he heard a knock and quickly pulled the sheet over himself before Tiberius walked in with a glass of water. "Pill time," he said. It was time for Steve to take the twelve white along with the blue. He gave them all to Steve on a little plate along with the water.

"So, everything okay now?"

"Better," Steve said. I have a dildo up my ass, went unsaid. It felt pretty great. He kind of hoped Ty left soon so he could do something about it.

He went about taking all the pills. It took him a while.

"So... are you attracted to omegas?" Steve asked, suddenly curious.

"Me?" said Tiberius, and laughed. "No. Not especially. I like Alphas. Well... being an omega myself, you know. I always imagined myself with a male Alpha, a big strong one. They... ah, they tried to fix that in the camp." He looked down a little, then up. "Didn't work. Well. That's what toys are for, right?" He forced a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes, then added, "I know what you're wondering. Why I don't just get with someone who's non-statused. But it's not the same. Male betas
don't have knots, and female betas just... don't satisfy me. I want someone to fill me up. You know the feeling. But of course I'm..." He opened his arms in a helpless gesture, then reached over to pour Steve another glass of water. Steve was dutifully trying to choke down pill after pill.

"I know the feeling," Steve squeaked, turning a little pink. "Well, it took me over seventy years to get laid. So you've got that record to beat," he tried to joke. Tiberius laughed quietly and it was a deep sound. Steve smiled faintly. It was nice to see him laugh. He felt so very sorry for Ty. He couldn't imagine people avoiding you like the plague because of your smell. Steve knew it was like to be ignored, patronized... but when he was small no ever purposely tried to ignore him.

"I'm just happy what we'll be doing next week. And happy that you'll be able to do it with us, Steve," said Tiberius, patting Steve's wrist.

Tony was still asleep, splayed on his back with an arm slung over his chest, the arc reactor peeking out. His mouth was hanging open inelegantly and he was snoring slightly. The sheets had long since been kicked off and Tony was sporting a partial erection, though the knot wasn't especially visible yet; only a hint of its outline was present. Tiberius was pointedly keeping his eyes on Steve's instead of looking down.

"So am I. I was thinking of wearing the Cap uniform; would that be weird? I just, maybe the kids..."

"I think that's a brilliant idea Steve," Tiberius told him. "Here, I brought you two some snacks. Make sure you eat. That's a lot of medication. I'll, ah... leave you two to it. "I'll see you in an hour."

Steve devoured about five cereal bars (courtesy of Ty) and then began prodding Tony's arm impatiently to make him wake up.

"Too-nnyyy?" Steve nuzzled against his cheek, getting onto all fours. His eyes widened as the dildo moved inside of him. His Alpha still didn't wake up. He looked at the door Tiberius just had left out of it and then shook the intrusive thought away before he slumped back down on the bed and sneaked a hand down between his legs. "If you want something done right..." he mumbled, fixing his fingers around the base.

Then his vision fuzzed at the edges again. "Oh no. Don't you dare. Don't you--"

Steve moved to sit up and then promptly fell off the bed, into darkness. He groaned. "Fuck you," he mumbled, to no one in particular. Well, mostly to Bucky, but he couldn't exactly hear him.

"Полковник карпов?" The soldier's voice was muffled.

It was not designed for rational thought. It was designed to carry out orders. Yet there were no orders and nothing in his immediate surroundings were of use to him.

He was in a small, confined space and it was very cold. Bitterly, bitingly cold. He couldn't really see anything or even turn. He was standing but leaning back slightly. He had an erection, which was distracting and annoying.

He tried to feel the edges of his cell, but they were smooth. There was no handle. No way out.

A strange memory bubbled up in his mind, of being tied down. Of someone taking his arm and stabbing it, injecting fire into his veins. Of the all-encompassing agony that followed.

His left arm flared up with an intense itch that he couldn't move to scratch.
This was all wrong. The soldier was not a person. He was an it, a thing, a weapon. He should not have itching. Itching was a distraction from his glorious purpose, which was to serve his handler.

What had he said back then, when he was lying prone on the table, helpless? He'd said something, something he was supposed to remember. He didn't know why he was to remember it, but he knew it was important.

"Barnes," he said, voice falling flat in the tiny space. "James Buchanan. Sergeant. Three... two... five... five... seven..."

Perhaps, he supposed, Barnes was his next target. He would keep repeating it until they let him loose. Until his dear handler came for him. And wouldn't Karpov be proud of him, for already knowing the next mission, the next target... Barnes, James Buchanan.

-Thumps weren't uncommon from Steve and Tony's bedroom, but some sense of intuition told Tiberius that this wasn't a regular thump.

He knocked before entering.

Tony was still splayed out, naked and snoring.

Steve was lying on the floor, eyes glazed, shivering.

Tiberius strode over and grabbed a blanket off the bed to wrap around him. Not that modesty mattered much during heats, but still, it was difficult to comfort a man with a pink dildo up his ass and a very impressive erection.

"Steve? Steve, are you alright?" He waved a hand in front of Steve's eyes. They were unseeing.

Another episode.

Tiberius shifted Steve into his lap. The only thing to do was to let it pass, he supposed. It was only because of Steve's heat that he was having these momentarily flashes into Bucky's mind. They couldn't be pleasant, though. Steve's skin was clammy as if he were ill. Steve mumbled something in Russian.

"I don't speak Russian. English, please," said Tiberius patiently, rubbing Steve's arms in an attempt to warm him up; his body had chilled and seemed unaware of its balmy surroundings.

Steve was dully aware of his head being moved to lean against Tiberius' thigh. He was cold and shaky and his left arm throbbed like nothing else. Maybe it had gotten too cold. Maybe it was going to fall off. Oh no. He didn't want to lose his arm. No. That wasn't fair. Steve swallowed down a lump in his throat.

"He's never going to forgive me," Steve whispered. It didn't matter if Tiberius understood him, not really. It just felt good to say it.

"Surely he should be the one worrying about that," Tiberius pointed out. "He did... well, you know."

"...could never stay mad at Buck for long. Not even when he bought girls home. Too goddamn charming."

Tiberius frowned. "So you were pair-bonded, but you never...?"

"Nope."
“Hm, interesting.”

“I can assure you, it was pretty maddening at the time. I wanted him to breed me. I wanted it so bad.”

Tiberius hummed. “I can imagine.”

Steve sniffed, still shivering.

He still couldn’t see; everything was black. Tiberius's voice was grounding, though.

Eventually, Steve somehow fell back to sleep there on the floor with Ty running a hand up and down his arm. With a large huff Tiberius managed to lift him back onto the bed and rolled him over to Tony's side. Steve was still shivering a little, but sleeping off the blindness seemed to be the best way to deal with it.

Tiberius had nearly thrown out his back getting Steve back into the bed, but he managed.

He huffed, taking a moment to regain his composure.

He suddenly saw a brown eye staring at him.

“What’re you doing?”

“...just putting your omega back to bed. He had a bad dream,” said Tiberius with forced lightness.

Tony frowned a little. He wasn't stupid. He suspected Tiberius was lying. But he had no proof.

Tiberius ghosted out of the room, and Tony rolled over to reach for some water and a cereal bar. Steve was shivering next to him, asleep. Tony wolfed down the food and then snuggled up against his mate, stroking his head. He felt back asleep within moments, his body exhausted beyond all reason, and when he woke up later, he didn't remember the brief exchange with Tiberius at all.
When Steve woke the next day, he woke thirsty and horny and sore. And the day passed like the others had, except without the awful call from Maria telling him his other mate was awake. Steve tried not to think about Bucky (which was especially hard when he was, well...hard, all the time). On a primal level Steve would always want him. Oh, his traitorous goddamn body.

Time went quickly. They had a lot of sex. It was better than talking; Steve could not talk to Tony because what he wanted to talk about was Bucky. Tiberius delivered pills and only saw about five things he probably didn't want to, which Steve counted as a success. They went through all the fruit and cereal bars in the house and by the end of a few days Steve could feel the heat tugging at his bones, saying its goodbyes. He'd probably have a steamy morning the next day, but that was it. His body was done, drained.

When Steve woke on the last day, he did so with a groan. Tomorrow was Project 84, or so he thought (it was hard to keep track of time like this). Steve felt tired more than anything. He hadn't even woken up with a hard-on (like the multiple days before). He just wanted to be close to Tony, to cling to him. Half the bed sheets were across the room and the dildo somehow ended up on the dressing table. Steve wrapped a leg around Tony and shuffled closed, tucking his head against his Alpha's chest. He listened to his heart beat for a few minutes (he had learned to lay his head off-center to hear it, because the arc reactor was situated over it) before opening his eyes again.

"Hey there," Steve murmured when he saw Tony's own eyes flutter open. He sounded more himself than he had in days. "How you feeling?"

"Spent. Like I got hit by a truck," said Tony with a weary smile. "...you're going into post-heat, huh?" He nuzzled the top of Steve's head. "It's rough. It's really rough... but we get through them okay, right?"

He and Steve helped each other into the shower. The sheets were clearly ruined; they had had to be replaced after their last heat, and this time was no different. Tony opened the door to the balcony so they could get some air; they ended up fucking on the floor moments later. But they were both more lucid than they had been for days.

Tony checked the date with JARVIS. It was July second.

Despite being in post-heat, Steve insisted on going down to the Project 84 offices. Tony clung to him protectively. In the office, the omegas smirked knowingly at Steve's flushed appearance and slightly hyper demeanor.

Kerry sat down with Steve to explain the final moments; Tony sat on Steve's lap, facing him, his chin on Steve's shoulder and his arms around Steve. Of course Steve was too big for Tony to cover completely, but that wasn't going to stop him from trying. Kerry's body language was slow and submissive, aware of Steve's post-heat.
"The lawyers have compiled cases about every single one of the camps," she explained patiently. "They'll turn it in tomorrow; meanwhile, teams will be distributed to the camps themselves and set up temporary shelters for the survivors. We'll be working closely with local law enforcement. The Red Cross will be on site as well to help. The most important thing is documentation. When we go in, with the warrants, we'll be taking pictures of everything. Every kid gets a rape kit, gets interviewed, every file gets seized. More ammunition for us. We expect to be able to serve all the warrants simultaneously first thing on July 4th. Since it's a national holiday, they won't be expecting it. That's the idea. Catch them off-guard so we can go in and start making arrests and getting the kids out of there. Right now, we estimate getting between one and two thousand... I think sixteen hundred is probably the most reasonable estimate. The programs are small, twelve to twenty kids, but of course there may be some... unexpected.... you know."

Tony turned, still sitting on Steve. "Independence day," he said with a cheeky grin. "...it'll be their independence day. Literally."

Kerry smiled. "Yes. I suppose so. Are you two planning to be present?"

"Yes," they said, simultaneously.

"Zephyr Hill," added Tony. "The one in Alabama. That's the one we want to help out at."

Kerry gave them a thoughtful look. "...that's... specific. Well, our teams will be flying out tomorrow to their designated camps to help with the shelter set-ups. George and I will be in Georgia. If you want to be at ground zero on the 4th, then you should probably fly out tomorrow. Like I said, we're serving the warrant at about six or seven in the morning. But we'll be working all day and the night before to get operations set up. We're expecting that some of the kids are going to be pretty traumatized... physically, and emotionally."

"I've emptied prisoner of war camps before. I know the drill," Steve assured her. Kerry looked a little alarmed at the comparison, even if it wasn't wholly unfounded. He was practically vibrating with excitement. Steve couldn't wait. He got a bit sad whenever he thought about Wanda and Pietro (and Bucky) but he'd managed to persuade Phil to give him an update. Bucky had fallen asleep again on the last day of Steve's heat, and his cryostatus had stabilized. Small mercies.

George certainly wasn't immune to the excitement of it all either and appeared to have a spring in his step. He was sucking at a chocolate frappacino quite happily as he walked over, perching on the edge of Kerry's desk. "Hope you don't mind if I cut in? I thought I'd give you a Donner update," he said. "Whilst you're here."

Steve spun around on his chair so quickly that Tony almost fell off. "Well?" He prompted. "How is he?"

"Just insane," George said. "He won't stop cooking for me. He's a terrible cook; it's very awkward. Once, I refused to eat his lasagna, and he started crying. But he cleans a lot, which is nice. He's a 'nice' person, I guess. Very excited about the baby too. He keeps talking about birthing pools..."
George pulled a face. "But he stopped talking about 'Giddy' about a week or two ago. So I guess that's something."

Steve breathed out slowly. "Yeah. That's something. Thanks again George."

"No worries," George waved it off. "Wish someone had done the same for me."

There was an awkward silence after that. Kerry took initiative and broke it.
"Oh, and the video you made Steve. We still want to release it online even though you'll be there. If you're going to be on the ground you'll be pretty busy all day. Think of it as your press release, so the rest of the world actually know what you're doing. Then you can focus on the kids and ignore the press on the day, yeah?" Kerry said.

Steve nodded. "Okay. All sounds good."

"I hope you realise you have to suit up for the kids, Cap'n," George said around his straw, giving Steve a jokey wink.

"Will do," Steve assured him, smiling a little. He reached around and squeezed Tony's hand. "Sounds like we need to pack our bags."

The next day, around lunchtime, they boarded Tony's plane and Steve was so excited he literally could not sit still. They had small bags packed (uniform neatly folded on the top) and then they had been off, Steve flitting around the cabin during take-off while Tony watched over the rim of a martini glass.

Steve had hugged Tiberius tightly before they said goodbyes, telling him a sincere thank you. "I'm really glad I could. It was an honor Steve," he said. And Steve could tell he meant it. The memories of his heat were fuzzy...but he was pretty sure Ty saw some wacky stuff.

On the plane Steve paced back and forth along the aisle. Every time he caught Tony's gaze he smiled at him. This was actually happening. They were goddamn doing this.

"We're actually doing this," Steve kept saying. "Oh my God."

He remembered the idea coming to him after Yemen. The fact that they were finally achieving it... it felt like a significant, perhaps even final, step in his recovery.

Tony drummed his fingers on his armrest, staring out the window as the plane made its way east. Steve had the energy of a border collie and kept pacing around, grinning like a fool. Tony wondered if there was any truth to what Steve's psychiatrists said, about him only being happy when he was fighting a battle. Steve was approaching this like a military operation. Certainly, it had militant overtones, but... still.

Tony had more than a couple of drinks before they touched down. They were dropped off at the Atlanta, Georgia, airport and then it was a three-mile drive to Scottsboro, the town south of Zephyr Hill.

Tony watched the hotels of Scottsboro pass by longingly from the window of their car. Instead of going to somewhere nice, they were deposited in the middle of nowhere. It was a small tent-like city in a field off the edge of a dirt road and it looked like a refugee camp. Tony was in a suit and felt very over-dressed.

A young beta woman ran over to greet them. She was wearing worn jeans and work boots and had a flannel shirt tied around her waist.

"Captain Rogers!" she bubbled. "Welcome to the Zephyr Hill site. The camp's about four miles up the road. So far, so good. The Red Cross has really helped out a lot with this facility... of course, it's all temporary." (Steve had already been explained the system. A short-term site for when they actually went in and dismantled the camps... then the kids would be transported to regional centers,
"of which there were about a dozen." "Canteen is that way, med tent's over here-- this is the Chief of Police, Lawrence, he's been very helpful--"

"Hello there, Captain America," drawled Lawrence. He was a heavy-set black man with a long, drawing southern accent, an Alpha of moderate dominance.

Tony frowned. "Hello, everyone," he said gruffly, unused to being ignored.

"--and this is Joan, one of our legal consultants-- we have a sort of impromptu office in this tent-- they're working right up to the cuff, but we're ready to serve the warrant and get in there-- everyone's getting a camera to document what we see-- this is Bo, he's on our press release team, he'll be controlling the media; we do expect a big break so he and Larry will have their hands full with beating back the reporters while we try to get this thing sorted out."

Lawrence laughed, deep and heavy. "Folks around here are gonna have a field day, for sure," he agreed.

"Oh, and here's his deputy, Judy..." Judy was an omega. "...she's ready to start slappin' on some cuffs, aren't you, Judy? ...back there are the outhouses, and then if you look to your right, you'll see the tent where we've got the generators--" Tony's nose wrinkled at the word outhouses, then lit up at the mention of generators.

"Can I go see the jennies?" he asked eagerly.

"Uh... sure. Here's our volunteer tent; we have some Status Alliance volunteers who came all the way from Birmingham-- Barb here is a rape counselor, hello, Barb-- come meet the volunteers, all the counselors are dying to meet you, Captain..."

"Pleasure to meet you. Hi. Hi." Steve shook everyone's hands and grinned when Judy gave him a wink. "I was hoping maybe I could help with some of the setting up. I saw you were still putting some tents up at the other end and I'm pretty good at heavy lifting. Oh! And I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch your name?"

"Oh, I'm Jed." She told him with a breathless kind of smile. Steve, finally, shook her hand too. "And yes! Heavy lifting. There's a lot of it. Barb, why don't you show the Captain to the tents we're still setting up and I'll show Mr. Stark the generators?"

Barb looked like a mild sort of woman. Steve could imagine her being a good counselor. She walked with her hands clasped in front of her and wore a soft, navy blue sweater. She smiled at Steve warmly. They were all smiling at him. He guessed he really was kind of a celebrity around here. "The rest of them are very excited to meet you, Captain. They all think you're very brave."

"Doing the decent thing ain't really brave ma'am," Steve said. "Just what we gotta do."

"Sometimes it is," Barb disagreed gently. "And no one else is doing it. No one of us would be here without you, Captain. Even if we only save a handful of children out of this, it would be worth it. But we're going to save hundreds of them from that camp tomorrow. And all because you cared enough to do something about it. So," she placed a hand on his arm. "Thank you."

She showed him to the edge of the camp where they were still putting up tents for the kids to sleep in. It was a group of men putting them up, mostly alphas and betas. A few were in police uniforms. They were less star-struck around Steve (small mercies).

"So, where do you want me?"
"If you could just grab that pole around there..."

Steve spent the rest of the afternoon putting up tents. It was hard work, but not hard enough to make Steve break a sweat. Some of the guys, who were actually bigger than Steve, went wide-eyed when he started lifting up seven-foot poles of steel like they were nothing. The tents would be sturdy, at least. Steve wondered what sort of accommodation the kids were in now...

Once the tents were done Steve went to go find the counselors who were in prep. He walked into a tent, per Barb's instructions, and immediately found a load of women rushing up to him.

Oh dear.

Tony had commandeered some tools and gone to work on the generators. Whoever had set them up had not done a fantastic job. In fact, they might have been Amish or something. Tony may not have been the star of the show (every time he looked around, Steve had a small fan club trailing him) but he sure as hell wasn't going to let himself be useless or idle. Also he refused to work in a place that lacked both plumbing and tunes. He wanted music, at least.

After flipping all the main breakers and ensuring that he could get music to play from his phone, Tony decided to go find Steve. He had long since discarded his suit jacket and he felt much more at home after playing around with tools for a few hours.

It was already dusk; Steve was easy to find because of the squeals of women.

He was inside one of the canvas tents, looking sheepish as people squeezed his biceps and cooed over him.

"Hey! Hands off the merchandise!" barked Tony. Then he added, "Not that Steve is merchandise! Omegas are people, and people are priceless! ...it's just an expression!"

Judy rolled her eyes a little. She had been going over some legal do's and don'ts with Steve in between letting counselors and volunteers ask for his autograph.

Tony's phone rang; he checked. Pepper. He took it, hoping she might have some good news for him.

"Tony! You and Steve left in a big rush and your room is a complete disaster area. I can't let housekeeping in because--"

"Oh my God, you called me to nag? " asked Tony.

"--because I want to respect your privacy, obviously, but I don't know what you expect me to do, really, it's a mess, this is so inconsiderate, even for you!" finished Pepper. "There's a big-- a big rubber penis--"

"Right, yeah, that's Steve's. We wanna keep that," said Tony. "Just clean it off and put it away."

"Are you kidding me? I am not--"

"How hard can it be?" interrupted Tony, throwing a hand up. "Hold on, let me check--" He covered the phone. "Hey, Steve, is your giant pink dildo dishwasher safe?"

Steve turned a dark shade of pink and all the women around him started giggling. "Yep," he squeaked. Nothing to be ashamed of, Steve reminded himself. He was his own omega and he could stick whatever he wanted up there. Or get Tony to stick it-- Oh, Lord. Judy didn't seem phased, and
just carried on reeling off legal information, pretending not to notice Steve was bright red.

For dinner hot soup and bread buns were passed around. They ate on a large set of tables near the residential tents for the kids. Some of the tents were slightly separated from the others, designed for any adult omegas they found in there too. Considering what they sometimes made them do, it was important to keep them separate.

Steve and Tony were given a whole tent to themselves. It wasn't much admittedly, but it was something. There was a small bed very low to the ground in the center and the walls and roof were only just high enough that Steve didn't have to duck his head down. During the night they both fell out of bed a few times because they weren't used to such a small cot. But Steve thought it was pretty cute when he woke up to see a grumpy looking Tony staring at him from the floor with awful bed hair at 1am.

Everyone woke around half four in the morning. They had to be ready in time. It felt weird to be in his SHIELD gear again but Steve figured this situation was as close as he was ever going to get to actually needing it on. He just had the main suit on, no gloves or helmet or anything. Steve didn't want to look like he was actually ready for a real life fight. But he also knew how the uniform could motivate and inspire people.

"Yes! You look awesome!" Jed said, appearing as they emerged out of the tent. She was clearly very excited, bouncing up and down on either foot. "Come on. Breakfast is this way. It's basically just cereal and toast. So we'll go over our final plan of action after breakfast. Then we get into the minivans and we go. Some of us will have to walk back because we could not afford enough vehicles to take all of us and all of the kids, but it's not too far."

They arrived at breakfast and Steve started inhaling toast. A lot of people were staring because of the suit.

He turned to face Tony. "You excited?" Steve was obviously very hyper, his face lit up. "This still doesn't feel real."

Tony had slept poorly. They were in a canvas tent on a narrow cot. Steve, perhaps because of his days in the army, slept like a baby. Because of his size, he kept accidentally shoving Tony onto the floor. Not that Tony would have been able to sleep anyway. Tony's only association with tents and cots and shit was from Afghanistan. He was used to silk sheets and pillows with four-figure thread counts and memory foam mattresses; to him, these accommodations were frankly inhumane.

Worse, they got up early. Like, horrifically earlier.

There was no sun, only a lightening blue on the eastern horizon. Steve was beaming, star on his chest, stripes down his waist. Tony threw on jeans and a t-shirt and then, somewhat hesitantly, a hooded sweatshirt to cover up the reactor's glow. It was already hot and humid even though the sun wasn't up yet. Fucking Alabama.

Tony poked unhappily at his breakfast (which was as lousy as dinner had been the night before) and in the end gave up, drinking only coffee and vodka from a flask in his hoodie.

"I think we're doing good, Steve," said Tony wearily, who wasn't excited, really, because he was too hungry and tired and sore and cranky.

Judy was barking last-minute instructions to everyone.

"Okay, folks, listen up! We're serving the warrant at 6:30 sharp! Once we've done that, you can all
go in, but let's be clear here: everything is evidence. That means you touch nothing. We'll be doing a sweep of the whole building for people and extricating those people. Once a room is cleared, you put police tape across the entryway. Two lines in an X. Everyone grab a roll. Some of you have been outfitted with bodycams; if you do not have a bodycam, please make sure to get a hand-held recorder. You can record anything you want but don't touch a damn thing. Do not engage with any of the staff on site. Do not touch them, do not talk to them, do not answer their questions. Do not ask any of the omegas any leading questions that could compromise, influence, or alter their testimonies; do not offer them anything except water. Your job is to bring everyone back here and the less you say, the better. If any media is present, do not engage, do not talk to them. Leave any and all confrontations to law enforcement only. Is everyone crystal-clear on that?" Judy looked around. She was tiny was commanded a strong presence. Everyone was nodding.

"Okay, y'all have been split up into teams," said Lawrence, taking over. "Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta. Team Echo is residual and Team Foxtrot is emergency medical personnel. Cap, you're on Team Alpha, which will be the sweep that immediately follows the serving of the search warrant and will be headed by you and Judy. Remember to stick with your team at all times. We don't want no one being by themselves at any point, for liability purposes; I expect every single person on site to be within hollering distance of a teammate. Y'all got that?" More nodding.

Judy turned to Steve and Tony. "You two want to ride in the cruiser?"

"Naw. I only ride in cop cars if I'm in the back," said Tony. This failed to get a laugh from her; he frowned.

"I can take some of y'all up in the truck," added Lawrence, rising. It was clear he meant the back of the truck; Tony looked horrified at the idea.

"Oh my God, could this get anymore Alabama?" groaned Tony.

He followed Steve morosely to Judy's car and then set off, four miles north along the dirt road.

When the camp came into sight Tony was surprised. He had expected... well, he didn't know what he expected. Everyone kept saying "camp" and so his brain had conjured up terrible images of low huts surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers. However, Zephyr Hill looked for all the world like a parochial school. It was a single-story stone building that sat in the middle of a bucolic meadow. There were tennis courts and a swimming pool. There was no fence. They drove up to the front; the driveway itself was paved and circular.

Tony clamored out with Judy and Steve; following them in the truck was Lawrence and two other officers.

They walked up to the front door, a heavy wooden one, which Lawrence tried and found locked. He pushed the buzzer next to it, which had a neat little plaque above it that said Ring For Service.

An intercom came on almost immediately. "Hello, Zephyr Hill. How may I help you?"

"Hello, miss. Scottsboro Police Department. Can you buzz us in?" asked Lawrence.

There was a pregnant pause, then a buzz as the door unlocked, and they walked inside.

The foyer was as disappointing to Tony as the outside of the place. It had tile floors, a tall ceiling, some bland oilpaint landscapes on the wall. There were two wooden doors with windows on either side of them, one with a plaque declaring it OFFICE and another with a plaque declaring it HEADMASTER. There was a short wing that went left, and a longer one that went right, and right
in front of them was another heavy wooden door labeled CHAPEL that had opaque stained glass windows on either side of it, emphasizing the feeling of a private religious school.

They were met by a man and a woman, both Alphas.

"Hello, Sheriff," said the man, extending a hand.

"Mornin'," said Lawrence pleasantly. "We got here a search warrant, a warrant of execution, and a possessory warrant, on account of suspected unlawful detention, medical malpractice, and endangerment of minors, plus a whole host of other charges. So if y'all wouldn't mind us looking around we'd be awful grateful."

The man and the woman both went white.

"Ex-cuse me?"

"Y'all heard, now step aside," said Lawrence. He turned and nodded to the team behind him.

Steve elbowed Tony, vibrating with excitement. "Tony. Tony, is the video released? Is it?" he asked.

Tony pulled out his phone and checked. "Yep. Aria released it. We're ready the rock n' roll," he said, and offered Steve his hand. Steve took it, and together, they stepped forward.

The camera fades into a scene of Steve sat by a fireplace. He's dressed casually, in his usual jeans and plain collared shirt get-up, and looks perfectly normal. It looks like it's the house he lives in (but in fact, it's a set.) Steve smiles; it's friendly and sincere. "Hey there, my name is Steve Rogers, and I'm here to talk to you about something important. Something that's been bothering me for a while actually." He moves to face the camera properly, hands clasped in his lap like he means business.

"I know some celebrities talk about international injustices a lot and complain about human rights, but that a lot of them don't actually do something about it. Bet you figured I'd be another one of those, right? Well, today we're doing something very important. And I saw 'we' because I'm talking about a whole team of hundreds of people across the states who care enough about human rights to give up their time, resources and expertise. And without them none of this would have been possible."

"Today we're doing something that's been in the works since the new year, and it's called Project 84. Why 84?"

There's a new camera angle. Steve turns to face it. "In the United States there's currently 84 camps where people send omegas, usually aged between 11 and 18, in order to turn them into betas or Alphas. Some of you might have heard of these camps before, but for those of you who haven't--these are camps that tell children they've been wrong for being born the way they were born. It teaches them that they're inferior. Sometimes they even perform surgery. And what's even worse is that they have older omegas at these camps to teach these children 'how' to be Alphas. And I'm sure you don't need me to explain to you how that works."

Steve stands up and begins walking across the room, the camera following him. "What we're doing today, is we're emptying every single one of these camps. We think equality means opportunity and choice. Almost all of these children are forced into these camps, and they don't know any better. Because if you have people around telling you that you're inferior every day, then what else are you going to think?" Steve shrugs. "Today I'm here to tell omegas that you are equal to alphas. Sure, maybe your life would have been easier if you weren't an omega. I'm not gonna deny that. But it
shouldn't be that way. And today is the first step towards facilitating that change."

"These camps are a violation of human rights and parental responsibility. These camps are inexcusable. They are un-American and inhumane. Strong and wealthy figureheads are behind these camps and these violations. And what I ask is that you, the public, hold these people accountable. An Alpha who thinks—hell, an omega who thinks omegas are somehow inferior and deserve to be punished for that do not deserve your respect. We need to be better. As a society, we need to start holding people accountable and we need to stop turning blind eyes. You hear your ten-year-old omega saying she wished she was a alpha? What do you do?"

Steve moves, turning to face the camera properly. "You tell her she's beautiful. You tell her she was born exactly the way she was supposed to be and that she can do whatever she goddamn wants to—and that anyone who says otherwise can go to hell."

"And for the rest of you Alphas out there, who think you can get away with stuff like this, consider this a warning. Because I won't live in an America that isn't equal. That isn't fair. That doesn't have basic human rights. The world is watching today and we're going to prove that we can facilitate change. Omegas don't have to accept their fate anymore, now they're reclaiming the power to change it."

Posted on July 4th at 6:32 am.
Steve was hyper the entire drive over. Just as they pulled up outside, his phone pinged with a text from Aria, with the first reports on his newly-released video. It would be a while till it went viral (it was still too early in the morning) but Aria and Pepper had wanted to get it out there as soon as possible.

Once they were inside Steve felt uneasy. There was something familiar about the place. It reminded him of the school he used to attend back in the forties. He could have sworn the tiles on the floor were the same kind. When the two Alphas in front of Lawrence spotted Steve (in uniform, he was hard to miss) their eyes went wide.

"What is he doing here?" one man demanded, turning to Lawrence.

"I'm sorry sir," Lawrence said, sounding polite and deferential. "Who you referring to?"

The man pointed at Steve half-heartedly. It was awkward. "Him! You know... Captain America." It looked like saying the words physically pained him.

Steve tilted his head at the man and offered him the most terrifyingly nice smile. "I believe the Sheriff offered an adequate explanation," he said simply, and then walked up to the map of the facility on the wall. He spotted the medical wing and felt a chill run down his spine. Supposedly, it was just there if the kids got 'sick,' but where else would they be doing operations?

"I'm heading down," Steve told them, catching Tony's gaze. Lawrence gave him a nod. People were beginning to file in, totally ignoring the sputtering Alphas in the lobby.

"Steve. I wanna look for Trickshot," said Tony, looking at the map beside Steve. The map was innocuous. There were classrooms labeled, a common room, a reading and study room, a gym, a cafeteria... it had all the trappings of a regular junior high school.

"You're looking for someone?" said Judy, cocking her head. "You didn't mention that. Family?"

"...no. Just... a personal favor," said Tony.

"Look," she said suddenly.

They turned toward the short wing on the left, a beta woman was leading six children in a single-file line. They were dressed in uniforms, with the girls in a navy skirt, knee-high socks, and white blouse, and the boys in a white button-up with navy slacks. They all looked between ten and twelve and perfectly normal and healthy. They were all omegas.

Judy stepped forward. "Stop right there. Scottsboro PD... where are you going?"

The woman looked alarmed. "I'm taking the children to breakfast."
The kids all craned for a look.

"The children are coming with me on behalf of Child Protective Services. Please step to the side, ma'am, I have some questions for you."

"What about breakfast?" asked one of the kids in a loud whisper.

Tony was trying to peek into the chapel; when the woman moved he got a whiff of something... odd. He looked over at her, examining her critically. She was protesting to Judy, saying she didn't know what this was about but couldn't just hand over the kids to a stranger.

Tony finally caught it. There was a long horizontal scar on her neck. Faint, thin, surgical. She was wearing perfume. And Tony suddenly remembered Lydia and realized that this woman was not a beta at all. She was an omega. Or at least... she had been, once.

"We need to find the hospital wing," Steve whispered to Tony. "They could be doing operations right now! We need to stop them before the fuck up anyone else."

With Steve's heightened smell, he had already noticed that the woman was not, in fact, a beta straight away. He felt sick. The fact they had them working here in this school, after what they'd put the omegas through... it made Steve feel angry. So angry he felt it in his bones. His hands flexed by his sides.

"Is that Captain America?" one of the kids whispered, the girl hiding her face against a friend's shoulder.

"We're taking the kids now. Please step away ma'am," Judy said, hands on her hips.

The woman shuffled awkwardly, looking torn.

"You don't want to make this difficult," Judy assured her and the woman relented, stepping back as she wrung her hands in front of her.

"I'm heading to the medical ward," Steve told Tony, brushing his fingers against the other's. "Are you gonna look for Trickshot? Keep me updated."

Steve offered the kids a small wave, his heart aching in his chest, and then he headed down the stairs to the basement.

"Steve, wait!" protested Tony, grabbing for his arm. "...they're not gonna be hacking kids up at seven AM on the fourth of July. C'mon, be reasonable here."

"I really wouldn't put it past them Tony," Steve muttered. He had to just go check. What if they went down in twenty minutes and found a kid who'd just been freshly mutilated? They'd feel terrible. Steve couldn't risk it.

Tony had to admit, he did not want to see the medical wing. "Let's go check out the dorm or something... we're here to get the kids out, right...?"

Tony had already noted where the kitchen was. Actually he was interested in raiding the fridge. But he didn't want to seem like he wasn't taking this seriously.

Steve was having none of it; he was already jogging down a flight of stairs. Tony followed unhappily.
The basement of the school wasn't a proper basement, not really. The floor was still lovely tile and there were still paintings hung on the walls and on one wall of the corridor were small, narrow windows on the upper part of the wall, flush with the ground. The early morning sun was providing them with some natural light. The basement was not an unpleasant place.

Steve burst into the infirmary with the fury of a modern-day Hercules.

A single boy was lying on one of four cots; he started awake, eyes wide. "Jee-sus Christ!" he said. He looked like he was about fifteen and his smell was neutral, beta-like. He had dark brown hair that flopped into his eyes and he sat up against his pillow in his blue hospital gown, looking alarmed at Steve's presence. "...MELINDA?" he hollered.

A moment later a women in a white uniform bustled out. She stopped short. "What on earth do you think you're doing?" she demanded. "Who let you two in here?"

Melinda was an Alpha. Her dominating presence reminded Steve of Peggy, or Natasha, except he was pretty sure Melinda was an asshole. She was frowned at them and her nose did a weird twitch. No, Steve did not like her. "The law did," Steve told her flatly. Melinda snorted.

"Well, I hope you have a warrant--"

"We do," Steve assured her coolly. "We're getting the kids out. Can he walk?" He asked, jerking his head towards the 'beta' in the bed.

"You aren't taking my patient anywhere," Melinda snapped. "I don't know what you think you're doing--"

"No. You don't know. This is the day where everything goes to shit for you, do you understand? This is the day," Steve whispered, walking right up to her. "That you realise that everything you thought you could get away with, you couldn't. This is the day you regret ever thinking you could do this to us." He squared right up to her. Melinda was tall, especially in her heels. She was a dominating Alpha but Steve was full of a righteous and quiet kind of fury and he stared her right down.

"Do you have anymore kids down here?" Steve asked. "I'm going to check anyway, so you might as well tell me. Do you?"

Tony and the kid in the bed watched this exchange with fascination.

"No," she said after a beat. "No, there are not any more kids down here, but if you really cared about him at all, you wouldn't try moving him. He's on bedrest until Thursday." (It was Monday.)

"Uh, Steve, remember how Judy said not to engage?" said Tony weakly.

"Hey, are you Captain America?" asked the boy, sounding excited.

"He's not. He's just some omega dressed up like him," said Melinda sourly, stepping back and letting Steve storm past her.

The boy looked a bit disappointed.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Tony.

"Nate," said Nate while Steve stalked around the room searching like there were closets full of mutilated omegas just waiting to be discovered.
"Hi Nate. So, you're coming upstairs with us."

"Uhh, I can't?" said Nate, shaking his hair out of his eyes a little bit. "Like Nurse Feldmann said, I'm on bedrest 'til Thursday. Probably Friday," he added, sounding a bit hopeful. "I'm not s'posed to walk or anything." Again, he sounded pretty pleased to be stuck in bed for a week. Tony supposed if he were fifteen or sixteen, he would feel similarly.

"Why not? Lemme see your neck," demanded Tony.

"Wha--"

Tony pushed his head forward. There was a fresh pink scar there.

Nate smacked Tony away, looking increasingly annoyed.

"What the heck's wrong with you? Are you faking or something?" asked Tony. Clearly, his gland had been cut out a while ago and already healed.

"No, I just had surgery last Thursday. I had a hernia."

Tony turned around and looked at Steve. "See? See? One kid down here, and he's totally fine."

"Yep," said Nate. "Can you guys leave me alone now? It's way too early. ...Nurse Feldmann, can I get some more Vicodin?"

Tony picked up the chart hung on the end of the bed, leafing through it despite Melinda's protests; Steve was still tearing through a medicine cabinet like he might find a vial of omega fingernails or something. Tony was on Nate's side; he wanted some Vicodin.

Tony paused midway through Nate's chart. "Steve. ...Steve, come here. I got something."

"That's confidential!" snapped Melinda.

"Shut up," said Tony dismissively. "Nate, was your hernia, by any change, in your groin area?"

"What are you, a pervert?" asked Nate.

"I am, yes, but I'm not into little boys," said Tony. "Groin hernia. Yes or no?"

"Yeah, so what? Aren't most hernias in your groin? That's why they make you turn your head and cough, isn't it?"

"Nate... are you an omega or a beta?"

Nate looked thoroughly offended. "I'm an Alpha. Are you stupid or something?"

"Let me guess. They told you that the reason you didn't have a knot was because of the hernia."

"...yeah, and they fixed it, I told you! Gawd, it's like seven in the morning, why are you two freaks even here?"

Tony looked over at Steve pointedly. Steve had stopped running around. "Steve," said Tony quietly. "I think you should call Team Foxtrot down here." He couldn't quite read or feel Steve's emotions, but he was prepared to grab Steve if Steve had a freak-out, which seemed likely.

The realisation of what the kid actually thought had been done to him sunk deep into Steve's bones,
down into his very core.

Steve's mind shuffled through a few different ways he could kill Melinda and a few ways he could hide the body without being caught. Perhaps it was mildly insane, but it helped calm him down.

Some weird motherly instinct kicked in and he wanted to crawl over Nate and protect him from the world. In a grim sense, it occurred to Steve that they'd done the operation 'well.' He didn't smell awful like Tiberius did. He wasn't repulsive but there was a sense of... loss, emptiness. And it tugged at Steve's chest.

"I'm the real Captain America," he assured Nate, walking up to his bed. He inspected the drip (he was familiar with this sort of stuff) and carefully removed it from the IV box.

"Oh no you don't!" Melinda marched up to him but before she could touch Steve he had her wrist in his hand and he held it back. He made sure not to hurt her, 'disarming' her in the way he'd been trained to deal with distressed citizens. The sort who tried to run back into fires to save relatives who'd already long gone, stuff like that.

"Let go of me," Melinda demanded. "Unhand me."

Steve walked her to the other side of the room. "Don't try to touch me again."

"How do I know you're the real one?" Nate piped up.

"My neck, look at it. ...double bond, see?"

At the invitation, Nate did take a peek. "Huh." He blinked.

"I'm going to lift you up now, alright?"

"I always thought you were an Alpha, though," Nate said a little uselessly.

The only way Steve wasn't going to punch a hole in the wall was if he got this poor kid out of the ward and away from Melinda.

"I like surprising people," Steve said simply, wrapping Nate up in the blankets like he was some sort of burrito. "Read the news when you get out. I'm an omega."

"Why are you here?"

"Because these people are bad people," Steve said.

"Don't listen to him! He's full of rubbish," Melinda muttered. The woman was absolutely fuming, her face turning bright red.

Nate let out an undignified sound when Steve picked him up. "Tony? Can you tell medical we're on our way?"

"If he gets sick, that's on you 'Captain'!"

Steve turned back, meeting Melinda's gaze with a cold, hard stare. "No," he breathed. "That's on you."

And then he walked out of the door with Nate in his arms.

"Hi, Team Foxtrot? This is Tony, uh, Tony Stark, and Steve's... Steve's carrying a kid upstairs to
"Ow! Let me down, you psycho!"

"Confirmed, one injured. What's the nature of his injury?" asked someone on the other end of the walkie-talkie.

"He's got a-- a broken dick?" said Tony helplessly

"What the hell! No I don't!" said Nate, twisting in Steve's grip. "Lemme go, spade, you're hurting me!"

Tony cringed. "Sorry, kiddo. Someday you'll thank us."

Nate squirmed and complained the whole way up the stairs. One of the medical team as waiting for them with a stretcher; the front hall was already in chaos. The administration was huddled in groups, some talking to police; there were kids scattered around in uniforms, some excited and bright-eyed, others looking petrified. A long of heads turned when Steve strode through with Nate in his arms.

"Hey, yo, Nate!" called one of the boys.

"Ryan! Dude! This crazy spade's kidnapping me! Call the cops!"

"The cops are all here already, man!" said the boy named Ryan, gesturing.

The moment Nate was down, Tony put a firm hand on Steve's arm and pulled him away. "He won't understand until later," said Tony quietly, tugging Steve away. "Come on. We should keep sweeping. I forgot to put the tape on the door and we should probably drag Melinda up here to explain how they--" He couldn't finish.

Ryan peered at Steve. "Hey-- what? Is that Captain America?"

"The one and only," Steve assured him with gritted teeth as he lowered Nate down onto a stretcher. Ryan smelt different too. They must have done the same thing to him. Fuck.

"Used to wanna be like you when I grew up, man!"

Used to.

Steve turned around and follow Tony's touch, reaching up to grip his hand. He needed the contact in that moment. He needed to feel grounded. There was no people for him to punch, nothing for Steve to channel all his energy into. He was struggling to keep it together.

"We should try and find out where they keep Trickshot," Steve whispered. He spotted Lawrence walking past.

"Hey, Sheriff--" Lawrence turned around. "--there's a doctor downstairs. She's the one's whose been... doing this to the kids. Aiding, abetting. She knows what they-- well, she needs to speak to the medical staff so they know how to proceed."

"On it, Cap'n," Lawrence assured him with a small nod before heading down the same steps they only just come up from.

Steve spun back around to stare at the map. "Where do you hide people?" Steve whispered. "Where the hell would they be, Tony?"
Then he paused, fingers curling a little tighter around Tony's.

A strange memory returned to him all of a sudden. The president, years and years ago, laughing with a cigarette in his mouth as he shook Steve's hand.

"And there I was thinking every omega belonged in the kitchen."

Steve kept a hold of Tony's hand.

"Of course! It makes sense. They won't be using them for the screwed up stuff every day. They need 'jobs' here and they need someone to run house. They're in the kitchens, Tony. It's why everything looks so normal on the surface. They're just staff, like everyone else!"

He pulled him down the corridor towards the canteen.

"Wait-- Steve!"

Steve was already dragging Tony down the long hallways of the school, swarming with confused students and stern police officers and grim-faced volunteers and indignant staff. Jed passed with a trail of young girls behind her. One of them looked no older than seven. Jesus.

Steve burst into the canteen and headed straight towards the kitchens at the back. No doubt, they were preparing breakfast.

When they entered the cafeteria Tony's mouth began watering. It smelled like eggs and bacon.

Steve strode purposefully toward the kitchen doors with Tony at his heels, nearly tripping over a couple of students huddled half-hidden under a table.

"Hey!" said Tony breathlessly.

They were a boy and a girl, both somewhere between sixteen and eighteen. The boy had dark skin and the moment Steve nearly stepped on him he snarled; the girl behind him was small, pale, light-boned, with blonde hair in a pixie cut. An omega. And the boy--

Tony wasn't sure, actually. The boy smelled like an Alpha but his dominance was an utter mystery. Trying to figure it out was baffling. It was like seeing $1 + 1 = 4$ written on a blackboard and trying to figure out how such a conclusion had been reached.

In any case, his hackles were up, and his arms were out protectively, shielding the girl.

"Hey. Guys. We're here to rescue you," said Tony.

"Back off!" the boy practically barked, still snarling.

Tony held up his hands. "We're on your side, spunky!"

"You're here to take away my omega!"

The girl behind him gripped his arm, her wide, pale eyes getting even wider.

"Dude, seriously, calm down, chill-- put-- put your hackles down," said Tony, who was finding it very hard to talk to this boy for some reason. He made him uncomfortable.

"I can't."
Tony felt confused for a second. Even for an upset teenager, it shouldn't be hard to flatten--

Then it clicked.

The boy had dark, curly hair. At least most of it was. The back of his ears, from the top of his ears to the nape of his neck, it was straight and spiked. It was well-blended, but it was suddenly obvious to Tony that that wasn't his original hair. And that a real Alpha wouldn't have their omega behind them, either; they would lay on top of them to protect them.

He wasn't an Alpha at all.

Tony relaxed a little. "You guys both students?"

"Yeah, but we're bonded, and we won't let you separate us," said the boy firmly.

"Okay. Fine. Sure. Stay together," said Tony. He gave Steve a sidelong look. They'd have to radio in this pair later.

He followed Steve toward the kitchen; Steve slammed open the stainless steel doors and a woman holding a pan of hashbrowns shrieked and dropped it, spilling potatoes everywhere.

Steve had been right. There were three omegas in the kitchen, a man and two women.

"Trickshot?" asked Tony eagerly, pointing to the man.

The man shook his head, looking alarmed. "Azabache."

"Is that your real name or a fake omega name?"

The man only looked more confused. "It's-- it's my real name?"

"Where's the rest? Where's Trickshot?" demanded Tony.

The three of them exchanged confused, fearful glances. "Please, sir, we have to finish making break--"

"Where are the other omegas?" yelled Tony, aiming a kick at the pan on the floor.

One of the women shrieked again and covered her head; the other jumped forward quickly to placate him.

"I'll show you, I'll show you, Alpha!" she said quickly, looking thoroughly frightened. "Everyone's already up and doing their chores, but there's two in the dorms making beds and three in the laundry room and Willow is in the office with Mr. Joseph, and three are in the lounge."

"I want Trickshot, " said Tony.

Everyone exchanged a helpless look. "I'm Satin," she offered weakly. "There-- there's no Trickshot."

Tony felt a supreme, crushing disappointment at this statement. "Are you sure? Positive?"

Satin hesitated again. "Cashmere and Hyacinth are on housekeeping today. Mystery, Dash, and Rose are in the laundry room. Willow's with Mr. Joseph, doing paperwork. Robin, Mocha, and Elf are in the lounge. And today me and Banjo and Azabache are on kitchen duty."
Tony's shoulders sagged. He'd been so certain... he smushed a piece of potato under his toe miserably. The other girl, presumably Banjo, rushed over silently with a dustpan to sweep away the mess immediately.

"...what a bunch of stupid fucking names," said Tony suddenly, irritated.

"I'm sorry, Alpha. ...may I-- may I get you coffee?"

Tony hopped up on the counter with a sigh "Yeah. Thanks, Satin." He looked over at Steve. It was a kitchen full of Donners. Ugh. None of them were even looking at Steve; while Banjo hurriedly cleaned up the mess, Satin hustled to pour Tony a cup of coffee, which she gave him on a saucer with a side of rich cream and two cubes of sugar. Azabache had already gone back to cooking.

"He has to be here," Steve whispered. "He has to be... did no one called Trickshot used to ever be here, work here?" he asked, sounding a little desperate.

All the omegas reactions to Tony made Steve cringe a little. Sure, he might get down on his knees for him but the thought of being so meek and polite to an Alpha he didn't even know grossed him out. It was like they were the shells of people they once were. There was no personality.

Satin gave Tony his coffee and then showed them around the rest of the rooms. They cleared the omegas out and told them they would have to go to the lobby. They didn't look happy about it but they seemed willing enough to comply. None of them looked like Clint, or even a distant relative. Steve felt oddly deflated, like they'd failed.

Banjo was one of the younger ones and she almost had a spring in her step as they walked out of the kitchens, presumably excited by the morning's events. Steve figured it was worth a shot.

"Do any other omegas work here?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know, aside from in the kitchens and in house keeping."

Banjo frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Steve moved to stand in front of her as they were walking down the corridor. "Please," Steve whispered. "I'm begging you. We just want to help. This place is shutting down anyway; you probably won't have a job to come back to, so don't worry about getting into trouble."

That evidently didn't make Banjo feel any better.

Tony sipped at his coffee, searching the faces for one that looked like Clint's, but none of the omegas really resembled him. Tony could feel Steve's disappointment in his gut. But on the outside, Steve was all business; he blew around collecting omegas like Pokemon, leaving Tony to scurry after him feeling increasingly useless. Luckily, the omega staff, after being told they really had no choice but to abandon their chores and come to the lobby to talk to the police, completely defaulted to listening to Tony instead of Steve.

They trailed after him like ducklings as they made their way back to the lobby. Steve was having a hushed conversation with Banjo; Tony was still trying and failing to feel at all like he was helping. He was used to people basking in his brilliance, but here, aside from being a natural Alpha, no one seemed to appreciate he was Tony goddamn Stark. Even the staff kept glancing over at Steve in his uniform.
"Please," Steve whispered to Banjo. "Do you know where they... where they keep them?" Banjo's expression was conflicted. "The special ones? The misbehaving ones? The ones they can't use in the kitchen?" tried Steve desperately.

Hesitantly, finally, Banjo nodded timidly. "T-there's an old building out the back. They call it the learning annex."

Steve vaguely felt like being sick.

"Thank you Banjo. ...you go with Tony and the others to the lobby. I'm gonna go check out outside."

And in a second Steve was off. If the omegas really were in there it was probably best that Tony, an Alpha, wouldn't be along with him. He found a door that led out back. There appeared to be some sort of playground for the younger kids and a gathering of trees. Off to the left there was a smallish building which had grey walls and a flat roof. It could have been a garage, or a storage building.

Steve ran to it, his feet pounding on the dusty grass. The door was locked when he got to it. Steve kicked it once. Twice. The door swung open.

"Hello?" Steve called out tentatively, stepping inside a dark corridor that broke off into several rooms. Each door had a number on it. They went up to the number five. Steve swallowed, stepping further in. He placed his hand on the door handle of number one. "Is anyone here?"

No response.

"It's... it's Steve Rogers. I'm here to help."

When he got to the lobby, Tony lost his followers; the police took over, and the omegas drifted away from him. He sighed heavily and turned to talk to Steve only to discover he was missing.

He'd been having trouble keeping up with Steve all morning. Now he'd been dumped.

Tony sulked.

"Hey, mithter!"

Tony looked down. A small, beaming little girl in blonde pigtails was grinning up at him. She'd lost a few front baby teeth, giving her a lisp.

"What?" asked Tony, who did not know how to talk to children and did not appreciate being called "mithter."

"Where'th Captain America?"

Tony groaned internally and strode away. He needed a break and Steve was MIA, probably off signing autographs with one hand while saving someone with the other hand.

He slipped out a back door and leaned his back against the stone wall of the building, already warmed by the sun. Behind the school was a small playground and a couple of large, old trees. There was a single low, stone building off to one side, probably a shed or something, and beyond the well-cared for lawn was an old, mossy-looking wood.

It looked normal. Peaceful.
Tony was wishing he still smoked so he had something to be doing out here when he was hit with a sudden realization.

The map on the wall. It had the blueprints for the school, everything neatly labeled, right down to janitors' closets. And the map had included the grounds, included the playground and tennis courts... but not that small little building over there.

Tony perked up. Maybe this was finally his chance to discover something horrible and gets some credit. He loped across the lawn towards the building, already picturing piles of skeletons or something. There was a little brass plaque outside the door that said LEARNING ANNEX, and Tony felt a sinking disappointment. So this building wasn't on the map only because it had been built later than the rest of the school.

Still--

He opened the door and immediately found an omega.

...it was Steve.

"Oh. Hi," said Tony.

"Stand back," instructed Steve, his voice hard, and before Tony could stop him, he was smashing open the first of the five doors.
The learning annex didn't look anything like Tony had pictured. He was reminded of a waiting room at a massage parlor or a therapy office. They were in a narrow, dark corridor with a couple of little potted plants and a little table with a tiny fountain running. Tony spotted a white noise machine on the floor under it. Yeah. Total therapy vibe.

The rooms were numbered. Steve was poised in front of room number 1 like he was in the midst of a very suspenseful gameshow.

He pulled but it was locked, which wasn't really surprising.

Tony yelped in surprise when Steve, with very little warning, smashed the lock.

"Hey! Judy said not to--" began Tony, but his voice died on his lips.

He had expected either a classroom or a couple of couches or something... instead there was a bed and staring over at them was a gorgeous woman, dark hair tumbling down to her breasts, red lips open in a startled expression. She reeked of post-heat.

Tony felt a prickle of discomfort and he realized why after several moments; she hadn't yanked up the sheets to cover herself, which would have been normal. She'd only sat up, but now she was sitting there, staring at them as if not at all concerned about her nudity or vulnerability.

"--you startled me," she said, unnecessarily, then smiled disarmingly. "Good morning, Alphas."

Another weird prickle. Her greeting was wrong. Steve wasn't an Alpha. But before Tony could say a damn thing (such as "What the hell are you talking about?") she settled back down onto the bed, kicking away the sheets, smiling up at them like they had a meeting that Tony and Steve had forgotten about.

Steve, gentleman that he was, quickly closed the door. He was bright red. Also (he would never admit this out loud) that was the most naked he had even seen a woman in real life. Sure, he'd seen them in movies (God, he sounded like a child) and after looking up porn once (and discovering that it very much wasn't for him) he'd seen a few naked women then too. But in real life? Nope.

Peggy would be pissing herself laughing at him if she could see him right now.

He cleared his throat and cracked open the door a little. "Erm, do you maybe want to... put some clothes on?" Steve croaked.

The omega giggled; it was a shrill but pleasant sound. "Now why would I want to do that?"

"Because, erm, we need you to, er... leave? We're clearing out the school."

"Oh stop being silly and talking about nonsense."

She'd walked up to the door in this time, slim fingers curling around the edge. Annnnd yep, she was still naked. Brilliant. Steve didn't know where to look. He settled for the ceiling.

"Are there other omegas here?" Steve asked, trying to sound much more confident than he felt. He felt awkward. Every fiber of his forties sensibilities was screaming inside.

The omega pouted. "Why? Am I not good enough for you?"
"No! We just... we would really like it if you would get dressed," Steve said, clearing his throat. "Now, are there other people here? And do they give you a key for this lock?"

"Well, I don't think a key would do much good now..." She hummed in fake concern. "You are a strong boy, aren't you?"

Steve turned an even darker shade of red. "Please," he practically squeaked. "Just get dressed."

She giggled again. "I can't," she said, a mischievous smile on her lips. "I guess you might have to discipline me, huh?" She climbed onto the bed, on her hands and knees, wiggling her ass at them.

Steve was a shade of beet and Tony couldn't even blame him because she was currently presenting a perfect ass to them and Tony was suddenly very conscious of the wedding band on his left hand and the smell of post-heat in the room (which, while pleasant, wasn't Steve's, and therefore strange and uncanny to Tony).

"Hey, wait a second! I know you!" he said at her ass, snapping his fingers. "I've seen you in something, you were in, uh--"

She looked over her shoulder. "Lesbian Sorority Rush Week 4?" she guessed.

"Yes! Oh my God! You're the actress who was in Curious Co-Eds 8 with Stella Starr!"

She actually sat up on her knees and turned to face him. "Those were forever ago. I haven't done any acting since, like... well gosh, at least ten years now."

"Yeah, you like totally disappeared after Mindy and Comet's Big Day Out... what the hell?"

"Oh, well, Comet got bonded by the producer and Mindy OD'd on some bad dope and I just didn't want to do it anymore after that. So anyways Comet's producer sold me here and I've been an educator ever since."

"Educator?" repeated Tony.

"Yeah, you know, like, teaching Alphas how to... do their thing." She shrugged a little. "It's not glamorous but I get everything taken care of for me so that's nice, I guess."

"Wow. I can't believe I'm talking to-- wait, what's your real name?"

"Athena."

Tony waited. She provided no last name, and Tony was willing to bet JARVIS that she had not been born with that name. It was an oddly strong name; perhaps she had given it to herself.

Steve had no idea what Tony was talking about with the girl, he was just glad it was stopping her from trying to seduce them. He was very weirded out by the whole experience. He was expecting to see miserable omegas, who were desperate to leave. But she had been confident, almost peachy. She had seemed, well, very much for it. Then again, who knew what she'd been through. If HYDRA could brainwash Bucky the way they had, why couldn't Athena be brainwashed, too?

Athena was still watching them attentively; she put a finger in her mouth sweetly and smiled at Steve.

"Look, we're not with the school. The police are here taking all the omegas. Get dressed," demanded Tony.
"I can't," she repeated serenely, smiling at them. "I don't have clothes."

Tony paused, then grabbed the corner of the sheet and yanked it. "Then wrap up. We're going outside. C'mon, Steve, let's go."

Not that he was exactly hoping there were four more ex-pornstars in the other four rooms, but... well, it wouldn't be the worst thing he could imagine.

Steve cracked open the second room looking grateful that he didn't have to look at Athena anymore; his blush wasn't fading. The omegas in the second room-- there were two of them-- shrieked and gripped each other. They had identical blue eyes and straight, strawberry-blonde hair that came down to their shoulders. Aside from one being male and one being female, they were shockingly matched.

"Twins?" demanded Tony.

They nodded.

"Let me guess. You guys have some stupid omega names that match, like... like Mercedes and Ben, or Pollux and Castor, or Romulus and--"

"Ours names aren't stupid," said the boy.

"I'm Vim," said the girl.

"Vigor," said the boy.

Tony groaned. "Those are dumb. We're liberating you and junk. Listen, we're looking for Trickshot--"

"You mean Fletch?"

"No, I mean Tricksh--"

"Fletch is in room four. He was Trickshot before he came here," said Vim.

"He's bad," added Vigor, who seemed more nervous than his sister. "We can take care of you; you don't want Fletch. He's bad."

"I told you, we're liberating you! Steve!" Tony yanked Steve's arm; Steve had gone pale.

"Get dressed," Steve told the twins sharply.

"We don't have-"

"Use sheets!" Steve said, despairing as he turned on his heal and headed to Trickshot's room. He swallowed.

Steve felt like he was shaking with something akin to excitement. Excitement that had the potential to turn into either elation or horror, depending on what he found.

He kicked at the door twice and it swung open. Steve stepped into the room. And a second later a plate was thrown at his head. Steve ducked (thank you, super serum reflexes) and it smashed against a wall.

He could see Clint in him. He could see it immediately. Except he looked naked and afraid and ready to throw the cup that had supposedly come with the plate.
Steve put his hands up. "Please. Don't. I'm here to help."

"You stay the hell away!"

Tony peeked into room four and knew, immediately, instantly, that they had found him.

His hair was brown, not blond, and he was a little more muscular than Clint, but he looked worn and ragged, like it had been a rough couple of years for him. He had a shadow of a beard but not a full one, being an omega; he smelled faintly of post-heat, just like the others. His expression was one of stony non-compliance.

Steve swallowed. "I'm not here to hurt you. I promise. We're here to help." He hesitated. "I know your brother."

The omega hesitated.

"Clint Barton," Steve continued. "I work with him."

He snorted, lowering the cup a fraction. "Explains the dumbass suit."

Steve almost smiled; he had forgotten how cheesy his Captain suit was to someone who had never seen it before. "So... er, guessing you don't have any clothes either? Grab that sheet and we'll get you out of there. I just got to open the other doors."

He glanced back into the hall; the twins had stepped out, wrapped up in bed sheets. "I'm pretty sure Sera has someone in there. She's number five," the girl offered and Steve went a little pale.

"So, Trickshot, huh!" said Tony with delight.

Trickshot glared at him, still holding a glass, clearly ready to pitch it at him.

"Who the hell're you?"

"I'm Tony Stark... I'm here to rescue you," said Tony. He turned to Steve. "You take room five and I'll take room three."

They split; Trickshot let out a loud yell of protest. "Hey, morons, I'm still tied up!"

Tony glanced back; Trickshot was holding up a chain around his ankle.

"They did that 'cause he kept trying to run out," offered Vim, peeking in the doorway, still wrapped in her sheets.

"Hey Vim," said Trickshot wearily.

"Hey Fletch. He can't walk either anymore," said Vim to Tony.

"Where's the key? Never mind, Steve, take room five, and I'll take three, and we gotta radio Judy--"

"What'd you know about my brother? Is he at a camp? Is he okay?" demanded Trickshot. His face softened just a fraction. "Hawkeye is a good guy. Is he safe?"

Tony snorted. "Wait a second. Wait a second. Do you mean Hawkeye is his omega name?! He's been using it as a code name!"

"Code name? What the hell do you mean, code name?"
"I'm never gonna let Clint get over that..." said Tony, grinning. "No, yeah, he's safe, he works for the government... we're gonna crack open the other two doors and then we'll get you out, okay?"

Trickshot's watched Tony and Steve go, his face a stormy mask. Tony had already begun to think of him as "Angry Clint."

He went to room 3 and tried to shoulder it open. Unlike Steve, he found it difficult. He gave it a few more kicks; Vim hesitantly helped him kick it, even though she was barefoot, looking cautiously hopeful that they were truly being rescued. Vigor hung back, clearly not willing to cause any trouble.

Steve had already managed to break in door 5; Tony felt pathetic, still trying to break in to door 3.

On the other side, someone banged several times in response, as if worried Tony and Vim might give up.

"CUPID, WE'RE GETTING RESCUED!" called Vim against the door, and gave three sharp knocks. On the other side of the door, someone gave another three sharp knocks, and Tony thought they sounded enthusiastic.

Breaking into room five was Steve's worst nightmare. He kicked the door down to find two guys beneath the sheets. "Oh my God!" yelled one of them, yanking up the covers. The 'Alpha' (who couldn't have been more than 17 years old) let out an undignified sound and grabbed the sheet, pulling it over himself. "Is that... Captain America!?" He sounded uncertain, like he was questioning his own sanity.

The omega beside him looked young too. He was ginger and pale, freckles littering his cheeks. Sera grinned lazily, completely unashamed of his nakedness and the fact that he was very turned on. His arousal hit Steve the moment he'd broken down the door; he was in full heat. "You know," he grinned. "This is just like a dream I've had."

"Get dressed," Steve said, turning less red at the sight of naked men. Somehow, that was better than a naked woman. Maybe it was Steve's old-fashioned, chivalrous side, but he always got more embarrassed around women, regardless of their status. "We're clearing this place out."

He stepped out of the room to find Vim; she awkwardly patted his arm to get his attention. "You gotta break the chain before we can lift him."

"The what?" Steve's nostrils flared a little and when he went back to Trickshot's room. And then he saw it. "Jesus Christ," he muttered.

Steve walked over to where the chain was attached to the wall. He couldn't break metal but he could break the wood it was attached to.

He punched the wall. Once, twice, three times. Then he grabbed the wood, wrapping it back until he could eventually get the metal plate the chain was attached to off.

Trickshot watched with wide eyes. "Huh."

"He can't walk properly either," Vim called out and Trickshot glared.

"I'm fine--"

"I can just carry you," Steve assured him.
"I don't--"

"Just let me carry you and I'll tell you everything you wanna know about your brother."

That shut him up. Steve wrapped a sheet around Trickshot's shoulders and then lifted him up in his arms.

"Is he happy?" Trickshot croaked.

"Yeah," Steve said, a smile tugging at his lips as they all walked out of the learning annex together. The 'Alpha' looked positively mortified. "He is."

"Well, I'm not," he said, clearly annoyed. "Sera and I are s'posed to be honeymooning."

"I hate to break it to you, kid, but you guys aren't bonded any more than I'm sober," said Tony, pulling a flask from his jacket pocket and taking a swig.

The 'Alpha' sputtered indignantly.

Maybe Steve's hero complex was rubbing off on Tony, because he couldn't help but feel strange that no one seemed overly enthusiastic about being liberated. Athena and Cupid both seemed serene; they followed with their arms linked together, wrapped in their sheets, looking only mildly curious. Sera clung to the man he had been with, who seemed thoroughly indignant; from a brief, hushed conversation they had together, Tony gathered that they were spending the weekend together and that they were upset that Steve had walked in on them; they had been scheduled to leave the camp at the beginning of the following week and did not understand what the "rescue" entailed. Tony felt sorry for them, both of them. They were both, in their own way, victims, though they didn't yet understand that.

Vim and Vigor stayed shoulder-to-shoulder; Vigor looked alarmed as he followed Tony. "Are we in trouble?"

"Nope," said Tony.

"You-- you said you work with him. What are you guys, like mascots or something? Is that why you're dressed like Captain America?" asked Trickshot.

Tony snorted little at the idea of Clint as a mascot. "Clint's a spy or something. He works as an agent for the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division. And Steve is Captain America."

Trickshot looked absolutely baffled.

"Captain America's an Alpha," interjected the 'Alpha' who was with Sera. They were holding hands.

"Yeah, I bet they don't let you guys watch the news, huh?"

They pushed into one of the back doors of the school, walking back down the tiled hallway toward the lobby.

Several police officers and counselors hurried over.

"Oh my goodness, where did you find them?" was the first question posed to Steve.

"Steve," hissed Tony, tugging on Steve's arm. "We gotta keep an eye on Trickshot... and how're we
Vim and Vigor clung to each other harder, as if convinced they might be separated. Sera's 'Alpha' moved in front of him protectively, his expression one of determined bravery, even though the lobby was swarming with police and medics and students and staff, and a lot of people were taking pictures.

Two medics with cameras were already prodding Trickshot.

"Can you walk?" asked one.

"Sort of-- no," admitted Trickshot grudgingly. Then, with a touch of pride, he added, "I got shot. In the back."

"Are you all at the end of your cycles?" asked one of the other medics.

Cupid and Athena both looked confused by the question.

"They induce us every two weeks," said Cupid. "What is it, Monday? I guess our next heat would be on Friday?"

"That sounds right," said Vim, nodding in agreement.

Steve nearly dropped Trickshot. "Every two weeks?!?" he echoed, appalled. On his heat, Steve was a mess. If he had one every two weeks he didn't even know if he'd be a full person; no wonder some of the omegas seemed willing! That was all they knew; they had to be half out of their minds.

Steve felt sick.

"...Captain? Captain Rogers? ...hello? We have a stretcher." One of the medics had clearly been trying and failing to get his attention.

"Oh." Carefully, Steve bent down and laid Trickshot out over it. He saw the other wince a little and felt bad.

"What the hell is this?" One of the medics lifted up the chain that was still attached to his foot with wide eyes.

"I kept running away," Trickshot said, sounding rightfully proud.

Steve knelt down next to him. "Listen. They're gonna have to take you in. Get X-Rays, MRIS, do a rape kit, saw off that chain--" Trickshot suddenly looked alarmed. "I'm going to call your brother, okay? Don't worry. We're taking everyone back to the same place. We will find you again."

Despite his bravado Trickshot looked grateful at the reassurance and nodded.

Steve stood back up as the medics carefully lead the omegas away. He pulled out his phone and sighed when he saw it was dead. "Goddammit," he muttered softly and turned to Tony. "Can I borrow your--"

Trickshot's arm shot out and he grabbed at Steve's arm. "Don't tell Clint about the rape kit. About any of this. Please."

A moment later he'd disappeared into the fray, and Tony was pulling out his phone to give to Steve when they were approached by a tall, overbearingly dominant man.
Tony felt something curdle inside him.

"I bet you're very proud of yourself, aren't you."

The male Alpha had come out of seemingly nowhere. He was dominant, perhaps a bit more than Natasha but not on Bucky's or T'Challa's level. He was wearing a smart-looking suit and had a dark beard that was beginning to grey at the edges. He must have come down from some of the residential rooms no one had time to check yet. Locating children had been a priority over the staff. There was something about the Alpha that screamed Headmaster at Steve; the way he was glaring at him almost reminded him of that look his mother would wear when he'd been caught drawing on the walls.

Steve tilted his head and then shrugged. "Yeah, I mean, I'd say this was going about... exactly how I intended it to."

"You're ruining these children's lives."

Steve barely contained a laugh. "Right. Sure."

"Steve," said Tony. He put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "The cops said don't engage."

"Do you have any idea what you're doing? Hm? You think these children want to live their lives as spades, wasting all their potential, when they could be changed, improved, made to be--"

Tony swung.

He wasn't sure who was more shocked: him, or the headmaster. For someone like Tony, who wasn't very dominant, this man was incredibly powerful and normally Tony would have been naturally and instinctively inclined to act submissively around him, especially now, when the man was yelling at them and his hackles were barely being kept down. Maybe it was his casual use of the word "spade" in a room full of children and omegas, or maybe Tony had just had enough.

In any case it was an excellent punch and the headmaster staggered with a loud yell of indignation.

A moment later one of the police officers was grabbing Tony.

"This man assaulted me!" shouted the headmaster.

Tony was grinning. "Yeah, I did. I totally did. You can charge me, I don't care, I'm rich, it was worth it," he said happily.

"Come with me, Mr. Stark," said the police officer wearily, guiding Tony away. Tony was not the slightest bit upset. Actually, it had been wonderfully cathartic. He looked over his shoulder at Steve with a grin.

"...meet you back at the camp, Stevie," he called.

Steve wanted to kiss him, but there were children around. He offered Tony a wink before he was led out of sight, poorly suppressing his own grin.

Across the room, a couple of omegas had begun clapping, grinning shyly as they watched. Some of the older omegas, who thought they were Alphas, looked thoroughly offended.

"I like assertive Alphas," hummed Cupid mildly next to Steve, smiling a vapid, serene smile while the headmaster sputtered.
"Cupid! You don't say one damn word to them, you understand? They're trying to ruin us!"

"Yessir," she hummed, still watching Tony being led away. "...he's cute... I like him."

"I like him too," Steve sighed and Cupid giggled beside him.

"That's Tony Stark," said one of the students nearby, a girl of about fourteen, who was filing her nails and looking bored.

"...who?" asked her friend

"The spades aren't really allowed out much," the bored girl explained to Steve. "They don't know about how you were like, unfrozen or whatever, or about Iron Man, or anything really. My parents just sent me here last month so I heard all about it. ...I can't believe you came out. If everyone already thought I was an Alpha I would have like, stayed that way forever."

Steve felt a little sick. He needed some air.

The bored stifled a yawn, apparently unfazed by the going-ons around her. "So what's the deal with breakfast...?"

"Why would you wanna be an Alpha when you could be yourself?" Steve asked the girl and she blinked, giving him a funny look. "Oh. And don't have high hopes for breakfast," he warned her, before pushing through the crowds to step outside.
Despite the fact it was only 8am, Steve's video had gone viral, and the news was making the event the headline of the day. Outside, checking his phone, Steve found a lot of messages from Aria giving him updates on the news cycles. Phil had sent him a congratulations text, and Banksy had sent him a stream of emojis and exclamation marks.

But Steve hadn't stepped outside, away from the school, to check his messages.

He had a phone call to make.

Steve let out a long breath and pressed dial.

Clint sounded like he'd just woken up when he answered. "Why are you doing this to me?" he grunted. "Oh-- and happy birthday."

"You seen the news yet?"

"No, asshole, I just woke up. Why? This about your 84 thing?"

"Yeah. Clint, look..."

"What is it, Steve? Better have been worth waking me up for."

Steve let out a long breath. "I found your brother."

There was a long, pregnant pause.

Clint sat up. He was in the Joint Dark Energy Mission Facility in the middle of the Mojave Desert and he had been on a six-hour break from guard duty, which meant, for Clint, sleeping. His room was small, a tiny room outfitted with three other cots and lockers for other agents.

Clint's grip on the phone tightened. "Wh-what? ...you... you found... you found Barney?" His voice was rough with sleep and he wasn't sure if he was dreaming or not. "...is he..." Clint's voice sounded dangerously close to cracking. "...alive?"

Clint was not sure if he had mentioned he had a brother to Steve or not. He suspected he had; it was not a secret. Phil, a fellow omega in the agency, also knew. Steve had brought it up before, saying they'd spoken with one of his brother's ex-Alphas, but that meant nothing to Clint. By the time he began trying to track down his brother, the trail was cold. They had been separated as teenagers. It had been about two decades. He had pushed that part of his his past deep, deep down.

The memory came flooding back to him in an instant. He and Barney, screaming for each other on the thoroughfare, calypso music playing incongruently in the background, the sweet sharp smell of hay and caramel corn. Straining for his brother as they were pulled apart. The sensation of being unable to easily hear what Barney was screaming at him as they dragged him off. The calm explanation he'd been given later, by Carson, in a confusing jumble of half-heard words and writing and made-up signs: _He won Trickshot fair and square. His new Alpha will take care of him. He doesn't want you. You're broken. It's okay; your home is here. You don't need an Alpha. You stay here. Jacques will take care of you._

Clint realized he was breathing heavily into the phone and hadn't heard what Steve had said. "Is he alive?" he repeated, firmer. "Is he... is he... okay? Where are you? Are you sure?"
"He's alive. And he's gonna be okay. Look, Clint, he's not in the best of shapes now, but I think it's best you hear his story from him." (He'd said not to mention the rape kit, so Steve wasn't going to.) "We'll be heading home tomorrow or in the next couple of days, and we can bring him back with us."

"Wait--" Clint whispered, his voice shaky. "Does this mean you found him at one of the camps...?"

"He's gonna be okay, Clint," Steve said with a swallow. "But I can't-- you need to hear it from him."

"His gland. Did they cut out his gland?"

Steve hesitated. "...no," he said, because he felt he could at least tell Clint that much without breaking Barney's trust.

"Are...are you with him?"

"He's just being checked out by medics. It's procedure. Don't worry," Steve said. He gave the headmaster a sarcastic little wave as he saw him being taken into a police car, still spluttering and swearing. "Do you want me to put you on the phone with him? We could try and call later."

"I... no. I think- it needs to be face to face."

"Okay Clint, I'll let you know as soon as we're on our way back. Promise."

After Steve had hung up, one of the police officers snagged him. They were still sweeping the school with the thoroughness of a much larger agency, even though they were mostly made up of volunteers; however, the process didn't simply involve getting the kids shepherded out, but of taking photographs and locating records and putting things into neatly-labeled evidence bags.

It was well into the afternoon before Judy found Steve. "Hey, Captain. ...you didn't break for lunch, did you?" she asked, leaning against the wall of the dorm to sip on her bottle of water. Steve was helping another pair literally turn over mattresses. Every inch of the place was being upheaved and scoured; Brent Walker, the lawyer, had explained to Steve that they needed enough charges that, even if the institutions were found innocent of one or two, they'd be able to get them on the others. "Steve. Take a break," said Judy, putting a hand on his arm. "All the kids are back at the camp and quite a lot of them have been asking after you." Her mouth suddenly turned up in a tiny half-smile. "Also, your mate... he was just bailed out. The, ah, headmaster is charging him with assault. He seems happy about it."

Although Judy had made it sound like a suggestion, it was clear she was commanding Steve to go back to base camp. Steve hadn't eaten since five AM, over ten hours ago, and she personally escorted him back down the long, dusty road to the camp, where it was bustling with activity.

Most of the staff from the school had been arraigned; the little camp was half-volunteers and half-ex-students. When they saw Steve arrive, the reaction was a mix. Half rushed over to him, eagerly, and half stalked away warily. It was obvious that the younger children were more interested, perhaps because they had been less brainwashed. The older students, the ones with implanted hackles (and perhaps, grotesquely, implanted knots, and other modifications) shied away from him and clearly seemed to think he was a bad influence. A couple seemed doubtful that he was even the "real" Captain America.

As Judy had mentioned, Tony was there, and he was basking in two newfound pieces of fortune. First, after getting bailed out (a quick, aggressive phone call to Pepper and the help of the legal team at Stark Industries had had him in and out in less than a couple of hours), Tony had found a
convenience store in Scottsboro, and stocked up on liquor. Now happily buzzed, he was feeling much better. Secondly, he had finally found his own fanbase. To the "converted" Alphas, Tony was an excellent role model. He was a demanding Alpha and, because they weren't really Alphas, he was the automatically most dominant one. He sat with a cluster of teenage boys, talking grandly about all the missiles he had designed ("...flattened a whole mountain!).

He waved to Steve when he saw him; Steve was being dragged to the cantina by Judy, being orbited by a contingency of admiring fans.

"Aaaaand here's my favorite mate! Boys, the real Captain Ameri-- don't you scoff, Scott, my dad built him, I oughta know, this is it, the real one! ...Steve, these kids are really cool, Paul here wants to be an astronaut-- wait, your name's not Paul? --no, don't tell me, I don't care, I won't remember it anyway, you're Paul now." Tony slung an arm around Steve's shoulders, using him for support. "I'm kinda drunk. Hi. You're going viral, I just checked on my phone, I set up a hot-spot. The kids-- hic --the kids, they love their hotspots."

"We didn't have internet," said one of the kids, who clearly thought this was a violation of his basic human rights.

"They weren't allowed internet!" repeated Tony, sounding aghast. "Oh, and I already talked to the lead medic about Tr --hic --kshot... he's downtown, at the hospital... he can't walk. Got shot in the back." Tony closed one eye and mimed shooting a gun.

"Trickshot was really bad," supplied one of the teens behind Tony. "One time he kicked me in the balls."

"In the balls," repeated Tony. "...although if you were trying to bone him when he did that, y'know, obviously--"

"Every omega's bond is every Alpha's right," recited the boy.

"Oh my God!" Tony threw up a hand in exasperation. "I already told you, Edgar, that is bullshit, and besides, you're an omega, you can't bond another omega, okay, it's physically imposs-- HIC --able."

"And I told you, Mr. Stark, that I am so an Alpha--"

"Oh yeah? Do this." Tony's hackles prickled.

"I can't yet; I'm thirteen!" Edgar looked thoroughly offended.

"You're an omega, kiddo! And that's okay! Look at Steve, he's an omega and he's-- hic-- the greatest. Steve doesn't have hackles, either, we can't all have hic --ackles!"

Judy appeared and peeled the bottle of whiskey from Tony's hand. "Mr. Stark, public inebriation is--"

"Lemme see the badge. I like the badge."

She frowned. "Steve, can you... do something about...?" She gestured, then turned to the kids. "Shoo."

"We don't gotta listen to you," said Paul. "You're just an omega, not a real cop."

"Show him the badge!" said Tony, swaying. He jabbed a finger at Paul. "And I told you, Paul, you
should respect women!"

"...I didn't say anything about her being a girl."

"Oh. Well, good!"

Steve frowned. He obviously wasn't impressed that Tony had gotten drunk, today of all days, and in front of a load of kids. "I'm coming back to talk to you lot," Steve said, giving 'Paul' a warning look before he grabbed Tony's arm and pulled him off towards their tent. He was becoming increasingly aware that this wasn't just about saving the omegas here but also showing them what right and wrong meant, and breaking it to them that someone had done awful things to the people they kept in the annex. But omegas like Paul had to know what they'd done, so they didn't do it again, or let other people do it to them.

God. This was tricky.

Steve got them into their tent and set Tony down on the mattress. "Why did you have to get drunk Tony?" he sighed, frowning. His brow knotted together. "Come on. I get that you punched that guy, and that was awesome-- but there's kids around. And you know I hate it. And I don't want other people to see you like this." He let out a withered sigh. "And it's my birthday," Steve whispered.

Tony let Steve drag him back to their tent, protesting. Steve dropped him on their narrow little cot. Tony didn't think being drunk in front of the kids was as much of a big deal as Steve was making it out to be; Howard was always drunk in front of him and he'd turned out fine, after all.

But then Steve mentioned it was his birthday and Tony shut up.

Fuck. Right.

Steve glared at him, waiting for him to apologize. But Tony was drunk. He wasn't getting Steve's words, by the looks of it. "Just... just stay here and sober up," he said, finally. "You can't be drunk around the kids." Then he stepped back out, a slight slump in his shoulders. It was evident in every fibre of Steve's being: he was disappointed.

Steve walked back over to the group of kids, some of the boys making fun of Edgar because Judy told him off in front of everyone. He sighed internally.

"Right." Steve put his hands on his hips. "Who here believes every omega's bond is an Alpha's right?"

Over a dozen hands shot up.

Wonderful.

Steve sat cross-legged in the dirt, hands in his lap, looking serious. At least most of the kids were fascinated by him, so they listened. But he was still 'just' an omega, as Edgar kept grumbling to himself.

"You never have a right to touch anyone without their consent," Steve said, for what felt like the millionth time. "Regardless of their status."

"But when omegas are in heat they want sex!"

"Yes," Steve agreed. "But they still have a choice. The problem is, in heat, it's hard to make thought-out decisions, which is why you should really get consent before a heat. Which you can't do if every
omega in that annex was essentially in pr or post-heat... or just plain heat. They can't consent properly."

One of the older girls frowned. "I'm confused."

"Heats are very disorienting. Things can easily happen in them that people regre--" "Has anything ever happened to you?"

"Why do you have two bite marks on your neck?" "If they enjoy it, isn't that what matters?"

Steve stared dead ahead, his throat going dry. Fuck. This should have been easier, but it wasn't. "I think you've bothered Captain America enough for one day," Jed said, appearing by Steve's side and patting his shoulder. "He's not even the real Captain America! He's an Alpha!"

Jed opened her mouth, about to protest. Steve patted her arm. "Just leave it. I think they've been confused enough already."

Jed walked away with him. "How much longer do you think you'll be staying for?"

"I don't know," Steve admitted. "When Barney is out of hospital, we'll probably leave. I work with his brother. We're friends. I want to get him back to him."

Jed nodded. "Of course. Makes sense. We've been very grateful for your help, Captain."

"This wouldn't have been possible without people like you," Steve assured her with a tired smile. Then his phone started ringing. "S'cuse me," he nodded to Jed and pulled away. It was George. "Hey George, everything going okay?"

"No. I mean, with 84? Yes. The problem is Donner."

Steve frowned. "What's happened?"

"They found him. My neighbor said a bunch of men in suits are at the apartment. I tried to call Donner; he's out shopping right now, but he wants them to find him. He still thinks 'Giddy' will take him back."

"Shit," Steve whispered. "Look, I know he doesn't like you." Harsh, but true. "But please try and convince him, Steve. You can't let him go back to the flat; they'll take him and I can't be there to stop them. None of us can. Goddammit. Why'd it have to be today?!"

Steve ran a hand over his face. "Okay. Okay, don't worry, George. I'll handle it."

He stepped outside of the edge of the camp. His hands were shaking. This was a strange reminder that Steve couldn't save them all, especially not from themselves.

_Goddammit, Donner._
Well, he refused to lose him. Not today.

Steve swallowed, scrolling down his contacts list. He dialed.

"You really should stop phoning me; whatever will your Alpha think?"

Steve resisted the urge to punch the tree in front of him.

"What will it take for you to leave him alone?" he hissed.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, Gideon! What will it goddamn take?! You fucking piece of shit. What will it take for you to leave him the hell alone?"

"Nothing you'd be willing to do, Captain, I assure you," said Gideon.

"...yeah? Try me."

Steve had disappeared out through the flap of the heavy canvas wall and left Tony with a heavy stone of disappointment in his gut. His mate was upset with him and it made Tony feel like an incredible piece of shit. He had felt like he was doing pretty well, all things considered. He had been helping all day, hadn't he, and it was hard, with everyone ignoring him and paying attention to Steve, and with spending all night in a canvas tent on a narrow cot like he was back in Afghanistan and then opening that fucking annex and finding them locked up in there, especially room 5, because Tony knew exactly what it was like to be dragged to a small, windowless room and kicked around and then shoved down onto your knees and have some stranger dig his nails into you and--

Tony rolled over and vomited, suddenly aware that he was breathing fast and shallow. He was having a panic attack. It had come on suddenly and he suddenly had a very good answer to Steve's question about why he'd gotten drunk, but Steve had already left, and Tony was feeling too weak and shaky to go find him. He rolled off the cot (happily on the opposite side of the one he'd vomited on) and then slithered under the cot, curling into the dirt. He could handle dirt. But the cot, no. He cot reminded him too much of the one he'd sat on in Jalalabad in a medical tent, straining to breathe through sore, cracked ribs, his emotions a confused mess of mourning and jubilation. He had made it. He was alive. But Yinsen wasn't. And who knew how long his arc reactor would hold for. And who knew if he'd ended up with AIDS or something. And besides, destroying one little outpost in the middle of nowhere didn't fix that his weapons were probably distributed far and wide, in hundreds or even thousands of other caves, ones that might as well have been run by him personally, because they had his name stamped all over the place: STARK. STARK. STARK.

...typically, the two of them noticed each other's panic attacks easily, but Steve, outside on the phone with Gideon, was not currently aware of anything but his own emotions.

Gideon gave a breathy laugh into the phone. "If I didn't know better, Captain, I would think you were propositioning me." His voice grew a little more serious. "Of course, you don't have any other real bargaining chips right now, do you? Your unfortunate little stunt looks like it's going to shut down quite a few schools owned by Trinity Corp., which, I'm sure I don't need to tell you, I had ample amounts of money invested in. This is a very unfortunate turn of events for me, this unpleasantness with all the schools you're shutting down. And here I thought you'd behave, considering how generously we let you and your mate go overseas for your anniversary, and how lightly we decommissioned you. You realize, of course, that you're still partially government property, and we didn't have to let you go at all. But certain people trusted you. And I thought you
would appreciate that... and also appreciate that we were caring for your mate. Yes, that's right, I
know all about Barnes being in cryo over the JDE Mission Facility. You know, several members of
the WSC, including myself and Mr. Pierce and Mr. Singh, thought it would be better to permanently
eliminate the asset. But you got what you wanted, Barnes all safe and sound... and this is how you
repay me?" Gideon tsked. "I also happen to know, by the way, why you were so insistent on going
to Zephyr Hill. I know Trickshot was there, and I know his relation to our own Hawkeye. I thought
it better not to rock that boat. Trickshot was being taken care of and besides, I didn't want Hawkeye
to end up with littermate syndrome and begin slacking off. He's a very good agent, for an omega.
...surely you didn't think that SHIELD was unable to track down Trickshot? Of course we knew.
But we blocked Hawkeye from it; it would have only upset him. You do like upsetting people, don't
you, Captain?"

Gideon paused languidly and Steve thought he could hear the ocean in the background. Gideon
sounded like he was somewhere considerably nicer than Alabama.

"My point, Captain-- I'm being very long-winded here-- my point is that you already owe me. If you
had called yesterday, I might have asked you to abandon Project 84, to leave my schools alone, to
leave Trickshot alone... again, we've already been very lenient with you, and also have let Barnes
live, which was very generous of us... but really, at this point, you have no leverage at all over me. I
only want my Donny back. I understand you and he are cousins? ...Donny makes a lot of Alphas
happy, Steven. And despite all the talents you have, thanks to the ingenuity of the Erskine and Stark,
there remains one thing you are clearly incapable of, which is knowing your place. Donny, unlike
you, will always kneel."

Gideon sounded like he was smiling on the other line. "So. When Donner comes home, my men
will pick him up. Because nothing would make my day like seeing Captain America kneel for me,
especially after what an awful day I've had with all of these... unfortunate accusations against the
schools I had invested in. I'm sure you understand the kind of wonderful stress relief Donner can
provide. He's a sensitive soul and he loves better than being a good omega. Something you took
away from him."

It was one omega out of sixteen hundred, but Steve still felt like a failure. They'd saved so many kids
today. But he couldn't save Donner, his own goddamn cousin, from just one man. He was physically
shaking with anger and there was a tightness in his chest, like he almost couldn't breathe. Steve
leaned against a tree heavily for support. The bark felt rough under his fingertips. He belatedly
noticed he had red knuckles from when he'd punched through the wall, the odd splinter sticking out
of his skin. He hadn't even noticed the pain before but know it felt like it was burning. Steve's eyes
watered. "You're a monster," he seethed.

Gideon sighed as if he were talking to a stupid child. "Don't be so over dramatic, Captain."

"Over dramatic?! You've been funding schools that lock people up for children to practice having
sex with. Are you kidding me? The sort of stuff your money has gone towards is inhumane, it's more
than inhumane, it's monstrous, it's--"

"My money has certainly killed less people than Stark's has."

Well, that shut Steve up. He pressed his lips together into a thin line. He was still shaking.

"What if I _was_ propositioning you?" he asked suddenly.

"I would never believe you. You're far too proud for that."

"Don't want the real Captain America kneeling for you?"
Gideon laughed, the sound rumbling up from deep in his throat. "You've been spending too much time around Romanoff, I see."

"But you'd like it?" Steve pushed as he pressed his thumb against the tree, a wedge of bark digging into his skin. "Wouldn't you? Would it be enough for you to leave him alone?"

A small shadow shuffled up to the edge of their tent. A small hand grabbed the edge of the flap. "Ew."

She couldn't have been older than ten. She was an omega, dressed in the same uniform the other kids had worn. The girl must have presented early to end up at the camp so young. She was clutching a teddy that looked like Tigger from Winnie the Pooh and was sucking on one of its ear, her eyes wide and timid. She waddled into the tent, keeping away from the sick. And then plopped down on the ground, ducking her head to see Tony on the floor.

"My mommy and daddy said monsters hide under beds," she said and then pulled Tigger's ear from her mouth.

"My names Emily," she announced, sounding rather proud of herself. "Do you have a name?"

Tony's eyes tried to focus and failed. "--wh-what the f-fuck kind of p-parents tell you that m-monsters hide under beds? They're s-supposed to tell you that there aren't m-monsters under the bed," managed Tony, still gasping slightly for air. "--and this is a cot. Not a bad. But they're right." He curled up slightly.

Emily stared at him, wide-eyed. She was pretty sure he had just said a bad word.

"How come you puked on the floor?"

"It's the g-ground, not the floor."

"How come there's a flashlight in your chest?"

"'C-cause I'm s-scared of the dark."

The sarcasm was lost on Emily, who nodded wisely. "Me too. Is your beard real?"

"What the hell kind of question-- yes, it's real!"

"Are you a real Alpha? Lots of the Alphas here aren't real Alphas but you're not s'posed to say that." She put Tigger's ear back into her mouth. "Am I gonna go home now? 'Cause Mom says I can't 'til I'm a beta."

Tony gritted his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. "Shit. What did Steve say to tell you...? Emily, you are beautiful. You were born exactly the way you were supposed to be and that you can do whatever you goddamn want to and anyone who says otherwise can go to hell."

Emily stared, wide-eyed. "You say lots of bad words."

"Yeah, no, I'm awful with kids. You should talk to Steve, he's better at this than me."

"...'k," said Emily thoughtfully. "Want me to leave Tigger so you don't get lonely?"

"...yes."
Emily handed Tony the stuffed tiger and got up to go find Steve.

Steve was still on the phone, and Emily had been taught it was rude to interrupt people on the phone, so she went back to the tent to sit in the dirt beside Tony.

Outside, the phone conversation had taken a turn. Gideon's voice softened slightly. "I would like it, Captain. Very, very much. In fact, it would be a dream come true for me to have a night of your company. And to be honest, I might not want Donner anymore after that... he is, after all, only a pale substitute for you. But do you really think you would be able to behave yourself? I don't. And would your Alpha ever allow such a thing? ...actually, he might. He already let another Alpha take you, didn't he?"

Steve's heart was racing a little slower in his chest now. He slid down against the tree, slowly, until his bottom was on the floor. He swallowed, letting the question hang in the air. He had to play this right. He had one goddamn chance to do this. In a weird way, after Gideon mentioned Natasha, it made it easier for Steve to think of her. She was bright and goddamn manipulate when she wanted to be. She'd once joked, in training, that Steve should learn to use omega wiles. Whatever the hell that had meant, he hadn't been sure at the time...

"Yeah," Steve said, his voice catching a little for effect. Natasha would have been proud. "He did."

A complete and utter bare-faced lie but Steve sold it well.

"If you were mine, I wouldn't share you."

Steve swallowed again. Jesus Christ. He felt like he was going to be sick. For a second he stared at the ground, almost expecting sick to appear. Wait. No. He hadn't been sick. He just felt sick. God. He blinked hard and rubbed at his temple.

"The serum makes me pretty hard to keep with," Steve said, keeping his voice soft. "It's hard to keep me satisfied."

Gideon laughed again.

"Let's make a deal, Captain. I have some friends who are waiting for Donner to return home to pick him up. When he comes home, they will take him. And if you would like him back, you may come and earn him. You understand that I hardly believe you're going to follow through with this... which is why I am taking my Donnie as collateral. It's up to you if you want me to return him." Gideon’s voice softened a little more. "I have to say, I'm extremely intrigued by your offer. You always struck me as too proud. But perhaps I was wrong about you. ...well, I have to go speak with my lawyer, as, you can imagine, I am currently hemorrhaging money thanks to you. But perhaps you might like to discuss Donner's safe return over drinks when you get back. ...have you ever been to the Providence hotel? ...I'm sure I could make time for you." Gideon's voice dropped just a little more. "You do understand that this is not a game, Captain. There is no clever little trick you can play on me. I'm taking Donner and if you try to do anything for me, other than kneel, I will make sure he pays dearly for it. So please, if you don't plan on being a good little spade for me, then don't waste my time."

Gideon hung up.

"Steve?"

Steve had been sitting on the ground for a while, phone in his hand, staring. Who knew how much time had passed.

Jed knelt in front of him. "Yoo-hoo. Steve. ...Steve, are you okay? You haven't eaten today, have
you?" Her expression was one of concern. "I know," she said, quietly, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "This is hard. It's hard to see. ...come on. You at least need some water, it might hit a hundred degrees today..."

"I should go check on Tony first," Steve said. "He needs food too." Jed nodded, following behind Steve. He tapped away at his phone as he walked, downloading the soundbite.

His own phone had died that morning, and he'd been on Tony's. Tony's phone saved everything.

He forwarded the file to two different people. First, he sent it to Phil.

> Can I get him fired over this? I really wanna get him fired. SR

Steve was pretty sure the answer was gonna be no but it never hurt to ask. Then he sent it to Donner.

He turned around to Tony's and his tent to find--

"Tony, are you in here? Who's this? Oh my God, is that puke on the floor?" Steve immediately felt awful and realised why he thought he'd been sick back by the trees. "Jed, could you...?"

"Sure--"

She moved, offering Emily her hand with a warm smile. The girl took it and let Jed lead her out of the tent, the flap falling shut as he bent down to check Tony's temperature. "You need water," he murmured and then tugged on Tony's arm, gently persuading him out from under the bed until his head was resting in Steve's lap. He ran his hands through his Alpha's hair and felt him tremble. His forehead was clammy. "I'm sorry," Steve whispered, feeling miserable as he stared at the sick on the floor. "I wish I could make it better."

He really, really did.

Jed appeared with water and food. She pushed it along the floor to Steve then let the tent flaps back down, giving them some privacy. Steve grabbed one of the plastic cups and poured water out into it before offering it to Tony. "Here, you'll feel better."

Once the cup of water was gone Steve's (well, Tony's) phone started ringing. Steve put it on loud speaker and then dropped it on the cot.

It was Donner. He was crying, a lot.

"W-why would you send me that?!"

"Because it's true. He thinks you're a pale substitute and he'd give you up in a heartbeat to live out some sick fantasy with me. He doesn't love you, Donnie," said Steve firmly. The words hurt to say.

"You think I don't already know he'd rather have you?!!"

Well, least he had some spunk in him when he got upset. Or maybe the pregnancy was just helping with that.

Steve calmly poured Tony out another glass of water.

"He's literally prepared to give you up for one night with another person, and you're still gonna go back to him," Steve deadpanned, offering the water for Tony to drink. "You're an intelligent guy, Donner, smarter than me. You got into Harvard Law and you're wasting your time on him? You want an Alpha and stability? You can have those things without having a guy who doesn't value you
"But I want Giddy," Donner insisted, his voice weak and small. "He's all I have."

"No he's not. You've got me."

"All you've done is get me into trouble since the day I met you," Donner sniffed loudly. "You're the one ruining my life. Not Gideon. If they'd never unfrozen you, he wouldn't have given me up in the first place."

"I know I've stirred a lot of shit up and I'm sorry that's backfired on you. I know I've not helped, that I've made things hard for you and I'm truly sorry about that. But least I respect you, Donner. Least I think you should have a life. I'm just trying to give you one. Do you really wanna raise a kid with that guy? What happens if you have an omega, huh? What happens if he wanted to send your kid to one of those camps where they cut their neck open? Or worse, what if he sold them? He's sold you. Why wouldn't he sell your baby?"

Donner went silent.

"You're a commodity to him. We both are. And we're both better than him. And I'm gonna keep saying that until you believe me, okay? And I know you still don't. And I know you're probably gonna go back to him. But I had to do this, I had to try and prove to you what a sleaze bag he is. You deserve so much better. Because if you go back to him today, after everything, then I'll never goddamn forgive myself."

"...why...why do you feel so responsible for me?" he asked in a whisper.

"We're all responsible for each other," Steve murmured, gently brushing Tony's hair back from his forehead. "And you're my cousin. I went under for 70 years. I don't have any family left. It's nice to think that...that I actually do, you know?"

There was a long pause on the other end. "...what do I do, Steve? I can't go home if there's men waiting for me. And George is in San Diego at one of those schools," said Donner. "Do I just... just keep waiting here at the bus stop forever?" He sounded genuinely frightened.

"No, Donner. You can come with me--"

Another phone call came through suddenly: Phil.

"Just hold on, okay, Donnie? Gimme two minutes."

Tony remained in Steve's lap, silently staring, his fingers idly stroking the fabric of Steve's pants. How much he was getting was unclear. He had managed to mumble an apology to Steve and say something about Kunar, but that was it.

Phil's voice was low and dangerously calm. Phil was someone who simply didn't seem to experience anger.

"Steve. That file you sent me... we have a problem." Phil took a deep breath. "First of all, the WSC has enough shit on you and Tony to put you both away for life. Could we get Gideon fired? Possibly. Would he retaliate? Yes. Is it worth it? No. Second of all, you're the one who was... was... what was that, seduction? Do you have any idea how bad that sounds for you? Some of the things you said, Steve... about letting Tony-- about kneeling-- if that file got out, it wouldn't just ruin Mr. Malick. It would ruin you, too. Third..." Phil took another deep breath. "...we... we cannot let Barton know. I personally-- I had no idea. I personally tried to help him track down Charles Barton.
We had no idea we were being sabotaged. But..." There was a pause. "It's not Barton I'm worried about. It's Romanoff. Steve. If either of them hears about this, you realize we won't be able to stop them from murdering Gideon Malick? And that while you and Stark may be famous enough to get away with a hell of a lot... they aren't. You and I have to keep this a secret, because-- because if we don't--" Phil sounded like he was literally choking on the words.

Phil and Clint, Steve knew, were friends. And it was probably killing Phil to say any of this.

"....would it really be so bad if they did?"

"Steve!" Phil snapped, his voice wet. "This isn't a war. This is real life! And you can't play this game. I need to hear you say it. Tell me you won't tell them. I need you to say it. Please. Steve. Say it."

Steve felt conflicted. But when he'd first woken up Phil had always been the voice of reason. He'd been grounding and calming and he'd facilitated so much of his recovery. Steve trusted him. And he knew he only had Clint's best interests at heart. Steve let out a ragged breath. "I won't tell them, Phil. I swear."

"Thank you. Goddammit, Steve. This is a shit storm..." This was probably the most human Steve had ever heard Phil. It was unsettling. "Did you at least find him?"

"Trickshot? Yeah," Steve said. "We did. They had him chained to a wall."

Phil swore under his breath. Steve didn't stop stroking Tony's hair.

"Now, I need to talk to Donner, Phil. I'm sorry, or that really was for nothing. At the very least, Donner got to hear Gideon saying he doesn't care about him, and maybe he won't go back to him."

"Right." He swallowed loud enough for Steve to hear, obviously still very upset. "Well. Happy birthday, Steve."

Phil hung up.

"...Donner?"

"...Y-Yes?"

"You know where we live, right? Do you have money on you?"

"Yeah. George gave me some for food."

"I want you to get a cab to our house. JARVIS will let you in. We're coming back tonight," Steve murmured, staring down at Tony's form. He'd have to ask if Trickshot could transfer hospital. "Pepper and Aria should be there, and if Gideon sends any men around, they'll deal with them. And remember, so long as you're somewhere of your own free will, they have no right to take you anywhere. Got it?"

Donner sniffed. "O-Okay."

"Text me when you're in the taxi."

Steve hung up and then gently stood, picking Tony up in his arms. He tucked him into the cot, shrugging off his jacket and draping it over Tony, leaving himself in just his undershirt. Then he stepped outside, finding Judy. "Hey, Judy?" She spun around to face him. "Tony's not very well, so I'm gonna take him home tonight. Do you think we could get our friend's brother on the plane and
transferred to another hospital?"

"Yes, but..." Judy pulled a face. "It won't be quick. It'll take a couple of hours."

"We can pick him up from the hospital on our way to the airport," Steve said. "I just really want to get them home."

Judy patted his arm. "I'll make some calls."

Steve, in his undershirt, attracted more attention than he would normally be comfortable with. Surprisingly, it was generally not negative. The omegas were fascinated by him, and even the older ones were curious; they wanted to know what it was like to be a tall omega, a strong omega, how his bond worked, if he could have or wanted children, what he was like before the serum, what it was like fighting a war.

Judy and Jed orbited around Steve trying to get him to eat and drink and to contain the children as best they could, shutting down questions that clearly made him uncomfortable. But they were up against quite a lot of kids, some of whom wanted autographs or to feel Steve flex; at least two of the littler ones begged to be picked up and at one point, one of them climbed into his lap while he was sitting down.

As the sun set, many of the kids began to disappear, being taken away by Child Protective Services or paramedics or the police, to be processes, interviewed, examined, placed in foster care, or taken to one of the hostels set up by Project 84.

A text from Brent Walker came in as Steve was watching the sun creep toward the horizon.

> Tony, I need to talk to Steve.

> This is Steve. My phone died so I'm using Tony's. What's the word? - SR

>: All camps are emptied for now. Legal battle will be a long one ...but at least for tonight, everyone's safe.
Jed offered Steve a ride to the airport just as the sun was setting; it would be easier for him to leave at night, quietly and without anyone noticing, than trying to muscle through crowds of curious fans. "I just have to wake up Tony," he whispered to Jed; she followed him to their tent. Tony was curled into a tiny ball on the cot, burritoed in Steve's coat.

"...he didn't drink that much, did he?" asked Jed, peeking in.

Ton startled awake with a yell and a swing at Steve (who easily avoided it thanks to his reflexes). It took Tony a moment to remember they were in Alabama, which was dry and hot and dusty and somewhere he'd really rather leave.

On the way to the airport, Steve pulled in his phone and, when he turned it on, discovered a new series of texts.

From Aria: There's some guys here for Donner. Pepper just went total Mama Grizzly on them. It was amazing! - AT

From Clint: Got granted emergency leave from duty, on my way to Los Angeles now. Where are you guys landing? LAX? Which airport do I meet you at? - CB

And from at least a dozen people: Happy birthday, Steve!

They had to swing by the hospital on the way to the airport; Trickshot was waiting for them in a wheelchair in the lobby, chatting animatedly with a nurse. His face broke into a grin when he saw Steve.

"Steve Rogers! ...so you were frozen and then unfrozen? I haven't had access to the news in two decades, congratulations! And happy birthday! You're... what, ninety-one? Ha ha! And an omega! That's great! What a time to be alive." He was beaming up at them from the wheelchair. Smiling, his resemblance to Clint was even more obvious.

"Ninety-three," said Tony proudly, curling an arm possessively around Steve's waist.

The nurse looked grumpy. "To be clear, he's been discharged against doctors' orders," she said, heaving a large file toward Steve. "He needs to get back to a hospital as soon as possible--"

"No more locked doors for me, thanks," said Trickshot. "You know what I want?"

"Cheeseburger," said Tony flatly.

Trickshot blinked in surprise. "...actually... actually, yeah, that's exactly-- how did you...?"
Seeing him smile made everything worth it and a strange sort of weight lifted off Steve's chest. He accepted the file off the nurse. "We'll arrange the best care for him, I assure you," Steve promised. The nurse still didn't look convinced. Although she did keep staring at his arms. This was why Steve didn't walk around in vests more often. Tony still had his jacket over his shoulders, despite being warm.

"I would actually kill for some chicken nuggets right now," Jed hummed.

Getting Trickshot into the care and then folding up the wheelchair was, well, tricky. But they managed it. Steve was more concerned with breaking it than anything; he often underestimated his own strength, and cramming things into cars was a surefire way for him to accidentally break stuff. Jed and even Tony pitched in to help. On the way to the airport they stopped by a MacDonald's and ordered a disgusting amount of food. Steve inhaled three burgers on the way to the airport. He texted Clint where to meet him and then asked Aria if Donner was okay, to which she replied:

> I don't know. But he's more himself now. He's calmed down, anyway. AT
> How'd you convince him to give Gideon up? AT
> You don't wanna know. SR

Steve cringed when he thought about it.

Steve just carried Trickshot onto the plane when they got there, it was easier than fiddling with the chair. He gently set him down on one of the long seats when they got inside. Jed gave them all tight hugs, nearly tearing up a little as she said her goodbyes. "Thank you for making this possible, both of you," she whispered, squeezing his and Tony's shoulders.

"Call if you need anything," Steve nodded, offering her a small smile in return.

"Oh! And happy birthday!" Jed called before she disappeared back outside.

"I let Clint know when and where we're landing," Steve told Trickshot as they settled down for take off. "So he should meet us there."

And suddenly, the omega looked almost nervous.

"So, uh... Hawyeye works for the government, huh? ...how's he... how's he doing? I mean, we haven't seen each other, since, well..." He laughed awkwardly and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. "I guess it's been about twenty years. How did he end up...? Is he bonded? Kids?"

Tony settled down into one of the leather seats of the plane with a groan of gratitude, hunched over his McDonald's burger. "Clint's a lovable dork. He's like a super-spy. Spec ops, basically. He's bonded to his partner; her name's Natasha."

"Did they buy him?" asked Trickshot bluntly.

Tony cocked his head, then looked at Steve. "You know what? I have no idea how Clint ended up with SHIELD, actually."

"Did she... their bond... was it...?"

"Scent-mates," said Tony. "Totally mutual. Actually, he's the one that found her."

Trickshot's face broke into another smile. "You mean I've been getting the crap kicked out of me for
twenty years trying to go save my little brother and he was doing just fine this whole time?"

"Yep," said Tony.

Trickshot laughed with relief. "I thought-- well-- I thought he-- I was worried they would-- you know. Sell him into something horrible, on account of his hearing."

"Of his what?"

"Are you making a joke?"

"No, I didn't hear you."

"His hearing," repeated Trickshot. Tony still looked confused.

"...what, omegas aren't supposed to hear good or something?"

Now it was Trickshot's turn to be confused. "No, because he's deaf."

Tony looked over at Steve, baffled. "Clint's not deaf. ...oh my God. Did we get the right guy? What if there's another Clint Barton with a long-lost brother? ...Clint'll be so mad at us."

Trickshot looked worried. "His-- his full name's Clinton Francis Barton, we were born in Iowa. He's blond?"

Tony shrugged helplessly; he had no clue where Clint had been born or even what his middle name was (thought he hoped it was Francis so he could make fun of him later).

"We've got the right Clint. He is deaf," Steve assured Trickshot quickly. He turned to Tony and explained. "I've seen Natasha sign to him before."

He was reminded again that Tony didn't know about Clint's family. He (probably selfishly) wished he could tell Tony. There was a point of no return, Steve had warned Clint. If he left it too late Tony really would be hurt. He'd try and pretend he wasn't, but he would be. And Steve hated keeping big secrets from his mate.

To reassure Trickshot, Steve got a picture of Natasha and Clint up on his phone. Trickshot gripped it tightly. "Yep," he croaked out. "That's him." Then he laughed, softly. "She is way out of his league."

Steve smiled. He was glad he could still make jokes.

The flight passed quickly and Trickshot was evidently becoming increasingly nervous. They even gave him a whiskey to help calm him down. It made him giggle. They hadn't let them drink alcohol at the school, unsurprisingly, so his tolerance was very low. "I missed this, too," he informed them as Tony poured him a third shot.

When the plane finally landed Trickshot looked white as a sheet.

"Tony, could you grab the chair?" Steve asked before he moved to pick Trickshot up.

The omega in his arms looked nervous and didn't weigh enough. "You're gonna be fine," Steve told him softly. Trickshot punched him lightly in the arm in response.

They stepped down the stairs of the plane to find Happy waiting a little ways off with the usual car. And then there was another car parked just in front. Because of the speed at which they have moved west, it was evening in California, and the sun was hanging low in the sky and teasing at the
horizon. Steve's second sunset of the day. In Alabama, it was no doubt already night, and the kids from the camp were probably already in their beds.

"You want the chair?" Steve asked. "Buddy? You want me to put you down?"

"Yeah," Trickshot said, voice a little hoarse. "Yeah. Yeah, sure."

Tony set down the chair and then shielded his eyes against the sun. He waved to Happy; Happy waved back.

Steve set Trickshot down delicately; he looked nervous but also grateful. Steve got the impression he wasn't fond of being carried.

The doors of the other car opened and Phil got out of the driver's seat. Steve should have known. Clint got out of the passenger's side. He stood there for a moment, frozen.

Phil closed his door, walked around, and put an arm around him, leading him over. Clint must have only arrived recently, because he was still in full SHIELD garb: black pants and shirt, a bulletproof vest, a hip and thigh holster, heavy combat boots. The only thing missing was his archery glove.

He had crossed only half the distance when he stopped, still staring.

Trickshot held up two fingers to his forehead and tapped.

Clint burst into something that was half-laughter and half-sobs and flung himself over, throwing his arms around Trickshot's neck and practically climbing into his lap.

"BARNEY!"

"CLINT!"

Trickshot grabbed Clint's head to focus him. "Clint! Clint, you stupid son of a bitch, you-- you grew up!"

"You asshole, you grew down!"

They both began laughing again, grabbing each other, punching each other's arms playfully, swearing at each other affectionately.

Phil slithered up beside Steve, hands clasped neatly behind his back. "Captain," he greeted him with a small, tense smile. "...happy birthday."

Clint kept burying his face into Trickshot's shoulder and Trickshot kept grabbing his head and pulling him up to look at him, and it occurred to Steve that Trickshot-- Charles-- Barney-- whatever his name was, was used to having to speak to Clint directly to ensure he could read his lips.

"You're-- holy shit, Clint, you're buff! You're all-- all-- badass-looking now! And you got a hot Alpha?"

"Yeah! Yeah, she's in the field but I already let her know, as soon as she's back in the States you can meet her, and-- " Clint swiped furiously at his eyes. "--and I got a place for us and-- and so many people for you to meet, Barney." Tears were streaming down his face. "And stop grabbing my hair and yanking me around. I have a hearing aid now, I can hear you fine, I don't gotta read your lips."

Phil leaned in to Steve softly. "We'll speak later, Captain. I'm going to take the Bartons. ...thank you." He gave Steve a small nod.
Clint and Barney were too excited to see each other to even acknowledge Steve or Tony.

Tony put his hand into Steve's a gave him a little tug toward Happy. Even with Tony's total lack of social graces, he understood this was a private moment. He even waited until they were in the car to say, "Since when was Clint deaf?"

Steve almost felt like crying. The moment was something precious, irreplaceable. He didn't think he'd seen Clint so happy before. His heart ached in his chest, but in a good way. And when Tony's fingers threaded into his own he squeezed lightly.

"Since forever, I think," Steve said softly. "Or maybe an Alpha did it to him in the past. M'not sure," he admitted. "For a long time, though."

"Happy birthday, Steve," Happy offered from the driver's seat with a smile. Steve nodded back.

"Oh, by the way, Donner is at the house," Steve said. "Not sure if you picked up on that. You were kind of out of it when I called him. But Gideon found him at George's. Managed to convince Donner to come back to ours, told him that if he insisted he was there of his own free will, that they couldn't take him away. And apparently Pepper gave Gideon's people a good talking to as well."

They were still holding hands, fingers linked together over the middle seat.

Steve leaned his head back. He was admittedly pretty exhausted. It had been a trying day.

"Can we spend the next week in bed?" he asked Tony in a murmur, glancing over at him.

Tony nodded wearily. He was still prickling with anxiety and was unusually quiet on the ride home.

When they arrived, the house was already lit up. Pepper, Aria, Banksy, Tiberius, and Donner were in the living room; Donner was sitting beside Banksy, a blanket over his shoulders, holding a cup of hot chocolate. Tiberius, as usual, was sitting off to the side. George wasn't present; he had already texted Steve to let him know he didn't expect to be back before midnight and he wouldn't see them until the morning.

"Steve!" exclaimed Banksy with delight. "Have you looked at the news? Project 84 is huge, Alphas United is incensed, this is dynamite!"

"Really proud of you, Steve," said Tiberius. "And happy birthday." He pointed to the coffee table; there was a small collection of wrapped presents. Among them, Steve spotted Pepper's small, neat handwriting ("Steve"), Aria's spiky, bold lettering ("Steve"), Sam's blocky, efficient scrawl ("Steve"), Tony's cramped all-caps ("Lover Bunny") ... and one that was labeled, in a delicate, timid, tiny hand that begged not to be noticed, "Cousin Steve."

Donner wasn't yet showing, not really. Even with his slender frame, at best, he looked a little bloated, but he was less than four months along. Still, one hand was protectively over his stomach. He looked up at Steve with his usual nervous glance. "Happy birthday," he echoed.

"Donner is going to stay here tonight, if that's okay with you, Tony," said Pepper firmly. "I told him it would be fine but he insisted on hearing it from you directly, since it's your house." She didn't add it probably had a lot to do with Tony being an Alpha. "So. It's fine, isn't it?" Pepper's tone left no room for argument.

Tony nodded. "It's fine, fuck, I don't care, he can sleep in our bed if he wants."

Donner actually looked hopeful. He glanced at Steve, then at Banksy, as if asking silently if they
were having another little slumber party.

"...you look awful," observed Pepper.

"I know. I got an assault charge today. Is Lowenstein on it?"

Pepper sighed. "Yes."

Lowenstein & Schaedler was a legal firm whose big claim to fame was representing Tony Stark. Tony was a high-profile client and also an excellent proving ground for new junior partners. Lowenstein had been the head of Tony's legal team for the last nine years, since he was 41. He had personally gotten Tony off on charges he'd incurred after crashing a Lamborghini into the Bellagio Fountain, with the argument that Tony Stark was of such great intelligence and so aneurotypical that he had been suffering from temporary insanity at the time of the accident, caused by over-stimulation from the night lights of Vegas. He'd even gotten Stephen Strange on the stand to testify. (Dr. Strange had begrudgingly conceded that it was "possible" but that he, as an aneurotypical person himself, would never be caught dead crashing a Lamborghini.) The "Stark Defense" was now widely taught in law schools around the world, in the same chapter as "Affluenza."

The state of Nevada, which had desperately hoped to make an example out of Tony, had in the end found him not guilty of all charges, but had required him to pay back the Bellagio for damages and had also permanently revoked his license, stating that Tony's "temporary Las Vegas insanity" clearly demonstrated that he could not be trusted to drive while within the borders of the state.

"Pep, can you make me a night cap? I just need something to take the edge off..."

She sighed, rising. "You know I'm not your PA anymore, right?"

Tony waved a hand wearily at her and dropped into the seat she had vacated.

Donner was still watching Steve. Though he'd said nothing, Steve had the impression that it was largely due to Pepper, Aria, and Banksy's presence that he hadn't yet bolted. George had been keeping Steve updated and even after all this time, Donner still spoke fondly of Gideon, although less and less often. There was no doubt in Steve's mind that Gideon could probably sweet-talk Donner right back into a terrible position if he wanted to.

"Open presents. Also I got you a cake in the fridge," said Tony, one hand wearily over his eyes.

"Actually, I got you the cake," interjected Aria. "It was Tony's idea to put ninety-three candles on it, which Pepper and I vetoed because we didn't think burning down the house would make a very good birthday."

"I tried it during my fortieth and it was very popular. Totally stole the show," disagreed Tony. Aria rolled her eyes.

Steve was tired and he wasn't honestly in the mood to do the whole birthday thing. But his friends were here and he wanted to at least try. He smiled wearily and let Banksy come up to hug him. He caught Donner's gaze a little awkwardly and offered him a small nod. "I should just go get changed real quick. I'm covered in dust and I'm sweaty."

"No one's complaining," Banksy winked and Steve laughed before heading upstairs. He changed into joggers and a hoodie before heading back down, letting Aria tug him down onto a sofa before finding a present thrown into his lap.

As Steve opened his first present Tiberius brought over the cake. It was caramel with a banana
cheese cream icing on top. It smelt and looked amazing. "Chose well, right?" Aria grinned.

"Sure did... what is this?"

"Oh! It's a proper yoga outfit for you, because your leggings right now can't quite cope with the stretch," Aria explained. The outfit was white and pale blues. It was thoughtful.

"Thank you," Steve smiled. (Last yoga session he accidentally ripped his leggings; it had been an awkward walk to the car.) "It's always nice to see clothes in my size."

They ate cake and opened more presents. Pepper got him fancy charcoal pencils for drawing. Banksy got him a few bowties, insisting that he just had to try them out some time. Tiberius got him a few CDs of artists missed out on. (Apparently he had a thing for Elton John. Steve hadn't checked him out yet.)

Steve reached for Tony's present and gave him a half serious look. "Is this safe to open in front of company?"

Tony looked up, then suddenly seemed to snap back to himself. "No," he said quickly. "I mean-- I mean sorta-- no." He was actually turning red. "You can open it upstairs. ...it's just for you. And, um, I guess Donner can see it, too."

Pepper's and Aria's eyebrows went up.

"Tony, that had better not be a double-ended dildo or-- or some other weird thing!" said Pepper.

"No! No, it's not, it's just-- it's-- it's really personal--"

"Open it!" said Banksy.

"Open it!" agreed Tiberius.

"No, guys, really, don't--" protested Tony weakly.

"Is it something sexual?" demanded Pepper.

"N-no, no, it's just-- just-- cute, and I don't--"

Pepper got a wicked smile. "It's something cute?"

"OPEN IT!" shrieked Tiberius and Banksy, both wearing identical grins. Banksy loved scandal, and Tiberius, as Tony's old friend, loved embarrassing him.

Even Donner looked intrigued. "...open it," he agreed meekly, nodding.

Tony knew when he was out-numbered. In retrospect, he should have left the present upstairs, but he hadn't been thinking. He had wrapped it himself in his shop and Pepper must have found it and placed it with all the others.

It was obvious that Tony had wrapped it himself; it was not as neat as Pepper's or Aria's wrapping jobs, and there was a coffee ring on the paper, as if he'd set a mug down on it at some point without thinking.

Steve tore away the paper. Instead was a box that had once held a desk lamp and been re-purposed. He tore it open and out fell a floppy, long-eared, incredibly worn brown bunny. The eyes were made up of a pair of mismatched buttons and the fur on the ears had been loved off.
Everyone examined it. They looked disappointed.

"I don't get it," said Banksy finally.

"What is that, like an old dog toy you fished out of the trash or something? Is this an inside joke?"
asked Aria.

Tony face was still buried in one hand in embarrassment, his other clutching his scotch.

Steve carefully lifted the bunny out like it was a baby, like he was scared he might break it if he held it too tight. He stared down at the teddy in his hands and swallowed thickly. "Tony..." he drifted off, his eyes a little glazed over. Whilst its meaning went over everyone else's heads, Steve clearly understood it. He reached over to brush his fingers against Tony's hand and then leaned over to kiss his temple. "Thank you," he whispered, voice soft and reverent.

Gently, Steve set the rabbit back down in the box to keep it safe in there.

"It's cute, I guess," Banksy offered. "Donner's present next!"

"I, er, didn't have much time..." mumbled Donner, clearly feeling shy about it.

Steve gently peeled back the wrapping paper. The present had been diligently wrapped, the wrapping paper pretty. There was a small box inside which he opened to find a collection of handmade sweets.

"I, er, made them myself."


But what really warmed his heart was the tag that said 'cousin' on it. It wasn't a declaration of anything, but it was an acknowledgement. And that meant something.

"Ahem," said Tony. "Well. Now it's late and everyone's tired so... let's go to bed, okay?" He had gotten off easy, he knew. But Pepper had a look of determined curiosity and he knew she would ask Steve about the rabbit later and then probably tell Aria.

Pepper knew at a glance when Tony had had a rough day, and she could tell Steve was exhausted too, so she took it upon herself and Aria to handle things. They shooed Steve away, letting him grab his presents and go upstairs, and told him not to worry, they would fix up rooms for Tiberius and Banksy and Donner if they wanted to stay.

Donner, at least, was stuck; Banksy stayed largely to keep an eye on him, since George wasn't around, and Tiberius stayed to help Banksy stay sane.

Tony was feeling completely wrung out and considering he'd just had two glasses of scotch and a large piece of cake, also a little ill. He staggered upstairs (Steve could handle Banksy and Donner, he figured) and flopped into his own bed with a groan of appreciation for the cool, soft, luxurious sheets.

He slept like a rock. When Steve joined him later, after saying good-night to the other omegas, he curled an arm around Tony's waist, tugging Tony to his chest and spooning him. And despite the weird memory foam mattress and the silk sheets, luxuries Steve doubted he'd ever get used to, he slept like a rock, too.
When Tony woke up the next day, yawning, he took his time in the shower, brushing his teeth and shaving under the warm spray of water, not wanting to face what he was sure was a total clusterfuck downstairs.

It's not that he was psychic; rather, JARVIS had been trying to get him and Steve up since 6:00 AM. First it was because of a phone message from JARVIS. Steve had gotten a rather rude awakening from Gideon.

"Hello, Captain. I assume you've had time to think about the arrangement we spoke about earlier. If you could call me back at your earliest convenience, I'd appreciate it. Otherwise, I will assume you're disinterested and will come along later today to collect Donner."

Tony was half-asleep for this message and had no clue what Gideon was talking about; he tried to go back to bed only to get woken up every five minutes by JARVIS, who kept saying there was someone at the door for him.

Finally, after a lengthy shower, he staggered downstairs in irritation just to shut JARVIS up. "I get it, I get it, there's someone at the door!" he yelled grumpily.

"Mr. Stark, there is someone--"

Tony yanked open his front door furiously, still in his bathrobe, and realized why JARVIS had kept repeating himself. There were at least twenty people standing there. Clearly, they had been waiting for some time and had elected a leader, a not-very dominant, heavyset Alpha woman who stepped forward with two large stacks of envelopes in her hands.

"Tony Stark," she stated.

"Yes...?"

"These are for you, and these are for your mate, Steve Rogers."

"I don't like being handed--" began Tony, but she shoved the envelopes at him and he grabbed them automatically.

"You've been served," she added.

Tony realized he had just been handed at least fifty subpoenas. "...PEPPERRRRR?" he hollered, turning into the house.

When Steve saw all the envelopes in Tony's hands he knew it was bad. He'd heard Gideon's message and he'd felt a little bit sick. The fact that the guy was that desperate to sleep with him, though? That was petty funny. Or at least would be after this shit storm was over. He'd slept in as late as he could get away with, dressed in just a tee, boxers and dressing gown. He'd actually put on Tony's gown by mistake but hadn't bothered to correct himself.

He'd tottered down after Tony for breakfast only to see a huge group of suits outside.

"What's going on?" asked Banksy who trailed out, followed by Donner.

"Gideon wants Donner back," Steve sighed, heavily. Banksy frowned, moving to hand a hand on
"Donner's arm. "Though I'm confused as to how he can legally demand that."

"I'm getting you in a lot of trouble," Donner whispered.

"About time you returned the favor, right?" Steve joked gently with a half smile and a shrug. He knew this was bad, and he wasn't really sure what to do about it.

Pepper appeared and she looked alarmed at the amount of papers Tony was holding. "What are those?"

"Subpoenas, I think," Banksy filled. Pepper lifted a hand to rub at her temple.

"This man..." she said tiredly. "He really is a monster."

"Hey, they're not all from Gideon. Let's see... this one is from the board of Miss Porter's School for Girls... this one is from Bill and Sharon Whitehall of Ohio... I guess one of their kids-- oo, this one looks official!"

"I'll call Lowenstein," said Pepper wearily.

"Gideon wants me back, though?" asked Donner, hope creeping into his voice.

"I don't know how we're supposed to respond to all these summons at once..." said Tony, tearing open the envelopes indiscriminately. "A lot of them are at the same time... let's see, here's one from Lake Cherokee... here's one from Alderdice... yep, looks like half the camps are suing us, and some of the parents, too."

"It's fine, we'll handle it," said Pepper.

By lunch, Lowenstein and five other people had burst in. Lowenstein was an Alpha dressed in a crisp suit; his associates were three other men and two women, all Alphas as well. Tony was lounging on the back pool deck; Pepper led him through, past the enormous pile of summonings covering the coffee table.

"Tony, Tony, Tony, you just can't stay out of trouble!" said Lowenstein, beaming. "This is our new junior partner, Mr. Narayan--"

He stuck out a hand. Tony stared at it blankly. He was eating some of Steve's birthday cake on a plate on his lap.

"He doesn't shake," said Lowenstein, swatting his hand down. "Does Mr. Rogers have any representation yet?"

"Mm... Brent Walker, I think," said Tony. "Y'know Jeff Walker's mate? He's doing it pro bono."

"...Brent Walker is a tax lawyer," said Lowenstein, sounding horrified. "We'll take on his case, too."

"Thanks," said Tony, pointing at him and then going back to his cake. "The subpoenas are on the table... go ahead and help yourself. I super-hate going to court so if you can just absorb, deflect, and delay all of them as much as possible...?"

"Not a problem, Mr. Stark, not a problem!"

The legal team paraded back into the house to tackle the paperwork. Tony went back to his cake, finishing it off before dumping the using plate on the pool deck and wandering inside to find Steve and let him know the situation was being taken care of. Steve had been accosted by Aria earlier in
the morning and was currently up to his neck in media dealings.

However, when he peeked into the office Aria and Pepper used, only Aria was there.

"Steve's with Donner," she explained, then added, "He's puking."

Tony padded down the hall to the nearest bathroom. Sure enough, Donner was kneeling over a toilet, retching, while Steve rubbed his back and Banksy watched, perched on the sink counter, waving his legs.

"What's up?" asked Tony.

"Just a tough pregnancy. He's actually been puking a lot lately, according to George," said Banksy. He gestured Tony over then added, in a low voice, "George is still in San Diego and won't be back until tomorrow, and Donner won't shut up about Gideon... we don't know how to keep him here. If Gideon shows up..." He shrugged helplessly.

"I think I'm done!" announced Donner, sounding relieved, then promptly retched again.

Tony edged away, as if pregnancy might be contagious. "...gross."

"...I hope I'm feeling better-- better by the time-- time Gideon gets here," he said into the bowl. "---I shouldn't have had-- had that cake."

"Don't mention cake!" warned Banksy, but it was too late; Donner was gagging again.

Steve wished he could shake it out of him. A childish part of him wanted to scream in Donner's face. Can't you see?! He doesn't want you! And he never had. From day one, Gideon had bought Donner because he looked like Steve. And now he was willing to get Donner back in order to bargain with Steve himself, or just to prove he could. But either way it was because he ultimately wanted Steve, not Donner. Donner was just second best and better behaved. It was easier, more accessible, but he would never be what Gideon really wanted. Once Aria had joked:

"Steve, people either wanna have sex with you, kill you, or be you."

"...did you steal that from the Hunger Games?"

"Damn, Steve! How quickly do you read?"

Sometimes it felt like Gideon wanted all three of those things.

When Donner was done Steve gently wiped at his mouth with a wet cloth before offering him a glass of water to sip. A little shakily, Donner stood.

Steve gave Tony a bit of a lost look as they headed back out and gently lead Donner to sit down on a sofa.

"You do know that Gideon doesn't actually want you back, right, Donner?" Banksy said gently, sitting down on the other side of him. He'd also listened to the recording. Steve had tried to explain the situation to him best he could, that he'd done everything he could think of to try and get through to Donner.

"But he's sent people for me."

"He did that before," Steve pointed out. "And then he sold you, Donner. Look, we can't fight your battles for you forever. The only way you can be safe is if you refuse to go with them yourself. Else
they'll accuse us of forcing you to stay here." Donner looked conflicted. It didn't look like he refused much throughout his life. "Please."

"But I don't know what... what I'll do." Donner said, looking miserable as he stared at the floor. "What do I without him?"

"You don't know what will happen with him either," Banksy said. "He can sell you again any day he chooses to Donner. You need certainty and you need stability for your baby, and that isn't going to happen with Gideon. He thinks with his stupid knot, not his heart. He doesn't treat you like you deserve to be treated."

"Even if Tony's in a bad mood, he'll still treat me like a person," Steve said, reaching over to take his Alpha's hand.

Tony winced a little, all too aware that Steve had been touching a vomiting person moments earlier.

"I miss him," said Donner softly, looking down. His eyes welled up a little. "I miss him so much." A hand went up to touch the mark that was still on the back of his neck. The one that no longer bore any meaning. "Maybe-- maybe things would be different, with the baby--"

"Oh, Donner," sighed Banksy. "You... you moron. They wouldn't be. If anything, he'd just make you have another abortion."

"But I'm already in the second trimester."

"Yeah, they can totally do them in the second trimester," said Banksy breezily.

Donner's face blanched a little. "I... I need to go take a nap now."

Tony waited until he had slipped past them and padded away silently down the hall before he looked at Steve. "Even if you convince him, he'll never be able to say no to Gideon if he shows up. That guy has zero backbone."

"There, but for the grace of God, go I," said Banksy philosophically. "You know Boswell... he's old-fashioned, but he never limited me. He liked how I was. If I'd ended up with a guy like Gideon, though..." He shuddered a little. "Can you even imagine? Urgh."

"He has no regard for himself," Steve agreed. "He's fine with being the second or third choice, so long as he's a choice. But I think he'd put that baby before Gideon if he had the choice presented to him, I really do."

Banksy sighed. "Why does Gideon even want him back? I thought he didn't want him. And surely he doesn't know, he's...you know, with a load of other Alphas." He grimaced and Steve grimaced in turn. "You'd just think a guy who's that much of a statusist would be hung up on stuff like that."

It kind of felt like Gideon was punishing him. Punishing Steve. But he didn't want to say it out loud and sound like a self-centered asshole.

"I just can't believe he heard that phone call and still wants to go back to him. The guy must have no self-esteem," Banksy sighed sadly.

"Just... I'm gonna try and talk to him again," Steve said, pressing a quick kiss to Tony's temple and then disappearing.

He brought Donner some chamomile tea to help settle his stomach after being sick. He found him
perched on the bed of one of their guest rooms. "Here. This should help you get some rest."

Donner nodded, accepting the cup and curling slim fingers around it. "Was it true...what you said? About Tony letting you be with another Alpha?"

"What?" Steve frowned. "God, no. He would never do that. Tony doesn't--" He sighed. "I'm not a commodity to Tony. I couldn't be with someone who thought I was. When I was...in Yemen, the Alpha took stuff from me when I was in an induced heat. Tony was torn up afterwards. He didn't deal with it well." Steve shrugged. "Neither did I."

"Then why did you lie?"

Steve felt his heart break a little. "Because I was trying to get him to say what he did, to show you what an asshole Gideon is. That you deserve better. It was a weird and creepy conversation, and I didn't want to have it. And, by the way, Gideon still thinks he can orchestrate this to get what he wants. He tried to call this morning and he left a message. He's still prepared to give you up for one night with someone else Donner."

Steve knelt down in front of him to meet his gaze and Donner looked alarmed. "Please," he whispered. "You gotta see this ain't right. All we're doing is trying to protect you Donner. Because we're scared for you, scared about what's happened and what will happen if you go back to him. But we can't stop you from going back to him because then we'd be doing exactly what he accuses you of doing: not giving you the right to make your own choices. This is in your hands, no one else's. If you do go back with him I will be heart broken and I will have to live with knowing that I failed you. But I won't stop you. Because you're your own person and in the end you can do whatever you goddamn want to."

Donner slid down to the floor with Steve. With both of them on their knees, Donner only came up to Steve's shoulder.

"...maybe... maybe I can just go visit him?" suggest Donner hopefully, delicately, trying to compromise. "Maybe I could just go with him for dinner or... or one night...?"

Donner had never said a thing to Steve or George, but George had talked to Steve over the phone about how strange it was that Donner never talked about going home. Just "back to Giddy." He did not seem to have any personal effects at all. If he owned anything, anyway, it was probably long gone, thrown out by Gideon.

"Or-- or we could visit him together? Please?" suggested Donner, still hopefully. His eyes watered again. "Who's taking care of him, Steve? Who's taking care of Giddy? What's he doing without me? He's had me for years. He needs me and I can be good and now that there's a baby, maybe--maybe..." He trailed off, his tone at the end defeated, and Steve could tell that he knew he was lying to himself.

"I need a nap now," said Donner, quietly, looking miserable. He gave Steve a very gentle push away, more of a suggestion than anything. "Will you wake me up when Giddy comes? I have to see him."

"We both know that if you go visit him then you won't come back," Steve said gravely, his voice a little thick. Donner didn't deny or confirm what he said.

"I don't care about who's taking care of him. I care about who's gonna take care of you," he told him, reluctantly standing up when Donner did. He didn't want to leave him but it was clear the other was done talking. "Alright Donner. I..." Steve hesitated by the door. "Sleep well."
He found Banksy and Tony back where he'd left them. "Well?" Banksy looked up.

"Not sure I should be downstairs when Gideon gets here," Steve admitted. "There's a legitimate chance I might try and kill him. Or break his jaw."

"That bad?"

"That bad," Steve hummed. He moved to sit down on the sofa, his head in his hands.

"You guys both kicked ass yesterday," Banksy tried to point. "You can't let this get you down." Even though it was evidently getting him down too.

It seemed the world wasn't willing to give them a break however, as the door bell rang only moments later. Steve swallowed.

"I know you're worried about punching the guy," Banksy put a hand on his arm. "But I also don't think you should hide from him, Steve. Anger doesn't have to be violent, if you channel it in the right way."

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I sure hope it's another subpoena," said Tony. He crossed his fingers and pulled open the door himself.

Tony and Gideon stared at each other.

"Hi," said Tony. "...you here to serve me a subpoena?"

"No. I'm here to pick up Donnie," said Gideon. He leaned to the side a little, to look over Tony's shoulder. "Hello, Donnie."

Tony turned and so did everyone else.

Donner was standing at the foot of the stairs, gripping the banister. He gave a tiny nod.

"Would you like to come home, Donner?"

Donner looked desperately around the room. Unused to having a lot of attention on him, and unused to making decisions, he looked like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming car.

"You can't leave without even saying good-bye to George," said Banksy suddenly, desperately. "George will be back tonight, or tomorrow morning, and he'll worry about you."

Donner looked relieved. "Yes. I don't want to worry George," he agreed softly.

Gideon's eyes narrowed. "Aren't you that fellow on Boswell Mackabee's show?"

"It's our show," retorted Banksy, drawing himself up a little.

"Uh-huh." Gideon didn't seem convinced. "Come along, Donner. It's not as if I don't have a telephone. You can call your little friend when we get home."

"Oh-- okay. Yes. I can call George," agreed Donner meekly.

"No, Donner, wait-- you're still ill! You don't want to ruin Gideon's car!" said Tony.

"Oh. Yes. Well, I feel. . . I feel a little better," said Donner, taking a few steps forward. Pepper and Tiberius blocked him, both glowering at Gideon, who looked not the slightest bit phased.
"Donnie," he repeated.

"Yes-- sorry. Sorry. Coming, Giddy," mumbled Donner, stepping around them and walking over with his head hung down.

Steve was pretty sure he was going to be sick next when he saw him. All he could think about was all the gross shit Gideon had said. He felt an odd sense of shame from it.

**Be a good little spade and kneel for me.**

Steve's hands clenched and unclenched by his sides.

He was watching Donner go and he felt powerless. He felt useless. George had told him last night, they'd saved 1,781 kids in total. But the number wasn't registering. All he could see was Donner walking out that door and back into the arms of a man who was going to hurt him again.

Steve didn't like bullies.

"Donner," he said, standing close to Tony for his own sanity. "Please."

Surprisingly, Donner paused and looked up at him.

"Donner, don't be silly--" began Gideon

"No. You're done talking. You're done. Don't you get? You've lost. Maybe that won't sink in today, but some day maybe. Because we're out here changing the world whilst you're still trying to convince the world we can't. You don't get to speak in my house. You don't get to speak to my cousin. And you're gonna leave him the fuck alone. Because you're a sad, pathetic excuse of an Alpha who doesn't even know how to love properly. I don't even think you're capable of it. You're weak. The only way you can even try to get what you want is through blackmail. Which, by the way, is laughable. I would rather fucking die, for the record. And you're full of shit. And I want you to get out of my fucking home, because you have no right to be here. You have no right to him. And if you actually cared about him, just a shred then you would let him go, because you full well know that you aren't a good Alpha. Not to him. Not to anyone."


Donner's eyes welled up and he twisted the end of his shirt. He looked desperately from Steve to Gideon, clearly moments away from having a break down.

"Think of the baby, Donner!" called Tiberius.

"--what baby? And what the hell is wrong with you?"

Tiberius's face darkened. "I got a bad arvicolinectomy."

"I'm having a baby," said Donner, hand going to his stomach.

Someone passed over Gideon's face. "What? No, you're not. Come on, Donner."

Donner didn't move. "Yes, I am. I'm due in December."

Gideon's frown deepened. "No, Donner, you can't have a baby. You can barely even take care of yourself. Now come."
Donner didn't move. "I can, too."

"No, you can't. I forbid it. I don't know what crazy ideas these idiots have been filling your mind with, but the idea of someone like you trying to take care of a baby by yourself is absolutely ridiculous."

"Someone like him?" prompted Tony.

"Fragile. Sensitive. Dependent. Stupid--"

"I am not stupid!" barked Donner suddenly. "I-- I'm not stupid, I know I'm not, and I am so having a baby. And-- and you can't--"

"I can't what, Donner?" sneered Gideon impatiently.

Donner's moment of confidence was wilting. "--can't-- t-tell me what to do."

"Of course I can. You're my omega, aren't you? Come on." Gideon turned and began walking back to his car.

Donner swayed for a moment, then walked toward the door.

Tiberius, Banksy, and Tony all made noises of protest, but it was Pepper who moved. Before anyone else could protest, she stormed over in heels and pencil skirt and, with a shockingly confident motion, scooped up Donner like he was nothing more than a kitten. Donner let out a squeak.

Gideon turned, and his eyes widened.

"You sexist, close-minded, shit-eating misogynist!" snarled Pepper. "Donner wants to have his baby and he's not going to let some selfish pig like you take it away from him! Donner's a good mom and more of a man than you'll get be. Now get the hell off the property-- it's private and we will press charges! LOWENSTEIN!" she bellowed.

Lowenstein and two other attorneys showed up, looking as shocked as everyone else that Pepper, all 114 pounds of her, was holding Donner in her arms.

"This man is trespassing, threatening, harassing, and stalking Donner Malick, who is now a client of Stark Industries... call the police. We're suing," said Pepper.

"What?"

"You heard me! We're suing the dick off him! RESTRAINING ORDER! YOU HEAR ME, GIDEON?!"

Gideon was already getting into his car.

"RESTRAINING ORDER!" bellowed Pepper after him.

Tony, wide-eyed, slowly closed the front door.

Pepper set Donner down and smoothed down her blouse. She turned to Lowenstein. "Start the paperwork, please, Mr. Lowenstein. Thank you." Her voice was clipped.

"...yes, Miss Potts."

Pepper turned to Donner. "Make sure you're only drinking the chamomile tea. The Darjeeling and
Oolong has caffeine in it. Bad for the baby." She turned on her heel and walked out.

Tony's face broke into a grin.

"...my God, did anyone else know she could do that?" asked Banksy in a hushed voice.

Donner was still clearly in shock. "Re... restraining order?" he repeated in a tiny voice.

"To protect the baby, Donner," said Banksy quickly, and Donner's jaw set in mild determination.

He nodded.

"Best birthday present ever," Steve whispered, more than little stunned himself. "Do you... do you maybe want to sit down, Donner?"

"I--" Donner paused, like he wasn't used to asking for things. "I want a hug."

Steve obliged him. Donner more clung to him than hugged him, as if he were afraid he might not stay standing without the support. He gripped Steve's shirt in tight fists and leaned his head against his chest, Steve's chin tucked just atop of his. He ran a soothing hand down his back. Donner sucked in a ragged breath. "It's gonna be okay," Steve whispered. "We're gonna be okay."

The rest of the day passed in a haze. Some interview was being set up with the *Times* for Steve in the next week and another news outlet wanted a joint interview with Tony about both their experiences. The work they had to do on Project 84 now that the raid itself was over was only going to get busier, especially with the legal battle ahead of them. That night they ordered in take-away, insisting that Donner choose the cuisine (he eventually just went with pizza). They wanted to get him used to making choices, even if it was only small ones.

Steve didn't hear from Clint, but he didn't expect to. He imagined he was busy, acquainting his brother with the whole family. A few days later and Tiberius and Banksy had gone. Donner was staying for the foreseeable future. He was hardly an annoying presence in the house. Sometimes he cooked; sometimes he even tried to clean. But sometimes it was like he was barely even there. Steve was just grateful knowing he was safe.

They went shopping with Pepper one day. It was hard getting Donner to choose things for himself, but they worked on it.

The week ended up too busy and Steve's head was swimming from interviews. On Friday he got a disappointing text from Phil.

> The WSC have decided you can't go see Pietro and Wanda, unsurprisingly. They don't see why you should get to see them. Poses too much of a potential security risk. PC

> Dammit. Thanks for trying anyway Phil. SR

> Donner's still with you, right? PC

> Yeah. SR

> Least that's something. PC

When Tony came up from the workshop that night he spotted Steve in bed with a familiar long box, smiling down at its contents. Steve glanced up when Tony walked in, almost looking sheepish.

"Hey," he murmured. "I never got a chance to thank you. This is... this is really touching Tony. And don't think I'm not grateful, I am. I get that it means a lot. But... why did you decide to give it to me?"
Tony's face went blank, a sure sign he was feeling emotional.

He peeled off his shirt, covered as it was in sweat and grease, and then kicked off his shoes and socks before shucking off his jeans. In his boxer-briefs, he walked over and set on the end of the bed.

"My mom got it for me," began Tony, voice even, forcefully controlled. "It was my favorite toy. I had it 'til I was five. Then, the day after my fifth birthday, Dad threw it in the trash. Said I was too old for it." He paused again. "Aaliyah fished it out for me and gave it to me that night. She was one of my nannies. She said to me-- well, it was a long time ago, but something like, Child, don't tink you gotta always listen to dat man all de time; he got too many crazy Alpha ideas in his head. I can't do a Jamaican accent. Anyway, I Anne Franked Bunny for... well... I guess the last thirty-five years. Aaliyah was right that Dad had a lot of ideas about what an Alpha should be, what a boy should be. And the funny thing is, if he had given it just one more year, I probably would have given up Bunny anyway. I was really into electronics and stuff, not really stuffed animals. Actually, Bunny might literally be the only one I ever had. But... but I guess the point I was going for was that... that since I met you, I changed a lot of my own views about... stuff. Like masculinity, dominance, what makes a 'good' Alpha... and... stuff like that. And I thought it was time for Bunny to come out of hiding."

Tony winced a little, reaching over to touch one of the ears. "He's looking kind of ragged, isn't he? Well, to be fair, he's as old as I am."

Tony laughed a little awkwardly and then patted Steve's leg before getting up to go shower, leaving Steve alone with the toy bunny and the memories it represented.
Tony spent the following weeks and months in his shop, trying his hardest to ignore the legal storm they were currently weathering. Steve, of course, bore the brunt of it. Subpoenas were a regularly occurring phenomena in the Stark household. Lowenstein and the five other lawyers breezed in and out at least twice a week, needing things signed, and Steve had to appear in court over a dozen times. Project 84 was fighting back, and they often asked for Steve's testimony on the things he'd see and heard... on room 5 in the learning annex.

On the sixth time he testified, he spotted Cupid in the hall, wearing a pair of black slacks and a maroon blouse with a ruffle in the front. Steve had not appreciate how young she was; in her professional clothes, she looked like a child playing dress-up. Steve doubted she was old enough to drink. Yet there was a new hardness about her, a sharp, professional meanness that had not been there before.

She was peeling an orange; she looked up and spotted him.

She smiled. "Hi, Captain. Thanks," she said, her voice perfectly normal, not at all the giggling, hypnotic tone it had been back in July.

"Jessica Jones?" called the bailiff, poking his nose out of the courtroom.

She rose. "Oh, damn, I just started peeling this thing..." She tossed the orange in the trash and, slinging her purse over her shoulder, walked into the court to get up on the stand.

Aside from the various court proceeding, Steve and Tony still had their hands full with the media blitz. Pepper and Aria both agreed that, while there were plenty of very liberal and young and modern and progressive newspapers and magazines and talk shoes that wanted them, they should really try to also appeal to Alphas.

Which is how one day in mid-October they ended up in a high-rise in Queens, New York, where John Jameson greeted them in his usual manner. "STEVE! TONY! GREAT TO SEE YOU AGAIN!" he shouted. He was smoking a cigar; Tony coughed.

"Are you allowed to smoke that in here?" asked Pepper.

"It's my floor! I'll do whatever I want! We already have the set up for the photo shoot! Parker! This is the lazy intern I was telling you about! The one who thinks he's gonna be a photojournalist but never gets me any damn pictures! Move that light, will you?!"

Parker was a skinny, small boy, an omega teenager with brown hair, who looked utterly exhausted.

"Is he old enough to work? He doesn't look old enough to work," said Pepper, frowning.

The boy stared at Tony, gooey-eyed, with clear fascination and curiosity. "Mr. Stark! Hi! I'm a big fan, I went to your Expo and--"

"Parker! Stop bothering the talent! Just ignore him," instructed Jameson. "Peter, didn't I tell you to move that light? Open your ears, boy! Light! Here!"

"Yes, sir," said the boy-- Peter-- quickly, turning toward a light that was taller than he was.

Tony looked at the light in alarm; it was clearly huge and very heavy. "Do you need help--" he
began.

Peter was already moving it by himself. "Naw, I carried these all up earlier, I got it," he said, beaming at Tony, clearly delighted to be addressed by him.

"How--" began Tony, but Jameson cut him off, yelling.

"Perfect! Much better! Wish he could be this productive every day! Must be your influence, Captain! See here, this is a real omega! But save it for the interview!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jameson, it's midterms and--"

"Stop complaining! God! These millennials! Always complaining! Have you two eaten? Do you want some food before the interview? Parker! Go get them some food!"

By the end of the interview and photo shoot Tony was positive he had tinnitus from Jameson yelling everything.

"I think I'd rather go to court," he joked with Steve on the plane ride back. Their court appearances had waned a little.

Steve didn't just spend a lot of time going in and out of court, of course. He also spent time working for Fury. He was still, at heart, a soldier. But he and Tony didn't talk about that much. Tony knew full well where Steve was going when he dressed in all black and took a scary amount of gear with him. But Steve knew his Alpha didn't want to think about him killing or hurting people, so they just didn't talk about it.

Most of the missions were solo runs but a few times Steve got to meet other agents. May was his favourite. She was stoic and bossy but incredibly brave. The beta had taught him a thing or two about how to kick right and she never treated him like anything special, just a normal person. It turned out she had some pretty good stories about Phil when he was younger too, but when Steve asked if they were friends she didn't seem to want to answer the question. Most of the time Fury was just asking for a memory card or a disc. Once he literally just asked Steve to sneak up a hotel building and record a conversation; it had all been about project INSIGHT. And wasn't that a SHIELD initiative? Shouldn't Fury already know all about that, as the head of SHIELD? Steve didn't question what Nick asked for but that didn't mean he found it any less confusing. Maybe it was just good old-fashioned paranoia on Fury's part; he didn't seem to trust anyone fully, not even within his own agency.

A few of the older omegas, like Jessica, sent Steve and Tony thank yous. Jessica sent it in the form of a bunch of flowers, all deep purples and blues. Other omegas from all over the states sent them cards and wrote letters that made Steve cry.

A few weeks in Steve went to visit Clint and his brother at the family household. Natasha was there too. It was amazing to see them all together. Laura probably hugged Steve about ten times, thanking him over and over. Natasha just patted him on his arm as he was leaving and told him:

"You did good Steve."

He wanted to tell her, so badly. About Barney's location being kept from Clint, and Gideon's involvement. But he'd made a promise to Phil. And Steve knew, he knew that he was right. Telling Natasha would spark a fight that would not end well. Ultimately, the only thing that mattered was that Barney was safe. Picking off old scabs would not change the past.

So Steve forced a smile back.
"Thanks Nat."

Donner, of course, began to show, and started getting weird food cravings too. One day Steve headed downstairs to find him boiling about twenty eggs all at once. Donner looked sheepish. "I just... I just really wanted some egg mayo."

Well, each to their own.

It soon became apparent that their were going to win their legal battles. They had proof the camps couldn't deny, unwavering evidence. And the existence of places like the 'learning annex' and the discovery of artificial Alpha implants in hospital wings meant that it was very hard for them to deny even the worst of it.

Steve went out for lunch with Kerry and George to give him an update. And he didn't miss the way George's hand lingered on the small of her back when they went up to order their coffees. That made him smile.

He was never bored anymore, at least, Steve thought. The very day after Jameson's interview, Steve actually ended up in court. Yet again. It was getting pretty exhausting; he never said anything new. Donner sometimes even came along to court with him; having wanted to do law once, he was fascinated by the process. Steve told him he could try and go back to college if he wanted but Donner kept insisting he had to go focus on the baby now. It was a choice Steve had to respect.

God knows how many days later, Steve was coming back from yoga, Aria having dropped him off.

And he walked in to see Fury in his living room. Steve blinked.

"I thought we didn't do home visits anymore?" he tried to joke.

"There are some things I'd rather not speak about over the phone," said Fury, deadpan.

A moment later he cocked his head; there was a loud, heavy clanking. Tony stomped into the room wearing a pair of red metal boots, wires running up to his chest.

"Oh, hey, Popeye. Are you gonna try to recruit me again? Guess who's got two thumbs and a brand-new pair of rocket boots?" Tony pointed to himself with his thumbs. "This guy!" He clanked back out; Donner hurried in and let out a cry of dismay at the scuffs all over the floor, then scurried off, probably to get a mop. Despite Tony's veritable army of maids, Donner still insisted on trying to be helpful around the house. Steve and Tony had given up trying to make him stop. It seemed to make him feel happy to feel useful.

Fury watched all this passively, but waited until the two were both out of the room to continue.

"As you know, all your missions have been off the record, and your involvement in SHIELD is, at this time, not endorsed by the United States government. However, you have some unique skills and knowledge that has proven very useful." Fury tented his fingers. "You've interacted with the Tesseract before, Lately there have been some... anomalies. We're curious if you've seen anything like that before."

Somewhere upstairs was a crash, following by a yell from Tony: "I'm okay!"

"And, as long as I'm here, I want to know what the plan is for the end of November. You have another heat coming up and if the asset continues to wake up each time, it constitutes a security risk that the WSC is not especially willing to put up with."
"But you won't let me get sterilised because the government likes the idea of super soldier babies," spat Steve. Nick said nothing. Steve pointed a finger at him. "We both know it's true. Otherwise they wouldn't give a shit. Look, if him being in a freezer doesn't work, then nothing will. I don't have a plan, per se. My plan is just to get the hell on with it. My main concern is me being half blind for another five days again. I'll be vulnerable. And people keep attacking us."

"Of course, SHIELD will arrange more security than last time. We aren't prepared to take risks again," Nick said.

Steve sat down on the couch a little heavily, running a hand over his face. "How comforting." Steve frowned. "Not still messing around with that damned rock are you? I told you, it's a bad idea."

"The Tesseract has great potential that we cannot afford to just ignore, Steve. We were wondering if you would come in, chat with some of the scientists, off the record. To help them figure out what they're seeing."

"Look, all I've seen it do is kill a load of people--" Steve sighed and then paused. "I guess, there was a point in the fight..." He hesitated. "This is gonna sound ridiculous. But it hit a wall and the energy kind of, spread over it? And I could have sworn for a second, I saw a part of outer space."

Nicky's eyebrows rose. "You didn't mention that before."

"That's because I'd just woken up, and you were all so paranoid I was crazy already. I didn't wanna add fuel to the fire. But yeah, it can do some weird kind of stuff. Stuff like you'd read in a sci-fi dime novel. I'd call a space window an anomaly." Steve sighed again, knowing there was no way around this. "Look, fine. I'll come in. I have some spare time this weekend. Will Clint at least be there?"

"...Yes. Although his position is supposed to be classified."

Steve gave him a bemused look.

"Okay. Well, I'll be there. Do I need to bring my shield?" he asked, only half joking.

Fury didn't smile. "No. That won't be necessary." He rose. "Off the record," he repeated, then stalked over toward the door.

There was another crash from somewhere in the house; Tony tumbled off the second-floor mezzanine, hit the jets on his boots, and managed to land rather delicately on the floor with a loud clank of metal on stone.

"NO FLYING IN THE HOUSE!" yelled Donner and Pepper together from somewhere upstairs.

"I'M NOT!" yelled Tony back. He looked over at Steve. "Hey, where did Fury go? ...that dude's like a ghost. Steve, guess what? I almost got it. One word: magnets!" He held up his hand; on his wrist was one of the bracelets Pepper had gotten him for his birthday. Tony reached over and pressed it. A moment later a gauntlet flew out of nowhere and slammed onto his hand. He winced a little; he had only gotten the bandages taken off in September.

"Ta-da! ...almost self-assembling! I mean, it still needs a ton of work, and it doesn't always work if I'm moving, but... so far, so good!" Tony drummed his fingers in the air and the RT node in his palm let out a high-pitched whine and it began charging. Tony twitched his fingers again and it hummed, powering down. Tony beamed.

"Very impressive," Steve hummed. He walked over to kiss Tony's temple with a smile. He stared down at himself, still in his exercise gear. "I need to go shower," he said, squeezing Tony's side
gently. Steve's smile turned a tad suggestive. "Wanna join me?"

"Naw. I don't want to make you late to go play with Fury's space rock."

"You were eavesdropping?"

Tony grinned. "JARVIS hears everything. Don't act like Fury doesn't know."

Steve sighed. He did not want to join Tony in the shower; the mere mention of the Tesseract left him unsettled and put a damper on his whole weekend. It was dangerous and he did not care if it was the 21st century; he thought it was better off left alone.

Still, he was a man of his word, and he went out to the Mojave desert, to a facility that was not on any map, in order to take a look. And, admittedly, to be close to Bucky, who he knew was there somewhere.

At the SHIELD base Steve didn't know what to tell them. He thought everything they were doing was stupid and foolish, and reminded the scientists of it at regular intervals. They were clearly getting equally frustrated with him, running off statistics and numbers like he was supposed to understand. "Look," one of them said, pointing to a video monitor. "Sometimes it convulses, like this." The blue energy around the Tesseract twisted, the pattern circular and uniform around the cube. But no space window.

"I don't know what that means ma'am," Steve told her. "Can I go out and look at it?"

"Er... sure. Just, don't get too close."

They led him into a large, warehouse-like area. The cube was in the center.

Steve stood in front of it, his hands on his hips. It was so weird to be looking at it again. The last time he'd seen it was... a very, very long time ago.

"It gets pretty boring after a while."

He glanced sideways to see Clint perched in the rafters, looking bored as hell. One leg was swinging down idly.

"Do you know what they're actually trying to do with it?" Steve asked. Clint shrugged.

Steve turned back to the Tesseract, peering at it.

It... it almost felt like there was something on the other side of it, looking right back at him. Steve thought about the space window. Was it... was it still there? Maybe if they threw it against the wall?

"I dunno what to tell you," Steve said an hour later, as he made his goodbyes with the team. "The convulsions look dangerous to me. I don't think you oughta be messing with it."

"Yes, Captain, you've made your concerns clean."

Steve let out a soft huff.

He took the long drive back home through the desert and along the beach, wanting to enjoy the view from his bike. The wind felt nice in his hair and he relished in the salty smell of the sea. When he got home Donner had ordered Chinese take-away for everyone. Aria told him about a guy she'd been on a date with. Within an hour Steve had forgotten all about the Tesseract and the way it stared at him. It was just... well, nice. Not to think about it.
Tony bothered Steve for about a day after his visit to the Mojave to see the Tesseract; Tony had hacked enough files and also gone through enough of his father's old lab notebooks to have a healthy amount of curiosity about it. But Steve's knowledge was frustratingly non-technical and so Tony gave up quickly, re-focusing his efforts on building the Mark VII, which was coming along well (in the sense that Tony had not broken any more bones).

Fury had no follow-up with Steve about the cube, which was not unusual. Fury rarely followed up on things. It was unsettling. It was unclear if Steve had been any help or if the thing was still undulating strangely, and Clint, the only one who had any firsthand information, was unable to tell Steve about it. ("Sorry, man. It's classified.")

It was two days before Thanksgiving when Steve and Tony were woken in the middle of the night. It was just before 4 am and Steve's immediate thought was that it was Fury.

"I'm terribly sorry, sirs, but the phone call is urgent," said JARVIS.

"Is it the cube? It's the cube, isn't it?" said Steve in alarm, sitting bolt upright.


It was George, who was calling from the hospital. Donner had stayed over at his place that night.

"Steve, Tony, it's me... you gotta come down to the hospital, now--"

Tony sat up sleepily, blinking. "Oh my God, is Donner having the baby? He's not due for another month." Donner, as slender and small as he was, had begun to resemble a caricature of a pregnant omega. His features had softened from the hormones, his face becoming more delicate and feminine. He hadn't gained a significant amount of weight except for the baby itself; it looked like he had cramned a basketball under his shirt. He informed everyone that pregnancy was no longer fun; he felt sore and bloated and had to pee constantly and his feet kept swelling.


Tony blinked. "Whu-- oh. Oh. Shit. Is Banksy there?"

"Yeah, he wanted me to call Steve. He's not holding up very good," said George. "Donner's with him but he asked specifically for Steve and Danielle. Danielle's on her way."

Steve had not realized how close he and Banksy had become. Banksy, social butterfly, had so many friends he probably couldn't even name all of them. But now, he'd only asked for thee people: Danielle, Donner, and Steve.

"Tell him I'm coming," Steve said wearily, shoulders slumping. His panic had subsided and left him with normal midnight exhaustion. He rubbed sleep out of his eyes, yawning loudly, and then leaned over to kiss Tony's forehead, but missed and got his eyelid. "Urgh. Sorry. I'll let you know how he's doing when I get there," he promised and then slipped out of bed. He wobbled a little before he made his way into the wardrobe to get changed.

The drive to the hospital felt strange. He knew Boswell was old, but he couldn't stop thinking about... about this being Tony one day. Steve knew it was selfish, he should be thinking of Banksy right now, but--

But there was an age difference. And one day Tony would be sick and maybe... maybe one day he'd be making a call to Banksy just like this one. It was a chilling thought.
When Steve arrived at the hospital it was chaotic. Of course, Boswell was getting the best treatment possible so he found them all in a private room. Danielle was already there, holding a coffee and looking exhausted. Donner looked surprisingly awake, but his pregnancy had really messed his sleep cycle up at that point. And Banksy looked...well, dreadful. Wordlessly, Steve pulled him into a hug as Banksy stepped towards him.

"Where is he?" Steve asked softly, meeting Danielle's gaze.

"He's with the doctors right now," she murmured, clutching her coffee tightly. "They've not given away much."

Banksy's eyes watered. "He's-- he's got the best team," he said. He wrung the edge of his shirt. Banksy looked like a completely different person; his face was drawn and his eyes were red and his hair, usually in a perky little ponytail, hung down below his ears, messy and unbrushed but still straight. "We-- we rode together here, he was looking right at me the whole time, that's a good sign, right?" He looked between Danielle and Donner. "Right? It's a good sign? His eyes were tracking-- he-- we got here soon-- he's not really that old, you know, he's-- he's so active--"

Donner got to his feet with a groan. "Sorry. Gotta pee. ...the doctors are really good, Banksy, they're gonna do everything and more for him." He patted Banksy's shoulder as he passed.

"Can you grab me coffee, Dons?" called George.

"Uh-huh..." Donner waddled out of the room.

Banksy paced a little, then began rambling again. "He's in great health, really, he's very active, you know, he takes the stairs every day to the production office. He's going to be fine, right? We caught it super early. When we came here he was holding my hand and looking right at me." He looked from Danielle back to Steve, desperately.

The door opened and a doctor walked in; Banksy flung himself over. "Is he okay?" he let out breathlessly, the question practically a single syllable.

The doctor gently pried Banksy off him, guided him to a seat in the room, and sat him down. "Mr. Banksy... we're doing everything we can. Mr. Mackabee is a fighter and considering how quickly you responded, he has the best shot of recovery. However... I'm sorry to say that... at this time, his prognosis is not promising."

Banksy sat rigidly, leaning forward, hands clasped as if in prayer.

"We think it would be best if you came to see him now. He's awake and he's very comfortable, but--"

The doctor's beeper went off and he checked it, then got up suddenly. "Excuse me." He practically bolted from the room, nearly knocking Donner's coffee out of his hand.

"Hey!" protested Donner weakly, holding open the door. In the hallway, someone was calling a Code Blue, and Banksy's face had drained of its remaining color, taking on an almost translucent sheen.

Donner offer George the coffee; George offered Donner his seat. Donner eased into it with a groan.

"He'll be fine, though, right? He's awake, they said," said Banksy in a hushed voice. "They said he's comfortable-- he's a fighter. That's Boz, he's a fighter, you know, and he's very healthy for his age. He-- he was fine yesterday, perfectly fine."
"They're doing everything they can, Banksy," Donner reassured him.

Banksy got up and began pacing again. "I mean, he's not really that old, he's barely in his eighties, really, and he's in great health. Like they said, he's a fighter, and--" Banksy stopped suddenly and then crumpled like a marionette whose strings had been cut. His previous, slightly manic rambling was replaced with a high, keening wailing that went on far, far longer than was normal.

George and Danielle both rushed over to him, but Banksy was beyond words; he just kept wailing. And Donner's face went white, and he turned and looked at Steve. "--the bond broke," he said softly. Of course Donner knew what that felt like. Danielle herself was unbonded and George was still bonded to his old Alpha, Luke. Steve had only experienced it once, very, very briefly, in Yemen, the sudden empty silence as part of the soul flickered out like a flame in the wind.

After thirty years of being bonded, Banksy and Boswell were severed, which could only mean one thing.

Banksy sobbed on the floor, oblivious to either George or Danielle trying to help him up.

A moment later the doctor stepped into the room, gingerly closing the door behind him. He didn't need to say what had happened; Banksy felt it. But he stood by respectfully, clearly prepared to do the grim job of reassuring Banksy that they had done everything they could, given him every chance, and that at the end, he had been comfortable.

Steve knelt down on the floor next to Banksy and tugged him against his chest. Banksy moved easily, too caught up in his own sorrow to be aware of little else. His head tucked under Steve's chin just right. Within minutes his shirt was wet with the other's tears but he didn't care. Banksy's sadness was palpable. Gently, Steve rocked him forwards and backwards whilst he cried.

"It's okay. We're here. We're not going anywhere. We'll always be here," Steve whispered.

He couldn't imagine the pain. He thought he'd lost a bond once with Bucky and he'd been wrong. Steve had no idea what he was going through. His and Bucky's bond had only been hibernating, but it had been there. He'd been able to feel it, even if he hadn't realized it. Bond severance was not something he could relate to.

"You've got us," Danielle emphasised, kneeling down too with her hand on Banksy's arm. "It'll be okay."

They kept saying it, like somehow it would make it true.

When they finally made it out of the hospital, Steve carried Banksy out. George drove them all back to Banksy's house. Once inside, Steve carried him up to the main bedroom so he could tuck him into bed. It would still smell of Boswell, at least. Steve's instincts had been right. Banksy clung to the sheets like a life line, eyes red rimmed and still tears. Donner sat down on the edge of the mattress.

Steve pulled out his phone, sending Tony a quick text as he sat down on the other side.

> He's dead. SR

Tony sent back a text almost immediately: If you need to stay with him, I'll understand. - TS

George, Donner, and Danielle all quietly agreed among each other to stay with Banksy. He spent the first day curled up in bed, crying himself dry.

Then he gathered himself up and, with cold, mechanical precision, began making all the funeral
November 26th dawned cool and brisk but sunny, as was typical for Los Angeles.

Tony and Steve both wore black suits. There was a strange pit in Tony's stomach that wasn't his and he felt like Steve spent a little too much time trying to fix his hair. It occurred to him, on the ride over, that he was twice Steve's age, that he and Steve were a younger version of Boswell and Banksy, and his blood ran cold. Did Steve see it, too?

The funeral was, unsurprisingly, absolutely packed. Boswell was being interred in the Hollywood Forever Cemetery. Banksy looked like he had aged twenty years and lost twenty pounds in only four days; his hair hung limply. No one had ever seen him in all black before.

"Hello, Steve, Tony, Donner..." he greeted them, voice distant, like his was daydreaming. Tony thought suddenly of how Jarvis's voice had gotten like that, after Dad had died, and his blood chilled again.

"I know what it's like to lose a bond, Banksy," said Donner, pulling him into a hug. "...it doesn't get any easier. But you get stronger."

Banksy looked surprised at this insight. "...thank you, Donnie." He forced a smile, then went back to greeting people. Donner had moments like that occasionally, ones where he was... almost human. Still generally shy, he had gotten more used to making his voice heard. Only yesterday, he had complained loudly that they didn't really make omega maternity clothes for funerals. (Still over three weeks from his due date, Donner looked ready to pop.)

Steve and Tony sat respectfully through the usual prayers and quiet memories. It wasn't until the priest invited Boswell's mate to say some words that things got interesting.

Banksy shuffled over to the coffin and set a hand on it, his other hand gripping a wrinkled sheet of paper tightly.

"...I love Boswell," he began. His voice was hard and determined. "I... I love Boswell with all my heart. And I always will. Boz was my best friend and my mate and--" His voice cracked a little. He paused. "--and I love him," he repeated, then took a deep breath and looked down at the paper in his hand. "I-- I met Boswell in 1982, when I was seventeen years old. He bought me for eighteen thousand dollars, which back then was the price of maybe two luxury cars."

There was a shocked gasp that ran through the crowd, but Banksy continued.

"--we bonded that year. I did not want to be bonded to a man who was fifty years old, but I was told I did not have a choice. We had a small ceremony and when he-- he bit me, I cried. I felt like my life was ending. His son was actually a couple of years older than me, nineteen at the time, I think, and joining the household was very lonely and isolating. Only Boz ever talked to me; Ryan ignored me and I knew no one. Because I am an omega, I was only spoken to by Boswell's friends to be given drink orders."

Banksy swallowed, then looked up with a sad smile. "Ryan and I are okay now, by the way," he said. There was a nervous, sad chuckle from the audience and Boswell's son, Ryan, nodded at Banksy with the same sad smile.

Banksy took another deep breath. "Boz and I were pair-bonded for thirty years. The-- the first two years I hated-- I hated every second of it. I hated being bonded to him and I know he knew that. But... but the reason I say all this is because... because Boswell and I had a relationship that evolved.
Boswell did not discipline me. He did not get angry when I spoke back to him. I got braver, and one day, when he told me to kneel, I told him I would not. And Boswell said to me... he said...

Banksy's eyes teared up and he began crying but he kept speaking. "...he said he would never make me kneel if I didn't want to. But I had to say it. That-- that was the Boswell-- that's the Boswell who I have to-- say goodbye to today. Boswell gave me my voice. He fought to get me on his show and he fought to turn the show over to me. Boswell was old-fashioned but he and I grew together... we grew toward each other, and with each other. And after thirty years, I can say that the worst day of my life wasn't meeting him. It was losing him. Without him, I wouldn't have ever learned to be the omega I am. Our relationship started in a bad way but-- but I love my mate. I do. I will always love him and the way I remember him is not as the man I knelt for, but the man who told me that I didn't have to. Boswell lived a long life and he watched the world change around him and he changed with it, something that-- that not many people can do very easily. He was an inspiration, I think. I-- I love him and I miss him and-- and I wish--" Banksy's tears flowed harder. "--wish I could just-- kneel for him one more time," he finished in a croak. He couldn't go on; he was crying too hard.

Danielle came over to put an arm around him and gently lead him away.

The audience looked deeply uncomfortable with this shockingly candid, confessional-style eulogy that touched so heavily on omega rights. Most of them probably had no idea that Banksy and Boswell were arranged.

They lowered the coffin into the ground and everyone tossed a handful of dirt onto it; Banksy wept on Danielle's shoulder and he didn't appear for the somber reception at his own house. Donner informed Steve and Tony that he was upstairs, buried again in bed, huffing Boswell's clothes and crying himself senseless.

Unsurprisingly, Boswell's passing left a splash on the headlines, but so did Banksy's speech. Steve had not appreciated what a closed little secret the beginning of their relationship was; people seemed genuinely shocked that Banksy had been force-bonded in the first place. Also unsurprisingly, most of them focused on the negative, not the positive.

"Assholes," proclaimed Tony as he leafed through a tabloid, days later. Happy, Rhodey, and Agent Mackenzie were reading over the same one.

"I know... they totally missed the point. Anyways, the guy's dead now... Jesus," said Rhodey.

"Aw, damn it. I got Union Jack," said Happy, pouting.

"...what?"

Happy flipped the magazine around. "Page 46, there's a quiz. Which omega superhero are you? I got Union Jack. I was hoping to get Steve."

Tony snatched the magazine from his hands. "Just because Steve's an omega doesn't mean everyone is! I thought I told you to stop believing these stupid tabloids!" He didn't add that Union Jack was indeed an omega.

He checked the quiz. The options included Captain America, Union Jack, Mockingbird, and Spiderman.

"Mockingbird is not an omega!" he said triumphantly.

"Agent Morse? Yeah she is," said Mackenzie.

Happy looked smug. Tony gritted his teeth. "Well... well, Spiderman isn't!"
"Bet he is."

"No, he's not-- damn it, Happy, these stupid tabloids are just guessing!" Tony threw down the magazine and stomped off to his shop. So far, Happy's tabloid had successfully guessed Steve, Taylor Swift, Carson Daly, Rihanna, Union Jack, and Mockingbird... but he felt like he needed to prove to Happy that they were only guessing.

Even a stopped clock was right twice a day, right?

Tony didn't think it would be hard to disprove Spiderman's status. All he had to do was figure out the guy's secret identity.

He swept some papers off his desk; there were proofs of some pictures from Now magazine that poor, overworked Peter had sent to him, asking for approval. Tony had forgotten to send them back but it was on his to-do list.

"Okay, JARVIS. How does one go about setting a web for a spider?" mused Tony.

There wasn't much to go on. The guy operated alone. He always wore a mask. He never left a trace behind, no hair, no fingerprints, just--

"Spider silk," said Tony out loud. Ha! It was so simple. Whoever this guy was, he was someone who needed access to the protein in spider silk for his little web shooters. He was probably a chemist or something.

A quick visit to Wikipedia and Tony had heard that the primary composition of spider silk was something called fibroin. A visit to VWR Lab Supplies confirmed that the stuff was insanely expensive. The guy might just be purify his own, but still, he was probably burning through a ton of money buying small amounts of the protein and getting it into the solution for his webs.

Within ten minutes Tony had created an eBay account and posted 1 kilo of "purified fibroin" for $100. Considering a 5% solution of 20 mL was over two hundred dollars commercially, Tony felt he had set an excellent trap. Now all he had to do was wait for someone to buy a suspiciously large quantity of spider silk and then he would have their address. Easy-peasy.

_I really am a genius_, he congratulated himself cheerfully. He shot out an e-mail to Erica over at Natick to make sure he could actually get a kilo of fibroin. (Fortunately, he could.)

"Hey, JARVIS, where's Steve? I wanna brag about the amazing Spider-man trap I'm setting," he called.

"Captain Rogers is currently visiting Thomas Banksy," intoned JARVIS.

Tony groaned. Steve had been over there a lot lately. Tony could not stand the grieving process and, indeed, avoided any sort of mourning as if he was allergic to it. He had not cried at his parents' funeral, nor Obadiah's, nor Jarvis's or Ana's. For Yinsen, there had been no memorial service at all.

"Steve's a stronger man than I," mused Tony. JARVIS did not disagree with him.

The very night after the funeral Steve had ended up at Banksy's house. Tony had gone home, though he'd taken Steve by a fancy liquor store and told him to bring Banksy wine. Although Steve wasn't a fan of Tony's drinking, bringing over Banksy's favorite bottle of red wine turned out to be the right move. They sat up in his bed drinking it from coffee mugs late into the night, talking quietly.
"I thought it was very brave of you to tell everyone," Steve murmured, staring down at the red liquid in the bottom of the Doctor Who mug he'd been given.

Banksy sniffed. He was drinking his wine a little quickly, but Steve didn't comment on it. "It felt like the right thing to do," he whispered. "I... I wanted to show how much people could change, you know? That Alphas can change."

"Yeah." Steve sipped at his own wine. Banksy sniffed loudly next to him. "I think they can too. Boswell was a good guy."

"Tony's a good guy too, Steve. I was worried before. But I see it now. He's a good guy. A good one."

"He is," Steve agreed with a tired smile, thinking of how Tony had walked around the liquor store hours ago, picking up various items and asking anxiously if they might make Banksy feel better.

"Your heat's coming up soon, right?" inquired Banksy.

"Yeah...yeah. Like in the next few weeks. Don't really know when. My metabolism makes it hard to predict."

"You're not excited about it, huh?"

"Heat's aren't a good time. Let's just say... the person who force bonded me--" Steve cringed. "He's on ice now. So my last heat I kept going blind, or being convinced I was freezing half to death. I could feel him so strongly that-- that it was like I wasn't even in my own body. Or, I was, but-- but it was just feeling him. It wasn't fun. And it's going to happen every heat."

Banksy frowned. "The bond must be terribly strong for that, don't you think?"

Steve remembered seeing Bucky's car on the street and just knowing, getting into a passenger seat without a word. They'd always been like that- so in sync. It had made them good on the battlefield during the war, even if off it they'd barely been talking.

"I guess so," Steve croaked, his heart aching in his chest.

Banksy curled over, his head leaning against Steve's shoulder. "I just... I don't know what to do now. There's this hole. And I've got nothing to fill it with. I'm beginning to understand why Donner wanted to go back to him, even though Gideon is such an ass." He sipped at more of his wine. "It's feels like I've lost a limb. Like a part of me has been... amputated."

Steve didn't know what to say. It felt like there was nothing he could say to make things better.

"And I wasn't even with him, when he...when he..." Banksy's face crumpled.

"Yes you were," Steve disagreed softly. He curled an arm around him, letting Banksy slump against him. "That's what a bond means. You were there with him. You're always with him. Even till the end of the line."
Abuse of Power

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone! We are only one or two chapters away from OMEGA RISING PART 5: AVENGERS. I know you guys are fucking excited for that and you totally should be.

Some notes on this chapter: there are GRAPHIC descriptions of a non-consensual assault. If you're not into that, I highly recommend you skip this chapter, as Cap gets into a really dicey situation. Although we have tags and warnings on the story as a whole, I want to emphasize that this chapter in particular has potentially triggering content, so please exercise your own good judgement before reading. Thanks!

- T

Steve's heat hit earlier than expected, at the beginning of December. He'd gone to yoga with Aria and then headed out to the shops to grab a few things. Despite not needing to, Steve still liked the simple act of shopping and picking out his own groceries. He was determined to not let a computer do everything for him. He was already a little hyper from the morning and realized the tingle down his spine was probably a telling one. But Steve would only be going into preheat; in his mind, he was going to be fine.

It was a critical error of judgement.

Suddenly, his vision started to go. He walked into a pile of boxes, knocking a few over, and realized he was screwed. He fumbled for his phone, but couldn't see the screen. StarkTech phones had no buttons and required one to be able to see the "keypad."

Goddammit, Bucky.

Steve managed to make out some kind of light in front of him, supposedly the exit. He set down his basket on the floor, feeling bad, but he couldn't walk out without paying. He walked into someone. "Sorry! Sorry!" And then stumbled out onto the street. He still couldn't really see, and, God, he was cold. And he was in preheat. This was not good.

Someone put a hand on his shoulder. Steve flinched. He didn't like people touching without asking.

"Dude, you okay?"

"No, no-- get off." Steve stumbled back. He couldn't see anything clearly. Just blurry, vague shapes that didn't mean anything. "I need-- I need to call Tony."

"Whoa, man, chill out." (A comment that Tony would have no doubt seen the humor in.) "You're okay, you're in preheat. Give me your phone, I'll call Tony... is that your Alpha? Sit down, buddy."

"Is he okay?" asked someone else.

"Just a 'mega going into heat. He might be sick, I dunno, he's pretty disoriented. It happens."
At home, Tony shuddered suddenly.

"Did it just drop like ten degrees? JARVIS, put on the heat!" he hollered.

Donner frowned. He was doing a puzzle on the coffee table. "I don't think it's cold. If anything, it's really hot in here already."

"You just think that because you're pregnant," said Tony dismissively. He was lying on his back on the couch in a wifebeater and a pair of ragged jeans, barefoot, and one of his arms was sheathed in a gauntlet. He had been fine-tuning the grip all morning, flexing his fingers, listening to the gears whirl and click, making tiny little adjustments with a set of watchmaker's tools on the table beside him. He had declined joined Steve and Aria for yoga because they always ended up going early and Tony loathed "early."

JARVIS beeped at him. "Sir, you can an incoming call from an unknown number. It is unblocked; the area code indicates a Malibu native."

"Probably a misdial, then. Send it to voicemail," said Tony lazily. He shivered again. "Seriously, how are you not cold?"

Donner shrugged. "We could light the fireplace. That would be festive." His face lit up a little. "Can you believe it's only seventeen days until Christmas?"

"Ugh," said Tony, who had not gotten gifts for anyone yet and was hoping Pepper would step up to the plate for him.

"I'm due on the twentieth but it would be fun to have a Christmas baby, I think."

"Are you kidding? That would suck. Poor kid would always end up being overshadowed by Christmas, and cheap people would get him one gift for both holidays."

"Well, I think it would be swell," huffed Donner.

"Know what would be swell, Steve? ...if after the war, you and me took a little vacation to Jersey or something... somewhere where we could see the stars for real."

The memory came to him suddenly. He was lying down, and it was cold, and he could see his breath, and it was dark. His first thought was that he and Steve were lying on the roof of their building, staring up at the New York sky. But then he realized he couldn't move and that it was a different kind of cold, and that there were no smells or sounds or anything to indicate he was in the city.

Was he dead?

The thought came to him and it was a strange, clinical one. If he was dead, how could he be thinking at all? But he suddenly remembered the blistering cold of the Alpines and the weak, numb grip he'd had on a moving train, and then sudden, terrifying weightlessness...

His heart throbbed. He was dead and for some reason that terrified him, even though if he was still thinking, he had to be somewhere. But this didn't really much resemble heaven. Did that mean he was in hell? ...maybe this was just purgatory.

...that made sense. Gawd, it was boring, though. How many years would he have to be here?
His left arm sudden erupted with a tingling, burning, itching sensation and he gasped; a plume of steam came from his mouth and he twisted, trying to scratch his arm, but he couldn't move.

...maybe this was hell, after all.

Tony scratched his elbow idly as he lit the fireplace. "Much better," he sighed, rubbing his left arm subconsciously.

"You could wear the sweater I knitted you," suggested Donner.

"Yeah, no thanks."

Donner's eyes welled up. "...you don't like it?"

"No, no, I like it!" protested Tony quickly. "It's very... yellow. It's just that I'm... I'm not really a sweater guy. ...aw, dammit, Donner, don't do the emotional pregnant thing on me..." A tear slipped down Donner's face and Tony groaned. "...I'll go put on the sweater," he grumbled unhappily, going upstairs to go get it.

"Oh my God, is that Captain America?!"

"I think it might be!"

"He looks sick."

"Oh, he's just an omega in heat, let him be."

Steve had attracted a small crowd. Someone had guided him to a bench to sit down on, although he still kept flinching and swatting away everyone's touches. And then he cried out, suddenly, his left arm throbbing. He ducked his head down between his knees, gritting his teeth.

"Tony isn't picking up, dude. What do you want me to do?"

"What's wrong with him?"

Steve's hands fisted in his hair. Stupid people. So stupid. They didn't understand. They could shut up already. His heat was fogging his mind, making him irritable and confused and disoriented, and he could feel his bond with Bucky, throbbing insistently in his gut, confusing him further.

"...Everyone, move out of the way!" Steve heard voices. People were parting. They sounded authoritative. Someone knelt down in front of him. "Captain Rogers? My name is Brock Rumlow. Agent Rumlow. I was in the vicinity. I'm with SHIELD. I'm here to get you home."

And of course, SHIELD had been keeping tabs on him. If it was SHIELD.

Brock, whoever the hell he was, admittedly smelled great. He was an Alpha, almost as dominating as Bucky was. He put his hand on Steve's shoulder and Steve caught his arm in a tight grip. Just because he was blind didn't mean he didn't have reflexes. "I'm not coming with you," he stated plainly.

"Captain, it's SHIELD. Come on."

"No. You could be anyone. You could be HYDRA. I'm not coming with you."

Brock sighed. "Captain, you can't just stay out on the street--"
"Well, then, get Tony here."

"We've tried to contact him. He isn't picking up."

"Well, I'm not coming with you!" Steve snapped, sounding determined. "You could be anyone. And I can't even goddamn see. I'm not coming with you."

He heard someone else shouting out; presumably they were with Brock. "Hey! Stop taking photos!"

"Captain. You're obviously not thinking very clearly." Rumlow's voice dropped so that it was quiet. "You're in preheat and you're emotional. You need to come with me. You can't just sit out here; people are noticing. And if you lash out, you could hurt someone. Come on, I'm on a STRIKE team with Agent Romanov. You can trust me." He gave Steve a very gentle tug, them repeated, "It's not just for your safety or for the safety of your image, Captain. It's for the safety of the people. You've already got about a dozen civilian onlookers, and you're going to attract some Alphas."

Rumlow's voice was incredibly reassuring.

"I said no pictures!" yelled someone, and there was a crunch that was probably a phone.

"Barnes's stats in cryo went haywire this morning and he's waking up. That's how we knew we had to come find you. The WSC wants you off the street and under supervision ASAP. Now come on..."

"Come on," groaned Tony, looking at himself in the mirror. The sweater Donner had knitted him was bright yellow and he looked like a fucking Easter egg crossed with a duckling.

But at least it was warm.

He walked back downstairs with a sigh. Donner beamed when he saw Tony wearing the sweater.

"At least Steve's not here to tease me," said Tony.

"Where is he, anyway? Yoga doesn't normally take this long."

"Probably getting groceries or something," said Tony with a wave of his hand. "He doesn't like using JARVIS. Bit too technical for him. He's an old man, you know."

Donner giggled softly. "He and I are the same age, though, really."

"PEPPER, CAN YOU GET ME A BLANKET? I'M FREEZING MY ASS OFF!" yelled Tony.

"You...you work with Nat?" That seemed to comfort Steve, if only a little. Although he couldn't remember her mentioning a Rumlow before. But then, maybe this STRIKE thing was a new gig for her, he wasn't sure. Reluctantly, he nodded and stood. Rumlow kept his hand on his elbow and lead him towards a car. He put Steve in the back seat. He heard two men get into the front; Rumlow stayed in the back with him. Steve was feeling around, getting his bearings. He had not felt this helpless in a long time, and he did not like it.

"So you're gonna lose your sight now every time, huh?"

"Yep," Steve said, sounding peeved.

"That's gotta suck."
"You have no idea." The car started and Steve instantly felt nervous. How did he really know he could trust these people? He didn't.

"Try and call Tony again."

"He's not picking up," Brock said.

"But you didn't even try!" Steve protested. "You just tried to warn me about Alphas approaching. And now you've put me in a car with three unbonded ones! Call Tony."

Who the hell even thought these people were a good idea? If they'd known since this morning, then why would they send Alphas?! Urgh. Idiots.

"Where are you taking me?" Steve demanded. "Are you taking me home? Have you tried calling Tony yet?"

"Calm down, Rogers. We're all professionals here and we were sent on the instructions of SHIELD and the World Security Council," said Rumlow. "Listen, give me your phone and I'll try Tony for you again. If we can't get him then we'll take you to base so that you're safe, which is what the WSC advised us to do."

Rumlow put a hand on Steve's arm, perhaps trying to be comforting, then repeated, "Give me your phone, I'll try again."

Donner winced a little. "He's kicking again. I swear, this kid is going to be a soccer player." He lifted his shirt; there was a small ripple over his stomach.

Tony actually gagged. "Look, Don, the miracle of life is amazing and all but I'm a mechanic. Your spawn terrifies me. Put your shirt down."

"I could really go for a taco," hummed Donner.

"JARVIS!" hollered Tony.

"No, no, like a bad taco. A food truck taco," said Donner. "Nothing fancy."

"Oh. Well, call Steve, have him pick one up on the way home. JARVIS! Call Steve."

Steve's phone rang in Rumlow's hand; he silenced it immediately. Steve's eyes were still unfocused and unseeing. Rumlow patted his arm again. Steve was clearly tense, probably from feeling vulnerable, but Rumlow was relying on his natural charm to calm the omega. He had very specific orders. "Don't worry, Captain. We're taking you somewhere safe," he promised.

Once Steve gave his phone over that was it. Steve was putting all his trust into this random agent. He swallowed thickly. He was shivering again. Steve had tried to use his phone multiple times, but he couldn't do it himself.

"Here. They told me you'd be cold." Brock offered him his jacket, which Steve reluctantly accepted. It smelt of the wrong Alpha but it was warm, at least, and that was something.

"I want to go home," Steve said through gritted teeth.

"I'm sorry Captain, we have to follow--"
"Which base?"

"Sorry?"

"Which base are you taking me to?!" Steve demanded, getting increasingly upset. "If you don't tell me where I'll get out of the car."

"It's moving!" pointed out one of the agents from the front seat.

"I'm serious," Steve hissed. "Where are we going?"

"Steve," said Rumlow, his voice stern and calm and authoritative. "Please listen to me. You're in pre-heat and your heats are very intense due to the serum. You're very emotional right now. I will answer all your questions but you need to calm down, alright?"

Suddenly there was a hand on his head; Rumlow was stroking his hair. "Calm down. You're with STRIKE agents. The most important thing was to get you off the street. I'm sure you feel threatened right now because we're all Alphas and you're not with your mate, but we're soldiers, like you, Steve, and no one here thinks any less of you for going into heat. It happens. Take some deep breaths, okay? ...Stuart, can you hand me some water for him? Here, drink this."

With Rumlow's coat over his shoulders and Rumlow stroking his hair and handing him water, Steve was being overwhelmingly smothered by Rumlow. The other Alphas in the car were not as dominant, and Rumlow seemed to be in charge. His touches were not sexual in the slightest; it was the sort of petting an adult might give to a weeping child. On one hand, the patronizing was insulting. On the other, admittedly, Steve was throwing a bit of a tantrum. Then again, he had every right to, considering he was blind and in a moving car with a bunch of Alpha strangers who were taking him to an undisclosed location.

"Just relax and I'll give you all the details, okay?" said Rumlow. Steve kept swatting him off but he kept trying to stroke Steve's hair. "Relax, Steven. We're going south, to Ventura. There's a base there. It's less than an hour north from your home in Malibu and Tony can come pick you up as soon as we get into contact with him, which I'm sure will be later today. You'll be home before your full heat hits. We just want to make sure you're safe, that's all. Having you blind and mentally compromised in the middle of a Ralph's parking lot isn't a good look for Captain America." He threaded his fingers gently through Steve's hair. "Do you want us to turn on the radio for you?"

"I want you to stop touching me," Steve managed to grit out. It was confusing. It felt nice. And he liked it. Steve wanted to lean into the touch, wanted to nose against Brock's neck. But it wasn't right. He wasn't Tony. He was just the closest Alpha to him and he was speaking softly and kept touching him. Steve's breathing was a little elevated and he was stressed.

Steve sipped at the water then spat it out. "That doesn't taste right."

Brock sighed next to him. "It's just water, Steve. You gotta trust us."

"I don't trust SHIELD anymore."

"But you trust Fury, right?"

Steve hesitated and then brought the water back to his lips. The lack of sight was making him paranoid, he knew, and during his heat things could taste funny. He finished the bottle of water and then dropped it with a crinkle.

"No," Steve muttered. "No radio."
Brock still had his hands in his hair. Steve didn't want to admit it was calming. Goddammit. He was glad he didn't work for these people anymore.

Well, ha, not on the record anyway.

"How long is the drive?" Steve asked. "I want you to tell me where we're going." His head throbbed and his hand rushed out to grip the car door, fingers curling around an edge to steady himself. "Shit. I want you to-- fuck --tell me the road n-names."

"Whoa, whoa whoa whoa whoa," said Rumlow. He took Steve's hand and gently unpried his fingers from the door. "Don't touch the door; we don't want you tumbling out by accident. Listen to my voice, Steve. I already told you, the drive is only forty minutes, okay? You can grab my shirt if you need to grab something. We're on the Pacific Coast Highway and we'd headed north, okay? We're headed to Ventura, there's a base there. They already know we're coming and they're going to get Tony to come pick you up. ...you don't need to feel embarrassed, Steve, we understand that this is a normal part of your biology and no one here is going to think less of you for it. You know SHIELD has lots of omega agents. It's okay to relax."

Despite Steve's protest, he was still stroking his hair softly, hypnotically.

"Ventura's naval base, on Point Mugu, it's literally a straight shot north on the 1," said Rumlow. "...heck, if they get Tony on the phone, he might even beat us there. And then you can go home. Okay? We just want to make sure you're supervised until then."

With his unoccupied hand, he adjusted his coat, which was still over Steve's shoulders.

"What happens in the car, stays in the car," offered someone up front, presumably the driver.

"We're under strict confidentiality orders from the WSC," clarified Rumlow. "As a representative of the government, they have a vested interest in making sure your public image doesn't get too smeared. Now relax. Doesn't that feel nice? Just enjoy the drive. We'll be there soon."

"He should be home soon," said Tony, checking his watch impatiently. They had called Steve but it had rung once and then gone to voicemail, which likely meant that his phone was dead. Steve always forgot to charge it.

"But I really, really want a taco," whined Donner.

"Okay, okay, chill out... let me call Aria, she was with his this morning, maybe she knows what's up." Tony called Aria, who picked up after two rings. "Hey, Aria, any clue where Steve is?"

"...no," said Aria suspiciously. "He wanted to go shopping after yoga but he only needed like, a dozen things. He isn't back yet?"

Tony felt a tiny little chill, then dismissed it. He was always worried about his mate; being pair-bonded meant he, as the Alpha, was constantly getting over-protective.

"Actually, I think he's pulling up right now. Sorry for bugging you," lied Tony, hanging up.

Donner frowned. "Why did you lie to her?"

"I don't want to be one of those clinging, over-controlling Alphas who needs to know where Steve is twenty-four seven," explained Tony. "...maybe he got called away on a mission or something. ...lemme just check with Phil." He called Phil. "Hey, Phil, by any chance, is Steve... is he like, on a
"classified mission?"

"If he was, I wouldn't be able to tell you, because it would be classified," said Phil.

"Okay but... just between you and me...?"

"I wouldn't be about to tell you, Mr. Stark."

"Ugh. You are the worst!" Tony hung up.

On the other end, Phil frowned at the phone. It seemed like an odd question to ask out of the blue. He was at his desk in the JDE Mission Facility; he turned to his computer and went to check his e-mails.

No, Rogers was not deployed on anything, not anything on the books, anyway. There was an e-mail alert from Level 8 informing him that Cryo Tank 5 had abnormal readouts.

Phil frowned. Cryo Tank 5 was...

He called Fury. "Hey, Nick. Barnes's vitals are elevated today. He might be waking up again."

"So sedate him. What's the problem?"

"It means Rogers is probably going into heat. ...he's not in the field, is he?"

There was a pause, then Fury said, "...no, there's no SHIELD activity in southern California right now. There's one STRIKE team that was deployed directly by WSC but since they bypassed SHIELD, I assume that must be an international incident, outside our jurisdiction."

"Gotcha," said Phil. "Just making sure. I'm going to call the Stark household and let them know."

Something wasn't right. Phil hung up before Fury could ask any questions and called back.

Rumlow's hands were rough. Like Bucky's. They were soldier's hands. Steve liked the feeling of them. He shoved his hands in his lap, gripping the edge of the coat around him. It smelt of Brock. Steve was swaying a little, enjoying the fingers in his hair...

Goddammit.

Steve blinked, his vision fuzzing at the edges. "I hate the WSC," he murmured. Brock laughed quietly.

"He wants to have sex with me," Steve wheezed, laughing himself as he ducked his head down to press his forehead against his knees. "Asshole."

Either they knew who Steve was talking about or just didn't ask. God, he was starting to feel sick. He wanted Tony. He missed Tony. Tony smelt so nice...

He sat back up, blinking. Then he rubbed at his eyes. Nothing.

"I think...I think..." Steve whispered, frowning. He suddenly felt imminently about to pass out. He felt sick but sleepy, overwhelmingly so. And it was not a natural seepiness.

Brock's hand moved down to rest on the back of his neck. No, no, no--

He slumped down, his head smacking against the window, eyes falling shut. Steve went out like a
"You lost my mate?" Tony was hysterical, yelling and pacing through his living room.

Donner's fragile confidence had wilted and he sat curled on the edge of the couch, arms over his bulging stomach, watching silent and wide-eyed.

"Not lost, just... we don't know where he is," said Phil.

"That is the definition of lost, you fucking idiot! You lost my mate! Call the World Security Council! Call the STRIKE team! Call... call the National Guard! Call... someone!"

"Listen, maybe Steve's just browsing a farmer's market or something," said Phil reasonably. "You know how bad he is at charging his phone. Don't you think maybe you're over-reacting?"

"No! He's my omega!" shouted Tony.

Donner nodded timidly in the corner. Gideon had always known exactly where Donner was, all the time. For an Alpha to not know where their mate was was certainly upsetting.

"Look, let me call Fury and have him call Pierce or Hawley. They can at least confirm if he got sucked into the STRIKE team that's outposted over there," said Phil reasonably. "If not, then he's probably just having a beer somewhere. I really think you're over-reacting. Steve can take care of himself."

"Unless he's in heat and blind!"

"He's not due for weeks, Tony, he and I cycled together last time," said Phil calmly. (He had not told Tony about Bucky waking up and did not plan to; it would only work him up further.) "Just hold on and let me check, okay? I'm sure where ever he is, he's completely fine and in control of the situation."

Steve woke lying on the floor. Surprisingly, the floor was carpeted. The room he was in had no windows and was lit with a soft, dim lamp. It had the vibe of a therapy office and it was actually warm and pleasant.

There was a pair of legs in front of him. Someone was sitting on a couch beside him, one leg crossed over the other, shoes shined to an immaculate gleam.

"Good morning, Steven," said a pleasantly, oily voice. One that Steve knew all too well.

Gideon rose, stretched, and then crouched beside Steve. Steve felt a hand on the back of his neck.

"I did tell you it was you or Donner, didn't I? That I wasn't playing games? Being a member of the World Security has its perks. ...I took Donner's little restraining order to mean that you chose to spend a night with me in return for his freedom. I think that a lifetime of independence is worth a little tryst, don't you? It's more than fair, actually. ...stop struggling, Steven, the drugs aren't going to wear off anytime soon." Gideon's hand caressed his neck, tracing the two bonding marks softly. "I wish that I'd been there when you woke up. To be honest, I didn't believe it. You and I, Steve, we could have been bonded. We could have been mates. It would have been wonderful. With my political power and your... unique talents... we would have been utterly unstoppable. You can't imagine my disappointment when you and Stark announced your bond. Stark's an unstable drunk. And, let's be frank, a very, very weak Alpha. I met his father, you know, back in the early eighties.
Very lovely man. Very dominant. Had a very well-behaved omega, too." Gideon's hand moved behind Steve's ear. "I know you're spoiled. I know you're poorly trained. But maybe just for one night, you can indulge me, try to be the omega that God made you, instead of the abomination that serum turned you into. ...you never know. You might just like it."

No. No. No... this wasn't happening. It couldn't be happening. Steve was powerless. He was wearing fucking yoga pants and trainers. He couldn't even breathe properly. His limbs felt heavy, too heavy too move, and he blinked blearily. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be real. He tried to flinch away but he could barely move. Gideon's hand was clammy and cold. He hated it.

The way he touched Steve's bond marks felt like a violation.

Least I can see, Steve thought grimly.

He tried to push away Gideon's touch but he could barely move his own arms. He could feel panic rising in his chest. Steve, for once, was actually afraid of Gideon. For once he wasn't the stronger one. He was defenseless and he'd put himself in this goddamn position. His gut had told him something was wrong with the STRIKE team. Steve knew he couldn't have gone with Rumlow. But then they were just following orders, weren't they? They must have still known something was up. And the water. Steve had known it tasted weird. He never should have finished it.

"'M..." Steve struggled to speak. His words were too thick and slow. "'M gonna k-kill you."

He was pretty sure he heard Gideon laugh. Steve tried to get but the hand on his neck kept him down. He trembled. His heat was coming on already.

"T-Tony."

Steve tried to squirm away from him. But he couldn't; he wanted to cry. He had not been so powerless since the previous century.

Except, that wasn't exactly true. Steve had been here before, in a cell in Yemen. And he knew what came next.

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"We didn't give any orders to Rumlow's STRIKE team," said Alexander Pierce, frowning.

"You sure?" asked Fury. He could sniff out a lie a mile away.

But Pierce didn't seem like he was lying. "Yes, quite sure. I can put you in contact with Agent Rumlow directly if you'd like. At this time there are no active missions in that region."

"Alright. ...let me confirm that with Rumlow and I'll get off your back," said Fury.

"We're not about to have another Yemen situation, are we, Nick?" asked Pierce wryly.

"No, no, nothing like that. Just checking in for a friend. Personal favor. Sorry to bug you," said Fury coolly.

A moment later he was on the phone with Agent Rumlow. He could hear mariachi music in the background; apparently, the team was out to lunch at some Mexican place.

"Agent Rumlow, this is Nick Fury, director of SHIELD. Mr. Pierce directed me to you. I just wanted confirmation that you were not currently involved in any operatives in the last 48 hours."

"Why? Are we needed?" asked Rumlow.
"...answer the question."

"One extraction and delivery," said Rumlow. "Why?"

"According to Mr. Pierce, the WSC gave no orders to your team."

"He must be mistaken. We got orders from Mr. Malick this morning," replied Rumlow.

Fury swore. "Which base was the target delivered to?"

"Don't think I can divulge that."

"Damn it, call Pierce and get his approval, then!"

Gideon gently pressed behind Steve's ears; Steve let out a weak, thin whine.

"Shh... sh, sh, sh... I won't hurt you if you behave. I only want you to kneel for me, Steve. I want you to kneel and to call me Alpha." There was a note of perverse excitement in Gideon's voice. "I want to feel your cheek on my thigh and to put my hand on your head and, for just a moment, feel what it would have been like. That's very little to ask. And then you can go back to your mate and we will hopefully never cross paths again." He rolled his fingers over Steve's scent gland. "Surely that's not too much to ask?"

Steve squirmed, and not in a good way, trying to get out of Gideon's reach. But that was impossible really. It was wrong. It felt good, but it wasn't Tony. He was touching one of Steve's most intimate areas. He wanted to grab Gideon's hand and break it but every bone in his body felt like lead.

"N-no..." Steve stuttered, trying to shake his head for effect. "Never."

And he meant it. If Gideon wanted Steve to kneel he would have to bully him into it, physically. And despite being stiff and tired Steve would kick and writhe through all of it. This felt like an awful lot of effort for Gideon just to get him to kneel for him. Steve didn't trust that he would let him go. He said he wanted a night. Steve didn't want to know what that meant. And he sure as hell wouldn't ever cooperate.

"G-go fuck yourself," Steve gasped out.

Gideon sighed deeply. "I didn't think you'd cooperate. But if you insist we will do this the hard way. You're going into heat and you're on enough muscle relaxants to bring down a bull moose, Steven. You're helpless. I'm very generously willing to let you off lightly if you'd only cooperate with me." He scuffed the back of Steve's shirt and pulling him up; Steve was as floppy as a rag doll. "I would rather do this now, Steven. While you're in pre-heat. But if you want to want until you're in full heat, I'm a patient man."

He sat back down on the couch, dragging Steve over to rest his head on his kneel, still massaging behind his ear. Steve wasn't kneeling; he was simply draped like a ragdoll, half on the couch and half on the floor.

"Call me your Alpha," demanded Gideon.

"What do you mean, Malick deployed the STRIKE team to pick up Rogers?" demanded Pierce. "No, we didn't hear anything about that! Rogers isn't even our concern as long as he's not off ruining international treaties! ...get the Ventura base commander on the phone, I need to know what
the hell's going on."

"Mr. Stark, we think we've located Captain Rogers."

"Finally! Christ! You people!" shouted Tony into the phone. He turned to Donner. "Come on, get your shoes, we're going to pick up Steve." He turned back to his cell. "Where is he? I'm getting my keys."

"He was taken to the Naval base in Ventura."

"Great, perfect, I'll meet you there in twenty minutes," said Tony.

"I'm in Mojave, Tony," said Phil patiently. "Rumlow's STRIKE team will be there along with Agent Mackenzie. Rumlow says he handed off Steve to Mr. Malick on his orders but doesn't know the nature of the assignment--"

"Son of a bitch," said Tony, who could already guess the nature of the assignment perfectly well.

Steve grunted as he was pulled up, arms flailing a little as he tried to push back and failed. Gideon didn't smell good. He smelt musky and heady. He was gross. He reminded Steve of Schmidt, or someone equally foul. "W-will never cooperative with you," he slurred, trying to sound menacing and somewhat failing.

Steve trembled as Gideon pressed on that point behind his ear. His body was responding traitorously. Steve tried to pull away, but the hand on the back of his neck kept him where he was wanted.

Steve's eyes were watering. He shuddered.

"N-no," he grit out. "No piece of shit Alpha d-does-" It was hard for Steve to get out coherent sentences. He was terrified of his instincts taking over, of something dreadful happening.

It was a stupid and childish fantasy. The idea of Steve letting Gideon mate him was laughable. He wouldn't entertain the man's fancy, not for a second.

"Go ahead and resist," hummed Gideon. "The longer you wait, the harder it will become. I've heard your heats come on unusually fast, don't they, Steve?" He pulled one hand away from behind Steve's ear, keeping the other in place, and licked his fingers. "I should also like to remind you, Steve, that one of your Alphas is currently under the care of SHIELD, which is overseen by the WSC. Keeping him alive is both a massive security risk as well as a huge cost drain. It would be very, very easy to eliminate him. I'm happy to keep Barnes alive for you, if you would show some gratitude." His hand went back to Steve's scent gland, massaging it; it was slippery with oil, a result of Steve's preheat and the stimulation.

"I swear to Turing..." growled Tony as he and Donner drove north on the Pacific Coast Highway. His hackles were up and he wasn't bothering to try to flatten them. They were in one of Tony's convertibles, a sleek sunburst-orange Corvette. It was a lovely, clear, blue-skied day. Donner looked absolutely mortified; he was shrunk into his seat, unhappy at being in such close proximity to an aggressive Alpha.

"I'm s-sorry about G-Giddy," said Donner.
"For the millionth time, stop apologizing, it's not your fault and I'm not mad at you! I'm mad at the whole fucking situation," said Tony. Donner's stutter was back. "I'm mad because they just won't leave Steve alone. Well, specifically Malick--"

Donner's eyes watered. "It's m-my fault m-my cousin's in trouble. I shouldn't've left Giddy."

"You didn't leave him! He left you, and good riddance! The guy is a psychopath!" said Tony. They were zipping north at over ninety miles an hour, which is the fastest Tony could go while weaving in and out of traffic. "We should get Pepper to get a restraining order for Steve again Malick, too, that guy is completely fucking-- stop apologizing!"

"You w-won't kill him," Steve wheezed, somehow still talking despite all the hormones clouding his brain. He hated the fact that his body was responding, that he was still slick despite all this. He was repulsed at himself. Maybe his body struggled to portray his true feelings but as Steve looked up at Gideon there was nothing but contempt in his eyes.

"You kill him, then you have nothing to black mail me with," Steve pointed out with a grim kind of smile. "And I'm still pretty sure the government has their heart set on super solider babies, even though y-you won't admit it. And I would rather die, then d-do a-anything for you."

Gideon's eyes darkened a little. "Don't think I won't kill him to get what I want. With him waking up twice a year, I could very, very easily orchestrate that. Would you like to test me, Captain?"

Gideon shifted Steve a little, laying his head onto his knee, so that he was sort-of kneeling in front of the couch. He continued to rub behind Steve's ears and play with his hair lovingly. No. Not lovingly. There was no love, just a cold, proud sort of possession.

"My sweet, proud little spade," he growled softly.

"You fucker, where's my mate?" shrieked Tony flinging himself at Rumlow.

Rumlow easily grabbed his wrist, twisted, and got him onto his knees.

The colonel beside them, whose hands were clasped behind his back, raised an eyebrow.

"I was only following orders, Mr. Stark," said Rumlow patiently, easing off Tony.

Tony sprang up, teeth bared and hackles up. Unfortunately he was still wearing a fuzzy, bright yellow sweater.

"This way, please, Mr. Stark," said the colonel politely. "Captain Rogers was left in one of the second-floor lounges."

Tony growled at Rumlow. Rumlow actually rolled his eyes. Tony wasn't dominant enough to even register as a threat to him, and Tony hated both Rumlow and himself for that.

"I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding," said the colonel.

"I was told we were protecting him," offered Rumlow. "...don't want another Yemen incident, after all."

"Shut up," snarled Tony.

The only one who was affected by Tony's aggression was Donner, who followed them silently, like
No, Steve thought, not yours.

He tried to move his arms, his hands only flexed by his sides. From onlooker's point of view Steve must have looked unnatural. For a soldier, his back wasn't straight enough and his arms hung awkwardly. Even his legs looked disjointed and poorly coordinated. He couldn't have been comfortable kneeling there like he was. And he wasn't.

Steve could smell Gideon's arousal and he was pretty sure he wanted to be sick.

"If you t-think that you could kill him and h-hope to even survive a day, then you're k-kidding yourself. The only thing killing Bucky will-will-" Steve struggled to speak as Gideon pressed down on his neck and he let out a strangled sort of gasping sound, convulsing a little. Steve's hands clenched and unclenched by his sides.

"L-Let me go. S-Stop it. I don't want it. Stop." Steve was breathless, he was struggling to speak, his brain fogging over with hormones and a confused and reluctant sense of arousal.

"For once Captain, stop fighting. Just relax. I can see and smell how much you like this. This is what your kind was designed for, you know. Without the serum, you're nothing but another omega, one designed to please an Alpha. And right now, I'm the only Alpha in the room. Your Alpha," emphasized Gideon, adjusting Steve a little more so his posture was more natural. "There you go. Comfortable...good boy." Steve's body shuddered. "Yes, that's right. Good boy...very good...you like kneeling don't you? It's instinctual. Good boy...just relax, breeder."

"D-don't call me--" Steve's jaw clenched as one of Gideon's fingers jabbed into his scent gland, too hard.

"I left him in here," said Rumlow.

Rumlow, two of Rumlow's men, the colonel, Tony, Donner, Mackenzie, and two sergeants had all walked through the base and into the main headquarters, taking a flight of stairs into a very normal-looking office-style hallway where they actually passed a cluster of cubicles and a man in a military uniform banging on a copy machine.

The door to the lounge was plain, heavy wood. Tony grabbed it and yanked but it rattled.

"It's locked," he reported.

"What? This door doesn't lock," said the colonel in surprise.

"Yes it does... I mean, we never lock it, sir," said one of the sergeants.

"I locked it," supplied Rumlow. "I was told Rogers can go feral and violent during heats--"

"No he doesn't!" yelled Tony, rattling the door harder.

"--which he kind of was in the car, to be honest, so we sedated him, as ordered," continued Rumlow, ignoring Tony. "Here's the k--"

Tony snatched it from him and ripped open the door.

No one got a good look at anything because the lights were dim and Tony immediately flung himself
into the room and collided with another man and in an instant, the two were on the floor snarling and writhing and snapping.

The two sergeants both dove into the fray to try to separate them.

Donner watched, wide-eyed, and giggled softly.

"You think this is funny?" asked the colonel in surprise.

"Well... everyone but me has an erection."

It was true. The room reeked like omega heat and every Alpha was responding to it. Only Mackenzie, a beta, and Donner, an omega, were unaffected.

It was hard for Steve to move but the moment he was released from Gideon's grip on his neck it was like he could breathe again. He could smell Tony; he could hear them going for each other. He wished he could goddamn move. Steve wanted to kill him. He wanted to punish Gideon for ever thinking he could do this to Steve and get away with it. But right now he was useless.

"Steve."

He looked up to see Donner, who knelt down next to him. "Steve, can you hear me?"

He just about managed to nod. Donner reached for his hand and frowned when he felt Steve's fingers were limp.

"What did you do to him?" Donner frowned.

The colonel shrugged. "He had to be sedated, like the agent said."

At some point the sergeants had managed to separate Tony and Gideon and were holding them away from each other at different ends of the room. McKenzie stepped forward to help Donner get Steve standing. It soon became evident he couldn't stand by himself. He tried to reach for the gun in McKenzie's belt and he would have got it too if the Colonel hadn't stepped forward, a hand on Steve's arm.

"Oh no you don't Captain."

Steve growled, low in his throat. The colonel looked surprised; it was rare for omegas to growl.

"What the hell is going on here?" Rumlow demanded.

Steve was practically trembling with fury. And his heat. But mostly the former, and he looked about ready to tear Gideon's head off. If only his goddamn body would work. Now Tony was here, and he felt safe, all he fear had dissipated and in its place was anger. A righteous kind.

"Well, obviously, they were right. They're both feral," said the colonel.

Tony was beyond words; he was snarling and snapping and desperately trying to get at Gideon.

Donner stood up. "No. No, Steve doesn't go feral in heat. There's been a mistake." Donner looked petrified to be speaking up.

"Well, I was around for his first heat, and other than a single incident, he seemed pretty with it," agreed Mackenzie.
"He was acting very anxious in the car," supplied Rumlow.

"Hmm..." said the colonel. "Well, Mr. Malick? What do you think?"

"Rogers absolutely--" began Malick firmly.

"No," interrupted Donner suddenly. He looked over at Malick, and the two made eye contact.  "No," he repeated firmly, staring Gideon in the eye.  "We want the-- the opinion-- we want the opinion of-- of the whole council. Not him. He's-- he's too close. Because-- Steve's my cousin and--and-- and we're ex-mates."

"This is your ex-mate?" asked the colonel, gesturing to Donner. The resemblance between he and Steve was obvious.

Gideon hesitated, then growled out, "...yes."

"Well, then, he's right. There's an obvious conflict of interest. Let's call Pierce and ask if we can let them go home," said the colonel. He pointed to one of the sergeants. "Simmons, go call Pierce and Fury. Gentlemen, this should only take a few minutes."

"Unhand me," demanded Malick. The sergeant holding him obeyed; Malick brushed his suit off, then looked over at Donner, accessing him. Donner was enormous. Malick stared. "Donnie? ...when?"

"I'm due in eight days," said Donner.

Malick looked completely speechless.

"Congrats, Mr. Malick," said the general.

Malick sputtered. "I don't-- I never-- I told you no!"

Donner shrugged a little. "You're not my Alpha anymore."

The atmosphere in the room was tense; Steve was in preheat and Tony was still growling and being held back, and Malick looked horrified, and Donner was serenely pregnant. An unbonded, pregnant omega alone was enough to freak everyone out.

The colonel came back with a phone pressed to his ear. "I'm on the phone with Councilwoman Hawley. No extraction of Steve Rogers was ever cleared by the WSC. Clearly this was a big misunderstanding. Rogers, Stark, you two are free to go. Malick, Rumlow, the council has requested that you stay for questioning."

Mackenzie held Tony's shoulders firmly, guiding him out of the room; Tony was too upset to say any words. One of the sergeants threw Steve's arm around his shoulders and half-carried, half-dragged him out. Donner waddled after them.

"Donner! Donnie, wait!" cried Malick.

Donner paused, turned, and looked at Malick. One of his hands slid over his stomach, and then, he smiled. "No," he said simply, then turned and followed the others out.
It was a struggle getting Steve all the way out to the car when he couldn't support his own body weight. Steve was obviously upset, but proud of Donner. Still sedated and struggling to control his own limbs, he felt devastated by his own weakness, scared, violated, dirty, relieved, and fiercely satisfied with Donner finally standing up for himself. It was a confusing state of mind for his preheat. The sergeant helped Steve sit down in the back seat of the car, his feet hanging out.

"We are really sorry," Mackenzie said. "The boys were just following orders. It's their job."

"Sometimes it's your job to question those orders," Steve muttered, eyes narrowing.

Mackenzie nodded. "Absolutely, Captain."

The men left them, heading back into the base, and Steve reached out for Tony. He wanted the contact. The minute his Alpha got close he buried his face against his chest, trembling a little. Steve's movements were still limited, awkward. Everything he did appeared to be wooden and forced.

Steve realised he was crying; his shoulders shook a little. "I t-thought he was gonna... gonna..."

Tony clamored into the backseat of the car with Steve and lay over him protectively, while Steve cried and nosed into his neck for comfort.

"No. No, never, I would never let him--" snarled Tony. His hackles were still spiked and now, with his mate distressed and in preheat, Tony was a bundle of anxiety and paranoia. "Never," said Tony firmly. "Never, no... you're okay... shh... omega... shh... my mate... you're with me now... I'll never let anyone touch you, I swear..."

Donner sat awkwardly in the passenger seat, not sure where, precisely, his role was in all this.

Tony kept growling out comforting words, half of them simply "omega" or "Steve," shielding Steve while he cried it out. They sat there for well over a half-hour before Donner groaned quietly in the front seat.

"Oh my God, Donner, we'll get you your fucking taco!" snapped Tony, who was short-tempered.

"No, it's just a cramp. He's kick-- ahh."

Steve was crying all over Tony and getting his shirt wet. His preheat meant his emotions were on overdrive anyway and this had tipped him over the edge. He was crying in relief mostly, rather than distress, his hands bunched in Tony's shirt. "I didn't want it. I-I didn't want to kneel. I couldn't move. I'm so sorry Tony. I'm so sorry-- sorry-"

He felt guilty. Like he'd shown weakness. Like he should have been better. When, in reality, there was nothing he could really do.

"Look, can you drive? I want to stay with Steve," said Tony, who remaining flattened over Steve, clinging to him desperately and unwilling to be more than an arm's length away from him.

"I don't know how to drive," said Donner, sounding alarmed.

"...are you fucking kidding me? You've never driven?"

"No, of course no-- ahhhhHHH!" Tony looked up at the sudden change in pitch. The color had
drained from Donner's face and he was gripping the car door. "...I... I think my water just broke."

"Are you fucking kidding me right now, Donner? These are leather seats!" bellowed Tony.

"I'm s-sorry," said Donner, trembling.

None of the three of them had enough experience or knowledge to realize that putting a heavily pregnant omega into an enclosed area with pair in heat, both of them dripping with pheromones, was a sure-fire way to induce labor. Even if not for the extreme amount of pheromones in the air, the stress of seeing Gideon and Steve probably would have done it.

"What do we do?" asked Tony in alarm.

"Go to the hospital?" guessed Donner.

"I meant about my seats! Is it like, sticky? Is there blood in it? Can we put some cold water on it so it doesn't stain?"

Surely Gideon had to get fired for what had happened? That was an ultimate abuse of power. Steve trembled under Tony, clinging to him like a life line. Then he finally listened to what Donner was saying....

What? Oh. Oh, dear.

Mackenzie appeared back outside. "Guys? Is there a problem?" They'd hung around for a while and Steve was obviously upset. "...what... what did he do in there exactly?"

"My water just broke," offered Donner quietly.

"Shit." Mackenzie blinked.

"Can you drive us to the hospital? I think Steve needs to be close to Tony right now," Donner explained, with an immense amount of politeness considering he was about to give birth.

Mackenzie blinked. "I, er, yeah. I guess. Let me just let the Colonel know..."

Mackenzie loped back onto the base.

Tony remained on Steve; he couldn't have pulled away if he wanted to. "No. No, shh, my omega... my good omega... it's okay, it's okay, it's okay..."

Donner let out another pained groan.

"This isn't about you right now, Donner!"

"S-sorry," said Donner.

Mackenzie cam back in about ten minutes. "Okay, I'm sticking with you guys. I mean... I would have to anyway... since Steve, you know, has the... you know, the bond to... the... asset."

Tony growled.

Mackenzie winced and got into the car. "Okay, so... where am I going?"

"Santa Monica. Just go south, you can get the UCLA med center in like an hour. Well... forty, in this car," said Tony.
"This is a nice car," said Mackenzie admiringly.

"Yeah, it was nicer before someone decided to gush baby juice all over it." Tony went back to nosing Steve, clinging to him, mumbling words of comfort.

"Sorry," repeated Donner.

Mackenzie drove them south (the moment he touched the accelerator, the car lurched forward; Mackenzie let out a whistle, unused to something so responsive), eyeballing Tony and Steve in the back. "...what happened?" he asked, softly.

"That fucking scumbag," snarled Tony. His hackles had remained spiked since they'd opened the lounge. "He was-- he was-- he was molesting Steve, that's what, he's always had a fucking creepy obsession with him and he-- fucking--" Tony got too worked up to finish.

Donner slouched a little in his seat. He had insisted that the baby was Gideon's, though there was no proof as of yet. For the first five months, the baby had tentatively been named "Gideon Jr." (Although Donner had once said, "Or Ladybug, if it's an omega.") That idea had long since evaporated. But even if Donner no long spoke fondly of Gideon, he never said a word against him, either. Perhaps the closest he'd ever come was on the base, when he had made eye contact and said no.

"...Brock wasn’t in on it, was he?" asked Mackenzie with surprise. "He's-- he's always struck me as a good guy, we've worked missions together."

"Dunno. Don't care. Hope they fire Gideon's pasty white ass and send him back to whatever hole he crawled out of," snarled Tony.

"Can we-- can we please not talk about him?" asked Donner with a gasp of pain. "I-- I want my baby to-- to come-- to come with nice things. You know, like... like... rainbows."

"Rainbows," repeated Tony incredulously.

"Uh-huh. I want him to see it's a beautiful world and-- ahh-- and-- and that there's nice stuff in it. He doesn't need to know about-- about people like Gideon, yet."

Tony huffed a little and adjusted himself on top of Steve, tenderly wiping away the tears on his cheeks. "Let's get you something to drink when we get to the hospital... it's okay... it's okay, omega... you're safe," murmured Tony.

"Ahhhhh. Oh, gosh, it hurts... can we call... can we call Banksy? And George? And Aria? And Pepper?" asked Donner. "Oh gosh... it... it actually really hurts a lot. It feels like there's hot iron bands across my lower back. And an electric drill on my insides. And--"

"Donner, will you shut up?" snapped Tony.

"Yeah, sorry." Donner let out another very soft, tiny groan of pain, clearly trying to keep it down for Steve and Tony.

"Maybe I should drop you guys off at home?" suggest Mackenzie.

"No!" Donner twisted around in his seat, looking terrified. "No. Please. C-cousin Steve, I want you to stay with me, p-please. I'm sorry, I'm-- I'm scared. Please stay."

"I like rainbows," Steve offered weakly, sounding far too sad to really mean it.
It was awkward. They were both teary, for different reasons, and Steve had to wiggle where he was half squished by Tony. But he managed to hold Donner's hand from the back seat. The omega's fingers felt sweaty and shaky. "It's o-okay Donner, m'not going anywhere."

Donner gripped his hand tight. So tight it almost hurt. "T-Thank you."

Tony's phone started ringing in his pocket. Groggily, Steve reached for it. It was Phil.

"Tony? Is Steve there? Are you both okay? I just heard about what happened, my God..."

"We're okay," Steve said, speech a little slurred still. "Donner's having his baby t-though."

"Oh. Oh wow."

"Hi," Donner said weakly, gritting his teeth through the pain.

"Congratulations!" Phil said quickly. "Listen, Steve. He's going to try and say that he was justified because of that phone call--"

"He drugged me! He literally sedated me, Phil!"

"I'm not saying it will work, I'm just warning you. His job is seriously on the line here. He misused government resources. And he, well...they're going to need a statement from you."

"I... I don't wanna. It's embarrassing."

"You have nothing to be embarrassed about Steve," Phil assured him. Donner wailed in the background. "Will he be okay?"

"Sorry!" Donner said, half yelling.

Phil sighed. "Don't apologise..."

"Phil? Phil. Do us a favour. Can you call people? Just tell Aria and Pepper we're- we're taking Donner and he's in labour. Please."

"Yes, yes, of course." Phil hesitated. "I... Nick just wanted to say, he's sorry."

"If he's sorry, then he can say it to me himself," Steve mumbled. His eyes were red around the edges and his cheeks were flushed in an ugly sort of way. Donner had let go of his hand to clutch at his belly. Steve returned to clutching at Tony's shirt, shoving his face against his chest, as if he could somehow hide himself there.

The rest of the drive was mostly silent, except for occasional soft whines from Donner.

They parked in the ER and Mackenzie got out.

"I can walk... it feels okay right now," said Donner, climbing painfully out of the car. He offered a hand to Steve.

Tony pulled off his thoroughly soaked shirt and tried to wipe off Steve's face with it; Steve was still red and his eyes puffy.

They walked into the ER together, Tony practically on top of Steve the whole way, linked arm-in-arm, bristling. Tony, if he had been in his right mind, would have thought they all looked crazy: Steve being enormous and sniffly, Donner hugely pregnant, Mackenzie in all-black op gear, and
Tony in his bright yellow sweater, hackles spiked.

But the receptionist was utterly unfazed. "Hello," she greeted them cheerfully.

"I'm having a baby," announced Donner, looking proudly surprised.

She smiled. "Well, congrats. Is this... your brother and your mate?"

"Oh-- oh, no. No. This is my cousin and his mate," said Donner quickly. "And this is... um... Al?"

"People call me Mac," supplied Agent Mackenzie.

"How long ago did you go into labor?"

"About an hour ago."

"And is this your first?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, well, I'll just need you to fill out some forms..."

Donner looked surprised. "But I'm having a baby!"

She smiled at him. "The first one can take a while."

"...how... how long's a while?" asked Donner, taking a clipboard with a pile of papers on it for him to fill out.

"My first took twelve but I'm a beta. For male omegas it can take longer. ...but not necessarily," she added quickly.

Donner looked petrified. He slogged through the paperwork, clearly disappointed that this process had any paperwork involved at all.

Mackenzie procured some paper towels and water and let Tony wipe off Steve's face.

By the time they got anywhere near the maternity ward, they'd already been there two hours.

"This is ridiculous," grumbled Tony. "Who knew having a baby was like going to the DMV? Can't you hurry up, Donner?"

Donner giggled nervously. "S-sorry."

The four of them sat in a ward together, Tony clinging to Steve, practically on his lap. Across from them, a woman in preheat was grinning madly. The moment they accidentally made eye contact, she began chattering away. "Hi. My name's Marissa. My sister's in there. I guess my hormones screwed hers up so now she's having a baby. It's her first one. Her husband's a beta. I'm going to be an aunt. Sorry, I'm super excited. Are you guys hungry? This place has sucky vending machines. Why's there a cop with you? Ben's brother is a cop. Ben's my husband. He's a beta. He's with my sister. Her name's Melissa. This is her first. Sorry, I get chatty in preheat. Have you met the doctor yet? He's a total hunk. Alpha. Bonded, though. Just call me Richard.' I like him. He seems pretty busy though. Any of your guys got change for a dollar? I'd love a Snickers but the vending machine keeps spitting out my dollar. Have you been crying? I get emotional in preheat too. Do you want a Snickers? I'll split one with you if you can make change." She sprang to her feet and began pacing.
Tony watched her warily, still half-covering Steve.

Donner let out a little wheezing whine, clutching his stomach.

Right on cue, the doctor arrived.

"Hi, folks, sorry I'm so late. I'm Doctor Richard McDermott, but you can just call me Richard if you like."

"You're the guy from Sex with Rex!" cried Tony, perking up. "From the convention!"

"Ah! Mr. Stark! A pleasure to see you again, and you too, Captain Rogers," said Richard, nodding pleasantly at them. "And-- my God, if it's not little Donner Malick. Where's Gideon, Donnie?"

"He broke our bond," said Donner, sounding surprisingly calm. It was perhaps the first time he'd said it without tearing up.

Richard pulled a sympathetic face. "I'm very sorry to hear that."

"I don't care. He wasn't a good Alpha. I don't want to talk about him," said Donner, again with startling confidence. He beamed slightly. "I'm having a baby."

"So I see," said Richard with a laugh. "Alright, let's take a look! Let's get you folks in an exam room. How are you so far feeling, Donnie?"

"...excited," whispered Donner, who genuinely looked excited.

"Excited to meet your baby, eh? That's fantastic." Richard seemed unflappable. He didn't comment on Steve's preheat or puffy eyes, nor Tony bristling with aggression, nor anything else. He also didn't ask any more questions about Gideon but make pleasant conversation with Donner as he got them into a room, offering Donner a hospital gown and talking him through what to expect. Donner listened attentively, wincing occasionally.

He stripped without embarrassment and yanked on the hospital gown before settling onto the bed; Richard snapped on a pair of gloves. "Now, the average labor takes about eight hours. But for omegas it's always a little bit longer... I'm afraid the ladies have us beat on that one," he said cheerfully, ducking between Donner's legs. "...oh, you've got a ways to go... you've barely started to dilate."

"About how much longer?" asked Donner. "I've already been here for probably two or three hours and... and it took us an hour to get here..."

"Eight to ten," said Richard.

Donner's eyes widened. "It takes fourteen hours?"

"Can't you just cut the little bastard out?" asked Tony.

Richard laughed loudly. "Now's a fine time to get caught up on Breaking Bad or Game of Thrones, if you like either of those," he suggested.

"Giddy doesn't let me watch Breaking--" Donner's eyes lit up mischievously. "Yes. Yes, I'll do that. And can you let all my friends in when they come? George said he would come, and Banksy too, and probably Pepper and Aria."

Richard patted his arm. "Sure thing. You just take it easy for now. No pushing yet. Make sure you
stay hydrated and I'll check in every hour, okay? So far, everything looks great. Congratulations, Donner."

Donner reached out and grabbed his arm. "Mr. McDermott? You know... you know DeSoto's Alpha, right?"

"...I do."

"Is DeSoto okay?"

Richard smiled a little. "I saw DeSoto back in November and yes, he seemed very okay, Donnie. I'll tell him hi for you next time I see him."

Donner smiled and flopped back onto the pillow, looking over at Tony and Steve. He reached for Steve's hand again and his eyes softened. "I'm sorry, Steve. I'm sorry for what he did. It's my fault. He did that because of me, because I left him and--"

"Don. Stop it," interrupted Mackenzie. "Only person who's in trouble here is him. And we're not going to talk about him, okay? Important thing is that we're all safe, right?"

Tony was practically scaling Steve. "Right. Safe," he agreed, clinging to his omega. He nuzzled Steve's hair. "Safe omega. Good omega."

"Won't you go into heat within the next ten hours?" Mac asked, glancing over at Steve who seemed very content to have Tony draped over him. His Alpha was making him feel safer so the closer they were, the better.

Steve took a while to think about the question. "Yes. I mean-- probably. The sedatives might slow it down a bit, but I don't know how it works. We could ask Richard."

"They're gonna wanna take a statement before you go into full blown heat," Mac warned him gently. "They'll probably have Agent Hill waiting at your house. I'm guessing you don't wanna do it here."

Steve shook his head. He never wanted Donner to hear the details of what went on in that room. He hated the thought of him feeling responsible. If anything, it was Steve's fault. He shouldn't have... he shouldn't...

He was just trying to show Donner how gross Gideon was! He never thought it would come of anything, he never thought he would try to...

His plan had accomplished what it meant to; it had showed Donner just how terrible Gideon was. But at the price of Steve's dignity.

Steve buried his face against the curve of Tony's neck.

"I'm sorry we can't stay for the whole thing, Donner," he mumbled.

"It's okay Steve. You don't wanna go into heat in a hospital." They really didn't. A number of doctors were often Alphas. And nursing was a popular profession for omegas. It would be chaos. "And I'll have the others by then."

The others arrived shortly. First it was Pepper and Aria. They bought flowers and food stuffs. Pepper rushed forward to hug Donner, mumbling to him about how proud she was. Not long after Banksy and George arrived. Banksy took a look at Steve whilst George started asking Donner all sorts of questions.
"What happened to you?" demanded Banksy, jutting out one hip.

"Nothing. It's fine."

"Did they say anything about it coming early?" George asked, curious.

"I..." Donner opened then closed his mouth. "There was a-- a lot of Alphas around, I guess."

Banksy sat down next to Steve, watching the way Tony clutched him even tighter. He was in preheat, yes, but even this was over the top for Tony. "Let's just focus on Donner," Steve said but when he reached for Banksy's hand he let him take it. Banksy looked better than when Steve had seen him last. His hair was tied up, neatly enough, and he was wearing smart patterned trousers with a more casual-looking shirt.

"I don't wanna miss the birth," Steve sighed.

"We'll give you updates," Banksy promised.

"I know, it's just... I should be here for him. I don't wanna leave him."

"You also don't wanna go into heat whilst he's going into labour," Aria pointed out bemusedly from where she'd started munching on the grapes they'd brought. "Everything okay, you two? You look... weird."

"Fine," Steve said quickly.

There a bruise blossoming on his neck by his gland. It wasn't a huge one but it was a nasty shade of purple. Steve caught Aria staring at it and he just shook his head at her.

Not now.

Richard reappeared to check on Donner. He went over him, smiling broadly. "Still looking good Donner. Hang in there. How're you liking Breaking Bad?"

"The bald man... he's very angry."

Richard laughed. "Quite right!"

"Hey, Doc." Mac caught his attention. "If an omega on preheat is given sedatives... let's say, enough to knock them out, will that affect when their heat comes on?"

Richard blinked. "Well. That's an alarming question."

"Please sir, it's important."

"Well, I... I would imagine it might veto the heat entirely, especially if the body is put under enough trauma. It's sort of like the 'fight or flight' response. The heat knows it's a bad time and sometimes it will stop. If an omega is in danger, the last thing they want to be is in heat too."

"Can...Can you see if that's happened to me?" Steve asked awkwardly.

"Ah. Of course," Richard nodded. "Now Mr Stark, if you'll just--" He sighed when Tony curled over Steve impossibly further. "You're going to have to let me take a look at him."

"Is there any side effects to having a heat just stop?" Steve said, sticking out his arm so Richard could take his pulse.
"You might feel a little sick, or queasy. The heat might not stop entirely. Sometimes it can just be delayed another day or so. The body is a funny thing. Hard to predict. Especially yours. No offense, Captain."

"None taken."

Donner let out a pain sounded, clutching at his stomach. "Ah! Ah, it hurts." Pepper gripped his hand tight.

"I'm afraid it will be doing a lot more of that," Richard hummed. He turned back to Steve. "I would say, Captain Rogers, that it still looks like you're going into heat. But if you have been, ahem, sedated. Or in a stressful situation... then I would suggest that it probably won't last as long as a normal heat for you, or be as vicious. But being around your mate will mean it will probably come on." Then he moved back to the bedside, checking on Donner again.

"I wanna try and stay for the birth," Steve said.

"Remember. Your statement," Mac added.

Steve shrugged. "If I have to make it post-heat, so be it. I'm not missing the birth. This is more important."

"But Gideon's detained until--" began Mac.

"Good. Let him rot," said Steve bluntly.

"Thank you," said Donner, turning his head to look at Steve. He gave a brave smile, wincing. He stretched a hand out for Steve's.

Tony growled warningly.

Pepper looked over. She had known Tony for more than ten years and never seen him quite this feral. Tony had been largely uncommunicative the entire time since she had arrived; Tony haven't moved away from Steve and remained on top of him, snarling at everyone who came by, his only words mumbles of comfort toward Steve.

Donner let out a sudden, pained, gasping wheeze and arched in pain. "Ah-- ahh-- ahhhh no!"

"Let it out, Donnie!" said Banksy, gripping his other hand. He cringed. "Oh-- oh, shit, Donnie, that's a hell of a grip."

"N-no... swearing..." Donner managed to gasp. "Only-- good things-- for baby."

Both Mackenzie and Aria snorted, but Donner remained steadfast in his insistence. The afternoon turned to evening, then to night, and still, with every contraction, Donner cried out but continued to maintain a firm level of positivism.

Steve remained in preheat; Tony remained on top of him, largely feral, snapping at anyone who even looked too long at him.

"My omega. Steve. Good omega," he chanted softly, nuzzling against Steve. He gave a sharp warning snap at Aria when she passed Steve a bottle of water.

"It's actually very, very common," said Dr. McDermott during one of his check-ins. "Family members often cycle together, and the pheromones from a heat can induce labor."
"I thought you worked at Culver College," said Aria suspiciously.

"I do," said Dr. McDermott. "But I have a fellowship with UCLA right now to investigate a new type of birth control for omegas. ...by the way, Captain, Rex and I were quite happy with your Project 84. I've always advocated against conversion therapy, you know. If any of your... contacts... well, if they need... reconstructive help, I would be happy to donate some of my time. My mate, you know... he was from Pine Hills."

Tony growled.

"I'll just leave my card," said Richard.

The clocked passed midnight. Banksy, Mackenzie, and George had begun a friendly game of poker. Donner whimpered.

"It's already been more than twelve hours, Donner. Can't you hurry up? My mate needs to get to bed," groused Tony, who hadn't left Steve even to use the bathroom.

"Tony, maybe you should take a break," suggested Pepper gently.

Tony snarled, hackles quivering on the back of his neck. "Steve needs bed."

"Okay! Okay!" she said quickly, holding up her hands.

Donner let out a thin, weak cry. "It hurts," he said plaintively, clutching his stomach. "My-- my back hurts so much--"

Richard breezed in as if summoned by Donner's cries. He checked his watch. "Well, your contractions are happening much more regularly. I'd say you're due in another hour or so, Donny."

Donner whined. "It-- it hurts so much. Can't-- can't you make it better?"

"Sure. How's an epidural sound?"

"Wh-- what's that?"

"Steroid injection into your spine. Should help with your lower back pain. Which, by the way, is much, much worse in omegas than, say, beta women. To be honest, you're a champ, Donnie. You're doing great. You're probably one of the calmest patients I've ever had."

Donner smiled weakly. "Does-- does that-- thingy hurt the baby?"

"No, no, no," said Richard reassuringly. "Just helps you out a bit."

Donner tensed and his back arched; he cringed and let out a muffled cry. "Y-yes... I--- I want that, please, it hurts..."

"Alrighty, Donner, hold on," said Richard, patting his arm. He swept out; Tony snarled at him on the way.

Despite the injection, Donner was still a groaning, whimpering mess. It was three in the morning and Donner was sweating, pale, and looked frankly deathly ill.

Tony remained draped over Steve, body quivering with effort, hackles stiffly at attention.
"You know," said Richard, pleasantly, "epidurals can be administered to the neck to help lower hackles. ...it's not really good for the muscles in the back of the neck to keep them raised that long."

"*Stay away from him!*" barked Tony.

"Alrighty," said Richard, who was between Donner's legs and couldn't have been more disinterested or submissive at the moment. "Well, Donnie. You're fully dilated. You're just about there."

"Yay," gasped Donner.

"I'm timing your contractions and you're almost ready for the big push, okay? You're doing great."

"Yay," repeated Donner, dazed. He clung to Steve and George's hands, panting softly. "It-- it hurts."

"Oh, yes, yes it does," agreed Richard pleasantly. "But we're in the home stretch! You can swear if you like--"

"*No,*" said Donner firmly. "I want-- I want him-- I want him to only know-- good things." Another contraction seized him and he arched with a cry of pain. "*K-kittens!*" he yelled. "*Dolphins! S-sunsets!*"

Richard chuckled appreciatively. "Go ahead, let it out--"

"Cupcakes! Disneyland! ...*ahh-AHH-ahh--*"

"I wish all of them were this positive," said Richard cheerily. "Donner, I need you to breathe, please. In and out. Come on, let's see some breathing. In and out--"

Donner panted.

"--that's good. Just like that. Now the next time you feel a contraction, I want you to push, okay? One big, nice push for me.""

"I--I can't. It hurts," said Donner.

"Oh, shush, you're doing great! One last push and you're all done," said Richard, with surprising alertness, considering it was three am.

Tony glanced over and immediately regretted it. It was like some fucking goatse shit and he nearly puked. On the plus side, his hackles went down.

Donner let out an unearthly shriek. "*NnnAAAAHHHHhhhfuudge,*" he said.

"Did you seriously just say fud-- *oh my God!*" yelled George.

A second later Richard was holding up a slimy, blue-veined ball that looked, to Tony, like a potato with eyes. The eyes were blue. They blinked, unfocused, and then the potato began crying. It wasn't a baby's cry. More of an "*eh-eh-eh-eh*" noise.

"What's wrong with him?" asked Tony in alarm.

Richard laughed. "Nothing at all. She's perfectly healthy."

Donner stretched weakly toward the baby. "--my baby...?"
"Congratulations, Donnie. A healthy little girl. ...beta, I think. Or not presenting, yet, at least."

"A girl," repeated Donner, as Richard handed him the gooey mess. Her umbilical cord was still trailing; Tony was actively gagging over Steve's shoulder. "A... a little girl. A girl!" He looked around the room, beaming, eyes watering. "I-- I have a baby! A girl! A baby girl!" he exclaimed. "A... beta? She's a beta! A girl!"

"Congratulations, Donnie!" said Banksy, and everyone else began congratulating him and patting him.

Donner shuddered a little as the afterbirth came out, but he was clearly more interested in examining his baby, checking her hands, counting her toes, smelling her head, smiling at her bright, staring eyes.

He pulled down his gown to offer her a nipple; Tony actually did end up vomiting, grabbing the bin by the door and retching into it dramatically.

"Oh, grow up," snapped Pepper.

"He's got weird little man tits!"

"He's a nursing omega, you idiot!" Pepper gave Tony a light slap over the head. (She didn't bother to add that Donner and she probably shared a bra size; both were somewhere in the lower B range.)

Donner didn't even notice their dispute, hugging the baby to him as she suckled contentedly.

"...so... what's her name?" asked Aria.

"Granite."

"...what?" asked Aria.


"Granite...?" repeated George, clearly confused. "Like... like the rock?"

"Elphaba, like the witch from Wicked?" asked Aria, also looking confused.

"Mm-hm. I thought about it a lot. It's Cousin Steve's middle name and I wanted him-- her-- to have a strong name."

"You literally named the baby after a rock and a witch?" asked Tony, raising his eyebrows.

"The witch was the protagonist," said Donner a bit defensively.

"Well, at least we know Gideon won't take Donner or Granite," said Tony suddenly, his sense of puns returning to him. "...get it? Donner for granted? ...anyone?" Pepper gave him another whack. Ton ignored it. "What do we call her, Granny? ...Granite's a stupid name."

"No. It's perfect," hummed Donner sleepily, still hugging his daughter. He looked over at Steve, head lolling a little. "Now you've got two cousins."

"A cousin four times removed," said Pepper, smiling at the baby.

"Mm-hm. ...I thought about Sarah, too, like my great-grandma." Donner's head was literally dropping. "She's beautiful, isn't she?"
"I can't believe you're actually gonna name her Granite," said Tony. "That's not even a name."

"It's a great name," said Banksy firmly, then caught Tony's eye and nodded in agreement, mouthing, Weird name.

The baby was like magic. The mood shifted immediately, from one of impatience and pain to something like relief. But it was more than just that. "Tony. Tony, let me--" With some persuasion, Tony let Steve stand up so he could walk over to the bedside properly and see Granite close up.

"She's perfect," Steve whispered and almost felt like crying again for an entirely different reason.

Gideon didn't even matter anymore. He wasn't even on Steve's mind. All he could think about was this beautiful baby in front of him, how proud he was of Donner and how Granite was going to change his goddamn life.

"Donner will probably be okay to go home tomorrow evening. He's been fantastic," Richard said, even sounding a little tired himself as he put a clip over the umbilical cord.

"Can we stay with him?" Steve asked.

Richard breathed out slowly. "I would recommended you go home with Mr. Stark, Captain. I believe being in your own home will help... calm everyone down. Besides, Donnie here probably wants some alone time to get to know his baby."

"My baby," said Donner in a hushed, awed tone, clearly delighted with the tiny infant nestled in his arms.

Steve ended up being pulled back down into Tony's lap, restoring contact.

"Happy's here to drive you back. We can stay," Pepper offered, totally mesmerised by the baby herself.

Despite being sweaty and tired Donner was almost glowing now. Steve had never seen him so happy before.

"And we really do need to take your statement Cap," Mac added from the side. "They er, have G--him in for questioning and they don't want to release him or take any action until they've compared it with your side of the story."

Steve nodded, taking Tony's hand.

"Donner, will you be alright without me here?" Steve asked, sounding genuinely bad for it.

Donner gave him a tired smile, looking up from Granite since she'd been placed in his arms.

"Go have your heat, Steve. We'll be here when you get back."

Something warmed in Steve's chest. He nodded and leaned over to kiss Donner's forehead in an act of tenderness that surprised himself before he pulled away, still holding Tony's hand, leaving his cousin and the baby to spend the rest of the night in peace and quiet.
"Was the baby born?" Happy asked as they got into the car, sounding excited but weary considering the hour of the morning. It was late; Donner's entire delivery had taken a little over fourteen hours, which, Richard assured them, was completely typical for a male omega, and actually not bad, for the first time.

"Yes. She's named Granite."

"Huh." Happy blinked.

"He wanted to call the baby Grant, but then it was a girl," Steve tried to explain as they piled into the back; Tony laid out on top of him.

Tony had never especially cared for babies. Granite was no different. Everyone was ogling over her like she was special, but frankly, Tony felt she looked a little weird. Maybe it was because she was only recently birthed, but Tony felt her eyes were too googly and her head had a weird shape and she was too blue.

"...you er, okay there, boss?"

"It's been a long day," Steve supplied weakly. He did not have the words, or energy, to explain all that had transpired in the last twenty-four hours.

Steve half-slept through the drive back and stumbled when they got out of the car. It felt good to see the house though, to just be home. At some point, the weird modern architecture of Tony's Malibu cliffside mansion had stopped looking alien to him. Steve felt like he belonged there.

Phil and Maria were waiting in the kitchen for them. They stood up when Steve and Tony walked in.

"Hey there, Captain Rogers. So, Donner had the baby?" Phil said. They all knew they hadn't come to exchange small talk.

"Yes. She's called Granite."

"Aw, because of Grant?"

Steve smiled weakly. "Yeah. Actually."

"Why don't we go sit in the living room, get comfortable. This might take a while," Maria suggested. She had a recording device and a tablet to presumably take notes on. It was slowly sinking in just how serious this all was.
Steve and Tony stayed plastered together on one of the white leather sofas in the main room. Steve was all too aware of how echo-y the house was. The fountain that occupied the inner spiral of the main staircase bubbled quietly, supplying some much-needed white noise.

"We want to take your statement as soon as we can, Steve, so you don't forget any details," Maria explained calmly. "SHIELD is taking this very seriously, as is the WSC. We really want to get to the bottom of what happened here, Steve."

"Right," Steve swallowed. "So I have to tell you guys... everything?"

"Yes," Phil said. "And if there's any marks, we'll need to photograph those."

"There's, erm, a bruise on my neck," Steve said quietly. "But that's it."

Tony's hackles had only gone partially down when they entered the house. He remained close to Steve, like a bodyguard; at the mention of a bruise, they spiked up again immediately.

Maria, because of her lack of status, couldn't sense the tension, but Phil could. Close to preheat himself, he seemed warier than usual. Tony kept trying to climb over Steve on the sofa.

"Mr. Stark...?" asked Maria.

Tony whipped around, teeth bared. "Leave him alone!"

"...Steve," said Phil, in an uncharacteristic demonstration of personability. "...I know you're in preheat but... this might be easier without your mate present. Tony seems..."

He didn't say it but didn't have to. Tony was borderline feral and had been since attacking Malick.

"...he has a history," added Phil, softly. He probably wouldn't have said it if he thought Tony were capable of comprehending. And Tony didn't react, at least not consciously. He remained pressing Steve into the couch, laying over him like expecting a live grenade to hit them at any moment.

But Steve saw the shadow pass over his face, the tiny wrinkle in Tony's brow and around his eyes that meant he had processed it and was probably having some sort of internal flashback. The coiling in his gut confirmed it.

"Tony, you were there. I can take your statement separately--" offered Maria. Tony let out a snarl-wail, clinging harder to Steve. "...or not," she finished.

"Tony. I don't want you to hear it right now," Steve whispered, running his fingers through his Alpha's hair soothingly. He wasn't in the right state of mind; it would just take Tony even more upset. And he didn't want him to... to think about what had happened before. Heats were supposed to be special, intimate. But it seemed they couldn't have one without someone taking advantage of it.

"Why don't you go into the kitchen and Maria can make everyone some cocoa, or something?"

Maria nodded. "Great idea, Steve. Come on Tony, leave them be. Steve isn't going anywhere. He's safe."

"I'm not going anywhere." Steve kissed Tony's forehead, still running a hand through it's hair. "It's alright, Tony. Promise."

Awkwardly, they eventually managed to peel away the pair from each other. Maria made sure not to get too close to Tony as she followed him back out into the kitchen. Steve offered his mate a weak
smile when he seemed reluctant to leave. When they were finally alone, Phil let out a long exhale.

"All right, Captain. I want you to start from the beginning."

"Right. Okay." Steve moved to cross his legs on the couch, getting comfortable. "So I went to yoga, with Aria, and then I went shopping. And I was just in the store and my vision just went. Some people helped me find a bench, sat me down. I'd say within... ten minutes, a STRIKE team showed up. It took a lot of persuading to get me to go with them. I couldn't see for the whole thing. They got me in the car eventually but I was pretty upset. They took forever to tell me where we going and I'm not even sure they tried to call Tony. They gave me water, which was drugged, and then I passed out."

Steve let out a ragged breath.

"So I woke up... on the base. And Gideon's there, on some sofa, and I'm on the floor and I-- I couldn't move. It was like my arms were just to heavy. And he--" Steve pressed his hands against his face and then fisted his fingers in his hair. He had not felt weak in years. He had forgotten how terrible it was, to be vulnerable.

"Take your time, Cap," Phil murmured.

"He touched my neck. He wouldn't stop touching my neck. And then he started pressing on the gland. I could barely speak properly at the time. He kept asking me to kneel for him, wanted me to say he was my Alpha. It's like this sick power fantasy of his. And then he pulled me up so I was kneeling and I couldn't f-fight back. I wanted to. But I couldn't move. He put my head on his knee and he wouldn't stop pressing on the gland behind my ear. It almost hurt."

Steve remembered Gideon licking his fingers and shuddered. "Then- then he started saying that he could have Bucky killed if he wanted to. That I should be good for him. Should show my gratitude. Called me a spade."

"Do you think he was trying to blackmail you into sex?"

Steve shook his head. "I... I don't know. He said it as justified because of what I'd said before, about Donner... but I never meant it! I just wanted to show Donner how gross he was. I didn't mean I'd ever actually do anything for him. I don't negotiate with terrorists; I don't trade lives like that. I didn't--" He was tearing up a little again, but not crying properly. Phil leaned forward and put a hand on his knee.

"Steve," he said calmly. "You didn't consent."

Steve reached out to grab his hand, clutching it tightly. "Thank you," he whispered.

Maria managed to convince Tony to come to the kitchen, but she couldn't get him settled. He paced around aggressively, hackles up, hands flexing at his sides.

"Tony? Tony?" prompted Maria gently. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Whiskey," said Tony shortly, still pacing, eyes scanning.

Maria opened the freezer and pulled out a bottle. "Will this--" she began, but Tony had already grabbed it.

He yanked off the top, took several deep swigs, and then finally stopped pacing with a small shudder.
"...he was kneeling."

Maria remained small, hands clasped non-threateningly on the countertop.

Tony turned. "He was kneeling. Gideon made him kneel. Steve would never--" Tony's voice caught in his throat. He took another gulp of the whiskey. "--his posture was all wrong, limp. Steve-- Steve kneels properly. With-- with his back straight and-- and his hands-- it's the right position. It didn't look right. He was-- the way he was kneeling-- it was all wrong. I could feel it, feel his panic, I-- I didn't get there soon enough, he was touching his neck, he-- he was rubbing him, right here--" Tony pointed to a spot behind his ear.

Maria had no idea what he was referencing but remained silent.

"--my-- my mate-- he touched my mate-- he touched our mark-- he made him kneel. He hurt my Steve."

Suddenly Tony's eyes welled up with tears.

Maria reached for him; Tony swatted her away. He pinched the bridge of his nose and looked up, blinking the tears away, then took another long drink from the bottle for good measure.

"He's safe now and we're performing a full investigation," offered Maria, softly.

"My Steve."

"He's safe," she repeated.

Tony couldn't take her word for it; he threw down the bottle and darted into the living room. Steve and Phil were touching; Tony practically slammed into Steve and then took a snap at Phil.

"Mine! Get away! Don't touch him!"

Phil jerked back in alarm. "I'm an omega, Stark! I can't hurt him!"

Tony relaxed, but only marginally.

"...we should dose him," said Maria in a low voice to Phil. "He's too vulnerable right now and his mood will affect Rogers's. Better for them to just sit this heat out."

Phil looked over at Steve with a sad look. "I'll need photos of your neck, Captain. I'm sorry. ...does... do you consent to having your mate sedated? He seems..." Phil didn't say feral, God bless him. "...a little worked up."

Tony was currently in Steve's lap, nosing at the bruise on Steve's neck, licking his gland, as if he could fix it somehow. Maria, as a beta, had no idea what was prompting his behavior, but knew well enough that it was something intimate, and was looking up prudishly, hands clasped before her.

"Can't you just give him something to... calm him down? Without fully knocking him out? I don't want Tony to fall asleep," Steve whispered. Maybe it was selfish, but he didn't want to be left alone.

With some awkward negotiating to get Tony out of the picture Phil managed to snap a few pictures of Steve's neck and the bruise there. "What's going to happen?" Steve asked. "Are they gonna fire him?" He didn't bother trying to keep the hopefulness out of his voice. He wanted justice served; the least they could do was fire Malick.

"We don't know," Phil said apologetically. "It depends who they believe. But we'll fight it; we won't
"But they can't... they can't believe him, that I agreed to it. I presented a hypothetical scenario over the phone. Like you said, I never consented. Right? I never..."

He trailed off.

"It'll be okay Steve," Maria said, sounding certain. She was producing a needle out of a suitcase. "This will calm Tony down, make him sleepy, but I won't give him enough to knock him out."

Steve nodded, carding his fingers through Tony's hair as Maria injected into his arm.

"I'll give you any updates as soon as we have them," Phil said. "Maria will stay here in case anything happens. Maybe get Tony upstairs before the drugs kick in?"

Steve nodded and stood, gently tugging Tony up with him.

"Come on Tony," he murmured. "Let's go to bed."

Tony let Steve take him upstairs; once in the bedroom, he shoved Steve into the bed, shoved blankets over him, and then lay down on top of him.

He paused in the peaceful quiet of their bedroom, lying on top of Steve. He looked down at him and very, very gently reached out to touch his neck, to examine it. There was a bruise behind Steve's ear.

"He touched the gland." Tony's stomach twisted. "...that fucker... Steve... Steve, I'm so sorry, I should have been there sooner." Tony pressed his body into his mate's, as if he could better shield him, have the bed swallow Steve up so no one could see him. "I'm sorry," repeated Tony, his words the slightest bit slurred thanks to Maria's sedative.

Why hadn't he come sooner? Why hadn't he been able to magically locate Steve using their bond before... before Gideon did that? So much had happened in the last twenty-four hours but Tony was still partially feral, driven to the very brink by his aggressive need to protect. He felt like he had failed. Like he should have been able to have stopped it.

In the enclosed space, he clawed at the door desperately, growling, shrieking, desperate to get out. He knew exactly what was happening because he had felt it a million times before. Steve had picked a fight with some Alpha and now they had decked him and he was lying helpless on the ground, they were nosing him, ready to take him, and he had to get there and help him... he had to stop it...

Steve's fear and shame was heavy in his gut and yes, he was in hell now, that much was obviously, being trapped and helpless while feeling his mate's hurt was the worst feeling in the world. He wailed Steve's name, but it was useless. It was cold and dark and he was impossibly alone in the tight, coffin-like space, and he couldn't get to Steve, where ever he was. He had failed; he was unable to stop it.

"Just...just wanna sleep Tony," Steve mumbled, tugging his mate closer. He tucked his head against the crook of Tony's neck and closed his eyes. This heat didn't feel like the others. Richard had been right, it was...fainter somehow. Steve had a feeling it would only last a few days, if that. They could manage contraception themselves for just a few days. Hopefully. It felt like they needed their own space now.

"It's not your fault," Steve murmured, reaching for Tony's hand and grabbing it. "Promise. He'll get what's coming to him."
He was too tired to be distressed anymore. Steve just felt sad, if anything.

Soon he drifted off, feeling safe in Tony's arms. Though, despite all the blankets over them, he still felt cold.

"You fucking little spade!"

Steve ducked out of the way of the guy's hands. Being little made him quicker. Although it was cold out, his breath puffing clouds of smoke into the air, his lungs wouldn't be able to keep up forever. If he spent too long out in the cold they would begin to ache. And Bucky always got mad when he came home wheezing. He'd get mad when Steve came home with a bruise on his cheek too though. He could already feel it blooming.

"Leave me alone!"

"I can smell it on you. You're mine."

Steve had gone into preheat. The irony was the actual heat would never hit him. But the Alpha in front of him really wasn't getting that. He'd just been downtown, getting groceries from the market, and did a sketch of one of the parks nearby. The preheat had crept up on him. Steve's were irregular. It wouldn't be abnormal for him to only have one in the year.

"I'm not no one's! Now leave me be."

"Your Alpha ain't here to protect you now kid."

And then he grabbed Steve by the lapels of his coat and lifted him up. Steve kicked him in the ribs and clawed at his face. The Alpha dropped him. "Fuck," he swore and then he kicked Steve. Now that really goddamn hurt. Steve curled up, preparing to withstand another blow. But it never came.

"Get the hell away from him."

And there was Bucky, all sweaty and dirty from the docks. He looked beautiful. Steve watched him sock the guy in the jaw with poorly concealed delight.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realise--"

Bucky shoved at his chest roughly. "Save it pal! You touch him again and I'll kill you."

"Jeez. Alright. I'm goin'."

"Stevie. Steve. Are you okay?" Bucky moved to bend down next to him. Steve could see the moment his scent hit him. Bucky's eyes darkened a fraction. "What the hell were you doin', goin' out like this?"

"I didn't realise. It came on so fast."

Bucky reached out, his fingertips brushing against the bruise on his cheek. Then they trailed lower, tracing the shape of his lips, before Bucky seemed to snap himself out of it. He moved to pick Steve up, despite his protests. The groceries were scattered all over the ground, the eggs cracked, ruined. Steve hadn't just gotten beaten up; he'd also wasted several precious dollars that they couldn't afford to lose. "Come on," he murmured. "Let's get you home. You sure you're okay Stevie? He didn't hurt you or nothin'?"

"I promise Buck," Steve whispered and tucked his head under his chin, closing his eyes. "I'm okay."
Steve woke up suddenly in the middle of the night feeling distantly aroused. Tony was dead asleep next to him, the sedatives having done their job. He would no doubt be out for another hour or two. He rubbed a hand over his face, and then he heard it. The voice was distant, like an echo--

"Steve!"

Was he still dreaming? Steve reached over, grabbing his phone. He had a few messages from Aria and Banksy.

No. He wasn't dreaming. He was definitely awake. It was early, pre-dawn, but despite only having slept for a few hours, he felt wide awake.

Steve slipped out of bed, heading downstairs to grab some juice. He spun around as he opened the fridge.

"Steve!"

Was he hearing things now? Or was it...?

Bucky.

Steve didn't know why he headed outside. It was automatic. He'd seen Bucky out here in the front yard once. His therapist put his hallucinations down to PTSD, but even Steve couldn't deny what Banksy had said. The bond was strong, whether anyone liked it or not. Steve had a connection with Bucky that was unheard of for most bondmates.

"Steve!"

He was cold but it wasn't bothering him. Steve walked over to the bushes where he'd seen Bucky before and then felt stupid. Of course, there was nothing. Bucky was stuck in cryo and it shouldn't even be scientifically possible for him to be awake.

The sun was just beginning to rise. It was actually morning, time to get up; a new day had begun. Being in the hospital had screwed with their body clocks.

Still feeling stupid, Steve headed back inside.

"Стеве!" His voice was hoarse from saying it. The word had become a mantra, a prayer. "Стеве!" The word was swallowed up in the small space, the opposite of an echo. "Стеве!"

A sudden sound. Or perhaps just a vibration.

"полковник?" he asked hopefully.

"нет."

"...Где Steve? Где моя омега?" he demanded.

"Он в безопасности. Ты знаешь свое имя?"

The asset hesitated. No. It did not know its name, and he felt like if he misspoke, there would be dire consequences. "...Карпов...?" The asset had no name, only a designation: WS-1. As far as names went, he knew only two. His omega and his handler. He was his handler's; surely at least they shared a last name, Karpov. His name was Something Karpov.
He was not supposed to think of himself as "he." He was not supposed to think. His programming was bad; soon, they would take him-- it-- to the chair.

It shuddered at the thought. (It was not supposed to have thoughts.)

The man it had been talking to did not respond to it providing its name, or what it thought its name might be. The man was an omega but the asset had no real interest in him. The asset was used to enemies trying to use women or omegas to win it over, but that didn't work. It had no use for sex. It had once heard Karpov brag, proudly, about removing such a primal instinct. "It does not desire, it does not fear. It only obeys. Find me a better soldier than that!" he'd said. And then his hand had lightly touched the small of the soldier's back and it had known that Karpov was proud of it.

"омега?" it called. The man he had been speaking to did not answer. He was once again alone.

Clint took a small, running leap at one of the supporting struts, kicked off the wall, and grabbed the edge of the catwalk, pulling himself up onto the mezzanine.

"Impressive moves, Barton."

Clint looked down. Fury was standing there, hands clasped behind him. Clint didn't say anything.

"You paid Barnes a little visit?"

"Just checking his vitals, sir."

"Didn't know you had to talk to him to do that."

"Didn't know I wasn't allowed not to," retorted Clint.

"He's supposed to be asleep."

"Understood," said Clint.

"And you're supposed to be guarding the cube. We had another team on cryo."

"Yes, sir. Understood." Clint's gaze moved over to the cube. It was lovely, the purest blue, ever-shifting, swirling, like the reflection water makes on surfaces when it's back lit by water. He liked to watch it from the rafters. Sometimes, when he stared too long, he felt like he was dropping into a pool; that the cube contained something bigger than itself, that there was a vastness it encompassed and that he could fall into it, that, just for a second, he wasn't looking at an object, but a doorway, something as incomprehensibly huge as space itself. And then he would blink and that glimpse was gone. He had mentioned it to Natasha, who had advised him not to tell anyone. "They already think we're unstable and crazy," she said. "Better to lie low." Clint had to admit, it did sound crazy. So whenever he felt himself staring into an abyss, he blinked a few times and looked away, and usually, by the time he looked back, the cube was itself again, and he assumed it was nothing more than a trick of the eyes.

Tony woke in the middle of the day. Beside him, Steve was sweating and breathing heavily, aroused. He was in preheat. Not heat. Weird. Tony would have thought, by now...

He had rolled off Steve during the night. He wearily, automatically clambered back on top of him, protectively, nosing his neck affectionately. "...мега..." His voice was thick with sleep. Steve winced a little and Tony realized there was a heavy bruise on his neck. Steve was fair, and bruised
easily. Tony nosed him again, gently, an apology for hurting him. Sleep was already dragging him back down. "They sedated me, huh?" he mumbled, hugging Steve to him. "...love you... sorry, Stevie... gotta sleep... no more fights, 'k? ...I can't always be comin' up from the docks to save you... " He mumbled something else, in Russian, and then he was out again.

Steve froze underneath Tony, his hands fisting in the sheets. He almost had the Brooklyn accent. It was unnerving and creepy. Steve wasn't sure how many more heats he could go through like this. He felt sick at the knowledge that Bucky was awake. He'd already felt crippled with the guilt of putting him in cryo, no matter how many times Phil assured him he did the right thing. But knowing that Bucky was waking up alone and in pain because of him... it wasn't almost too much. Steve wanted to be a good person; he was supposed to be good. He had made a promise to Erskine. But he was being awful to Bucky. Just plain awful. It felt like Steve was failing him.

After putting Bucky into cryo Steve had had nightmares. Frightful dreams where Bucky came to him, covered in frost, fearful and hurting and lonely.

Steve woke up the next morning after sleeping through most of the day, his sleep cycle ruined by the sedatives and the night awake in the hospital. The first thing he did was down a load of contraceptives before he woke Tony with a lazy sort of blowjob. They only had sex four times that day (a record low for when Steve was in heat). But it was like Richard had said: the heat was a mild one. It was almost nice, actually. They could appreciate the neediness of it, the rush, but there was no exhaustion, no awkward chaffing and no ruined sofas. Steve still wanted it to be over with quick though. He just wanted to hang out with Donner and Granite already.

On the third day of his heat it already felt like it was over. Steve had feeling the next day he would be free from it already. He didn't think about Gideon, or rather, he decided not to. But then that evening they got a call. To Steve's surprise, it was Nick delivering the bad news personally.

"They're not firing him."

"What do you mean, they're not firing him?! How can they not fire him?!" Steve demanded, sitting up in bed angrily.

"He's insisting it was... a reasonable interpretation of what you wanted."

"Are you kidding me?!"

"Steve--" Nick sighed. He barely ever called him just Steve. "I'm sorry. I am. But there's nothing I can do here. My hands are tied. Someone is protecting him; I don't know who. But he's completely forbidden from all WSC matters to do with you. And the restraining order is in place, I believe."

"Whatever! Who cares? Jesus fucking Christ--"

"Steve--"

"This century is a joke!"

Steve ended up spending a good few hours tearing through punching bags. He wrapped his hands but his knuckles still got sore. Then he had angry sex with Tony before passing out in bed. He woke up out the other side of his heat feeling strangely unsatisfied and generally frustrated. It felt like the world was slowly turning against him.

Steve, do you think you always need a feel need to oppose something?

"Stupid doctors, stupid everything." Steve muttered to himself as he headed out for a run to burn off
steam. He just wanted this heat to be behind him already. He wanted to focus on Donner and his daughter (both of whom were coming over later) and he wanted nothing to do with SHIELD anymore. He was done. Steve was fucking done.

He bet they weren't even doing anything to help Bucky like they said they would. Steve bet they'd just shoved him in a freezer and had hoped he wouldn't be a problem anymore.

*Ha. That turned out well.*

He walked home from his run, having sprinted out too far and actually gotten tired (his heat had drained him). Steve's phone started ringing in the back pocket of his shorts as he headed home. It was Phil. Steve thought about it before he finally answered with a sigh.

"I don't wanna talk about it," Steve said instantly. "I don't even wanna *think* about it Phil."

"Steve," said Phil quietly. Too quietly. "I'm not calling as an agent. I'm calling as a friend. One of your omega friends." There was a pause. "It's not easy for us, especially in this field. I heard the news about Malick and I... I wanted to make sure you're okay, Steve."

There was a pause, then, since Steve hadn't interrupted him, Phil continued. "Steve, you were my childhood hero. Now I've gotten to know you as a person. And people, unlike heroes, are complex. They get angry, and sad, and hurt. And that's okay. And I'd rather be Steve Rogers's friend than Captain America’s. And I hope you realize how much that means, coming from me." There was a small, wry bit of irony in Phil's tone. Steve *did* know how much Phil worshiped him, as Captain America.

"I'm probably going into heat next month. I would be happy to nest at your house, as a friend. I don't expect you to want to talk about... *him*. Everyone know he's an old-fashioned statusist. I just want you to know, Steve, that you have friends. And that most of the people who have *ever* dealt with him know that everything he's saying about you is slander."

So the word was spreading.

In any case, Phil was mostly right. Over the day, he received a series of texts and calls from various members of SHIELD, most of whom wanted to reassure him that they felt Malick should be off the WSC and that that, at least all personally, knew perfectly well that Steve was innocent and had been unfairly accused.

By the time Steve came home from his run, Tony was up, drinking blearily. He reached for Steve the moment he saw him, embracing him, nuzzling into his neck, giving the bruise there a gentle lick.

If there was any real upside to Steve's experience, it was discovering how many people were really on his side.

That afternoon, Donner came over. He was paler than usual, with deep bags under his eyes, and his body had altered in the way only male omegas' did: he was soft, his stomach still rounded and his breasts small, his face hairless and androgynous. Next to Steve, he looked positively feminine. He was holding Granite in his arms and George came in after him hauling a bag.

"Steve!" exclaimed Donner cheerfully, dropping into the nearest seat with clear exhaustion. The baby in his arms was asleep. He beamed wearly. "Wanna hold her? ...did you... did you have a... a nice heat?" Donner looked suddenly concerned, unsure of how to ask. There was an unspoken strangeness in their connection. Gideon clearly had a "type" and that type was Steve. He had taken Donner as his mate, dumped him, and then tried to take advantage of Steve.
Granite's eyes opened and her eyes, crystal-blue like Steve's and Donner's, roved around without focusing.

Tony wandered in wearing a silk dressing gown, holding a scotch. He frowned a little at the baby and took a sip of his drink. "...so... what's she, ah, do?"

"She's a baby," said Donner.

"I mean, I know, but what's she do? Like... roll over... or...?"

"She's not even a week old. She can't do anything," said Donner. His face broke into a grin again. "Look, Dr. McDermott gave me this book! Right now she can't even hold her head up... and she doesn't really track things more than a foot away."

Tony frowned. "So... so she just eats, sleeps, cries, and poops?"

Donner beamed and nodded.

Granite wriggled, then screwed her face up and began wailing her small cry.

Donner pulled his shirt down. Tony threw back his whiskey with a grumble.

"Wanna hold her? When she's done? ...she might throw up on you," warned Donner.

"Yeah, she puked on me yesterday," said George with a grin. "Banksy and me are helping out, you know, since... since Donnie doesn't have an Alpha."

"Better two good omegas than one bad Alpha," said Donner sweetly, smiling. "George has space in his flat and-- and Banksy's so lonely so-- so I hope it's okay, Steve-- if we-- if the three of us-- I mean, *four* of us stay with George and Kerry."

He blushed suddenly; George gave him a look.

"The four of us. Me, you, Banksy, and Granite," he said.

"And sometimes Kerry."

George looked even more embarrassed. "Shut up, Donnie."

Donner beamed a little. "No!" He rocked Granite slowly while she suckled, one small hand flailing and eventually grabbing the hem of Donner's shirt.


"...doesn't get out of jail until next year and, you know, I-- I don't know," said George, still slightly red. "That's not important."

"Well, personally, I'd like my fucking house back. No offense, Donner," said Tony. He had grown sick of the revolving door of psychologists and doctors and field agents and diplomats and news outlets and omega buddies that were constantly dropping by to chat with Steve. And while Donner was nice, Tony missed the solitude of his own home, where he could be naked and working on one of his gauntlets or jet propulsion hip packs in the living room while watching an A&E *Hoarders* Marathon and drinking gin straight from the bottle.

"I mean, we're cousins, we'll still hang out," said Donner.
"And Granite is... what is she?"

"First cousin, four times removed," said George, adding. "I checked with Aria."

Granite had apparently fallen asleep with her mouth still latched onto Donner. He didn't seem to mind. "But I... I wanted to make sure that... that we could do Christmas together," he said, shyly.

"I always go up to the lodge for Christmas Eve," interjected Tony.

"But... but we can all do Christmas?"

Tony's shoulders sagged a little. He already knew the answer.

When Christmas morning dawned, there were more than a dozen stockings hung on the mantle: Tony, Steve, Donner, Granite, JARVIS (Tony was insistent on this; inexplicably, he'd filled the stocking with batteries), Aria and Pepper, George and Banksy. Pepper had gone home on Christmas Eve, as had George, to spend the day with his kids. Banksy, however, spent half the day with them before leaving to have dinner with his stepson, and Donner and Granite stayed the whole day. (Tony was less than thrilled. Granite needed three diaper changes in an six-hour period and also cried no less than seven times. It didn't escape his notice that Steve held her several times with a look of gooey omega maternalism in his eyes.)

Fortunately, the baby wasn't invited to Tony's annual New Year's Eve party. That, as usual, was a media-covered event with many mature elites from the industry. Tony and Steve kissed at midnight and saw their picture in the news the next day, the two of them covered in confetti, their eyes closed in passion.

And then, thankfully, after that, things slowed down. Steve received no more official SHIELD calls; Fury was silent, perhaps his way of making amends for Malick's indiscretion.

Unofficially, however, plenty of agents called to tell him that they were on his side. And it wasn't just omegas or random SHIELD agents who expressed their support. Agent Rumlow called him a month after the incident.

"Who's this?" demanded Steve.

"Hey, er, this is Agent Rumlow. I just...wanted to apologise." The voice sounded genuine, regretful. Hm. Steve didn't know why it had taken him weeks to call though. Maybe he was nervous. "I had no idea. Not that that's an excuse. But I admire you Cap, a lot. And I just want you to know that I feel real awful about what happened."

"Right," Steve said, sounding a little awkward. "Well, I wasn't really hurt. So you don't have to--"

"Yeah. But, you could of have been. And it would have been my fault. I was just following--"

"Don't you dare say you were following orders," snapped Steve.

"Sorry. I-- like I said, it would have been my fault, I should have questioned the orders and I didn't. You're right. I take full responsibility. If anything had happened it would've been on me."

"Yeah, you're right. It would of. But it didn't happen. So count yourself lucky. If you want me to make you feel better about this, then that's not going to happen," Steve said flatly. Brock actually chuckled. The noise wasn't unpleasant.

"Ah. That's fair enough," he hummed. "I just want you to know that I don't think any less of you, for
"seeing you like that."

"No?"

"If anything, I think more of you." Brock paused. "Not in a weird way! Urgh. I'm screwing this up."

Steve actually laughed. "Yeah. Just a little."

"Okay. Better go for I say more dumb shit. Have a good one, Cap." And then he hung up.

Steve had never really imagined life after the army; he had always been a soldier. But Steve was kind of in love with Granite. He'd always found babies cute (who didn't?) but she was next level. And the fact that they were related only strengthened the connection. Donner kept saying stuff like 'you'll be Uncle Steve' and that made Steve feel all gooey inside, because Donner was comparing them as brothers. Granite herself was adorable. She liked to grab Steve's fingers when he held her and drool all over them. Steve knew Tony wasn't enamoured by her (something he simply couldn't understand) but he still tried to get him to hold her several times. There was a special sort of peace that came with not having any more missions, with knowing his work with SHIELD was effectively over.

He had plenty of interviews after Christmas, one actually on Banksy's show. Steve crashed an SNL sketch to return as the president because he'd been so popular before. He went on chat shows, more interviews. Without Fury beckoning him this way and that Steve had more time on his hands now. Pepper and Aria had even forced Tony into some more Alpha-orientated stuff too.

Steve didn't want to admit it, but he kind of missed Fury's secret missions. He'd enjoyed the rush and the thrill. He'd enjoyed feeling like he was doing something, something important.

But this was fine, too. This work was less thrilling but just as important.

He started looking into making a charity about cracking down on omegas being sold and traded. A few already existed and Steve reached out to them, wondering if he should join in with one of them. One responded to him within and hour and before Steve knew it he was at a charity gala the next week.

Occasionally, Steve thought about the other agents, the ones who were still active: namely, Clint, a fellow omega. He went to spend time with Clint and his family in the early spring. And when he came back home to Tony he instantly felt bad for lying. He tried to bring up telling Tony once, with Clint, but he obviously didn't want to. And Steve couldn't make him.

Tony tinkered away at the Mark VII, which could now come to him and self-assemble while he held still, and could be taken off by moving gantry, and was flight-capable for up to two hours. His arc reactor no longer bothered him in the slightest; aside from a weekly cleaning, it required virtually no maintenance.

In February, IUPAC formally refused to admit "badassium" to the periodic table of elements, forcing Tony to go with his second choice, edwinium. Because they were still not allowed to leave the country, Tony gave his speech from New York, where Stark Industries was building a new tower that was to run solely on renewable energy sourced from an arc reactor powered by edwinium. He and Steve toured it together as the finishing touches were being applied, navigating around contractor hardhats, toolboxes, drywall, and other such things.

"It's beautiful, huh?" said Tony cheerfully as he showed Steve proudly around the penthouse, which included a helipad and a mechanical gantry programmed for his armor. ("Not that I'll ever need it,
but... y'know. Iron Man.

March and April passed peacefully, with Steve still working on his omega rights campaigns to abolish conversion camps, and Tony throwing himself into Stark Industries' R&D. Things were shockingly stable; one night, Tony found himself and Steve in bed, side by side, Tony wearing glasses, the two of them reading quietly together. He paused to set down his magazine and look over at Steve fondly. "It's like everything just sorta... worked out, huh?" he said. He smiled a little and reached over to put a hand on the back of Steve's neck. "I'm glad I found you, Steve. You star-spangled son-of-a-bitch." He pushed his glasses up and went back to reading, well aware of the light that glinted off the band on his left hand.

Nothing, he felt, could go wrong in the world, and he looked forward to his and Steve's upcoming second anniversary.

"I think it was me that found you," Steve pointed out softly, a dopey kind of smile on his features that came from a combination of both love and sleepiness. When Steve wasn't in his heat it was easy to pretend everything was perfect. Aside from Tony's drinking, there was nothing else that really bothered him. Life was good, better than he ever thought it could be. The world wasn't perfect, yet, and he couldn't yet say he'd won the war. But he was still on his feet and fighting... and that counted for something.

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