your blue-eyed boys (1: someone's bound to get burned)

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Summary

In all of his life - including not only the stuff people would expect, like storming the HYDRA factory alone or crashing the Valkyrie, but also being a kid and so sick he could literally hear his mother praying through tears a few feet over, and the days and nights it was him praying and her gasping for breath that eventually left her -

In all that, through all that, this is the first time Steve's hands have actually shaken so badly he has to stop and sit and make himself calm down

Notes

Part One of your blue-eyed boys; the series should be treated as one story. The story uses only MCU canon up to Captain America: The Winter Soldier and extrapolates only from stuff actually in the films, plus my previous series.
Chapter 1

The boy seemed to have fallen / From shelf to shelf of someone’s rage.

- John Ashbury, “A Boy”

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That first night, Steve panics.

In all of his life - including not only the stuff people would expect, like storming the HYDRA factory alone or crashing the Valkyrie, but also being a kid and so sick he could literally hear his mother praying through tears a few feet over, and the days and nights it was him praying and her gasping for breath that eventually left her -

In all that, through all that, this is the first time Steve's hands have actually shaken so badly he has to stop and sit and make himself calm down before he can do things like pick up a pencil, or dial a telephone number, or punch letters on a keyboard.

He needs to do all of the above. There are . . . things. There are things he needs to do.

First there's people he needs to contact, to tell, and suddenly he's never been so grateful for anything as he is for text messaging. Because if he had to say things out loud - well that would be hard enough if he didn't think that Bucky's hearing's probably, almost certainly as good as his is - which means no, the wall between them and the closed interior door is not enough to block out the sound.

So texting, text messages - they're good. Steve likes text messages. And emails.

And then there's -

Well. He should probably make lists of things to do, because his head is running around in circles. And crashing into things on the way. Hard.

He has no plan. Not because he hadn't tried to make one. He'd tried to make lots of plans. Plan, adapt, plan again, tried to think of every contingency.

And then he'd thrown them away, because there wasn't much point. What could you plan for? He couldn't guess the possible contingencies, the situations, the potentials. And he sure as sure hadn't figured on what's happened now, on coming back to his place and finding Bucky here. He hadn't even hoped for that.

He hadn't realized he could.

Which means part of him's demanding why? over and over again, terrified there's a catch somewhere, something that's going to blow up. And with everything other part of him he feels like he's fifteen, feverish and lost. Again.

Which hadn't been that much fun when he'd been fifteen, feverish and lost - but is worse, much worse, here and now.

Bucky hasn't said much. Almost nothing. He followed Steve in like a ghost, watching Steve like while Steve might be using English words, he's speaking a strange, impenetrable language and one
where Bucky only understands one word in twelve. Steve's pretty sure his own speech - babble, really - seems . . .

Actually he doesn't even know how it had to look from the outside, but it definitely showed he was nervous.

Three words. No, yes and no - answers to are you hungry, get everything and need anything respectively, after Steve'd shown Bucky the extra bedroom - set up in probably Steve's most ridiculous gesture of overconfidence or desperate hope.

Steve'd been the one to close the bedroom door. He didn't think Bucky would have and wasn't . . . comfortable with the idea that Bucky might think Steve thought he needed watching.

Except now he worries that Bucky might have thought Steve was locking him in.

He hesitates. In the end, he tells himself that if Bucky wants to leave, an interior door isn't going to stop him, but he still can't decide which way would be right.

When he sends the text out, to Sam and to Stark and to the last number he has for Natasha (who he hasn't seen or heard from for months and who might as far as he knows have fallen off the edge of the earth, but she deserves to know), the replies he gets are different.

Sam sends back well hesit, the perfect example of answering a text fast and clumsy, and then text or call? and Steve answers don't call as soon as he sees it.

Stark's "reply" is Steve's seldom-used email suddenly getting a receipt and shipping invoice from Amazon.com and about six emails from something called JSTOR, both full of titles of books and articles that, to be fair, sound like they might be pretty relevant. Far be it from Stark to not be . . . .Stark. At least he didn't feel the need to say anything stupid. That was a blessing.

To Steve's surprise, he also gets a text from Natasha almost immediately; it says, Well done. He frowns at it, and texts didn't actually do much, and she must be sitting on her phone right now because he's only just hit "send" before the screen says, Next time I see you, Steve, we have to talk about the limits of your perspective. They're cute, but they're probably not going to serve you very well here.

Requests for elaboration get silence. He wonders where she is, what she's doing, but then the phone's showing him Sam asking for what exactly happened and Steve puts Natasha out of his mind.

He taps out the story in as few words as he can and typos enough he's ready to throw the phone against the wall by the time he's managed to comprehensibly tell Sam that Bucky just showed up, right here, told Steve he remembered remembering him but didn't actually remember him, and came inside when Steve asked him to.

well shit the text screen flashes again, correctly typed this time. Even with the panic, Steve fees his mouth twitch smile-ward; it was reassuring to know he wasn't the only one caught out and flat by this. And then the window slides up with a new message, this one demanding, well? i can't read your mind, steve, you want help I need details. how is he. what's happened. do i need to get iron man on standby to save your ass. that kind of thing.

As always, there's something reassuringly real and solid about Sam, even when he's only there by grace of the tenuous thread of a smartphone. Steve snorts softly, shakes his head and texts To start
with, you will never need Stark on standby to save me.

never say never comes back quick because Sam's a faster touch-screen typer than Steve. Steve decides to ignore it.

Second, give me a minute. He scrubs a hand over his face, sits up and rolls out his shoulders for a second and tries to think how to say it, how to put it, what's useful and what isn't, what's there and what's just wishful thinking.

Thin, he texts back. And I mean underweight. Said all of three words, and I mean literally. No expression I could see. Has no stuff except what he's wearing and the weapons I'm pretty sure he's hiding in it.

Steve closes his eyes, tries to drag more impressions out of the few minutes before he closed that door. No noticeable injuries, he types. Not filthy but likely been a couple days since last shower.

And then he hesitates, and adds, And this is me reaching so take it with a grain of salt but after he decided to come in I don't think he had any idea what should happen next at all. I mean none. No idea what would be behind the doors. No idea what I would do. Nothing.

And then this time - with no response yet from Sam, who's probably thinking - Steve really hesitates, but adds, Watched me like a bomb with a trigger you can't see.

Then Steve gets up, takes his phone and himself to the kitchen and starts pulling down stuff to make coffee. Caffeine's as useless as alcohol these days, but coffee's comforting and there's probably something to be said for the placebo effect. Besides, he needs something to do with his hands.

The phone buzzes; Steve turns it over to read, well last time you ran into each other you did kind of decide to let him beat you to death, steve, and thats the kind of thing that might make someone think you're potentially irrational. And Steve smiles, a bit unwillingly: he knows the tone of voice Sam just used.

Then the screen reads, damn this is gonna get annoying to text this much really fast and Steve sighs.

Pretty certain his hearing's as good as mine now, Steve replies. I can hear my neighbours' conversations in detail. Or at least, he thinks, he used to be able to when he had neighbours. The places on either side of him have been bought recently, probably by someone who plans to rent them out and hasn't got around to it yet.

Neighbours. It occurs to him that neighbours, whenever they show up again, could be a problem.

ok you're right not good plan, Sam's screen shows. talk tomorrow. right now BASICS some of which you should recognize: change = scary. change one thing people start looking for certainty other places. old places usually. familiar dynamics familiar surroundings familiar experiences. can get pretty extreme: theres convicts who get caught again on purpose b/c they only know how to live in prison and the change on the outside is too big. considering we dont know that much about his normal that doesnt let you predict anything except unlikely to be GOOD. so among other things let me tell you BE CAREFUL and damn it i mean of yourself.

Steve can see the look Sam has to be giving him, or at least the text-covered screen of the phone. He ignores it and takes his coffee to the arm-chair in the living-room. He sets the mug on the side table and leans forward, his elbows on his knees, trying to think.
They don't know much. Even Natasha's files were relatively sparse - everything from the outside or out of the mouths of informants, turn-coats, and all of it . . . outside. Bases, sightings, locations of deaths; a quick gloss on how you use the same assassin (and the word *use* snags on the edge of Steve's mind and tangles up in part of his thought) for more than fifty years. Thin notes on cryogenic freezing and memory erasure.

It gives Steve a timeline. Logistics. It doesn't tell him anything about how Bucky sees the world now. What they made his world into.

*You're my mission.*

Steve grimaces. He doesn't want to think about that, about the last moments on Insight C. For him there were only two moments that matter, and everything else - he'd be just as happy to forget.

That thought rattles around his head uncomfortably for a moment; he sighs and picks up his coffee, rubs between his eyebrows with a knuckle and tells himself to get over it. Tries to comb through thoughts and memories to try and find something useful.

*You're my mission.*

And suddenly Steve wonders why that mattered. He frowns at his coffee, tries to put *timing* back together.

By then, the Insight helicarriers were falling, one of them into the Triskelion. Pierce was dead. Natasha'd already dropped the database and, according to Banner, broken Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and something called Tumblr from the sheer traffic. It was over; HYDRA, at least as it had existed, was done and all its best on their way to being something to make the cleanup crews lose their lunch.

And there's trying, *wanting* to kill Steve because he upended the world and broke everything, sure. Steve can get that. Except Bucky didn't need a *reason* to do that. He didn't need a lens, a frame to present it in. He used one anyway, and the frame matters.

Even if Bucky didn't know Pierce was dead he knew the helicarriers were going down; he could have been gone, out, safe, the minute Steve put the new targeting blade in. He had to know that staying risked his own death. Had to know there wasn't much *point*, that the plan was dead and gone, and frankly there was a good chance Steve was going down with Insight C so - what makes finishing a mission that important? So much so that you *can't* even leave that one in a million chance? What makes doing anything that important?

What happens if you don't.

Next question: what does it take to convince someone that's going to happen *even after* the whole thing's gone to Hell? What does it take to make it so that even with everything in flames, they still don't dare leave something undone? What, and how much?

It's a question that leaves a sour, rotted taste in the back of Steve's brain. He picks up the phone again and types into the text-box, *I think his 'normal' means being watched. Always. ALWAYS. Being told what to do. For EVERYTHING. Probably suffering if it didn't get done.*

The "probably" is a cowardly word, actually. He shouldn't've typed it. But he did, because he doesn't *want* to let go of that cushion. That shield.

He puts the phone down, picks up his mug instead. It's not very heatproof, and the tips of his fingers burn. So does his tongue when he takes a drink - sugar, no cream.
Consequences. That's what makes a mission matter. And maybe it's what makes someone listen to a house tour like it's a mission-briefing and not think you're allowed to close your own room door. something tell you that? says Sam's next text.

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose. And he's not trying to think like Bucky now, he knows, he's trying to think like Pierce and he'd honestly rather wade through shit hip deep.

But. But to use your asset, you'd have to take him out of the freezer, and you'd have to let him go out into the world. Sure, you send backup and maybe half their job could be to keep an eye on him, but get them in arms' reach and killing them wouldn't make him break a sweat - and kill him from a distance and your favourite weapon's gone. So somehow you have to know he'll come back.

And now Steve wonders if Bucky really spent the last four months running from, hiding from him.

Following this train of thought is turning Steve's stomach, badly, and he stops. Doesn't need to go further down that way anyway. He's got enough to work with for now. Hunch, he texts back. Tell you tomorrow, too long for text.

Then he drinks most of his too-hot coffee, puts the mug down and sits with his head in his hands for a while trying to think of what the hell to do now.

By oh-three-hundred, he has to admit he doesn’t know. That thinking about it isn’t giving him any new ideas and that tired’s snuck up on him and wrapped its hands around his throat. Steve puts his phone back in his pocket, washes his face, brushes his teeth and then sits on the edge of his bed for a while. And the door to the other bedroom stays closed.

When he eventually gets undressed and lays his jeans over the standing clothes press (and hadn’t that been hard to find) that doubles as a clothes rack, he pulls out the phone again to put it by his bed where it lives, charging through the night.

Sam hasn’t said anything all this time, which is probably a good thing. But Steve pauses with the phone in his hand and then texts his admission of current defeat, and the words I honestly have no idea how to do this, and if he’s not sure he could explain what “this” is in words, he’s pretty sure Sam’ll get it. And he’s right.

The return text is steve, if there was an expert in HYDRA memory-erasure based trauma and deprogramming in ninety year old repeatedly frozen supersoldiers i’d already be giving you their number. hell i’d already have called them for you. NOBODY knows how to do this. congratulations: you're now a leader in the psychological field.

And then, after Steve doesn't answer for a minute or three, what are you doing now? Going to sleep, Steve replies and plugs the phone in. Everything he does seems loud in the night silence, especially now that all the other lights in the place are off except the tiny bar that comes out from under the other bedroom door. And, Steve remembers, he’d been the one to turn that light on.

are you SURE you don’t want me to call stark? or natasha? or anybody else? just in case? That text comes with an emoticon, little happy yellow smile sticking out its tongue, but Steve knows
Sam isn’t really joking. And Steve allows that if it was his friend who'd just told him that he was going to sleep without anybody to watch, in a situation like this, he probably wouldn’t be joking either.

I’ll be fine, he says, and then puts the phone on sleep-mode for the night before he turns off his bedside lamp.

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He sits alone in the room. The door is closed. His head aches. Beyond the door Rogers moves, target that can't be a target, mission failed, centre the world shook apart around.

Thinking doesn't work. His head is full of noise that never resolves into sound. Real sounds - city sounds, building sounds, human sounds - bounce off the surface and then go. Their meaning fades and then it's gone. Leaves behind the noise.

And everything wrong. But it - doesn't matter.

Everything is wrong, but everything has been wrong since the day the world shook so the wrongness is not new. Constant. Complete. Not new.

Here - is new.

He came here. Chose to come here, worked to come here. Borders, nations, continents - trains and ships, waiting in the dark - not difficult but . . . long. Far. Days and nights moving, waiting, coming closer and closer to places full of people who saw-noticed-cared instead of . . . away. Further away. Didn't go, didn't disappear, came here gave up fighting the impulse that makes no sense -

Why.

Thought-shape like a shiv to his brain and he can't answer. Sees no answer. No answer to a choice that doesn't make sense. Chose it anyway and now, here, this - why?

His head aches. Beyond the door Rogers moves, goes from one room to another and back. Runs water. Moves a chair. Drops something on a table; picks it up again. The only living moving thing anywhere near, Rogers drags attention back in like there's a line. Like a wire, movement to nerve-ending, every motion lighting up the brain.

Beyond the circle of motion everything is quiet, filled with sleeping people or empty space, nothing.

He came here. Chose to come here.

There is no mission. There has been no mission, there will be no mission, there can't be, they're over. No one left - There is no one to order one. And even if -

Even if. His hands close and tighten. Even if.

(No. There is a snarl, scream, hiss: No. No going back no thought no reason not again no. Never. Never. No.

Mixes in with the noise, makes it worse, head aching stomach churning but - no.)

Even if.

He left Rogers on the bank. Then, now, he came back here. His head aches. Why.
Counter: Why not.

Why not.

Why to why not.

There are no missions; there is nothing else. There is a face and a voice shaking everything apart, fracturing what he knows, and there is a man who won't fight back, who he can't finish, can't kill. Can't let die. That's all.

So: why not.

He sits, facing into the room. The room is rectangular, normal-sized for the building type. There is a single bed along the wall opposite the door, under the window. An armchair in the opposite corner. A bedside table, a lamp. A long table beside the armchair, wooden, decorative. A closet, open, empty.

Illumination comes from one incandescent bulb in a fixture in the ceiling. Only one. The light, tinged with orange. The walls - hanging framed photographs of landscape, terrain. Main room, adjacent dining-room, adjacent kitchen. Hallway: one side two rooms, this one and Rogers'; other side bathroom and smaller space with a closed door.

Knowing this gives him nothing.


He keeps his eyes open to stare at the wall because when he closes them the images are worse, the pictures and moments and tastes and sounds. With his eyes open they catch the edges of his mind like a serrated edge, spatter like blood. With his eyes closed they close over his head like a flood. But he can't hold them. The moment he turns to look they dissolve and leave him drowning and clutching at pieces.

Rogers fell, but in memory Rogers is above him and he falls. Can feel the fall, feel the desperate twist, feel the air, feel the cold, feel the ground break him.

It never happened. He has never fallen.

He does not remember, has never remembered falling.

Except now.

In memory there are trees, and the river is the wrong river. In memory there is snow. In memory there is skin and bone where he has only known metal. In memory there is fear of a kind he doesn't know and pain he has never felt.

He remembers that was in memory. For a moment. For - hours. A handful of hours. If he could reach it, it might be there again, and maybe there would be more.

But then it's gone and he knows Rogers fell, because he left Rogers on the bank, not quite dead. Should have killed him. Didn't. Should have let him die. Didn't.

Couldn't.

He sits in the room until the sounds outside briefly increase and then stop, and the other light he could see under the door disappears. It's 0327.
He turns off the light and stands in the dark to let his eyes adjust. This is a city, urban; the light pollution that comes in every window, even the ones with blinds and curtains, is more than enough to see by. He opens the door and listens for human breath.Suspends his to hear better.

One, to his right, in the other room. He steps into the hall. Underfoot carpet changes to wood.

Rogers doesn't close the door to sleep. It stands eight inches ajar. Enough to see everything past it, standing in the right place.

This room is a few feet bigger than the other, closer to square, the bed wider. Dresser in the corner. Clothes laid over something beside the dresser. Round woven basket beside it, deep and tall. Books on the table by the bed, some with bookmarks some page-face to the tabletop, the floor beside. Everything else neat.

He goes no closer than the doorway. Rogers sleeps to one side on the bed, face to the door, one arm underneath the pillow, the other arm in front. The front hand is empty. Impossible to tell with the other. Shallow, slow, sleeping breaths: either asleep, or practiced at faking sleep.

Not likely the second. Rogers is asleep. Unwary. Young: handful of years younger than thirty. Frowns in sleep; the line between brows says habitual.

He steps back away from the door. In the two rooms the floor is carpeted; out here, wood, the risk of noise increased.

Detail, not difficulty.

In the bathroom the floor is tile. Behind the bathroom sink is a wall of mirrors; he steps back and out faster than he meant. Catches the second step just before it lands and creaks wood against moving wood. He stands in the hall. He can see all of this room from outside.

From outside: square room, one window, frosted glass. He moves by.

Kitchen - tile, steel, dishes, knives. Pots and pans hanging from a rack above a centre counter. Cast iron, some. Window out over a balcony, with the door in the adjacent room. Dining room with table, chairs, small desk beside one wall. Computer, phone, both locked with pass-code. Pictures in frames on the desk, black and white: a woman with dark hair; two men standing together.

One of them is Rogers. The other's face is his. The same picture is in the Smithsonian, blown larger and framed with a plaque to explain who it is. What it is. Where. Why.

He looks at his own face in a picture from a place he can't remember and feels the -

When he blinks he is staring at his own hands. But not here, beside a desk, standing; he is far away, on his back, staring at skin and metal, the metal he's never seen and his skin crawls and he stares. At -

Hard to breathe. Hard to see. His head spins, like blood-loss. Vision fades in and out; he puts his right hand on the back of the chair at the desk to keep from falling, to stop the crash and the noise that would be body and picture-frame hitting wood floor without control.

He puts the picture down. Flat. On its back. Right now his right hand is shaking too much to prop it where it was. Right now his left would shatter the glass. He puts the picture down flat on its back and waits until he can breathe. Then he lets go of the chair. Turns around.
The main room is open. A low table in the centre. A couch, a chair, both stuffed full and covered with leather. A record turn-table in a polished wood case. A long flat shelf on the wall above a television on another low set of shelves. Two low tables. More pictures, most photographs in colour, some painted, all meaningless. Objects, all without purpose, on the shelves and on the tables: a small model plane; empty vase; empty bowl; small statues, figurines; magazines; a sketchbook; a flat, low dish.

The dish holds a pocket-knife, old, wooden-body, the wood scratched, metal caps on each end dented and scratched, but the whole carefully polished.

He picks it up without meaning to. The objects are without purpose, decoration. He passes them by, ignores them. But he discovers he's taken the knife.

It is in his hand. It is . . . fam -

He opens it.

The blade isn't straight. The blade is warped like it's been bent and straightened and he stops, turns it over, sees line of blade to case to -

It shouldn't open. It shouldn't be easy to open. The warp in the blade should stick against the side. But it didn't when he opened it.

He closes it, and it doesn't stick. He opens it again. The blade moves; there is give where it's fixed. A fraction. Press the blade one way and it slides in. Pull the same way when it opens -

He closes the knife and puts it back. It clatters softly against the pottery of the dish because his right hand shakes. His fingers don't want to uncurl from around it. He makes them and steps away.

A car passes outside, old model, louder; the noise makes him start, sends his right hand to the knife in its sheath along his spine. But it's only a car. This is a city. There are many cars here.

And the pocket-knife is still on the shelf. Where it should stay. Where Rogers put it. Where it is.

But he knows how to open it.

He takes it. It fits in his hand. He can open it. He knows the trick. He takes the knife and goes back, back to the room he came from. He closes the door and stands with his back to it, left hand on the door-handle, and doesn't know why his heart-rate is elevated, why he's struggling to breathe - not poison, not injury, not -

He goes back to where he sat before. After a while it becomes easier to breathe.

It's 0400.

The metal caps on the pocket-knife catch the light that comes in the window from the street-light. He turns it, over and over. He waits for a blink of his eyes to bring the things he doesn't remember, but it's nothing. Except that it fits in his hand and he knows how it works.

After some time - he forgets to track how long - he slides it into his right pocket, beside the knife already there. Then he sits and waits.

He doesn't know what for.

******
Steve doesn’t actually see Bucky for the next four days.

The first morning he oversleeps; he wakes up to a lot of text-messages full of increasing concern from Sam, one from Pepper explaining that if he could wake up and text his friend in DC Tony would appreciate it a lot, one from Stark saying more or less the same thing but nowhere near as polite, and one from Natasha just saying *Live through the night, Rogers?*

Steve sighs. He sends out a mass text saying *I’m fine, I just slept in, sorry if you were bothered* to all four of them and hauls himself out of bed.

He feels hungover, or at least, he feels a little like what other people describe as feeling mildly hungover, with faintly aching head and queasy stomach. He wouldn’t know. For the first part of his life, drinking more than one or two beers felt like asking for something to go wrong, for him to end up sicker than he could afford to be, and for the second part - well, if you can't get drunk, you can't get hangovers.

The sore neck is probably just tension. And he can’t exactly blame his body for being tense.

Bucky’s door is closed. For just a beat Steve pauses outside it and his hand half-rises to the handle almost of its own accord, but then he steps back, away, and takes a shower instead.

Shower, breakfast, a few more texts, and the door stays closed. Three or four times at least he hesitates, almost knocks, and then leaves it alone. He just can't think of how it would go. What he would say. What he could hope to hear back.

*honestly do what you normally do,* is Sam’s advice. *let change settle into something else predictable and make a new kind of familiar.*

That’s pretty much a loss for the day - Steve never sleeps that late, to start with, and he’s too unsettled himself to figure out the normal pattern of, well, *anything* - but Steve takes it on board. He’s got a pretty strong feeling Sam’s advice in any normal version of this scenario would be “go in there and talk the guy into admitting himself to a psychiatric facility”, and that anything else is trying to salvage bits and pieces of ideas out of the second-best options.

Sam’s seen the same files Steve has. The same pictures, of clean, orderly facilities that look almost like any other kind of hospital if you don’t know they’re pretty much torture chambers underneath; the same people in their lab-coats and scrubs with their clipboards. There’s nothing normal about this. Sam knows that as well as Steve does.

Steve finds an extra towel, a new razor and an unopened toothbrush. After thinking he adds a fresh bar of soap and stares at his closet, realizing that for the first time he and Bucky can probably share clothes, or at least could if Bucky weren’t so thin. Jeans - a pair that shrunk in the wash more than he thought they would - and a long-sleeve t-shirt get added to the pile that Steve leaves outside Bucky’s door, which once again he doesn’t knock on.

Once or twice he hears movement, or sees the shadow of it under the door. Then it’ll be silence again. And the door doesn’t open.

Steve goes for his run in the evening, which is probably the hardest thing he’s done in a long time. It turns out to be a good call. The exertion siphons off some of the wound-up feeling, and he turns for home feeling maybe a bit more balanced. A few blocks away he slows to a walk and calls Sam.

It takes a few extra blocks to cover everything, and he's right - Sam says, outright, "Look if this
was anything but what it is, man, if you couldn't talk him into committing himself I'd call the cops
to do it for you. Now that's just going to get people killed and make everything worse, I know that,
you know that, but that's what you're working with. So, you know, on the one hand that's
terrifying," and Steve can hear the wry smile Sam's got on, "but on the other hand don't feel to bad
about feeling overwhelmed."

When Steve gets back the pile of clothes, towel, toothbrush and soap are gone, but the door’s still
closed. Or maybe it's closed again, not still.

Steve checks: there’s a pear, some slices of bread and a Gatorade gone from the kitchen. That’s it.
He marks food as something weird, at least, maybe a problem - there’s leftover pizza in the fridge,
some Chinese, a lot of different bits of cold-cut meat for snacking, cheese, stuff like that. Hell,
there's canned soup in the cupboards. All that - it makes how little’s missing, and what it is, seem
pretty strange.

Who knows?

Steve makes supper, tries to watch a documentary on orcas that turns out to be more depressing
than he can take so he shuts it off, sketches a little and goes to bed. He sleeps fine. He wakes up
remarkably non-dead, although he can't say much for the tone of his dreams.

With small variations for wakeup times and exactly what’s missing from the kitchen, that’s the
next four days.

*****

Memory is like drowning in mud. Memory chokes: viscous; thick; just liquid enough that over time
it seeps through lips into mouth and past to the throat where it stops, clogging-filling-choking-
suffocating water and clay separating until grains scrape at the lining of airways and water spreads
burning rivulets into lungs; pushing into the throat until the body gags around it regardless,
regardless of -

Anything.

He remembers that this has happened. That the comparison itself comes from memory. He doesn't
remember breaking the surface but he remembers staying on hands and knees, coughing and
vomiting mud and water and blood to make room for air. Hands against the ground. Red and
brown. Staring at both until extraction.

Extraction meant treatment. Simplest most expedient way to remove remnant of sand from his
lungs. He heals quickly. That makes it simple.

That isn't memory. Knowledge. Extraction meant report - explanation, why, what went wrong,

Memory is drowning in mud. In his head.

Snow, trees, pain. The smell of cooking food he doesn't know; the smell of burning bodies that
makes him want to gag like he's never known before. The smell of wet and mud, of lemon with the
window of a kitchen showing daylight with the silhouette of a woman in a brown dress, heat, his
left arm screaming with pain he can't ignore.
The chair. Too much light. Rogers but too small too frail laughing until the coughing starts - coughing turns to wheezing and there's fear-panic-terror and his head full of light and fog, his left hand around someone's throat - *his* hand, silver against flesh tightened to kill, *die fucking die you Nazi son of a* -

The chair. Cold.

Memory chokes. If he reaches then it's gone. Then there's only blankness like static in his head. Then there are . . . words. Not his.

*Gift to mankind.*

Sometimes the memories stay in his head. Sometimes they bleed into his eyes. The chair in the corner is broken because for a moment he thought it was a face, the face that goes with the voice except when his left hand came away there was splintered wood instead of blood, skull and cerebral matter. Memory leaks everywhere like mud.

He can't make it stop.

The first day Rogers stays in the building until 1815. There are the noises of movement, of water running - little (taps), more (shower). Dishes in the kitchen. Both the vibration and the alert-tones of a smartphone, standard, no personalization. Rogers stops outside of the door seven times. The pauses are different duration. One comes with the sound of something made of cloth being left on the ground, blocking a small section of the space under the door.

He waits until Rogers leaves before he opens the door to see.

The first time he ate after he left Rogers on the bank, it stayed down for fifteen minutes before he threw it up again. Some things stay down longer. Some don't. Failure to eat ends in consciousness changing badly or failing completely; over months he's learned to eat something, to keep down what he can against nausea and any pain. With the condo empty, he takes what he thinks he can tolerate from the kitchen. He takes up the pile of towel-clothes-toothbrush-soap, too.

He closes the door. Changes clothes. Puts the old ones by the broken chair.

After that, Rogers wakes at 0530 and leaves to run; returns, showers, dresses, uses the TV, the computer, cooks. Leaves in the afternoon. Rogers' phone alerts throughout the day and into the night. The lights outside this room turn off by 2200.

He doesn't bother with the light inside this room. Doesn't need it, night or day. He goes in search of water, or food, or a container, or relief, only when Rogers isn't here. He could leave.

He could leave.

He doesn't know anywhere else to go. And memory chokes and suffocates and blinds and makes no sense no story no picture just pieces, pieces and confusion that crawls in front of his eyes and obliterates the world and mixes with thoughts and things he knows have happened.

*your work*

*fist of*

*your name is james buchanan -*

It wasn't like this before. But before he was -
Before he might be found. Before meant moving, changing, abandoning and finding new places to rest and wait and hide. Like running ahead of a flood. Now he stopped. Now it catches up. Now he's drowning.

Sometimes it's hard to breathe. Sometimes it's hard to stop gasping for air. Sometimes even if his stomach is empty he retches. But quiet. Silent. The last bit of control he has. His head hurts and he is here and he doesn't know why and he is drowning in his head, in snow and cold that digs in from his skin to his bones and then spreads like blood on snow soaking through.

He doesn't sleep on purpose. But sometimes his eyes close and he wakes up with time passed and his back against the closet wall. Isn't sure if that counts. And the chaos in his head doesn't stop then. Just paints itself in front of his eyes and makes less sense. Less order. Less meaning.

Rogers wakes at 0530 and sleeps by 2200. Day one, day two, day three, day four, day five.

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On day five Steve doesn't go for a morning run; he goes for a walk, with a cup of coffee, so he can actually talk to Sam again before either of them ends up doing something that makes conversation impractical.

"It's a waiting game," Sam tells him. "Be patient. Not to go all Daoist on you, but sometimes sitting still is the most effective thing you can do in these circumstances." Sam pauses and adds, "I should send you a book-list."

"Wait till I get home and text you what Stark already ordered for me," Steve says, a little sourly, not bothering to point out that his awareness of Daoism more or less extends to knowing it's Chinese and not much more, so the comparison is kind of wasted on him. "I got an Amazon shipping list about five minutes after I notified him. Speaking of, any news on the wings?" Steve adds, shifting the focus for a second. Partly because he's actually curious; partly because he doesn't like acting like all Sam's around for is giving him advice.

"Yeah, actually," Sam says, "mostly a lot of technical back and forth. Man seems really dedicated to showing up the original manufacturer. I'm afraid this suit's going to end up doing my taxes or making lattes or something."


"And you're changing the subject," Sam notes. "I mean that's fine if you want, but don't think I didn't notice."

Steve sighs. "Yeah, I know," he says. Thinks a bit. "In general, waiting is not a problem. I won't lie and say I'm not edgy, but that doesn't matter. The food thing - that worries me, though. I know you noticed -"

" - that you eat a lot and ideally you seem to have a snack every hour or so? Yeah, I did," Sam says. "I've never mentioned it because it makes sense - second law of thermodynamics, conservation of energy. You've got to be getting it somewhere."

Steve shrugs, habitual motion even if Sam can't see him.

"I can actually get away with not doing that for a while, but eventually I pay for it, and paying for it's pretty miserable. And the stuff coming out of my kitchen would leave you hungry, let alone me."
"Well," Sam says after a second, "if he does keel over from heart problems, make sure you warn the hospital you take him to." The tone to his voice makes it clear that's Sam's way of saying I got nothing and Steve glances heavenward.

"Thanks," he says. "That's very helpful."

"Let me know what Stark sent you, I'll tell you if it's bullshit or helpful and add anything else I can think of," Sam tells him. "And make sure you're taking care of yourself. Put on your own oxygen mask first and all that."

"Yeah," Steve says. Hears Sam snort.

"Try sounding less convincing, Steve. I don't think you're giving me your best effort here. I mean it. You keel over, what's he got? He sure as shit isn't gonna let me take over."

As irrefutable arguments go - "That's playing dirty," Steve says, letting his tone be his surrender.

"Where I come from we call that common sense. I think they call it more or less the same where you come from, too. You've got the hard road this time - you don't get to nobly sacrifice yourself once and then die your way out of the aftermath, you have to make sure there's enough left to keep going tomorrow."

"I got it, Sam," Steve says. And he does. He doesn't like it, but he does.

When he puts his phone away, he looks at his half empty coffee and throws it in the nearest garbage can. Then he does take a run, not for routine or condition or anything else, but because maybe if he runs fast enough for a while, he won't have to think.

The condo's still quiet when he gets back. Nothing much different. Nothing to catch the eye. The paper towels in the bathroom garbage are the only sign anything happened, and it's pure luck Steve looks. Pure luck he notices they've been used to wipe up blood.

He crouches down to take a closer look at them, pulling them carefully one by one out of the metal wastebasket. Mostly they show the smear of wiping along a smooth surface, the spots of mopping something up. A couple look like they've been pressed to something, though. Something seeping blood, and more than a little.

He hesitates. He hesitates a long time outside the door. He reminds himself that you can't clean up after yourself if you're dead, which means Bucky probably isn't, and if someone else were dead inside the apartment there would have been a lot more blood. And it's not like he doesn't know the smell of death - and it's not here.

It's still hard to step up to the door and tap on it with one hand, the other on the door handle. Hard to say, "Bucky?" and when there's only silence to make himself ask, "Can I come in?"

Steve feels like a kid. He feels like he hasn't felt since the radio told him Germany had invaded France and smashed their way through to the French coast and the whole world changed on him, suddenly coming into focus and purpose. Horrible as it was, it turned the world into a place where something needed doing, and it was clear what it was - even if it did take the rest of the country a while to wake up and figure that out, and even if it took a long and unexpected path to take him where he could do it.

Now - now something still needs doing, but only God knows what, Steve doesn't. He can only
guess and hope he's not wrong. Pray he's not wrong.

It feels like a long time before Bucky's voice says, "It's your home." The words are somehow wrong, his voice toneless and strange. Steve has to pause and take a breath - two - before he can turn the handle and open the door.

And he says, "But it's your room," as he does it, and he's glad he finished the words before he really saw the other side. It's still true and he'd still have meant it, but his voice might have gone strange. Might have been less believable. For however believable it was anyway.

Two of the framed pictures are broken. There's an ugly-looking hole in one wall. One of the doors to the closet is broken and off its runners. The blood's mostly on the glass in the picture frames; Steve thinks there probably used to be a lot more around the hole in the wall, and that's where the paper towels came from. The broken picture-frames are one on top of the other on the low narrow table that runs between the door and the arm-chair, and the is on its side, one leg broken, one side collapsed.

Other than the pictures, the blood's on Bucky. A smudge on his face, some on the shirt and the jeans, mostly on his right hand where the skin is cut and torn up, up to around his wrist and forearm. A little bit beading on the reflective surface of his left hand.

He's sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed, and Steve hates that the first thing he thinks of is a puppet with its strings cut. It's not true, anyway. Bucky's sitting straight and there's still all the tension Steve hasn't seen him without since he left for Europe, it's just that he's just . . . sitting, arms loose, legs bent a little, like he fell down there and braced himself just that much.

He looks up, when Steve comes in. Or at least he raises his eyes, meets Steve's - for a second. Maybe two. Bucky's eyes are red-rimmed, dark circled and sunken and his jaw and cheekbones too sharp, face too thin.

And there's something in the look on it Steve doesn't understand. Like the look of someone waiting for something to happen - something they don't want, but can't do anything about. Can't stop. Bucky looks at him like that for a second or two and then his eyes slide away until he's staring straight ahead again.

Steve doesn't know what to do. He doesn't. There's nothing he can reach for to help him with this. He doesn't know what the right thing to do is, what's going to help fix it and not mess it all up. And there's no one to ask, not before enough time has passed that doing nothing's the answer by default, because he doesn't think he has that much time to decide, before something's . . . gone, before some moment passes. Something needs to be done, and Steve doesn't know what it is.

But he can't do nothing.

"Bucky," he says quietly. "You're bleeding."

Bucky raises his eyes again and looks like it takes a moment to understand the words, like they're not what he expects; then he looks at his right arm, almost disinterested, like someone looking at a caterpillar they found crawling on their shoe.

"It'll stop," he says. His voice is indifferent, but his hand opens from its half-curl and he looks at it like he's looking at something new. Something he hasn't noticed before.

It turns out that right or wrong or even the last mistake, there are some things Steve can't do, isn't capable of doing, and standing around while Bucky bleeds is one of them. "I'll be right back," he
There's gauze and medical tape in the bathroom, in the kit under the sink; there's also antiseptic wipes and antibiotic ointment, and a lot of other stuff. Old habits die hard, and a stocked kit is one he got from his mom even before the war hammered it home. This one's got a lot more stock, admittedly, because it's not make-do and odds and ends brought home, hoping nobody would notice, but it's still the habit he got from her. Bucky probably heals as fast as he does, Steve figures, but that doesn't mean cuts don't need to be cleaned out and looked after.

Then it strikes him that actually, some people probably thought it did. The idea comes like a bad taste in his mouth and he has to keep from viciously kicking the door to the cabinet under the sink as he closes it. There hadn't been any bravado in what Bucky said, no emotion at all. Just assessment. Like it was routine, deciding whether or not an injury's important enough to bother with. If the bleeding will stop by itself before it causes actual...damage.

Steve wishes he hadn't thought of that. Now's not a good time for anger, that's one thing - maybe the only thing - he's sure of. That no matter the real reason, Bucky'll take it wrong, and if now Steve thinks maybe there's a range of action taking it wrong might lead to, the whole range is bad.

So he makes himself take a few deep breaths and let it go and forget about it, forget about people he couldn't get at anyway. At least not right now. Right now, Bucky's bleeding in the other room, and Steve can do something about it. That's what matters.

Bucky hasn't moved, except now he's staring through the floor. There's a line between his eyebrows; when Steve sits down in front of him he flinches like he's startled, suddenly focusing on Steve's face as Steve rips open one of the little packets of antiseptic wipes.

"Can I?" Steve asks, gesturing to Bucky's right hand. For a minute Bucky looks like he doesn't understand the question. Maybe he doesn't, Steve thinks, maybe he actually has no idea what Steve's asking if he can do - but he extends his right arm and watches Steve take it carefully, avoiding any of the lacerations, so he can hold it still.

There's no reaction when Steve starts on the deep scraping cut furthest up Bucky's arm. There's no splinters, but there's dust from the drywall to be wiped away and in some places cleaned out. At first Steve thinks Bucky's watching him do it, until he looks up to reach for another wipe and realizes that Bucky's looking through his arm, through what Steve's doing.

And whatever he's thinking, whatever he's seeing, the look on his face - it's not, it's not quite as bad as the last minutes on Insight C, before the fall and the river and the black-out afterwards. Not quite. But if Steve felt young and lost outside in the hall -

If Bucky'd ever looked like this before, Steve'd been too young to know. And he wouldn't've wanted to. He doesn't want to now. He would even take the rage, or the blank determination to kill, over this -

It's not even fear. It's beyond fear. Being afraid comes with wanting to run away, to fight back, to kill the thing that scares you before it kills you. What's in Bucky's face has passed that and Steve, Steve wishes there were something he could just hit until that look goes away and never, ever comes back.

Wishes there was something he could say. Something he thought would help, and not make it worse.

Steve looks down at what he's doing until he's finished, until every scrape and cut is clean and the
ones that don't want to stop bleeding yet are bandaged with gauze and tape, and then he lets go of Bucky's arm. Carefully. Because right now he wouldn't be surprised if, had he just let go, Bucky's hand hit the floor as hard as its weight could make it.

"Bucky?" he says, one last question, hoping maybe this time Bucky will come back from wherever he is and answer. Bucky's gaze shifts to his face, only a little more focused; then Bucky closes his eyes and swallows. "Is there something - " Steve starts, and then stops, because Bucky's eyes are open again, looking away from Steve. And there's something about him that feels to Steve like he's reaching back from that blank, helpless dread, and Steve doesn't want to be the sound that drives him away again.

"Snow, and trees," Bucky says. Eventually. He looks sidelong at Steve. Braced. But still talking. "Mountains. There were snow and trees - don't know where."

A knot twists itself up in Steve's chest and climbs up into his throat, but he manages to ask, "There a train?" without his voice going strange. His voice *needs* not to go strange. He needs to stay calm, and normal. And he can.

He doesn't know what Bucky expected, but it doesn't seem like it was a calm question back, or even a question Steve was really trying to keep calm. Bucky maybe blinks, or maybe it's a flinch, because his breath hitches with it, but he slowly nods. Once.

Steve swallows against the knot, the choking and fights for the same calm. "That was, um," he says and has to stop and take a breath. "We were in the Alps. The train - intel said there was - said Zola was on board. It was our job to capture him. You, and me, and - " he stops, stops himself from listing five dead men Bucky probably can't remember right now, " - the others."

He wonders if Bucky even remembers who Zola was, or if years passed and that got lost, too, even if Zola'd made him into this.

It takes another deep breath to keep going, to keep it matter of fact when he says, "It was a trap. We almost got out of it, but I - I let my guard down. Turned my back but there was still a guy alive with a power weapon, it blew out the side of the train. Took you with it. I tried to get to you, but I couldn't - I didn't make it."

He can't actually look at Bucky now. "The fall was hundreds of feet onto rocks or into a river," he says. "We were - I was sure you were dead. I was certain I'd just watched you die. We didn't - " he stops. "I didn't - "

"I remember trees," Bucky says. His voice is distant and mostly without any kind of inflection, except maybe confusion. "Snow. All around. Trees and snow and cold."

Steve tries to clear his throat and go on. Tries not to see, to let memory get him tangled up in wind and blasts and a scream. Tries to sort himself out, because this isn't the time for his memory, his mess. Not here and now.

He can't do much but he can give . . . answers. Sense. Truth.

"Zola must've figured you survive," he says, and his voice is only a little rough. "He knew what he'd done. We didn't - I - " he stops and takes a breath and says, "You'd never been hurt. Not since the factory. And you either didn't know what all they did or wouldn't tell me, so we didn't know how long it should have taken you to recover from that."

He looks up and Bucky's looking down at both hands, fingers spread, wearing that same look that's
painful and lost at the same time, that Steve doesn't know how to deal with; he makes himself stop talking, because he's babbling now. And justifying himself. And that's not -

That's not the point.

Steve's mind skips a track in the silence because it can't, can't stay there; he doesn't have anything to else he trusts himself to say but he can't stand leaving things here.

So his mind skips to how he can see Bucky's ribs and he says, "Bucky - you're not eating enough. I think you've lost weight since you came here. What you're taking from the kitchen isn't enough, believe me, I've been keeping track."

While Bucky stared at his hands it seemed like his breathing had almost stopped; now he inhales and it feels sudden and he says, "Food doesn't . . . work." His voice is different, less distance and more edge, and his eyes aren't so far away. His gaze focuses on Steve for a minute.

He looks . . . tired, maybe. Worn, instead of pained. Or maybe just pain that's familiar and comfortable, in a horrible way, instead of new and overwhelming. "I can't tolerate most of it," he elaborates. The phrase sounds like something carefully learned and not often used.

"You had to eat before, Buck," Steve says, pushing very carefully. "Not even we can live on air and we're definitely not solar-powered."

"Liquid," Bucky says. His exhale is almost a sigh. "Mostly. All necessities in it." The fingers of his right hand flex and release, like he's testing the pull of the medical tape against his skin. "Don't know what it was."

Steve has a suspicion that whatever it was, to start with it was pretty vile and to follow up, he's not going to be able to replicate it or even want to try. But there has to be other things - there's stuff designed for places hit by famine, for all kinds of people who can't handle normal food.

Sam might know. Come to think of it, Stark might; for all Steve knows, Stark's got a factory somewhere making the stuff.

"Well." Steve stands up, because it's the next thing he can think of to do. "We're going to have to figure something else out. I really don't want to have to take you to the hospital because your heart gives out and you collapse or something."

He holds out his hand. Bucky looks at it, and then at him, and doesn't take it; instead he braces against the wall and reaches out for the bed-frame to push himself to his feet. Steve thinks about maybe suggesting clean clothes, then figures he can bring that up later.

"What happens if you can't?"

Bucky's question stops him, stops Steve as he turns for the door. He didn't expect it, though now that he thinks about it he's not sure why not. And now Bucky's face is blank, so much so that he might as well be wearing a mask again.

It's a fair question. What happens if you can't? What if you can't figure this out, Rogers? It's a fair question, but it's one he only has one answer for, one he can only take one answer for, and it's the one he gives.

"We will," Steve says.
Chapter 2

Changes in light mark passing hours. Hours have no real meaning. He has sat through many, many hours. Waited. Then he knew what he waited for. Now -

Rogers' voice in his head again. Hesitation. Frown over blue eyes. A question.

There a train?

Question, not answer. Question, not explanation, not at first, not yet. Question, like it might be something else, like the answer might not - like it was important to keep from confusing it with -

Question. Like there might be more than one answer. Like Rogers didn't want to over -

His mind skids. Thoughts scatter.

He sits on the bed, as sunlight changes. The sun moves; the pattern of light from the window travels across the room.

He sits on the bed, because of something that changed in Rogers' face when he would have gone back to where he's been for the last five days - been, when he hasn't been throwing up or when sleep hasn't beaten him. So he sat on the bed and the shadow on Rogers' face shifted back.

It feels like a small victory. He doesn't know why.

This morning he ate in the kitchen; this afternoon Rogers brought food to the room. His body hasn't rejected it yet. This evening Rogers asked to see the bandages from the morning, checked them for bleed-through, for - Rogers said - comfort. They feel okay?

Another question.

He'd shrugged. The question didn't . . . make sense. Felt unreal. Irrelevant. Rogers had asked, If they start bleeding through or something feels wrong, let me know, okay? and then left. Pulled the door to, but not closed.

Questions. Always questions. Always okay, okay, okay.

There a train?

He closes his eyes and cold metal burns on the palms of both hands, both hands, cold on the skin the left hand doesn't have has never had but must have. A train, frigid wind, cold metal and a fall, and a fall that never ends until the rocks hit him and break him and then cold. Snow. Trees. Hundreds of feet onto rocks . . .

He remembers falling because he did. Rogers fell; so did he. Rogers fell to water; he fell to rock. Lay in snow until - faces, around him. Their words sound like Russian but he can't understand them. Can't speak to them. He can't stop -

He opens his eyes; his heart beats too fast and now he doesn't want to remember but he remembers anyway, human hands and pain and then after too long nothing. His hands clench, the fingers of his right hand digging hard into the cut on his palm, palm burning from that and not cold.

A distraction.
Welcome.

It's one thing. It's only one thing. But it's there in the centre now. Hard and unmoving now. The train the blast the wind and falling until the ground breaks his body - endless snow and endless trees and endless endless cold - then faces and hands and darkness.

Memory like rock. It doesn't disappear. It's one thing out of all of them that he can't get rid of now and -

_I didn't make it._

And he can't. He _can't_.

It's dark. Rogers is asleep. The window isn't hard to learn, to set, to pull himself through or tap to lock behind him.

The night isn't cold enough to hurt him. Lights, everywhere - risk of people if he goes down, but up -

Rooftops stay empty. Humans tend not to look up.

********

On day six in the late afternoon, when Steve gets back from getting stuff to fix the wall, Bucky isn't there.

Steve can't actually figure out how he got out of the condo. The front door's locked, none of the windows are open. A tiny sliver of him's impressed, because he can't help respecting the skill involved.

The rest of him panics, more even than the first night.

He pulls out his phone and then stops. He stares at it, at Sam's number already auto-filled into the recipient box at the touch of one letter. Tries to think of how -

Steve closes the app. Because there's . . . no real point. What can anyone do? What's he going to say? And how much is it going to panic everyone _else_ when he does say it? And does he want to, _can_ he deal with that? Right now?

_Nothing, who knows, a lot, and no, especially not right now_, in order. So Steve puts his phone back in his pocket.

Then he takes the stuff he just bought, and he fixes the wall. He takes a paint chip and sets it aside, because he'll need it to match. He gathers up and throws out the broken picture-frames, replaces them with two that use plastic instead of glass, because plastic doesn't shatter and cut up skin the same way glass does.

Then he cleans the place. Reorganizes a few cabinets. Starts to move the furniture and then stops, because it occurs to him that that would be change and if - when - Bucky comes back it might not be a great idea.

Then he changes his sheets, washes the ones he takes off and checks and finds that wherever in the room Bucky's been sleeping, it definitely hasn't been the bed. And also that Steve hadn't previously noticed that Bucky's taken one of his smaller mixing bowls and it's living in the closet and looks like it's been rinsed out recently.
No wonder Bucky looks like he's still been losing weight. Steve resists the impulse to throw the bowl against the wall: it's ceramic, it might break. He starts to think how do you get someone so messed up they won't leave a room around other people to throw up but it's a stupid question when you've already answered the one that really matters, that gives you all the other answers you don't want.

Which is how do you make someone who can rip the doors off cars do what you want?

When Sam texts to ask how it's going, Steve lies. It's a lot easier to lie over text - he doesn't have to think about keeping his guilt from showing in his face, because nobody can see it. So he tells Sam it's all the same and goes for a run. Makes supper. Cleans the kitchen again.

He tries to sleep, and doesn't do well at it. When he does drop off the dreams are vivid, bad and the kind he'd rather forget as soon as he wakes up. It feels like five-thirty takes forever to come; then he's up. He makes himself go for another run.

When the condo's still empty when he comes back he makes himself shower, get dressed, eat something, and then he can't any more and walks out the door to start looking.

Sun moves over the sky, and he makes himself stop at a McDonalds for lunch; sun moves further, he makes himself stop at a real restaurant for dinner.

Sun goes down, he has to admit he's not really looking anymore. He's just walking, and hoping, because he can't stand going back to an empty home.

Steve's not sure how he ends up at Stark Tower. Maybe the building's just so ugly the entire city's been warped around it, or maybe it's because it's the only physical representation anywhere within a couple thousand miles (at least) of people that live in Steve's metaphorical world.

Maybe it's because he wants to pick a fight with someone who'll still be standing when it's done. Not really very flattering idea, but it could be true.

Whatever the reason, he looks up from his angry reverie and realizes he's in front of the lobby, and since he's here -

Actually there's no logic to that. But he pretends there is: that since he's here he might as well go up. He's not much better at lying to himself than he is at lying to anyone else, but right now he's content to be an easy mark.

To be honest, he probably just wants to talk to someone who's actually here, in the flesh, even if that means it has to be Stark. Talking to anyone else just means having to lie.

The lobby doors are always open: this time of night, though, nothing else is and you just run into a security desk controlling the private elevators, which are the only ones that run after working hours.

Steve's not actually sure how he's going to explain why he's here, but it turns out he doesn't have to. The young woman behind the desk smiles as he approaches and says, "Good evening, Captain Rogers." She's young and dark-skinned with braided hair and she looks really small for a security guard, but Steve's not really inclined to be fooled by that. He doubts this security department hires anyone who can't hold their own.

Her nametag reads Stone, probably surname.
Steve smiles a little sheepishly. "Guess I'm kind of recognizable," he says. This time she gives him a grin instead of a careful workforce smile and it looks better on her, makes her eyes close to happy crescents.

"Actually, sir, part of orientation with the company is memorizing face shots of all the Avengers, and known SHIELD agents." She pauses and adds, "Or . . . whatever they are now, those faces haven't actually been taken off the orientation material."

She grins again. "The official reason has something to do with always forgetting passcards." Her eyes sparkle, implying she thinks the real reason is something else, which Steve figures too, since he's never had a passcard to begin with. "There's actually a prize for anyone who recognizes Agent Romanoff on un-announced arrival, without resorting to facial recognition software or JARVIS."

That . . . sounds about right, actually. That sounds exactly like Stark. Like any Stark, come to think of it. And Steve's willing to be distracted right now. "Anyone won it?" he asks, and isn't surprised when she shakes her head.

"Then again, as far as I know Agent Romanoff hasn't been here for several months now. She's actually fairly popular." This time her smile looks almost impish. "Nobody liked the HR manager who got fired for letting her Rushman persona through hiring procedures."

Steve'd heard about that one. As far as he knows, Natasha and Pepper Potts are drinking buddies at this point, or whatever you call the modern female equivalent if there's a special term. That hadn't stopped one of Pepper's first priorities after the Expo being to rip through Stark Enterprises employees, finding the ones that SHIELD had used to plant "Natalie Rushman" in the company and abruptly showing them the door, or in some case the other side of the courtroom.

Friends are friends, but in terms of running Stark Enterprises and keeping it fully autonomous and infiltration-free, Pepper Potts makes the actual Starks look lax. Steve gathers the private inquest after the Triskelion fell was even more intense.

"Here for any reason in particular, sir?" possibly-Ms Stone asks, polite-business again and Steve rubs his forehead.

"Actually, just ended up in the area and wondered if anyone was awake," he says, going for the simplest version. He still doesn't expect it to go over as smoothly as it does.

Maybe he should have. He can't be the strangest visitor Tony Stark's ever got in the middle of the night.

"Insomnia bites," the young woman says sympathetically. She's glancing down at her work-surface and spreading it out into the touch-keyboard that Steve cannot for the life of him figure out why Stark is so fond of, which pulls up a couple of windows Steve can't quite see. "Looks like Development and Testing Lab 23D is still online and occupied, which is probably Mr Stark, that area's pretty much -" she glances at Steve and suddenly half-smiles like a conspiracy. "I'll skip the technical terms, it's machines and electricity. Dr Ross'd be in the Q labs, that's pretty much her domain these days, but I guess she decided sleep was actually necessary tonight."

Steve cants his head, kind of diverted by the way the security staff apparently knew the residents' habits - and apparently found them amusing in the same kind of proprietary way one might speak about a weird relative. "Dr Banner?" he asks.

"Actually, Dr Banner almost never gets insomnia," Ms Stone replies, tapping her screen clear and then pulling something down from the top that looked a lot like a finger-print scanner. "Word is, he..."
says it's because he's given up caffeine. Which is funny because Dr Ross runs on the stuff."

Glancing up to see Steve's look of incomprehension she says, "It's always harder to quit something when someone else in your house keeps doing it. Elevator's open, sir," she goes on briskly, "and I think JARVIS can show you the rest of the way once you're up there, assuming you don't find disembodied voices too creepy."

"Well," says Steve, a little bemused, "thank you. Have a good and hopefully uneventful night."

She beams at him. "You too, sir," she says as he makes his way past her to the elevator.

Once the doors slide close, JARVIS voice comes from nowhere and everywhere, saying, "Good evening, Captain Rogers."

"Good evening, JARVIS," Steve says, actually kind of grateful that JARVIS is using that form of address. God only knows what Stark might have come up with.

"Mr Stark is indeed still awake, sir, as he is not currently observing a diurnal schedule," JARVIS says. "I can direct you to him or to any number of enjoyable facilities within the Tower if you prefer."

"What kind of schedule is Stark observing?" Steve says, wondering (as he often did) just how much of a sense of humour JARVIS actually has.

The answer, "That I have not yet established, sir. I shall inform you when more data has been collected," makes him wonder even more. Stark created JARVIS but sometimes - especially since seeing Zola in his endless analog computer-banks - Steve gets the feeling that JARVIS has assigned itself the role of endlessly patient guardian to Stark's occasional erratic metaphorical twelve-year-old, and that the AI's kind of become more than Tony originally planned.

Steve almost takes the offer of directions somewhere else. He knows there's a lot of stuff in the Tower, including an e-book library (God forbid Stark have something as common as paper anywhere near him, but the place had ereaders all around too) and a gymnasium space to make anyone jealous.

But in the end he says, "Directions to the lab, please, JARVIS," and after a brief sense of motion the elevator's doors open. Which implies the Tower's elevators are disturbingly fast.

"As you wish, sir," JARVIS says.

The directions are slightly more convoluted than you might expect, because the ridiculous architecture is more convoluted than you might expect, but Steve manages to follow them through three or four corridors before he finds the door marked D23, and JARVIS says from a different nowhere-and-everywhere, "I've informed him of your arrival."

"Thanks," Steve says and doesn't add, I think.

He's not sure what he expected, but honestly the "lab" looks more like a high-end version of somebody's stolen-space workshop or garage, except with two robots moving around the place making what sound like genuinely sad sounds as Tony kicks something. He waves a hand in Steve's direction while standing with his hands on his hips, glaring at the wreckage.

Steve looks around and says, "It looks like a car exploded in here," because it's the first thing to come to mind, and also because it does. He frowns. "A really complicated car."
Stark wobbles his hand back and forth in the air, steps over something and makes his way to one of the few untouched, tidy-looking corners of the room, where there's a computer desktop, one of his touch-screen desk-surfaces and some of the green sludge he seems to drink on a regular basis. For the first time, Steve finds himself wondering what's in that stuff, but wondering out of curiosity instead of disgust.

(He wasn't kidding when he told Sam the food's better nowadays, so the way people insist on eating and drinking things that only seem vaguely foodlike and definitely, well, gross, all in the name of "health"... bemilders him. Well, presumably Stark's drinking it for health. Who knew, with him.)

"Not entirely wrong," Stark says, after he's swallowed, leaning against his desk. "A very slow explosion, most of the propulsion done by human muscle, but sure, exploded. And it is technically a car. Come in, stop standing there with the door open."

Steve steps over one of the strangely-shaped bits of metal that managed to get all the way over here and the door closes behind him. "Technically a car?"

"It flies," Stark says. "Well, technically it floats on repulsor-coil technology."

Memory hits Steve, unexpectedly vivid, right down to the smell of the air and the feeling of having to push his way through crowds that didn't notice a guy who didn't come up past most of their shoulders, and he blinks. "I think I... actually saw your father's first demonstration of that. At the Expo."

"Yeah?" Stark says, putting the now empty glass down on the desk, voice curiously neutral. "Well, then you also saw it fail."

Steve actually doesn't remember that, but whether that's because he doesn't remember or because he'd already walked away to that last recruiters', he can't say. Not when he's trying to handle the memory of Bucky in pristine uniform carefully, without either fouling it or shoving it away, and without showing on his face the way it stabs through his brain.

"Don't do anything stupid until I get back."

Stark's oblivious, thankfully.

"Dad never did get it working properly, or I guess - " Stark makes a kind of gesture with his hand up near his temple, like he's spinning the air to find words. "Usefully. This one worked, and there was one other prototype he gave to SHIELD, or left at SHIELD, or something, which is probably a scrap-heap of twisted metal now, but really, they're all shit." Stark kicks a piece out of the way. "Hideously expensive to make and maintain, ridiculous to fuel and power - they're science projects, not real machines." Stark shrugs. "Thought I'd see if I could make something of'em."

Steve looks around at the absolute disaster, weighs the actual use of the project to Stark or the world in any way shape or form (because as far as Steve can see flying cars just mean exciting new accidents) and comes to a pretty obvious conclusion. "Is Pepper out of town?" he asks, and gets a sharp look.

"As a matter of fact, yes," Stark says, folding his arms. "She's in DC again arguing with idiots I'm not allowed to argue with anymore because apparently demanding to know if their parents just dropped them on their heads a lot or if they deliberately induced brain-damage somewhere along the line as adults isn't helpful - why is it," he goes on, frowning, "that people always leap to that conclusion when I'm up in the middle of the night?"
This time Steve makes his look around the room pointed. "Because whenever she's not around you seem to lose what little common sense you ever have," he says. "And being up at two AM tearing apart your dad's science projects doesn't show much common sense."

Stark looks like he's thinking about that for a minute and shrugs. "Point granted," he says. "So what's your excuse?" He looks Steve up and down and Steve has just enough time to register how knowing that look is before Stark adds, "New roommate run away?"

For a second Steve is actually incapable of answering, for any value of answer that isn't break Anthony Stark's nose; by the time that's passed Stark's already crouching down to pick up pieces of his slow-motion explosion. Steve makes himself unclench his fists.

"Don't worry about it," Stark goes on, like he didn't notice that second of aborted violence. He talks like someone completely distracted by what they're doing, with what's in front of them, their mind only barely on the other person in the room. "He'll be back."

Looking up, taking in the look on Steve's face he adds, "No, seriously." He sighs and leans one arm on his bent knee. "How long's he been gone?"

Steve debates the merits of answering versus those of walking out before he loses his temper, and eventually says, "Twenty seven hours. And ten minutes." The ten minutes is snide, pulled out of the air because Tony's annoying him but saying the number out loud still makes it sound worse. To him, anyway.

Apparently not to Stark.

"Call me in - " Stark tilts his head side to side thoughtfully, " - four, eight hours, tell me I'm wrong. Unless you have seriously screwed up - and," Tony pauses to add, sitting back towards his heels a bit and gesturing again, "in terms of what I mean by screwing up, I'm not sure you're actually capable of it, since you're annoyingly moral and also I don't think quite stupid enough to try to have him committed to a psychiatric institution, just to shut down that line of thought - seriously, if he was going to actually disappear again for anything less than an epic fuck-up, he'd never've shown up in the first place. Pass me that ca - that tool, by your foot?" he adds, with a tiny pause that implies to Steve he's skipping over a technical name for what he wants and sticking with one he thinks Steve will understand.

Steve wonders if the man gets it from his mother, or if just some random . . . spasm of the universe conspired to make Anthony Stark one of the most obnoxious people you couldn't bring yourself to kick in the head that ever existed. Or what it is that means Stark is allergic to looking like he's taking anything seriously, which makes it incredibly hard to tell whether or not he is.

And if he realizes how aggravating that is.

But Steve does pass him the tool and crouches down beside him. "And what exactly makes you an expert?" trying for a sharp note that Stark seems to want to ignore. Or maybe people are sharp at him often enough that he genuinely doesn't notice. Steve grants it could happen.

"Do something new in the last . . . day or so?" Stark asks absently, sitting all the way down on the floor, poking at the circuit-board with what looks to Steve like a laser, like some kid opening the back of a radio.

Steve hesitates, sighs and since looming over someone is a terrible way to have a conversation unless you're trying to intimidate them (and with Tony Stark that's pointless) and you can only crouch for so long in jeans before it gets uncomfortable, he sits down on the floor as well.
The things Stark seems allergic to taking seriously often, to be fair, seem to include himself. At least when he's working.

"Yeah, actually," he says. "But not bad. I don't think." At Tony's inquisitive look Steve sighs again and says, "He kind of . . . broke up some things in his room. Cut up his hand. I cleaned it out. We ate. Nothing big." He holds back on mentioning the memory, either what it was or him filling it in. He's not about to let Stark that far in, not out of pique and curiosity.

"Yeeeeeah," says Stark, drawing out the word, "I'm going to go ahead and guess you've been, what, looking at a closed door since he showed up, otherwise? Because you," and someone should tell Tony it's not really all that fun to have him emphasize a conversational beat by pointing the tool he's just been using to melt something right at you, even if it's off, "wouldn't barge in. Or even knock a lot."

Steve frowns at something in his tone. "What's that supposed to mean?" And he remembers they're only having this conversation because Stark's first question got his back up in the first place.

But Stark blinks like he's genuinely confused, raises his eyebrows. "That you've got admirable respect for personal privacy? That you're not actually an asshole or an idiot, shocking as that is? Not the point," he goes on, doing that thing he does where he drops a line like that into the conversation and then drives forward at full speed without letting you think up a response. "The point is, running away and hiding is a time-honoured and honourable response to completely losing your shit and your ability to deal with it."

He waves the tool from side to side, using it to mark his points. "You run away, you hide, you get cold, you realize that when it comes right down to it living in a tree-house or a, I dunno, doorway on a rooftop somewhere for the rest of your life is actually worse than dealing with whatever you were sure you couldn't deal with, you come home. Sometimes people are jerks and take months about it, but given that he showed up in the first place and stayed this long and thus you," and Stark points the laser-tool at Steve again, and it's no more comfortable the second time, "are probably the only thing in the world right now that doesn't without qualification completely suck, I'm guessing less than twelve more hours."

Steve tries to digest that - both content and tone, which is closer to what Stark uses to talk about calculations than people. Which means it approaches 'serious', at least close enough to toss a rock at it.

One thing sticks out. "Treehouse?" Steve asks.

Tony shrugs and goes back to tinkering.

"First time I did it I was eleven. My long-term planning skills were even worse then than they are now, which may be a frightening thing to contemplate, I admit."

He taps the laser on his other hand for a minute and then jabs it at Steve again, and it's still not really comfortable. "Oh, and getting overwhelmed and unable to deal with your shit happens with good shit, not just bad shit. Don't believe me, ask Betty about the first time Bruce asked her out. It's a hilarious story, she'll totally tell it. Don't let him tell it, he tries to make her sound less ridiculous so it's less funny."

Steve realizes he's frowning, looking at one of the disassembled pieces - through it, really. He actually wants to believe Stark. God knows he actually desperately wants to believe Stark. But, well -
There's a clink as the tool gets put down on top of something metallic and the sound of Tony taking a deep breath.

"Look, Rogers," Tony says, and this time, this time he actually does sound serious so Steve looks up, and Stark also looks, for a minute, completely serious, so serious it's unnerving. Not put on looking-serious, not a joke, but real serious. "Unless you royally fuck up, I will bet you this entire tower that's how it's going to be - he freaked out, he left, he's realizing that was a bad idea, he'll be back in half a day at most. Seriously, I will walk you down eight floors, wake up someone from legal and wager this building, right now.

"And," he adds, picking up the laser-tool just so he can reinforce the point by aiming it at Steve, "if you ever do royally fuck up, you'll know."

"I'll know?" Steve asks. He's not totally sure how to react to the sudden return of Tony Stark's sincerity, which Steve last saw on a damaged helicarrier.

Tony gives him a humourless smile and says, "He'll actually start trying to kill you again."

Steve sits back, a little bemused again, leaning on one hand. "I think everyone else figures he's going to try to kill me again anyway," he points out and now Tony's back to squinting at the circuit-board. But he does frown pretty intensely at that.

"Not my fault they're idiots," he says, sharp and suddenly impatient; almost like he can feel Steve's startled look he goes on, "for fuck's sakes, he had not one but two chances to kill you, where it would have been way easier to kill you than not, and he couldn't. Completely failed."

"One," Steve corrects and Tony snorts at him.

"Sorry, Rogers," he says. "I watched the traffic-cam footage of your little street fight in DC. If you hadn't hit the guy over the head with the past, you and Romanoff would both be in boxes deep underground. Wilson'd probably be joining you. You're not. So." Tony holds up a finger, "once he fucks up, second time despite you giving up he completely fails to beat you to death, then he can't even let you drown which, speaking of footage I've seen, okay so I didn't see you but I saw the wreck and believe me, I don't care where you were in that fucking mess and I don't care how enhanced he is, leaving you to drown would have been way easier and less likely to get him killed. I could not be less concerned about your roommate trying to kill you, Captain."

He still hasn't looked away from what he's doing, not once in the whole recitation. He pauses, considers and gestures with his tool again. "Might break some of your bones, but probably only by accident, and you heal fast. Lucky bastard."

Steve sits in silence beside him for a few minutes: the Stark Digest takes some time to, well, digest. Then he says, "I don't think that should be comforting."

"Why not?" Tony looks up, shrugs. "I find people not wanting to kill me very comforting, personally."

"I don't think it's normal," Steve replies, dryly, "to be comforted by the idea that someone's only going to break your arm."

"We're not normal, Rogers," Tony says, eyes still on his work. "I don't know if you've noticed, but normal people don't have grudge-matches with super-powered aliens or survive buried in ice for decades or have mind-wiped best friends probably camping out on their roof. Take comfort where it is, we don't get a lot of it."
He flips his tool in one hand and adds, "Speaking of which, whenever he's sane enough to meet, bring him by, I am like one hundred percent certain I can make a better prosthetic weaponized arm than a bunch of holdover-Nazis."

The smile isn't entirely willing, but Steve ends up with it on his face anyway, even if it's a little crooked. "I'm not sure anyone's sane enough to meet you, Stark."

"Yeah, whatever." Tony sits back, dropping the conversation almost abruptly, and announces, "I need coffee. Want coffee? I . . ." and he sits up as far as he can and looks around, "do not have a coffee maker in here. Why the hell don't I have one in here? JARVIS, remind me to put a coffee machine in here."

"Yes, sir," JARVIS' voice says, so blandly polite Steve's more and more convinced the AI has to be privately laughing.

"C'mon," Tony says, unfolding himself up in a surprisingly coordinated move. "There's a coffee lounge somewhere a floor down, let's go get some."

There is a coffee-lounge, which is basically a cafe, one floor down. Steve doesn't know why he's surprised that Tony just wanders behind the counter and starts making them both espresso macchiatos, and tells himself he probably shouldn't be. It's mechanical: of course a Stark can use it. Just because the end result of the mechanical wonder is edible instead of explosive, that doesn't make it more or less the same as everything else Stark messes around with.

Somehow, they end up talking about Peggy. Steve's not actually sure how, loses track of the precise progression. Tony makes some crack about SHIELD and things sort of go from there, because Steve's not actually averse to taking a few potshots at the fallen in this particular case and why not, and then there they are.

It's less painful than you might think. Steve finds it difficult on the days when they have to go through the whole discovery of his survival one more time, but it's difficult, not agonizing - and these days it's balanced by the fact that she has as much difficulty holding onto the story of SHIELD's corruption and fall, which spares her a lot of pain.

And he's still proud of her, beyond proud of her. And the memories are good - no regret, no mistakes to sour them.

"She absolutely terrified me when I was a kid," Tony says.

They're sitting in two of the arm-chairs and Steve has to admit, the espresso macchiato's pretty good. And it's halfway between familiar and unfamiliar, which is comforting right now.

"Completely and totally terrified," Tony continues. "Probably the only person in the world I'd do what they said, when they said it." He appears to think about that for a moment, sucking a spot of espresso off his hand and then says, "Mostly."

"As compared to what, never?" Steve asks, amused, and Tony gives a half-nod, half-shrug that clearly says, pretty much.

"Mom asked her how she did it once," he says. "She said it was because I knew Mom wouldn't lose her patience and shoot me, whereas as far as Peggy went, I only knew she hadn't yet." Tony makes a fair enough kind of gesture while Steve shakes his head, grinning.
"First time I ever saw her," Steve says, "she punched this jerk in the face and put him down. He had to have fifty pounds on her at least. Then later she stood in the street shooting at a speeding car coming right for her and got mad at me for ruining her shot when I got her out of the way. So yeah," he says, picking up his tiny cup. "She probably would have shot you."

And he may not be sure how they got onto the subject of Peggy, but after a while and after the coffee's finished, Steve thinks he can see sort of why. He thinks of his crack to Natasha about shared life experiences: of the two things he and Tony do share (other than alien attacks and near-death experiences), Peggy and Howard, Peggy's the one that isn't a minefield.

It's funny, in that not-at-all-funny way. Steve's not actually surprised that Howard hadn't been a, well, fantastic father. Steadiness wasn't one of his strong points. Howard liked to make the big leaps, figure out the big ideas and solutions, and then hand off the scut work and polishing to the people he hired. He was the artist - then he handed the plans to the craftsmen and they actually made the vision a reality.

You couldn't actually do that with kids. Well, you could, but the results tended not to like you all that much. Which gives you Howard and Anthony Stark, the problem play. Steve mostly wishes he'd been there to give Howard a kick in the pants and point all that out.

But that's still a gigantic knot he's not sure Tony's even untangled for himself yet, and God knows Steve wouldn't want someone bringing his mother into this kind of conversation, so Peggy it is. It doesn't hurt that for all his vaunted terror and resentment, Tony was clearly actually kind of in awe of her, in a little boy way.

Steve can deal with that.

The sun's coming up by the time they run out of anecdotes, arguments about the circumstances of anecdotes, and other safe things to talk about and Steve looks at the time, winces and says, "I should get back."

He doesn't feel tired, but he's not surprised. He tries to keep normal hours because it's smart, because just because he can stay up for several days with no ill effects before the lack of REM sleep means he starts seeing things (and wasn't that one fun to find out and there are no prizes for guessing who saved his neck then, either, as so many times before), that doesn't mean he should.

So he keeps normal hours, and his body generally acts like it thinks a twenty-four hour day is a good idea, but he never actually feels tired if he just keeps going.

Which is good, because coffee doesn't actually work anymore.

"Yeah, and I should kick some more ideas around." Tony stands up, mind clearly leaping ahead to his next point of fascination. "Good to see you, drop in any time, remember you actually have a whole floor here which I'll just mention is currently very generic and frankly boring because you never show up and use it, JARVIS'll show you out."

Steve just shakes his head. He'd consider pointing out that Tony could clearly use some sleep, but he thinks it'd be a wasted effort.

"Thank you for the coffee," he says, getting up more slowly as Tony heads for the door to the lounge and pushes it open.

Then Tony pauses, leans back in and says, "Oh, and don't worry too much about annoying your neighbours with noise or broken walls or blood-curdling screams or whatever. I bought the places
on either side of you and the one under you a while ago, nobody in'em, should be fine."

And then he's gone out the door before Steve can say more than, "What?"

He takes two steps to go after him, then stops. It won't be worth it. If Tony'd been willing to talk
about it he wouldn't've done that and there are literally hundreds of doors right out in the hall he
could dart into. Son of a -

"Captain Rogers," JARVIS' polite tones say, "if you would care to step down the hall to the
elevator, there is a car downstairs waiting to ease your journey home."

Steve makes himself take a deep breath and heads for the elevator.

Steve takes the car, because of the two of them, he refuses to be more childish than Stark. He
thanks the driver, stands in front of his building, and looks up at the living-room window as the
sun finishes rising.

Bucky's in the condo, when Steve gets up. The sound of the door obviously startled him, because
his hand's got a knife in it as he turns around, but he also stops and then puts it away (small
throwing knife, Steve notes, sheath in the right pocket of the jeans he's wearing) when he
recognizes Steve.

"Morning," Steve says, resolutely not showing anything beyond habitual moderate cheerfulness.
Bucky steps back from the beginning of a move that almost certainly ended with broken bones; he
nods, once, in acknowledgement.

And otherwise watches Steve like he's not sure Steve's not secretly a bomb.

He's still in the same clothes as when he left, and it strikes Steve to wonder if it even occurs to him
to change them or if - Steve tries not to let what he's thinking show on his face, because he's pretty
sure that would get misinterpreted - HYDRA basically dressed and stripped him when they
wanted, as they wanted.

Right now he's leaning towards the latter.

"Laundry day," Steve says, taking off his coat and hanging it up, "You know, this is the first time
ever we've been close enough to the same size to share clothes? I used to swim in yours. Then,
well, the other way around. Not quite as bad, though."

He kicks off his boots. Bucky's still watching him and he's still wary, but he at least looks a little
less like someone's about to . . . Steve doesn't even know, and more like he's trying to figure out
what Steve's even talking about. Possibly what the words Steve's stringing into sentences even
mean.

That, Steve decides, is a better option. Maybe the thing to do was just be resolutely normal.

Well, he amends, thinking of what Stark said, as normal as is possible, considering.

"C'mon," Steve says, stepping past Bucky and jerking his head towards the kitchen. "I'll make
breakfast."
The thing is, he says to Sam at one point, *I'm not used to people being scared of me.*

Well, Sam says, and Steve can hear the grin in his voice, *people that aren't Nazis, anyway. Or basically Nazis.* And Steve has to laugh, if a little grimly, and grant the point. He is very used to people who pass the "if they're shooting at me, they're bad" test being scared of him, but that's different.

*You know what I mean,* he says, and Sam does.

*Well think about it like this,* Sam says, sounding thoughtful, *and don't get all insulted at the analogy - imagine the nicest, happiest golden retriever you can think of, right? Completely the gentlest dog you could ever think of, completely well behaved, well: there's still gonna be people that are scared of it, because they're just scared of dogs. Dog bit them one time or just always was running at and barking at them when they were kids, who knows, but they're just outright terrified of dogs. So even this nicest dog ever is gonna have to prove over and over and over again that it's not gonna do that before they stop being afraid. Sometimes for a really long time, depending on how bad they're scared by anything dog-shaped.*

*Yeah?* Steve says, and sighs. *That makes sense. Except I think the shape here is 'any person not already marked out as a target'.

*Probably,* Sam agrees. And Steve finds himself thinking of Natasha and her last text.

If he were superstitious, which to be honest he sometimes kind of is, he might think that basically called her up.

It's windy but unexpectedly warm, and her hair's different again, falling in what's apparently called "bohemian" waves and then twisted up with a hair-stick through it. She's in black leggings, an oversized sweater and a jean-jacket.

Steve sees her as he's stepping out of the Starbucks with his coffee. And she's pretty obviously there at the intersection waiting for him; she stands there until she's sure he recognizes that it's her under the clothes and - compared to the last time he saw her - lack of makeup. Then she turns away to watch for the light changing, like it's up to Steve to decide whether or not he wants to join her.

He's walking beside her by the time the light's green, and he opens with, "Back on this continent already?"

Natasha turns her head slightly with a smile. "Just visiting." She glances over him quickly. "You look exhausted."

"Thank you," Steve replies, dryly. "You look unexpected. I'm surprised you don't have a big sunflower or daisy or something in your bun, to complete the ensemble."

"Plastic ones look cheap and the real ones shed petals all over your shoulder," she says. "Besides, then you have to fuss around with them if you want to let your hair down and they're just more trouble than they're worth."

Her hands are in the pockets of her jean-jacket. Steve's letting her lead, just, but she doesn't seem to have any destination in mind. Something seems off about her, a strange kind of distance, but Steve can't quite pin it down even in his own head. It's just . . . a false note.

It'd been there in the cemetery, too.
He pushes a little and asks, "How's Barton?" It's been his guess for months now that that's where she was, or at least, who she was wherever she was with. Clint Barton'd been in Afghanistan when they brought SHIELD down and Steve's limited contact with the intelligence world since has implied that he hasn't popped up anywhere anyone can find him yet.

If she's surprised Steve figured it out, or if it bothers her, Natasha doesn't show it. She tilts her head a little, looking up towards rooftops, and shrugs. "He said he was going to get a hot dog from somewhere, but that was thirty minutes ago, so by now he's probably around up there." She jerks her chin upwards. Then she lets her head tilt conspiratorially towards Steve as she says, "He worries," and Steve thinks that part of what's off, maybe, is that right now she thinks that's wryly funny and it probably isn't.

They walk for a while, and Steve was right: she doesn't seem to have any destination in mind, looping back here or there. She asks him about Stark, about Banner, about anyone else they know. She says some elliptical things about Fury. As far as small-talk goes it's kind of like a flute-solo over a jackhammer and works about just as well.

"I really didn't expect to see you back this soon," Steve tries, when she pauses. And the next few steps are silent before she looks at him, appraising this time.

"You know, exhausted isn't really the word," she says. "It doesn't really capture it. Working for SHIELD you spend a lot of time," she goes on before he can answer, drawing out the word lot, "looking after scientists and engineers and analysts. A lot of them have the situational awareness of a dead cat. But you put them in front of their projects and give a deadline that should be impossible to meet and you can watch them burn through caffeine like it's the end of the world." She pauses. "Even when it isn't."

Steve almost interrupts, but she's already saying, "They get rings under their eyes and they yawn all the time and their tempers get short and touchy as hell, but underneath that, the good ones . . ." she trails off and looks up at him again, and this time the smile is a little bit knowing and a little bit sad. "They're more alive than you'll ever have seen them before. And that's how you look right now, Steve. That's how you feel."

They walk on for a bit, and the wind picks up, while Steve tries to make sense of that and work out whether it's a good thing or not. He fails, finds a garbage can for his empty coffee cup and says, "Well - firstly, I have no idea what you're talking about, and secondly," and here he pauses, making her stop, too, and turn back towards him, "I don't think you're here to catch up and see how I'm doing."

This one-shoulder shrug and half-smile looks a little more like the Natasha he knows, though which Natasha that really is might be hard to say. It looks more knowing, less light, and older. "Maybe not," she says, and turns back the way she was going. Steve follows her. "You remember the text I sent you?" she asks, still sounding more familiar than before. Steve raises his eyebrows.

"You mean the last one you sent?" he says, a bit pointedly, considering all the times he tried to text her afterwards that disappeared into the sky. "The night that - "

"Mm," Natasha says, her noise of agreement cutting him off. "How's that been going?" she asks, all casual-gossip again with only a hint of weight on the that.

Steve does her the honour of thinking before he answers, holding back on the defensive response that comes so easily. Eventually he has to shrug.

"He's still here," he says. "Nobody's dead, as far as I know, and I . . . have been paying attention."
"Good sign," Natasha replies, and then there's nothing but their footsteps on sidewalk and the wind for another minute or two before Steve clears his throat.

"You said something about the limits of my perspective," he prompts. From someone else he might even have forgotten by now, but he hasn't; Natasha wouldn't go out of her way - and texting counted as out of her way - to make even an offhand remark she didn't think was important.

For a minute Natasha looks thoughtful, takes a slow breath. Then she says, "You're a good man, Steve Rogers. Good without sanctimony," she adds, giving him a look with a quirked eyebrow in it, "which is rare. You care about people and you care about the right thing even when it's not comfortable - but what makes you special is you make other people want to do the same thing."

She smiles like she's smiling at memories, a private smile "You make them think they can be better than they are," she says. "And you make them want to be. People like Fury lead because they know where to find the right people for the right job; you lead because you make the right people want to show up and throw in with you all on their own. That's something not many people can do, and it makes you precious."

Steve ducks his head without meaning to, feels the touch of flush and maybe starts to open his mouth for a demurral, but he stops, and stops walking, because Natasha has. And when he turns to look at her, her voice gets sharper and more focused and she says, "And if you're going to help him you have to stop doing that."

At Steve's startled face - he knows he has to be making a startled face - she half-smiles and touches his chin with a fingertip. "That," she says. "I tell you what you are, you get all aw-shucks embarrassed and start looking for ways to talk it down. And that's fine. Someone brings up New York, you want to talk about firefighters, that's fine."

She shrugs and the smile fades, disappears. "But right now," she says, no smile in her voice either, "you think it down, too. You disown it, even in your own head. And it's sweet and it's modest and right now it's really fucking dangerous, because you have to know what you do to people, even when you're not trying, because you have to be careful."

Steve feels a little bit like she hit him between the eyes. Natasha goes on, "Guys like you usually don't want to. You don't like taking steps down that road, you don't like that much self-awareness, because you don't want to meet the Tony Starks coming back from the other end. You're not worried about getting your credit, you're worried about taking someone else's, or looking like you are, or like you would. And the easiest way to make sure you don't is to make sure you believe it.

"You don't want power over people," she says, "so you pretend you don't really have it, even to yourself. It's sweet and with most of us it works, because whatever else we are we're strong enough that we'll still be ourselves tomorrow no matter what you do."

There's something deeply unpalatable about that; maybe a while ago Steve would have denied it out of hand, or argued with her that it didn't work like that, or something. But now when he tries he gets stopped cold by the memory of Bucky sitting on the floor, arm cut up, waiting for . . . something, and not something good.

And then how, after they ate, Bucky looked at him and then sat on the bed instead of the floor. And how relieved he'd felt, just for a second.

Steve leans against the wall of the building beside them, swallows around the bad taste in his mouth and says, "You're saying he's not," and Natasha deliberately, slowly and pointedly shakes her head.
"He doesn't have a self, Rogers," she says. "Maybe I have too many, anything I make up as and when I need it," this smile is brief and dark, moving across her mouth and her eyes like a shadow before she's serious again, deadly serious, "but he doesn't have anything. HYDRA told him what he was, and it was a weapon, not a person."

She comes to lean on the building beside him. "Pierce gave him missions and targets and punishments and now he doesn't even have that. He's just got pain, and confusion, and fear, and you."

Steve stares at the ground. He wants to argue, not even because he thinks she's wrong but because he just hates what she's saying so much, hates it and doesn't want it to be true. He wants to argue that reality can't be like that because it shouldn't be. He wants to say it can't be like that because it's wrong.

That's what kids do, though, and he's not a kid. Not for a long time.

"So how does someone come back from that?" he asks, still looking at the ground. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Natasha reach up and he figures she's taking her hair down when some strands fall into view. He wonders if even she has nervous habits, sometimes.

"I don't know," she says, frankly. "With great difficulty. Carefully. Slowly. With a miracle. When I told you you might not want to pull this thread, Steve, I had good reasons." She sighs. "Sometimes there isn't a way out."

His jaw hurts; Steve realizes he's clenching it hard enough that he's probably risking his teeth. He forces himself to let go and says, "You can't know that."

"And I don't," Natasha agrees; Steve looks up at her, surprised. She shrugs. "I can't see the future, Steve. I don't know what can and can't happen. I'm just warning you. You, Stark - one way you're the same. Neither of you likes to hear that there isn't a way to win."

She takes a deep breath. "But there's one thing that'll make the difference, if anything does," she says. "And that's that you didn't save him, Rogers." She prods his shoulder gently for emphasis, meets his eyes like she's trying to write that in his skull with a look. "You didn't save him, and you didn't find him, and you didn't bring him home. You couldn't find him. Your choice didn't matter."

She lets her hand drop. "His did. He found you. He got out. All you did was show him that he was trapped, and that there was a door to walk through. He's the one that used it."

Steve thinks about her and Barton, what she said to Loki, the fact that Barton's watching them now. Some conclusions draw themselves.

"And if you have any hope," she says, with another careful breath, "of helping him find a self to be, you have to know that, and you have to know everything about what you did that let you show him. And to do that, you have to know how people see you, how they hear you, what they want from you. You have to know how you affect them. You have to know what every word you say and every move you make sounds like outside your head, and at least inside - " she touches his temple, "you have to own it, because you have to control it."

She takes one more breath, smaller, and finishes, "If for no other reason than he walked away from them, Steve. He left them. He threw off the leash. And that makes him so much more dangerous than he'd be if you'd saved him. He used to have masters and he left them behind and if you trip or stumble and start looking like them to him then I think he'll kill you, and this time you'll die, and all he'll have left is the pain and confusion and fear. And then what happens to him?"
There's a worry-line between her brows. Steve's actually surprised he could put one there, him, or anything to do with him. She says, "You don't have the luxury of not knowing about power and how it works anymore, Steve. You have to know it inside and out because you have to know how to keep from using it even by accident. Anything else is cruel to him, and dangerous to you. Good intentions aren't enough anymore. Not for this."

When Steve doesn't answer her - can't, can't answer her right now through his closed throat and tight chest - she adds, softly, "And remember that the self he finds to be . . . might not be your friend."

Except that he can answer. "He is my friend," he says, flatly. "He is now. He was then. People change, life changes them, but that doesn't."

"I think you know what I meant," Natasha replies, almost chiding.

"I do," Steve agrees, allows. "I just . . . I think you should know what I mean."

She looks away, like she thinks her only answers for that aren't ones he's willing to hear. So he makes himself clear his throat, find his voice and say, "But you're right." And then, as her startled look turns on him, say, "Thank you."

She takes aim at a smile and only barely misses. "Believe it or not, I don't have so many friends I can afford to lose one," she says. And then, "Come on. It's getting cold."

It isn't, actually. But it's a good excuse. Natasha starts to walk again, and Steve pushes himself off the wall to follow her.

And it's uncomfortable as hell, but that doesn't actually matter; he catches up with her and says, "On that subject - I think I owe you an apology."

Now for a minute she looks exactly like the Natasha he knows, amusement and suspicion and sheer personality meeting in the middle of her expression and mixing into something unique. "I can't think of anything you need to say sorry for," she informs him, and he makes a bit of a face. "That's because one of the effects I have on people is they tend to forgive me for being self-righteous," he says, and she blinks at him in surprise. "They think it comes with the outfit."

He sighs. "On the Lemurian Star, I was frustrated with everything, and angry at Fury," he says, and her blinks change from surprise to momentary confusion. "I took it out on you. I was kind of a dick. I'm sorry. And if you hadn't gotten that file, we'd all be dead now anyway, and as somebody who actually took the time to pick up a power-pack from the weapons factory on his way to rescue his best friend," he pushes on, this time not giving her a chance to interrupt, "I should know that kind of thing is important. I do know that kind of thing is important."

He watches Natasha's face. He might be fooling himself, but he thinks something's softer, behind the wall of her eyes. "The only thing you did wrong was not tell me," he says, "and I'm pretty sure you didn't tell me because I would have . . . " he searches for the right way to say it.

"Flipped out? Gone off at me?" Natasha offers. "Completely lost your mind?"

"Something like that," Steve reluctantly agrees. "And that's on me."

This smile he thinks is real, maybe at least close to a spontaneous reaction from whatever Natasha is underneath all the others that he can expect to get. "Thank you," she says, quietly.
"Next time," he adds, "tell me so I can take it into account. Tactically, I mean." And she laughs.

She walks him home, mostly in silence. But it's comfortable silence. At his building when they stop he says, "Say hello to Barton for me. Unless you want to come in."

"I don't think that would be fair," she demurs. "Don't look - I don't think you'd see anything anyway - but your friend is watching us from your window now, and I don't think he's up to guests."

"Someday," Steve says.

She hugs him and, like in the cemetery, kisses his cheek. Then she waves and he watches her for a moment until she's gone around the corner and, he's pretty sure, completely disappeared.

If Bucky was looking out the window before, he's back in his room now, door mostly closed but not pulled to. Steve measures grounds into the filter of the coffee-maker, fills up the tank and turns it on. The burbling noises are a comforting break in the silence.

Steve pulls his phone out of his pocket, thinks better of it, and then takes the tablet off the desk. It's still a touch-screen and he still doesn't like it quite as much as the actual keyboard, but he's not a quiet typist on that, so the tablet's still easier than the phone, email easier than text. It still takes him about a half hour to get everything about today into the email, then type Sam's address in.

He hits send and leans back in the kitchen chair, staring at the wall for a while before the beep of the machine tells him his coffee's ready.
"Normal" is relative, Steve figures. People adjust. That's part of the problem, really: people can adjust to just about everything, but then the world changes on them and sometimes it's hard to adjust back. Where by "them" Steve sometimes even means himself. But no matter what, do something long enough and it becomes "normal", and sometimes "long enough" can mean "a few days."

"Normal" stops being Bucky staying in his room all the time unless Steve explicitly invites him out. Slowly. It starts being more that Bucky wakes up (or stops being quiet, Steve's not sure he really sleeps that much) and comes out of his room after Steve's done in the bathroom and uses it himself, eats, and then - granted - goes back to his room but now usually to sit on the bed with the door open and, maybe a little bit to Steve's surprise, read.

He reads anything and everything. Any book that Steve's not actively reading is liable to end up in Bucky's room at some point. Steve supposes it makes sense - if you don't have any memories of the world and you don't like talking to other people much, books are a good road. And if you've got next to nothing, anything helps.

None of this happens on its own, though. None of it. Every step, if it happens at all, pretty much happens after Steve finds a way to work a mention into the otherwise . . . well, honestly inane one-sided conversation he keeps up when Bucky's around.

Actually outright saying, hey you can use the shower any time you want - that doesn't work. It's like somehow the sentence doesn't translate to meaning. Working in a question about what kind of soap Bucky wants so that he can use it, the implication that this is something Bucky would, or maybe should, want - that works. Sort of.

Tentatively.

It's like the most fundamental things are missing, carved out of Bucky's brain along with all the memories and, Steve supposes, free will. Basic things seem hard to understand or believe, like: here's a new set of clothes, one for every day. Go ahead and take over the bathroom, once a day - shower, brush teeth, all of that. (Though Bucky seems to use the bath, not the shower; Steve doesn't ask why.)

Eating, three times a day at least, and yes go ahead and have whatever you want. Have warmer clothes if you want. Have a drink whenever. Change into more comfortable clothes for sleeping.

Sleep on a bed. Use pillows. Use blankets. That kind of thing.

As far as Steve can tell, when - if - he sleeps, Bucky's sleeping on the floor more or less in the closet, with nothing except the clothes on his back; after he figures that out, Steve starts turning up the heat when he goes to bed instead of turning it down, and living with either a much lighter blanket or none at all. Bucky adjusts to clean laundry and clean skin but Steve gets the impression it's almost as much for Steve's comfort as for his own. And food -

Food is a problem.

Bucky will eat pretty much anything Steve makes. Steve thinks his stomach tolerates maybe half of it, maybe a bit less, and what of the remainder Bucky likes or would have any interest in eating left on his own - well, actually, right now he doesn't seem to have any interest in eating anything,
left to himself.

He does seem to have figured out on his own that a certain amount of miserable vertigo and sickness goes down if he manages to win the "will eating this mean I throw it back up within a half hour?" roulette, but if he has any actual feelings about it at all, he seems to resent the necessity.

And besides, that round of roulette is easy to lose. And he doesn't actually tell Steve if something's on the losing end of it; Steve has to pay attention and catch the reaction, which sometimes is outright being sick - and even then, if it's overnight Steve'll never know - but sometimes seems to be pain instead, and that, that's hard to catch.

He keeps track, as best he can. Foods that are okay, so far: pears, white rice, white bread, potatoes, Ensure, and a kind of amplified peanut butter specifically designed for famine victims, which works well but is the one thing Steve is actually pretty sure Bucky hates even if he'll eat it.

Foods that are okay sometimes and sometimes aren't: cereal, most fruits, a lot of vegetables especially root vegetables, milk products, incredibly plain light meat chicken.

Foods that aren't okay or could turn out to be not okay without warning: everything else, but especially anything that looks like a leaf, anything high in fats or oils, whole grain anything at all, and any other kind of meat.

It occurs to Steve he hasn't tried any fish yet, but on the other hand, fish is really, really unpleasant to throw up. That he knows from his own pre-serum experience.

It's more or less impossible to hunt down professionals and ask them the questions he wants. There's no way to change how "I'm asking for a friend" actually sounds, and it's not like taking Bucky to see any of them is even remotely an option (and neither is bringing them home), and it's not like Steve wants to open up the issue to anyone else anyway. Way, way too many questions, and the answers to them... too likely to cause trouble.

Steve's given some thought to what happens if, say, the governments of the world find out who's living in this building. Mostly it involves playing chicken and refusing to blink. And that... that might go far enough to do things to more than just him, than just Bucky; that might change things in the world.

Or it involves disappearing, dropping everything about himself, his life, responsibilities, everything and walking off the map somewhere. And he'll do either. He's made that choice, made it when he refused to fight back. A lot of people might find that hard to believe - for that matter, his own past self might find it hard to believe - but at this point he figures he's actually given his life for this country twice (not his fault if it keeps not sticking), which means what responsibilities he has are to... people. And he doesn't have to be here for that.

But if he can, he'd rather avoid the whole issue. Looking for advice too far outside circles where he feels pretty comfortable about their support, well...

Don't seem like a great idea. Sort of does seem like courting disaster.

(He appreciates the irony of Stark being in that circle, when he's in the mood to appreciate irony at all.)

So he does what he can with what he has, and so he ends up in Dr Ross's office. Which does not in any way look like what Steve still thinks of when he hears the word office.
Apparently when Ross and Stark figured out what she was actually going to do, what she wanted to work on - for which, as far as Steve understands it, her formal doctorates in cellular and molecular biology and chemistry are basically jumping off points into taming the universe - and what to call the arrangement (Dr Ross is formally a "contractor" at Stark Enterprises, Steve gathers), Ross rapidly designed and arranged her own ideal workspace.

It kind of looks like the newer Star Trek sets wished they looked.

And she either likes Stark's changeable touch-screen things, or she's adapted well. Her work seems to be spread out over transparent screens and table-top surfaces in a kind of circle all around her, with some areas designated to work like paper for her to scribble things on with a stylus, and others set up to work like actual computers.

Despite all this, and much to Steve's private amusement, the floor is still littered with paper half the time, and so are the surfaces.

Other than that it's obviously to her design, there's not much in the way of personalization: everything's covered with work, no posters, no pictures, no trying-to-be-funny desk-ornaments. Her coffee mug does say Khaleesi in purple script with a little swirly design above and below the word, and Steve can't decide if that was more likely to have come from Banner or Stark.

Currently, Ross is supposed to be having lunch, which is why Steve came by around now. If he weren't here, he's honestly not sure she'd've stopped to eat, but she welcomes him in, offers him coffee, drags out some cut vegetables from a little cooler under her desk and looks at him expectantly while she chews on a carrot stick.

There's something about Ross that puts Steve at ease, and seems to work on other people too. He's not going to discount the fact that she's beautiful, or that part of her beauty are big gentle eyes and an easy smile. He's also not going to discount the possibility that she's figured out how to calm people down, that she does it on purpose. But it's still nice, and Steve can't bring himself to be suspicious about it.

She listens while he explains the problem and why he's bothering her with it, instead of finding someone in the field, and she nods as he talks, eyes going thoughtful. When Steve finishes, mostly trailing off with a sigh, she offers him a pea-pod.

"Well," she says. "I do have some thoughts. You know Bruce and I were working on a serum and process leading up to the accident?"

Steve nods, and she looks briefly annoyed, though not at him. "We didn't know that's what we were doing," she says. "The preliminary work had a lot of its context stripped away. We were brought in under the banner of disease prevention and accelerated wound healing - interesting enough to us to get us there, still plausibly something that would get military funding." She smiles a thin smile with cold eyes and says, "For the record, do not at any point willingly get involved with any project General Thaddeus Ross has any hand in whatsoever."

Steve notes the last name, but keeps his thoughts to himself; Ross takes a breath and dismisses all that. "First off," she says, "I think we can assume nobody actually cared what anything they did did to him, as long as he fundamentally still functioned."

"I'm pretty sure we can assume that," Steve agrees, trying not to make the words clipped or let them sound angry. She's a scientist, and he's approached her with a problem: of course she's going to lay out angles, thoughts, data. Howard did it, the other members of the SSR science and engineering teams did it, Steve knows this.
He knows it, and he reminds himself of it. Firmly.

Dr Ross taps her lower lip with her pea-pod. "We don't use cryogenic preservation for people," she says. "There's a lot of reasons, but basically we can't keep all the tissues safe, especially cerebral tissue. Something about you, and something about your friend -"

"Bucky." Steve hears his own interruption before he realizes he's interrupted, and when Dr Ross blinks at him in surprise he scrambles to figure out where that came from, why your friend had echoes that sounded so much like the asset he'd read over and over again in files, and so needed to be stopped and stopped hard. "Or James, I guess," he says, "if you want to be formal - he's a person, he has a name, I think . . . " Steve gropes at the idea. "I think he's been referred to by epithets for long enough."

Ross only takes another heartbeat to say, "I think I'll let him decide what nickname I can use," as if all of that had been completely normal, "but fair enough - James, then, something about you and him and the alterations you've been through preserves the cells and tissues we usually lose. People who are madly into cryonics," she adds with a wave of a half-bitten pea-pod, "insist that if we freeze everyone now someone in the future will be brilliant enough to heal them when they've unfrozen them, but to date, you two are the only people I know of who've ever successfully been thawed." She pauses and sighs. "Multiple times on his part."

"They would be leaning hard on the advanced healing factor," she goes on, thoughtfully. "They put a lot of effort into securing and altering him; if they were confident enough in the enhancement process to risk cryogenic preservation, I don't think they'd be worried about much else short of massive fatal trauma."

She glances at Steve and to his surprise gives him a small thin smile. "I know," she says. "This sounds horrible and cold; sorry. This is where I came into this field, trying to solve these problems - cellular rejuvenation, preservation, renewal. We never got very far because other than the gamma experiments we didn't find much that was safe enough to even bother testing on animals, let alone people, but HYDRA wouldn't care." She shrugs. "It's familiar ground."

"My point is I don't think they'd care how well his digestive system was working, as long as it supported the whole body in delivering the appropriate function." The corner of her mouth twitches down. "Which for them was obeying orders and killing people."

She pauses and purses her lips. "The healing factor probably accounts for why they felt able to do the memory destruction as well - usually the kind of damage that disconnects you from memory like you've described means the kind of damage that keeps you from making new ones. Or kills you. Which wouldn't be very useful. But if they were confident of cellular and neural regeneration because of the serum enhancement . . . " she trails off.

Steve doesn't interrupt; it feels like she's pulling on a thread, and he doesn't have much to offer, so he just lets her get on with it.

She frowns. "Even so," she says, "you'd want at least a twenty-four or forty-eight hour full fast, or the equivalent effects from a purge before freezing, to keep from risking damage from unincorporated matter - " she glances at him and makes a very slight grimace, "undigested food, waste, that kind of thing. It could - " she makes the hand-wave of trying to explain these things to laypeople, with which Steve is excessively familiar, "freeze wrong, cause internal damage, the kind that actually interferes with any and all function. Probably wouldn't kill him, would take time on the thaw-end to heal.

"Which means they'd want something they could - " and she glances at him and he thinks she
rethinks her wording on the fly, " - administer almost the moment he came out, which delivered the needed calories and proteins and nutrients in a rapidly useful form, and which was fully digested and processed quickly and completely.

"Which in turn means," she finishes with a sigh, dropping her now-empty veggie container back in her cooler, "that probably at least half the problem is he hasn't digested anything but the engineered human equivalent of puréed pig slop for decades, there's probably existing superficial damage and possibly layers of scar tissue, and it's never come up before because what do they care if his stomach hurts? Their slop got digested before he could reject it."

She tilts her head, looks at Steve and adds, "And, I think, if they didn't care, why would he?"

She picks up her coffee cup, looking down at her desktop. Steve's grateful, because he's struggling to maintain - well, an expression that doesn't scream about the anger he's trying to hold at arms-length, ignore.

"The bright side of that one," Ross continues, "is that it probably will get better. As the existing damage heals and his body gets used to processing real food into fuel, your list of physically accepted foods will get longer. I don't know about his emotional relationship to food, but there we're getting way out of my area of expertise." Her half-smile is apologetic.

Steve takes a moment to take that in, and it is a bright side, if one that he could hope progresses faster than she's just implied. Then he says, "'At least half'?"

"There's the issue of how much of this is physiological and how much is psychosomatic," Dr Ross says quietly. "Which I do know something about, since in my projects we deal with it in the form of phantom limb sensations and related issues, but -"

She taps her fingers on her desk, once again wearing the look of someone trying to boil something complicated down enough to offer him to understand.

"Basically, Captain Rogers, our nervous systems are weird and complicated and get into habits and patterns, and then get upset - metaphorically speaking - when things change or don't work the way they're supposed to," Ross circles her stylus in the air. "This means that emotional or psychological distress, if it doesn't have any way of being engaged with or expressed, sometimes turns into physical pain or illness. Which doesn't make it less real." The side of her mouth twists wry. "Just harder to diagnose and treat. I think if anyone qualifies for 'psychological distress without an outlet' . . . " she trails off, opening both hands upwards.

This time, it's Steve who sighs, leaning back in his chair. "I'd ask you what I should do about it," he says, trading her wry smile for his, "but I think I already know what you'll say."

"It's probably not life-threatening," Ross says, "the physiological side will probably fade with time and probably quickly, and the psychosomatic . . . you're already doing what you can."

Steve rubs his forehead, trying to keep it out of a scowl. It's good news, technically - but it's not really what he wanted to hear. He didn't want to find out there's another thing he can't do anything about but wait and hope. There are enough of those already.

Ross looks at him for a long time, long enough that it's almost uncomfortable once he notices it and then says, "What about you?"

"Huh?" Steve says. The question startles him: he was about to say goodbye and thank you and leave, and had already started to think of plans and things he can change, inasmuch as they exist.
When his brain catches up with the question, he flashes a smile and says, "I'm fine."

"Mm," she says. And she's smiling - but it's more kindness edged with knowing than amusement or friendliness. "Captain, I know you don't know that much about me other than my relationship with Bruce and its depth, so you wouldn't know, but - I grew up a general's daughter. I have more experience than most people you know with telling when a young officer is a lot more overwhelmed or wrung out than he'd like to admit. And right now - I can tell."

After a beat, Steve admits, "I don't actually know what to say to that."

Ross smiles at him again as she gets up, this time definitely wry again. "You don't have to say anything," she replies. "I'm prying and it's not actually my business." She refills her khaleesi mug and this time doesn't ask when she pours him some, just holds up the sugar for him to nod to or abstain. "But you look -"

"Tired?" Steve offers, but she shakes her head, face almost solemn.

"That wouldn't worry me," she says, "if you weren't exhausted I'd be - well, I'd be wondering if you'd been replaced by some kind of secret alien, because super-soldier or not -"

"Fair enough," Steve says. He takes the cup of coffee she holds out.

"You look," she tells him, "like someone who would look desperate if he knew what to be desperate for. And I know," she goes on, brushing an invisible speck of something off her shirt, "a little bit about looking for someone you've lost, and about finding them."

Steve doesn't think she notices how her hand goes to the pendant on a slender golden chain around her neck, a heart studded with tiny diamonds. Her eyes are serious and a little bit distant, like she's remembering something. "It's easy to get caught up in everything you want to do for them, everything you need to do, and to end up forgetting about you. So I wondered how well you're eating, and sleeping, and everything else."

She gestures with her coffee cup and adds, in a lighter voice, "You're allowed to tell me to bug off. I'm terrible about fussing over people. Ask my grad students."

"There are worse habits," Steve says and then runs one hand through his hair, and opens both hands in a shrug. "And Sam's said the same thing, more or less, and you're both probably right. Although I think I'm doing as well as I can, at that."

She looks dubious but just says, "It's a good idea to keep that up."

Steve counters with, "It's a good idea to eat a real lunch," because he just glanced down at her cooler for somewhere to look and the thought came to mind and maybe he's feeling a bit more defensive than he likes.

Dr Ross surprises him by outright laughing.

"Yeah, I'm pretty classic do-as-I-say-and-not-as-I-do in some areas," she admits. "Bruce keeps threatening to train one of the interns to nag me every mealtime. But you are absolutely right," she says, pretending that she's sobering, "and I shouldn't try to live on coffee."

"I'll walk you down to one of the many, many places to get food I keep noticing in this place," Steve offers, partly out of real courtesy and partly - he'll admit it - getting some of his own back. If nothing else, the sudden revelation of how well she can read him puts him pretty firmly on the "deliberately doing everything she can to make people comfortable around her" side of that
"Oooh," Ross says, slightly rueful. "Calling me on it - okay, okay." She puts down her coffee cup on her desk and then says, "I know we're all more thrown together than chosen - I mean me, and Bruce, Tony and Pepper - and I know Tony can drive you up the wall. But if nothing else, we know what's going on, we're here, and we're people you can vent to."

Steve does walk her down to the cafe-sandwich-corner on the floor below, and then says thank you. As he's leaving she seems to have a thought and says, "Captain Rogers? My current projects are all about enhanced prosthetics. If and when James is ever up to it, I think it might be worth letting me take a look at that arm."

On the way home Steve ends up picking up more books. They're for Bucky, not for him, but he doesn't have anything to guide his choices but what he thinks looks interesting. It probably didn't matter. It probably never would have, even if -

People'd always been surprised to find Bucky reading, more surprised to find out he tended to be at the top of the class and - and that was the irritating part - a lot of it without trying. He spent enough time in enough trouble and got into enough fights (a good portion of them Steve's fault, which adults, at least, never believed either) that most people assumed he'd be a lacklustre student at best, a dunce at worst.

Underneath whatever attitude he'd decided to wear that day, though, Bucky liked learning new stuff, more or less about anything.

Steve'd never managed to climb beyond the middle of the pack - he spent too much time off sick, lessons that took hours crammed into snatched space between the end of school and dinner, after Steve was well enough to pay attention, as best Bucky could summarize. It got Steve through, but he never excelled.

He picks up four books, three of them non-fiction and one a novel. He leaves them on the coffee-table in the living-room: giving Bucky things directly tends to get Steve the wary look he'd rather avoid if he can, but leaving them where he can find them seems to work.

When Steve wakes up at five-thirty the next morning, Bucky's not in his room, and so Steve doesn't expect him to be in the condo at all. It takes a minute for him to realize he's smelling coffee and a minute longer to realize what that means.

He's not careful on his way down the hall; the floor creaks softly in places, so Bucky knows he's coming, in case he wants to leave or stop what he's doing or . . . anything. Steve goes through the kitchen anyway, and - the coffee isn't in the programmable coffee-maker. It's in a pot, a saucepan, boiled on the stovetop. The coffee he's got isn't really ground for that, but he supposes it doesn't really matter. It smells good anyway. There's only a tiny hesitation before he grabs a mug down from their rack and pours himself a cup, adding sugar from the bowl on the other side of the stove.

Then he finishes going through the kitchen to the dining room.

Bucky's sitting on cross-legged on the table. Along with having something against the shower, he has something against chairs - he'll sit on the couch (rarely), he'll sit on the floor (usually), but if he can avoid a chair he will. Apparently that includes sitting on the table.
He's wearing one of the dark blue t-shirts Steve bought and his jeans have a hole in them Steve doesn't remember, which implies he spent at least some of the night out of the building. So does the scrape on his right forearm. Sometime in the last twenty-four hours Bucky's found scissors and cut his hair, if only a little, then tied it back with an elastic. His eyes have dark circles under them again and Steve figures he's going on another forty-eight hours without sleep - that's the pattern, so far, two days or so and then a kind of controlled collapse for way too few hours, and then maybe twenty-four hours and a repeat, and then forty-eight again.

But he's sitting on the table, and spread out around him are printed pictures, all clearly off the internet. They cover every part of the table-top that he's not sitting on and in some places they're piled three or four sheets of paper thick. Steve doesn't know how long Bucky's been sitting there, staring at different pictures of the Howling Commandos in turn - some shots for papers, some for propaganda, some from regimental photographers only too happy to sling an extra copy back to the unit, which from there made it into someone's official archive and onto the internet.

There's a mostly empty cup of coffee by Bucky's hip and after a second or two, as Bucky doesn't look at him but keeps staring at the photos all over in front of him, Steve reaches out, takes the cup and says, "You want more?"

Bucky nods once without looking. He's leaning forward on his left hand, his right arm folded and resting forearm to folded leg.

It's the first time he's ever responded - any kind of response - without hesitating.

Steve refills Bucky's cup, hesitates over the sugar and then makes it the way he always would have, and sticks both cups in the microwave for a minute, because the coffee's not as hot as it could be anymore. When he comes back, Bucky's picked up one of the photos, one of Dugan and Morita fast asleep leaning on a tree and each other. Steve puts Bucky's cup back where it was and says, "That's - "

"I know."

Bucky's answer is short, and Steve stops. Almost takes a step back. Bucky presses his right-hand forefinger and thumb to his eyes and says, "I stayed in the Smithsonian for eight days. There's nothing there, about this, that I didn't read. That I don't know." He drops his right hand and his left closes on the piece of paper, crumpling half of it. He throws it away, and the frustrated movement shifts some of the other papers and there's one of Jones and Bucky, as he used to be, playing cards. Steve remembers those cards. They'd been checking the bodies of HYDRA soldiers for maps and communications, and Dernier had found a deck of cards, and betting, losing and winning cigarettes from one another had rapidly become a unit pass-time.

Except Bucky didn't smoke, just hoarded the cigarettes to trade for whatever he wanted come a town or a proper camp, where everyone else was dying so much for a smoke that they'd hand over alcohol or food or souvenirs, even money.

Steve'd never bothered to gamble; watching'd been more fun.

What Bucky just said puts itself together between his ears and his brain and he says, "Nobody notic - " and then stops. "Never mind," he says. "That was an incredibly stupid question I was about to ask, so we can just pretend I didn't."

Because of course nobody noticed someone was sleeping in there, staying past closing and appearing in the morning. For that matter, Bucky probably hadn't been sleeping much.
"I read everything," Bucky says distantly, "and nothing was real. Letters scratched into paper. I didn't remember."

Past tense. Steve pays attention to these things, these days, and his attention gets caught by the past tense, so that he asks, "What about now?"

And while he waits, he thinks about how these are the most words Bucky's spoken yet, especially all together, about one thing.

Bucky takes the picture of him and Gabe Jones; reaches for another of Morita and Falsworth clearly posed in the rubble of a factory; puts them with a picture of all of them, the whole unit, except for Steve because Steve had been taking the picture after the photographer fell and cut his hand open.

"Pieces," Bucky says. And, "I don't know."

"I can tell you about - " Steve starts and stops because Bucky turns, fast, almost knocking the coffee cup over with his left arm and bathing the table in sugar and water and whatever else makes up coffee to make it what it is.

"I don't want you to tell me!"

The words snap out and it's the first time he's shown Steve anything but wariness or blankness or the faintest hint of distaste for food. Steve's not sure whether he should be glad, relieved about that, or worried about the anger; it maybe doesn't matter, because his chest hurts, because the look is one he knows like he knows up from down, or anything else.

It's not like Bucky was never mad at him.

But Bucky drops his gaze and half turns back and the look changes to one that makes Steve ache in a different way entirely, because it's overwhelmed and doesn't have a lot of hope in it. Bucky puts his face in his hands and takes a breath, and what he says isn't distant or sharp or anything else; it's just tired.

He says, "I don't want to be told."

Steve doesn't really know what to do. He wonders if anyone would know what to do. And almost hopes the answer is no, because if that person exists and the problem is he just hasn't found them, or risked enough to bring them -

And this is the most Bucky's said. And the first time he's done anything like this, or anything other than follow Steve's directions - or what he thinks Steve's directions must be, are going to be - and disappear. And Steve doesn't know what to do, but he's pretty sure something needs to be done, and he gets one chance to do it and hope it's right.

And he wonders if he should argue. If he should convince. And he can't, because it's also the first time Bucky has said or acted like he even knew what the idea of wanting means, so Steve stares at his cooling coffee and chooses and hopes it's right.

Oh God, please let him be right.

He walks around the other side of the table, hooks one of the chairs with his ankle and turns it around to sit back to front, arms resting on the back of the chair and says, "So tell me."

Bucky looks up sharply, eyes narrowed, and Steve shrugs. Tries to project calm. Gestures with his
cup towards the three print-outs and says, "Those are telling you *something*. You picked them out. Something's better than nothing. You made coffee, Bucky, and you boiled it in a pot and I don't think I believe it's because you couldn't figure out how the coffee-machine works. So it means something. So I won't tell you anything. You tell me."

For a long time Bucky doesn't do anything, just watches Steve while Steve tries to pretend he's completely calm and serene and not in any way worried about this or even uncomfortable the way you inevitably get when someone stares at you for ages. Then Bucky does the same thing to the pictures in front of him, until he sits up a little and reaches back for his miraculously unspilled cup.

"Coffee's still not right," he says, abruptly. But he knocks back half the cup anyway.

*****

Frustration crests like a flood hitting the top of a levee. It is 0743 when it breaks over. Table rocks, unbalances, falls. Papers scatter. Mug shatters; coffee spatters everywhere, including across him and across Rogers.

He ends on his feet, on the floor. Flood reduced, moment gone. Watching. Not breathing. Waiting.

Rogers is the worst liar in the world. Or the best. He doesn't know; could be either. Memory, impulse says one but he does not trust memory or impulse. Either perfect, flawless control over everything shown in face or body - or next to none.

And right now Rogers is written all over with - wrong things. No fear anger irritation disappointment apprehension strained patience, no -

There is - concern (*worry*), there is -

The words are wrong. Gone. He can't find them. Can't reach them. Doesn't want them, the spaces they try to shake open in his head and the shapes - Rogers starts to ask a question, say a name, a name he doesn't want to hear either.

The door to the balcony is behind him. It's easy enough to go. Rogers doesn't follow.

Somehow the daylight hours are . . . lost. Gone. He doesn't think he left the roof of the building. But he doesn't know. There isn't memory. There isn't memory again.

It's getting dark. He stays where he is until it's finished, until the light is moonlight and human-made, until the building is warmer than the air. He doesn't want to go anywhere else. He doesn't want to *be here*. Doesn't want to *be*.

Doesn't want not to.

He stays until he feels the chill. It bites over his skin and now the loudest thing he does not want is that, to feel *that*, and it's full-dark and late, later than Rogers goes to sleep.

He goes in by the balcony.

The table is righted. Shattered pottery gone, spilled coffee cleaned away. Printed pictures gathered up, smoothed out, piled to one side. Top is the card game. The one he doesn't remember but can feel just out of his reach.
Or wants to. Enough that even his head lies.

He is hungry. He can feel that - feel the twist in his abdomen, the irritable, the drag that comes with needing food. He raises his gaze to the kitchen, feels his mouth twist, and doesn't go in.

The only light is in the room Rogers gave him, and Rogers must have turned it on. He didn't. The door is pulled to but not closed. Everything else is dark. When he stands still in the hallway, after he's named all the other sounds of the night (wind, passing vehicle, appliances- ) and set them aside he can hear Rogers' breathing, sleep rhythm and soft.

He hesitates. Puts his right hand to Rogers' door, fingertips to thin, fragile wood. It makes no sound opening when he pushes.

He's stood here, for a moment, most nights spent in this building. Almost compulsive. Like he's looking for something he's . . .forgotten. He doesn't know what it is. Rogers sleeps the same: deep, unwary, relaxed except for a sleeping frown. That doesn't change. But he looks every night, or every night that he is here.

This time the door opens wider. This time he steps in.

It would be . . . easy, to kill Rogers here, now. The thought passes his mind by like smoke but it's . . . unwanted. No - unhappy. Rogers sleeps too deep, too easy, trusting to safety. He doesn't remember but he knows Rogers has always been like this. Standing beside the bed, a few feet away, he knows that this has never changed. Not even the sleeping frown.

He sits on the floor. The chill in the air isn't gone; he wraps his arms loosely around bent knees. Holds on to the left wrist with his right hand.

He knows that the shape in the bed should be smaller. Slighter. Curled up close, sometimes, against some pain that can't be fixed. He stayed in the museum for eight days. Knows every word of every description. One had listed illnesses - ulcers, asthma, arrhythmia, pernicious anaemia, scoliosis - many. But not enough. They had kept secrets, when they could.

They.

He has done this before. Sat, watched, while Rogers sleeps. He doesn't remember. No pictures. No details. Only . . . he knows. He knows, his body knows - something. That this fits into place with many times before. Too many.

Always afraid.

Moonlight changes, as he sits. Travels across the floor. Disappears.

The clock says 0322 when Rogers frowns deeper in sleep, shifts and rolls halfway back. The covers hiss over sheets and skin. The wood of the bed-frame flexes and responds to the change of weight. It startles him, pulls him out of quiet, and he is on his feet and back to the hall before thought.

Then it's . . . easier, to step into the other room. Turn off the lights. Close the door. Sit. Try to make himself breathe.

He doesn't sleep. At 0630, there is a tap at the door and Rogers asking him if he wants to eat.
Chapter 4

It's just working its way into summer when Tony announces that the prototype flight-suit is ready for testing and Sam needs to get over here and test it already. Sam calls Steve to let him know he'll be in town, and it's just about happy enough news to make Steve grin at an empty kitchen.

"I'm looking at where to stay," Sam says, and quickly adds, "and if you even think about offering me your couch right now I'm gonna call you some really unflattering names. I will happily throw a party the day I can come crash at your place, but now -"

"- is not that time," Steve agrees. "I know. I'm not that stupid."

"No, but sometimes you're pretty self-sacrificing," Sam says, irony in his voice. "It makes your common sense go hide somewhere else. Just making sure this isn't one of those times. Anyway - I'm checking hotels, but Stark's being pretty insistent about offering me a room at the Tower. Expert advice needed: how far should I run?"

Steve laughs a little, but thinks about it and says, "Honestly? Even though I do want to strangle the guy on a regular basis? I'd take it. It'll be nicer than anything you could book, you'll be right there, and you can always change your mind later. And Stark can be annoying, but most of the other permanent residents are pretty interesting people."

"That sounds kind of like the 'may you live in interesting times' kind of 'interesting'," Sam says, mock-suspiciously.

"No, not quite," Steve says, smiling. "Up to you, but I'd give it a shot."

"Yeah, I guess there's not that much of a downside to letting someone offer you something nice," Sam replies. "At least not this time. I given you the dates yet?"

Steve meets Sam at what is unofficially his favourite cafe, even if he only seems to make it there when he's in a bad mood, being as it's right by Stark Tower and the last time he was at Stark Tower in a good mood was - actually, never.

That's kind of sad, now he comes to think about it. Maybe he should do something about it. The thing's only really ugly on the outside, anyway.

Amanda looks up from the espresso machine and beams at him when he comes in, then gives him the extremely-raised-eyebrows that are her way of asking if he wants his usual or not. He waves, nods and glances around: Sam's not here yet.

"You look more cheerful than normal," Amanda says when he gets through the line to the counter. "No rough day today?"

"No," he says, handing her a ten, "actually, I'm meeting a friend."

She perks up, hands back his change and says, "Ooooh, that's new."

Then she looks horrified, and Steve shouldn't want to laugh, but she has a face like a cross between a silent film star and a (very pretty) cartoon: all huge expressions and exaggerated emotion. "I'm sorry," she says quickly, "I just realized I made it sound like you don't have any friends."
And that...is kind of funny actually; Steve smiles and says, "Honestly, with what you see of me, you could be forgiven for thinking that." He pauses and adds, "With what anyone sees of me these days, anyone could be forgiven for thinking that. Anyway. He's visiting from DC."

"Well," Amanda says, sliding the coffee and pastry across the counter to him, "I'm glad you're having a better day."

Steve sits where he's easily seen from the door, and Sam spots him the minute he walks in. Amanda catches Steve's answering wave to Sam, and Sam finds himself the recipient of her *best* Happy and Enthusiastic Customer Service, and looks as slightly overwhelmed by it as many people - including Steve, the first couple times - sometimes do.

Much like she's only got expressions that range the ends of intensity, she's either very shy, or very not. Steve's met her boyfriend (in the sense of "said hi to") once or twice, and the guy seems admirably able to maintain his centre in the Amanda one-thing-or-the-other universe.

"Well you're pretty popular," Sam says as he sits down with something topped with whipped cream and covered in caramel and chocolate sauce. Steve shakes his head a little, closing his sketchbook and sliding his chair back forward.

"I used to come in here to sketch for a while after I woke up," he says. "Then it ended up part of ground zero for the Chitauri. Amanda's a girl of strong impressions."

Sam pauses, turns around to glance at Amanda and then says, "Did her hair used to be blonde?"

"Yeah," Steve says, "and yeah, she's the one who gave that one reporter a piece of her mind. She's glad you're here," he adds, with conscious wry humour. "She was afraid I didn't have any friends."

"Well then I'm glad to prove her wrong, and relieve her anxiety," Sam replies. He raises his drink slightly. "It's a caramel mocha. I could see your horrified expression from the till."

"Not horrified," Steve says, "just surprised you want that much whipped cream this early in the day."

"I'm technically on vacation," Sam replies. "Healthy eating's for at home."

Steve laughs. He looks at Sam, thinks he recognizes a certain level of slight, well, bemusement under the normal expression and asks, "And how was your morning?"

"... interesting," Sam says after a telling pause. "You're right, though, it's nicer than any hotel I would've booked. And the food's great. And hey, it's not every day a guy gets to meet War Machine over breakfast."

"I didn't know Col. Rhodes was in town - and isn't it still Iron Patriot?" Steve asks. He met Rhodes once, very briefly; his overwhelming impression at the time had been that Stark's ability to get otherwise sensible, grounded, good people to like and put up with him was *astonishing*, and also that Rhodes was probably the terror of all his junior officers. Mostly the good kind, the kind that brought out the best in them - but still a terror.

Sam gives a short laugh. "Yeah," he says, "officially, but I got tired of having Stark mutter a correction every time anyone said it, so I've given up. Besides, I can't say I object to calling a spade a spade, and I've seen footage of that suit in action." He pauses. "But is Stark always that..." he trails off.

Steve offers, "Irritating?" and Sam grins.
"Yeah, well, kinda - but I think I was more going for intense." Sam uses his spoon-straw to scoop off some of his whipped cream. "I mean, really intense."

That's a fair question. Steve pauses to think; he's not that good at keeping track of other people's schedules these days, not unless it directly involves him - "Is Potts there?" he asks, and Sam shakes his head no.

"I didn't meet her, anyway," he amends. "I mean, maybe she was hiding somewhere - "

"No, if she was there you'd've met her - then no, even I'll admit he's normally a lot calmer," Steve says. "He's a bit on edge when he and Pepper are in different places and he's not allowed to go with her when she goes to DC."

"That explains that then," Sam says. "Dr Banner and Dr Ross are pretty nice. Banner's definitely not the guy you'd expect to be the Hulk."

"Or the lady you'd expect to have broken a corporal's nose with her elbow," Steve says, and Sam's eyebrows go up.

"Seriously? But she's tiny. And really sweet." Then before Steve can say anything, Sam shakes his head and says, "Wait, I know Natasha, that's a dumb thing to say. Anyway. I may have been drafted for prolonged testing tomorrow. I think I might have ended up promising to come back to the Tower later today, but Dr Ross saved me. Stark is dangerous when it comes to talking people into things, isn't he."

"If he doesn't get you with enthusiasm, he usually gets you by exploiting your resistance and turning it back on itself," Steve admits. "He's kind of like an eternal fifteen year old who turns everyone else back to fifteen with him."

It's gossip, really. Steve's not too proud to admit that. He's a little bit embarrassed at how he works to keep it up until their coffee's gone and they've both picked up another one for the walk they've decided to take; he'd offer his pride the sop of saying it's because he doesn't want to have the inevitable real conversation in the confines of a cafe where untoward things might be overheard (gossiping about the residents of Stark Tower doesn't count, everyone in the area does that including some tabloids, his is just more accurate), but really it's because he's avoiding that conversation, and he's still almost as bad at lying to himself as anyone else.

But eventually the gossip runs out, and it's not like Steve doesn't know Sam's been giving him searching looks since they were sitting down at the table, so after a few seconds pause as the old topic of conversation dies, Steve sighs and says, "And I think this is the part where you tell me I look like Hell."

"Actually," Sam says in a thoughtful voice, "it's kinda funny."

Steve gives him a sideways look. "What is?"

"There's this guy I work with," Sam replies, tossing his now empty cup in a garbage can. "He and his wife just had a baby, baby they've been trying to have for years and because they had a surrogate and his wife's an ER surgeon, means it's way easier for him to have the time off, so he's kind of pulling most of the long shifts. Kid's had a couple problems, been in and out to see some specialists, couple of ER visits himself. And honestly, you're kinda reminding me of him."

Not sure he gets it, Steve frowns. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Sam says, mouth quirking, folding his arms as they stop and wait for a light to turn. "Dead
on his feet, completely stressed out, terrified as fuck but trying really hard not to show it, frustrated and irritable - "

"Thanks," Steve mutters, both of them stepping out again with the light turning green, but Sam's not actually done.

" - and happier than I've ever seen him. You know. Under all that shit. Fundamentally."

They walk in silence for a minute while Steve tries to deal with the sudden tightness in his chest and his gut, tightness he mostly associates with almost but not quite overwhelming relief. The kind of thing where if he'd been holding a real thing, an object, he'd've been holding it too long and too tight and his hands would cramp up letting it go, except the brain doesn't have anything to cramp, so it sends it to other parts of your body instead.

(He thinks about Dr Ross's explanation of psychosomatic pain and sickness.)

When he's got it under control, at least mostly, he repeats, "Thanks," but means it this time, sincere instead of sarcastic.

"You do look like shit, though," Sam adds and Steve starts laughing, hard enough that they have to stop and he has to lean on a wall for a minute as the rest of the tight feeling shakes itself out with the laugh. Sam waits for him, folds his arms again.

"You were totally expecting me to try to talk you out of - " Sam's top hand lifts and he makes a little but all-encompassing gesture, " - all of it, weren't you."

Steve ducks his head, then pushes off the wall and admits, "Maybe. I dunno. I do know how all of it - " he mimics Sam's gesture, " - looks. From the outside. I'm not - I don't think I'm always good enough, explaining why that's wrong. I try to make up for that with conviction, but that gets kind of . . . " he trails off.

"Its own kind of exhausting?" Sam offers.

"Something like that."

Sam takes a slow breath and then says, "I'm not going to say I completely get this, Steve." He shrugs. "But I don't actually have to." He grins suddenly. "There's a lot of people think I'm a fucking nutcase because I love to fly even though I probably couldn't risk life and limb more if I tried. And they don't need to get it, either. Maybe it worries me, how far you'll go and what lines you're willing to cross, but it worried my mom that I decided my vocation was to jump out of perfectly good airplanes under fire to rescue people. It is what it is.

"So now," Sam goes on, as if putting that behind him, "now that you don't think you're gonna have to justify everything to me, why don't you tell me why you look like shit. Because now," he says with a wry but genuine grin, "I'm totally assuming you've been telling me the bare minimum."

This time Steve's sigh is a little bit explosive. "There has been exactly," he says slowly, "twice in my life that I've been really upset that it's pointless for me to drink. This is one of them."

Sam gives a short laugh and says, "Well there's a promising beginning."

They end up sitting outside a Starbucks. Sam somehow goes for another kind of fancy mocha; Steve sticks to a camomile based tea. "The funny thing," he says, "if by funny I mean it kind of
drives me nuts, is it's probably all progress. Technically."

Sam gives him a sympathetic look. "Yeah, actually," he agrees. "Congratulations. You've made him feel safe enough to have feelings and make some motions at expressing them. It's unfortunately not surprising that they're pretty much all bad."

"Frustration, mostly," Steve says. "And he doesn't really trust me, which I can't blame him for but - doesn't help."

"And feels like shit," Sam adds, giving Steve a knowing look; Steve acknowledges that with a gesture but goes on.

"He's trying to piece together bits of a lifetime and for a lot of it I am actually the only resource that exists. Which means for the stuff he really wants to know he's . . . got nobody to check with for what I say. Not even to get a baseline. Peggy's the only one of us still alive." He gives a humourless laugh. "Might have to explain who it is asking for the stories and why on a regular basis but ironically, this stuff she'd remember pretty well, she just . . . " he opens a hand. "Wasn't there for most of it.

"And on top of that," Steve adds, "as hard as it may be to believe, Bucky's actually always been worse even than me about asking for help in the first place."

"That's unfortunately impressive," Sam says, with total seriousness. "Because I love you, man, but you're pretty damn bad."

"Yeah," Steve agrees. "It is. So you can imagine how happy he is about just about anything right now." He taps a finger on the top of his cup's lid and says, "I did figure out how he was getting out and leaving everything locked, though. Apparently if you leave the lock for the window in his room in exactly the right place and the window beside it just the right way from the outside, it snaps back to lock. Getting in, I think he just picks the balcony door lock."

"Huh," Sam says, and he's pretty good at blank friendly listening but Steve can just see the underlying well that's not creepy at all underneath. Then Sam frowns. "So where does he go?"

"Rooftops," Steve says. "As far as I can tell you can get a pretty good distance in a couple directions comfortably - or, well, I can and he can. If you're willing to risk getting cut up or breaking something you can go further, or you can cross one or two streets on ground level. I think the food problems left him weaker than he's comfortable with and he's trying to do something about it."

"How are those, by the way?" Sam asks and Steve feels his mouth twist, tries to make it wry humour instead of anything else.

"Food problems? Physically, I think we're mostly good," Steve replies. "There's a couple of things that still end badly," and a couple of things, like fish, that Steve plans never to have in the house again because he doesn't need to know or care what the physical reaction would be, because the silent response to the smell and the sudden abrupt roll-back of any and all progress of the previous week or more had told him all he needs to know, which is no, "but he can handle a lot of coffee in a day and that's a pretty good test of that kind of thing, to me."

"And otherwise - ?" Sam starts and then must catch Steve's unconscious change of expression because he finishes, "That good, huh?"

"I can talk him into eating," Steve says. "Usually. But I'm pretty sure at this point he knows every
variation of my reasons-you-need-to-eat speech I've ever been able to come up with, and most of the remixes."

"But he'll let you convince him," Sam says, like he's looking for clarification and Steve nods. "Hate me for saying it, but that's a good sign, Steve. Sleep?"

"No idea," Steve admits frankly. "When he does sleep, I'm pretty sure he sleeps on the floor of his closet, wedged sitting in a corner. And he doesn't sleep very often, and he sleeps like a cat."

"Agoraphobia's a bitch," Sam sighs. "And not much you can do about it unless and until he cooperates. What's he do otherwise?"

"A lot of reading," Steve says. "Of everything. Every book you've sent, Stark's sent, everything I had already, anything I bring home and a lot of stuff he can get off the tablet. Takes a lot of notes, too," Steve adds with a bit of amused chagrin, "but they're all in Cyrillic so I have no idea what they are. I'm working on that - not so I can read the notes," he adds, "not unless he wants me to, but he seems to default to Russian a lot, especially on bad days. My French and German are okay, but we never went near the Eastern front."

Steve frowns, thinking and says, "Otherwise - he's got a smartphone, I got him one, which right now is more or less a glorified text-messenger that he only sometimes answers, but - " Steve opens his hand. "Everyone's got one now, you know? So it seemed like a thing to do."

"Yeah, I get that." Sam looks thoughtful for a few minutes before he says, "Well the good news is, I can't think of anything you're doing wrong, Steve."

Steve grimaces. "Which means the bad news is - "

"- that mostly the only answer is 'keep doing what you're doing and hope it gets somewhere', yeah," Sam finishes. "I mean, I can tell you that if he ever gives you any sign of what would help him sleep better, you should get on it, because the more we know about what goes on up here," and Sam taps his head, "the more getting enough of the right kind of sleep seems like at least part of the Holy Grail of Health, and like the first thing to go when stuff goes off. That kind of thing. But that's probably going to come from just watching and waiting."

"Good thing I'm persistent," Steve says and Sam snorts.

"The word is 'stubborn', Rogers," he says. "You're stubborn. And yeah, it probably is." He looks thoughtful for a minute and asks, "He had any contact with anyone other than you?"

"Not directly," Steve replies. "He kind of goes out of his way to avoid it. At least some of the time, he still goes out of his way to avoid contact with me." He takes a breath and says, "I did say you might be coming."

Sam almost looks surprised. "He okay with that?" he asks, cautiously and Steve gives him a humourless smile.

"As much as he's okay with anything, I think so, yeah." He gives Sam a questioning look. "Are you okay with that?"

Sam doesn't play coy; he says, "You mean is the fact that the last time I saw him he was kicking me off a helicarrier a problem? It's fine, Steve. I've been comfortable with the idea of free will and when it doesn't apply for a long time."

Steve gives half a shrug and says, "I worry."
"I know. I would too. I'm just telling you about that one, you can stop."


Sam waves it away with a grin. "Hey, thanks to you I'll probably get to fly again," he says. "Without anyone ordering me around, yelling at me, shooting at me or demanding I account for every single damn dive I do. Consider us even."

Bucky takes Sam's visit more or less the way Steve expected, except Steve hadn't actually expected him to be out in the living-room, sitting on the couch with his feet up off the floor, reading with one of the notepads Steve'd started buying flipped open on one knee, covered in cursive Cyrillic.

Steve almost feels like he should be unsure how to interpret that: it's not the first time Bucky's used the living-room for this, it's not that unusual, it could mean nothing, it could mean indifference, it could mean a sense of comfort, it could mean . . . a lot of things.

Except Steve isn't unsure. He knows exactly why Bucky's out here instead of in his own room or even on the balcony, given how warm it is outside, and it's because you could read either of those as hiding. As fear. And Bucky'd cut off his own - that is, Steve corrects himself, Bucky wouldn't do that. Couldn't, wouldn't do anything that could show Sam anything like fear, ever.

With someone else, it might be ambiguous. With Bucky, Steve knows exactly what this means and his gut won't let him second-guess, wonder if he should be attaching those motives to the person right here, right now. As Steve introduces Sam, and Sam says hello and Bucky's only response is a moment of attention, the small quirk of one brow and then pointedly going back to his reading and his notes, Steve gets even more sure he's right.

He can't mention that here and now, files it away for tomorrow, because he is not, even once, going to start talking about Bucky like it doesn't matter he could conceivably hear, even if the chance is small - if he and Sam sit out on the balcony with the door shut - and even if, he suspects, Bucky wouldn't actually care.

_He_ cares. Come to that, Sam probably cares, but it wouldn't matter if he didn't. But Steve makes coffee Sam's slightly more likely to enjoy than the stuff already made in the stove-top coffee pot Bucky uses to make his, constantly changing something he's doing just a little bit.

Steve's pretty sure he knows what Bucky's trying to replicate, but he's not going to mention it until Bucky does, both because he doesn't want to push and also because frankly he's pretty sure Bucky will react badly, the same way he reacts badly to any attempt to give him any of the answers he's clearly looking for while he pores over every single history of, well, _them_ that he could get his hands on.

And Steve gets it. It hurts, he won't lie, but he gets it and it hurts a Hell of a lot less than what's driving Bucky so he keeps his comments to himself and waits. And thinks about the bit in _The Screwtape Letters_, which he finished the other week, where it talked about people making a big show about declaring their willingness to suffer and die for something, to completely give themselves over in the name of someone or of a cause, and then completely missing the part where what's actually being asked of them is, say, being patient with an irritating neighbour over dinner or something equally mundane.

Lewis had some strange ideas in other areas, and Peggy would have had a lot to say about his
clearly having no idea about women (probably did, if she ever read it), but Steve figures he got that one right and he's been trying to admit it. He'd take a bullet for Bucky in a heartbeat; dealing with hurt feelings shouldn't even merit a second thought.

Turns out people don't quite work that way, Steve reflects, but he still reminds himself regularly.

Out on the balcony with coffee, he says, "So big day tomorrow," because Sam's wings are a safe topic no matter who's listening. And besides, it makes Sam repress a grin.

"Yeah," he says, and it's kind of nice to see someone genuinely happy. Then Sam shakes his head and laughs and says, "You know I'm pretty sure the guy redesigned the whole thing from scratch and a quick look at the Triskelion footage?"

"That sounds like Tony," Steve says. "I don't think he trusts any designs that aren't his."

"I don't think he trusts a lot of things," Sam replies. "But I've seen the prototype and he swears it'll work. You could hang around to catch me if he turns out to be wrong, though. If you're not doing anything else." He gives Steve an ironic look and Steve snorts.

"Yeah, I was planning on coming to watch," he says. "Besides, grabbing Sitwell wasn't that impressive and I was kind of occupied with the helicarriers, so you've still got to show me what you can actually do on those things. Without anybody shooting at you this time."

Sam laughs and then shakes his head. "It's the only thing I miss, you know? I thought jumps were fun until they gave me and Riley those damn suits and suddenly there's nothing like it in the world. I don't miss orders, I don't miss getting shot at, I really don't miss the food - " and Steve snorts another laugh, " - but there's nothing like flying."

"Leonardo da Vinci would be jealous," Steve tells him. "Are you just planning to fly around DC and annoy people with them?"

"I might try to find something useful to do," Sam says, giving an exaggerated shrug. "Besides, I got this feeling Stark isn't the kind of guy who's satisfied with his first attempt, so I figure I'll be testing for a while yet." Then he looks like he's remembering something and says, "Oh, I was supposed to say - Dr Ross said she wanted to talk to you about something, whenever you had a minute. She didn't say it was urgent, but she looked pretty serious, and that woman smiles a lot so it kind of stood out."

"Careful," Steve says, not even slightly serious, "she's a charmer."

"Yeah, I noticed," Sam laughs. "Why aren't she and Banner married? They act like they've been married for years."

"Probably kind of . . . redundant," Steve says. "Apparently he hones in on her and listens even when he's having a pretty bad episode."

"No kidding." Sam looks appropriately impressed. SHIELD's databases hitting the internet meant the footage of the battle between Hulk and Abomination in Harlem had hit the internet too - leading, Steve had been kind of gratified on Banner's behalf to see, to a bunch of of "we love you, Hulk" video messages and associated bits of graffiti and impromptu memorials springing up all around.

Once you watched the actual fight, it became pretty clear who was killing people and who, despite everything, was trying to protect them.
It was still terrifying to watch.

"After that, any kind of official recognition must seem kind of unimportant," Steve says and Sam snorts.

"Yeah, just a little. Anyway. I promised her I wouldn't forget, and I didn't, so there you go. She didn't say what it was, I figured it wasn't my business."

"No idea," Steve admits.

After a pause, Sam asks, "You heard from Natasha lately?" and Steve has to shake his head.

"Sent a couple texts," he says, "got a couple answers, but nothing recent. Pretty sure she went to find Clint Barton, and then for all I know they're in the middle of a rainforest somewhere with no cell reception." He shrugs. "She'll show up when she wants to talk to anyone, I guess. I think the whole SHIELD thing was pretty hard on her."

"Yeah, I got that feeling," Sam agrees.

They go out again for dinner. Steve's started out unsure about that, unsure whether or not he should just let Sam go back to the Tower and stay here. Then he came back into the condo and discovered the remains of sandwich making visible in the kitchen, a plate and an empty cup of what looks like it was milk on the side table beside where Bucky had been sitting, and a firmly closed bathroom door.

It's a pretty clear message, at least to Steve. Bucky almost obsessively doesn't leave mess, doesn't seem to like leaving any sign he was in a room. The kitchen says (to Steve) *I ate. Here's proof.*

The closed door says *Go away.*

So Steve does.

He explains it to Sam about a block away from the building, because Sam's been giving him the *I'm not going to say anything out loud but I'm surprised!* look since Steve suggested dinner. Sam considers it. He's good enough not to look dubious, even if he feels it.

He says, "Not challenging, just curious - you guessing, or is that something like he used to do?"

Steve remembers small rooms and narrow beds, clothes either too big or too small, and shakes his head. "Actually," he says, "it's like something I did."

"As everyone knows," Steve says, when they're sat and they both have beers, "I used to get sick a lot."

Sam's mouth quirks. "Yeah, that tends to come up whenever the story starts," he agrees. "Pretty impressive list of chronic stuff, if I recall."

"Yeah, well," Steve says, leaning on the table and knowing he looks part amused and partly guilty, "the list is actually incomplete. I think they tend to put on the stuff that makes everything more impressive, and leave off the part where the SSR winds up looking criminally negligent for letting Erskine take me on, no matter what he said."
That's something he's sort of come to terms with, the way you do as years go by: it's hard to overstate how lucky he was to survive Camp Lehigh, that he didn't get sick, that he didn't end up with an asthma attack bad enough to kill him, all kinds of things.

Sam's eyebrows lift. "Oh?"

"Well," Steve says, half-smiling and a bit rueful, "they tell you about the heart problems I was born with. They don't tend to list the part where I had scarlet fever when I was eleven. Or that it developed into rheumatic fever, which I got again a few times. And asthma doesn't really sound so bad to the average person nowadays, because inhalers are so easy, but we didn't have those. Actually," he notes, remembering his mother shouting at a "helpful" neighbour once upon a time, "almost everything anyone did use to try and treat it just made it worse. And serious doctors thought it was all in your head."

Sam's eyebrows can't really go any higher. "That, plus ulcers, plus what, anaemia?" he says, sounding somewhere between impressed and horrified.

"And some digestive stuff and probably an immune disorder," Steve confirms, "we just didn't know anything about that, or at least, the kind of medicine that managed to get down to where I was didn't. So not only was I pretty much constantly sick from the chronic stuff, on top of that I tended to get the flu every year. Occasionally twice. Sometimes with pneumonia afterwards."

"Wow," Sam says. "Which is not the most intelligent response I've ever come up with, but it's pretty much what I got. And with that you survived Basic," he adds, then shakes his head when Steve opens his hands in acknowledgement. "I'm gonna have to make up a new word, Steve, 'stubborn' now seems pretty inadequate."

"Which could be a problem," Steve picks up, "because I hated resting, I hated staying in bed, I hated eating anything special or more expensive because I already thought Mom worked too hard - if it had been left up to me, I'd've been out of bed and trying to do stuff more or less the minute it was physically possible. And trying to do stuff I probably shouldn't've." He sighs, sitting back to let the server put their appetizer down. "And a lot of the time, the person keeping me from doing that was Bucky."

"Huh," Sam says. He reaches out to pick up some of the chicharrón and then has to drop it fast onto his side-plate because it's hot. "Damn," he says, and then asks, "How'd you two meet, anyway?"

"I may have been in a fight," Steve says, "that I didn't have a hope in Hell of winning." He uses his fork to dish himself some food. "He may have decided to save my neck. And then decided to keep doing that."

"I may have been in a fight," Steve says, "that I didn't have a hope in Hell of winning." He uses his fork to dish himself some food. "He may have decided to save my neck. And then decided to keep doing that."

Sam gives him a quick, amused look and asks, "Did you start the fight?" Steve laughs.

"I was six, so I don't really remember, but it's a good bet," he replies. "Or at least tried to tell someone off, which was basically the same thing as starting a fight when you're little and alone. I started probably a good three quarters of the fights we got into."

"Wow," Sam says solemnly, "it's hard to imagine a time when you were like that. You've changed so much in growing up."

"Funny," Steve says, but he's smiling. It's a fair point anyway. "Then some of the other ones Bucky started but most of them were bigger kids trying to mess with me or take something."

He shrugs. "That was pretty much that, anyway. When I got sick the first time after that, he showed
up with stuff to help me keep up at school. Don't ask me why - he decided I needed a friend, and he was going to be it.

"Mom juggled shifts best she could, but she had to work, so after that he started showing up and bullying me into eating and resting, whenever I was down with something. Some days," and Steve shrugs again, "I hated his guts for it.

"When I was mad at him, he'd still come over and check and sometimes I'd make a big thing about making it really clear that I was fine, and doing everything I needed to, and he didn't need to come by." Steve pauses, looking at the food in his hand and says, "Actually now that I think about it I think every time I got really angry with Bucky has something to do with me being sick.

"After a while," Steve goes on, "every time Mom worked over the night I'd end up sleeping at Bucky's place. His parents hated each other but they were pretty good to him, and me. When I got scarlet fever it was the other way around - Bucky came over and spent nights at my place, even when I told him to cut it out because he'd get sick." He taps his fingers on the table, shifts a bit and says, "And when Mom died he talked me into living with him so I could keep studying for a while longer. Told him I could make it on my own. He told me I didn't have to."

He realizes he's starting to ramble and stops, grabbing a bit more of the food with his fingers this time.

Sam's been watching him, thoughtful; Steve can feel a kind of defensiveness trying to bubble up, to explain that this isn't something stupid and simple like owning, because that's an argument he's already imagined and had in his head with a half dozen different people. But Sam hasn't said a damn thing about that, and Steve makes himself do Sam the justice of assuming better of him.

Server brings their main courses, which is nice because it makes the silence, the break in the conversation something functional instead of something awkward; they both order another beer, too.

"I see what you meant, in the van," is what Sam actually says. "That even when you had nothing, you had him."

Steve says, "And now he's got me."

They're finishing up with coffee and moved on to arguing about whether or not flying cars really would be useless - apparently Tony's still working on his - when Sam pulls out his phone to check a text, and shakes his head. "And in today's moment of 'things my life did not contain this time last year', I just got a text from an artificial intelligence asking me if I wanted a car to come pick me up."

"And with good timing," Steve says, as their server drops off the bill with a smile. "You might as well say yes."

Steve says good bye and sees him off, and then goes back to the condo, locks the door behind him, and absently grabs Bucky's coffee-cup from the coffee-table as he passes. Bucky's back to where he was before, on the couch; Steve thinks the book is different.

When he brings the full cup back and puts it down, Bucky says, "He's afraid of me," without looking up, writing something down as he speaks. And he clearly means Sam.

Steve stops, but hasn't managed to think of anything to say before Bucky adds, "And a lot more
afraid for you."

There probably isn't anything to say to that. So Steve doesn't.

In the morning Steve heads for the Tower for about nine o'clock and meets Tony, Sam and Rhodes up in the penthouse. It's nice to see someone completely, joyfully excited, and while Sam is kind of trying to play it cool - Steve thinks in part because Rhodes is still there - he's doing a pretty good impression of a kid on an unexpectedly bountiful Christmas morning.

For his part, Rhodes is still tall, handsome, self-possessed and friendly but - today at least - sort of withdrawn from everything and mostly watching Tony with a slight frown on his face.

He is not, to look at him, someone you'd expect to be Tony Stark's best friend. He almost looks more like he should be someone's dad, the serious kind a kid's always trying to impress. Steve's seen him smile, knows he looks a lot less forbidding when he does, but right now the smile is not in sight. Steve wonders what brings him.

Steve can see why Sam was asking about Tony's intensity, though. Standing on the open-air landing platform that feeds into the penthouse, he doesn't seem his usual expansive self so much as concentrated, everything pulled down under his skin until he's vibrating and unusually focused. For Tony, he's almost quiet, right up until he's explaining technical specifications to Sam and helping him put the suit on.

"You'll be able to do this yourself when I'm done," Tony says, "this is just a prototype." Which is the kind of comment that makes Steve glad Sam's got a backup 'chute. He knows that Tony Stark's prototypes are a lot of people's finished products, but still -

The weather's good, bright spring sky and only the slightest bit of wind, and Sam's dive off the landing platform is accompanied by a delighted whoop that only gets repeated louder when the wings extend and the dive arcs up towards sunward.

Steve catches himself thinking that it's been too long since he saw someone genuinely happy, and then he cuts that train off as maudlin and self-pitying, and goes back to pretty near laughing as Sam acts like a kid with a great new toy.

And just plain being impressed. He really hadn't got to see Sam do more than pretty functional flying, back in DC. He'd been a bit busy himself when the amazing aerobatics had been going on; it's nice to see that they really are as impressive as he'd been imagining - somehow even more than anything Tony does, or Rhodes could do, come to think of it - in the suit. Maybe it's because Sam's wings are just that, and wings in the air fit better into the mind, mean more. Whatever it is, it's incredible to watch.

Nothing falls off and nothing breaks, and about three quarters of an hour later Sam lands wearing a grin that's doing its best to make the top of his head fall off. Tony'd said the prototype suit had power for about sixty minutes, so forty-five's a good safe bet.

Tony helps Sam back off with the suit and Steve and Rhodes follow them in as Tony listens to Sam's comments on the flight, brow furrowed and hand-held whatever-it-is (Steve's honestly not sure what half the little devices Tony's designed for himself are supposed to be) in his left hand while his right holds a stylus and taps it at various points. Maybe he's making notes, maybe he's playing a game - Steve couldn't actually tell if his life depended on it.
Steve pours himself some coffee from the bar counter. Rhodes, he notices, comes in and stands a little way back from Tony, arms folded across his chest but one hand up to rest his chin on his thumb. He's frown isn't really slight by now, and gets deeper as Tony says, "Right, great. You are awesome, Wilson, you are officially my favourite test pilot, you actually have enough brains to be useful. I'll get to work on this," he adds, picking up the wings and slinging one strap over his shoulder, "and - "

"Hold up," Rhodes says. His voice isn't loud, but it is definite and it makes Tony stop and frown at him. "You're not getting started on this right now, are you," Rhodes says. It barely even pretends to be a question, barely pretends not to be him outright saying, Tony, you're not getting started on this right now. Steve feels his eyebrows go up and glances at Sam, who's taken a casual step back.

Tony gives Rhodes one of his you have got to be kidding me scowls, the ones that mock and show his irritation at the same time. "Obviously I am," he says. "I don't have anything else to do."

Rhodes sighs, and the hand at his chin falls away. His jaw sets - not angry, but like he's about to do something unpleasant that still has to be done. "Tony, I need to talk to you for a minute," he says - and his voice matches his expression.

Sam takes another casual step back. He's good at it, Steve notes. He doubts either Rhodes or Tony noticed.

"I am right here - " Tony starts; Rhodes interrupts.

"In the other room," he says, and then says, "Tony," in a harder tone when it looks like Tony's going to either argue or blow him off. It gets Rhodes a spread arms exasperated eye-rolling look that screams what is your problem? but . . . it also gets Tony following Rhodes into the next room, where Rhodes can close the door. That, Steve thinks, is impressive. He doesn't think he's seen anyone successfully interrupt Tony before.

Sam's still looking at the door, his eyebrows up making friends with his hair, but after a second he glances at Steve, frowns and says, "What?"

The question almost startles Steve out of his thoughts, and he blinks and shakes his head. "Nothing," he says, "I'm just . . . pretty sure I have worn that exact expression. This week. Possibly last night."

Sam's eyebrows go up again. "Huh," he says, but doesn't comment further.

Unfortunately, while the door is closed, Steve can still hear Rhodes and Tony, and he can't think of a way of politely texting Rhodes to tell him, by the way I'm accidentally eavesdropping - yeah I know the soundproofing's supposed to be good, but . . .

Actually, come to that, Steve doesn't know Rhodes' number. So there's nothing much for him to do but sit at one of the stools with his coffee and try not to look too awkward. After a minute, Sam joins him, pours himself a drink.

"Are you trying to be my mom again?"

"That's not an answer, Tony, I asked when was the last time you slept. Now I actually know, but I don't think you know, because I think you're already out of your mind and frankly in about ten hours I think you're gonna start seeing things."

"You are completely over - "
"You know Pepper asked me to come here? Because she's worried about you?"

"That was incredibly manipulative. I can't believe you just did that."

"Believe it. Because I'm worried about you too. The last time you were acting like this you were dying."

"I am not dying."

"- and lying about it."

"What? I never lied! I never did - I, not even by omission, because someone'd've had to ask."

"I did. We had a whole talk about what the fuck you thought you were doing, and you told me you were fine and you had everything under control and you knew what you were doing."

"Which I did."

"You knew you were running yourself into the ground in preparation for dying on us, Tony, now forgive me if that means I'm a little sceptical now every time you're acting like this and then try to tell me you're 'fine'."

"This is nothing like that. Right now is nothing like that."

"You're right, it's not. Because you're going to give me that fucking machine and you're going to go get some sleep and then we can talk about this."

"Jesus Christ, Rhodey."

"I will call Pepper. I will. I will call her and I will tell her she needs to come home and then you can argue about this with her. Not a long flight."

"Once again incredibly fucking manipulative."

"I am fucking serious, Tony. Give me the wing-suit and go the fuck to bed. Get some sleep."

"I can't."

"What?"

"I. CAN'T."

Tony's voice gets loud enough even Sam hears it, and eyes the door warily. He asks Steve, "You hear what's going on in there?"

Steve grimaces. "Hear, yeah," he says. "Understand, not really, except that apparently Stark's been up too long and I've definitely worn Rhodes expression when he went in there before."

About food, not sleep, admittedly. He's still given up on sleep. And Bucky doesn't tend to yell back when it comes down to Steve saying anything, he just tends to seethe in silence. But still -

"I mean I can't, I mean what I fucking said, I mean when I try I end up seeing . . . things I don't want to see. I can't sleep. I don't fucking need to sleep. I'm fine. Pepper's home tomorrow, I'll be fine."

"You'll be taking some fucking Ambien and lying down is what you'll be."
"Fuck you - no! No I will not."

"Why not?"

"Did you really just ask me that kind of stupid question Rhodey? For fuck's sake - "

"I am right here. You want I'll go get my sidearm out of my bag."

Steve and Sam both jump as the elevator behind them slides open and Elizabeth Ross's voice says, "Hey, I heard Steve was here and - "

They turn; she looks up from her handful of papers and blinks behind her glasses. "Hi," she says to Steve with a smile, a more composed one for Sam and then she frowns. "Where's Tony?"

"Um," Steve says, clearing his throat and folding his arms.

"I think he and Col Rhodes are having a . . . discussion," Sam picks up for him, "over in the other room."

Steve's not sure what he expected - concern, maybe, maybe embarrassment on Elizabeth's part too, for walking into this. But she just closes her eyes in what looks like relief.

"Oh thank God," she says, "he was really starting to worry me."

There'd been a long pause while she came in, with the kind of timing life throws out sometimes, but then Steve hears -

"You saying you don't trust me?"

"What? Fuck you - no, fuck you, I have never not trusted you, I even tried to fucking tell you about the suit to start with and you blew me off - "

"Yeah and I'm not making the same mistake. Question stands, Tony, because that's what you're telling me otherwise."

There's another long silence, and Steve has seldom felt more awkward in his life. Not that he's never listened to other people's fights before, but then there'd always been the at least tacit understanding that by having the fight, you were at risk for other people overhearing. This time, neither of them know and there's no way for him to tell them, so he's . . . uncomfortable.

Elizabeth gives him a quizzical look and he sighs.

"I've got pretty sharp hearing," he says, quietly and she makes a silent O with her mouth and then grimaces slightly, but waves a hand.

"Don't worry about it," she says. "I'll mention something about that when I get a chance, then Tony will know, and we'll all pretend this bit didn't happen."

"Sometimes I fucking hate you."

"Take your fucking sleeping pills and lie down and you can hate me all you want."

And then, thankfully, there's either another door or they move far enough away that their voices go too muffled for Steve to make out words.

"Think Rhodes won," he says, shortly.
"Thank God," Elizabeth says again, and she fishes out her phone and starts texting someone.

The sound of a door-handle clicking and turning makes them all look back and Rhodes comes out wearing another look Steve's pretty sure he's worn and recently. He sees Elizabeth and sighs, like he's preempting a speech he was going to make and says instead, "Look, Betty, if you need Tony you're gonna have to - 

"Nope," Elizabeth says brightly, putting her phone back in her lab-coat pocket, "I was here to find Steve and steal him for a bit, so perfect timing. And Mr Wilson if he wants. I can catch up with Tony tomorrow."

Rhodes gives her a thin smile and nods to Sam. "Sorry - " he starts, but Sam holds up his hands.

"Completely fine," he says, "I'm on vacation, and you can't fail vacation."

When the elevator doors are closed, Steve turns to Elizabeth and says, "Should I ask - ?" He lets it trail out.

She blows out air through her lips and says, "Um. You know who Obadiah Stane is? I can never remember how much of their version of the story that Tony sank when he told the world he was Iron Man SHIELD tried to keep going."

Steve frowns. "I know he was Howard's partner - " and stops at Elizabeth's expression.

"Whoo," she says. She rubs her temple, glances at Sam thoughtfully and then seems to come to a decision about something. "Okay," she says. "Short version: Stane paid the Ten Rings to kill Tony. They kidnapped him instead. Stane made his own version of the suit based on the wreckage of the first one in the desert, his engineers couldn't replicate the miniaturized arc reactor, he decided to just steal Tony's and did, literally right out of his chest. Fortunately Pepper saved the old one, after a bunch of mess Stane got killed in power overload, happy ending."

"That's a really horrible short version," Sam offers and Elizabeth not-smiles and gives a slight nod.

"So Tony's been having JARVIS mine and sort through the SHIELD and HYDRA files when he's got nothing else to do," she continues, as the elevator slows, "looking for stuff that might be interesting or useful. It's volume-heavy, JARVIS is basically just sifting, not keyword searching, but - " she stops and takes a deep breath and says, "apparently he found a file that more or less implies that Stane's secret salute would have been 'heil HYDRA'. And by implies," she adds as the elevator doors open, "I mostly mean 'proves.'"

Steve winces. Sam gives a low whistle. "Yeah," Elizabeth says. "Right about the time Pepper left for DC again. I guess he was handling finding out HYDRA murdered his parents okay, and he'd sort of had the Stane stuff from before handled, but then adding them both together made something exciting and new and he's having some difficulties." She sighs, stepping out of the elevator that's politely stayed right where it was and hasn't even tried to close the doors on them. "When Tony has difficulties he stops sleeping, lives on caffeine pills, and gets a bit erratic. Pepper called Rhodes yesterday."

She smiles a little bit grimly at Sam as he and Steve follow her. "Obviously I trust your discretion," she says, "I'm mostly telling you so that in case Tony's not fit for human society tomorrow, you're not wondering what happened."

"I appreciate that," Sam says, sincerely. "It helps me know how to take . . .well, anything and
everything."

Steve glances back towards the elevator in as a substitute for glancing up (symbolically) towards Tony, and gives up sorting through what Elizabeth just said or what he uncomfortably overheard - or how familiar it all seemed. He'll think about it later, when he has time and space.

"You wanted to talk to me?" he says to Elizabeth instead. She takes a breath and straightens up, obviously putting Tony aside.

"Yes," she said. Her nose wrinkles slightly. "Tony's not the only one trawling HYDRA files, but my searches are a little more directed. Let's talk in my office."

When they step inside the door, Sam looks around and says, "Nice," with every apparent sign of sincere appreciation. Steve gives him a sideways look and Elizabeth grins.

"I never had the opportunity to completely oversee my workspace before," she says. "I kind of went overboard."

"I don't blame you at all," Sam says, and then glances at Steve and grins. Steve looks briefly heavenward.

"Yes," he says, "I am completely stuck in the past and like desks made of wood and keyboards I can actually feel. It's a character flaw."

"It's okay," Sam says, ostentatiously patting his shoulder. "You've got redeeming features."

Elizabeth snorts and taps her desk surface a few times. "Right," she says and looks up, then frowns briefly and gestures to Sam with her stylus. "Sorry to be impolitely blunt," she says, "but I want to check that you're okay with him hearing about ...things to do with James?" She circles the stylus in the air as if to indicate how generally she was speaking, just how much things was supposed to cover.

"It's fine," Steve says, "and thank you for checking - honestly we're mostly just skipping a step, because I'd have to tell him whatever you're about to tell me to get advice anyway, so - " he gives her a shrug, one palm up.

"Maybe," Sam says, with mock thoughtfulness. "Maybe not. You're not totally hopeless on your own."

"Only partially hopeless?" Steve retorts and Sam makes a show of considering.

"Call it sixty percent?" he says and then grins when Steve rolls his eyes.

Elizabeth smiles briefly and then pins something with her stylus and drags it up to the wall. It's a diagram with cutaways, and it's of something very familiar.

"That," Sam says what Steve's thinking, "is absolutely his - "

"Probably," Elizabeth says. "My current project with Stark Enterprises is development in next generation prosthesis; my background with the human enhancement field - super-soldier research," she translates for Sam, who might not need it, "even if nobody told me that's exactly what I was doing at the time - anyway, my background is extremely useful, and I've picked up a few things since then."
Which is a pretty self-effacing way to say she's picked up two new PhDs in completely different fields, and Steve considers pulling out his phone to text that to Sam, but decides to just tell him later.

"There are a few problems we're focused on overcoming," she goes on, sitting back. "Some are engineering - weight, articulation, durability. Some are more biological. A lot," she corrects herself with a sigh, "are more biological. Currently there's a lot of excitement about managing a nerve connection that lets someone pick up a ball, with a lot of care and designs completely impracticable for mass production - we want to go a long way beyond that. After DC," she goes on, "for reasons that should probably be obvious, I started mining HYDRA's files. Which is harder than it sounds, because they liked to do things like hiding their data in photo-files and other exciting tricks.

"As I'm sure you noticed," she adds, "even in the database files there's more or less no mention of the Winter Soldier, or anyone or anything associated with that project - this, and some other technical stuff that wouldn't mean anything to you," and she points at the diagram, "was tucked away in a file discussing neural connections in general, which was tucked away inside a report about Iceland. What logic lies behind that storage we may never know."

"Nice find for you, though," Sam says, while Steve frowns at the diagram.

"Yes and no," Elizabeth says. "Once again the fundamental problem with HYDRA shows up, which is they mostly didn't give two shits about, well, a lot of stuff I give a lot of shits about." Her smile is slightly bleak this time. "They used humans like lab-rats and a lot of what they developed is only useful if you don't care about the side-effects. Which brings us to what I wanted to talk to you about," she concludes, indicating Steve with the stylus this time.

"Side effects," Steve says, focusing in on her; she gives him a thin-lipped not-a-smile.

"To start with, the arm they gave him is heavy," she says. "Its design as a weapon is very clear, they were working with significantly lower surrounding technology than we have right now and I'm still pretty sure they've replaced or reinforced significant parts of the left shoulder with the same metal as the arm - but human musculature?" She presses her lips together briefly, mouth making a flat line. "Not made to carry that kind of weight to start with and definitely not meant to carry it asymmetrically. So to start with, and to put it bluntly, I'm pretty sure if a physiotherapist had a look at him, they'd cry."

"That's not the big thing," Steve says, with absolute certainty and Elizabeth purses her lips.

"No," she admits. "The big thing is neural feedback at that shoulder. I said there were problems on the biological end - I'll skip most of the lecture. The short version is most of the problem is neural feedback. It's one thing to make the hand pick up the ball," she elaborates, "but it's something else for the person controlling the hand to feel it. We're actually finding solutions for it, of which I am very proud, for both myself and my team, but we're the first and we couldn't be doing it without the work Tony's been doing with subcutaneous controls for the suits, the work I did with Bruce before, or what we've managed to amass from his changes since."

Sam frowns. "There's no way you could use any kind of limb the way he does without some kind of feedback," he says, and Elizabeth gives him the thin-lipped smile this time.

"Mm," she agrees. "And actually we can do it, too - pressure, temperature, texture. It just as yet comes with the unfortunate side-effect of what I'd describe as a kind of neural static - you know the feeling you get when your leg or your arm's asleep that comes just before the actual pins and needles? More or less like that. Just constant."
"And you're saying that," Steve starts slowly, sitting up straighter, but Elizabeth points the stylus at the diagram again and nods.

"This design absolutely has that flaw," she says. "And nothing in the rest of the data gives me any indication they overcame the problem. They just... didn't care."

She lays her hands on her desk. "When I mentioned my work to you before, Steve, it really was an afterthought - I figured maybe we could design something less obtrusive or with finer control. Now I think James' arm is probably causing him more or less chronic pain. Which can't be helping his mental state."

It can't. It isn't, if that's true. Steve knows it, knows pretty much exactly what chronic pain does to everything from sleep to temper, and how you can even forget you're in pain for a while because you're so used to it, but that that doesn't stop it from messing up your head.

Steve frowns at the diagram for a long time, trying to think of a way around the central, immovable problem and not coming up with one. He shakes his head.

"I am absolutely certain," he says, "that if anyone even tried to examine him - arm, anything - he'd kill them. Or at least hurt them very badly. I don't even think it would be a choice. Or he'd even know what was happening until it was over. Honestly," Steve says, "from the way he reacts I'm... not even sure I could bring it up without hurting him."

Elizabeth nods. "You know," she says simply, "I don't. But I thought you should know about this. If nothing else, maybe you can find some other way of alleviating the probable pain. I think it would do a lot for his stability."

"Thank you," Steve says, hating that there's not much he can do, and not even anyone he can hold responsible. "Let me know if you come up with anything else?"

"Always," Elizabeth says.

Steve leaves Sam at the Tower and heads home in a worse mood than he left.

When he talks Bucky into eating later in the evening, for a minute Steve lets one of his hands get closer to Bucky's left arm than he usually does, and watches the way Bucky moves away. It might be unconscious, but it's fast and it's defensive.

He files the new problem away to solve later, when maybe he can.

*****

The problem is that the world, that everything, that his mind is too fucking fragile and he loses all of it into shards at the smallest shock.

Over and over.

Eventually, Rogers always looks for him. Besides nausea, it might be the single constant he’s managed to find.

It’s... annoying? Maybe it’s annoying. It’s... predictable. A constant. It happens every time.
Circumstances notwithstanding. He watched Rogers do it for months before he came here, through cities and countries, Rogers the much, much easier to find, out of the two of them, Rogers standing out like a fucking beacon that only lit itself. Looking for Rogers was like looking for a lit match in a dark room. Rogers looking for *him*, not so much. That he knows. Impossible, really. Improbability doesn’t seem to bother the man.

It’s annoying, but it’s a constant and he’s not sure he’d get rid of it if he could. He watched it for months before he came and it's been true for the months here: eventually, if Rogers can’t see him from wherever he is, Rogers will look for him.

He hates how easily the world tilts off-centre. How easy it is to get lost. Wrong word wrong smell wrong *thought* and the world is gone and he's suffocating under everything again. This time, two steps took him to the door; then he turned away from it, put his back to the wall and slid down to sit and that’s where he stays, still is.

He feels sick.

That’s not new. Every symptom can be physiological or somatic, his reading has informed him; this variation on wanting to be sick probably counts as hunger, but he finds it difficult to *care* enough to trade one variation for the next and this one doesn’t actually involve vomiting at the end of it. So he sits where he is, the back of his head resting against the wall (because if he lets it hang forward something white and hot stabs from the base of his skull to the first visible vertebra of his spine), right leg bent and right arm resting on it, left leg half-straightened and left arm not, because the metal digs into his knee.

And he keeps track of time, to see how long it takes for Rogers to look for him this time. It's a thought he can hold onto.

Thirty-three minutes and twenty six-seconds later he hears the sound of a body that was sitting at the kitchen table standing up and walking down the hall; tracks the path that body takes through the hall, how close to each wall it walks left or right, the average length of pace. He doesn’t need to look to see when it reaches the open door and stops, leaning one hand each side of the door-jamb. Thirty-three minutes and twenty-six seconds is longer than some times, shorter than others; *that* isn’t constant, and he hasn’t figured out a pattern yet that he remembers right now.

(There is, at the edge of his awareness, maybe the shape of the idea that he should be using the words *bad day* and that there’s another kind. When his mind isn't drowning him in shit and rotting flesh. When he can think.)

Some symptoms are physiological and have their roots in actual malfunctions of the body. Some symptoms are psychosomatic and have their roots in neural misfire and misinterpretation.

Take a guess and pick one.

Rogers says, “You okay?” in a quiet voice. It’s a question. If question, then answer. If A, then B. That last thought feels alone and off-centre. Like it's coming from too far away.

“No,” he says, which is true. It is also honest, which is something else. Not as easy.

Rogers asks, “Anything I can do?”

And he takes a few seconds to answer this one, and his second “No” is more true than honest. He’s sick, and hungry, and now that he thinks he can’t remember the last sleep, although those are always hard to remember. There are probably responses to those parameters. He just doesn’t . . .
want to think about them.

Or do them.

Or say them.

And if he doesn’t, then there isn’t anything Rogers can do.

The next question is usually do you want me to go or do you want me to stay - the answer to both of which is No because there’s a central part of them that doesn’t apply - but Rogers doesn’t ask either. Just sits down in the doorway and doesn’t say anything else. There’s the faintest sound of paper being moved, cloth on cloth and against wood painted and not, the scrape of something pressed softly to paper and moved: Rogers is drawing again.

Now the silence is loud where it used to be unnoticed; little sounds in it, like the sounds of breathing, of sketching, of movement (cloth-skin-paint-wood-cloth-metal-cloth again), of everything else, are intrusive and irritating. After a moment he breaks it, because it’s starting to dig into his skull. So he says, “What do you expect?”

It’s the first thing on his mind, even if he didn’t know it a second ago. It has to be, because the words come to his mouth without needing to pause and drag them out of thoughts, turn the languages around to find the right one. He turns his head to actually look at Rogers’ face, with its blue eyes and something in them that’s like a kind of fear but isn’t fear. “What are you looking for?”

Rogers looks down for a heartbeat, a flick of the eyes; a hand rolls the pencil flat on its side along the paper. The sound feels loud and goes on for ages before Rogers looks back and says, “I don’t know.”

It’s not the answer he expects. He doesn’t know what he expects. Rogers says, ”Maybe nothing - I mean, there’s things I hope. But hoping’s not the same as expecting. And maybe what I expect isn’t important.” A pause. “Probably isn’t important, actually.”

And that . . . makes no sense, but he doesn’t know why he’s surprised, why he expected otherwise, because nothing this man has done has made sense. Not that he can actually remember. If Rogers made sense, if Rogers even knew how, maybe, then they’d both be dead. Which might be easier, and would be easier to understand.

He closes his eyes and rests right-hand finger and thumb on his eyelids, trying to find the base of everything again. The things that made sense.

“When w - when I was a kid,” Rogers says then, offers, “someone used to tell me that when God made me he left out the bit that tells me when I’m beat.”

Someone.

The word twists around his head and rewrites itself. Rogers names people. Rogers always names people, learns names and uses them, titles of respect and address and attaches their words to them. If Rogers says someone, it’s out of fear that the name will . . . upset something, maybe upset him, which means that someone can only be one person.

He realizes the wall is cool, even cold against the skin of his back and that the jeans he managed to find are digging into his hip. He drops his hand and opens his eyes and turns his head again and echoes, “‘Someone’, ” looking at Rogers until Rogers looks away again. And he says, “Me,” and half of him thinks him, the person that used to own this body and that Rogers insists he is, or can
be, or will be, or all of the above. And half of him thinks me, and wonders if he’ll remember, if there’s anything there to remember or if Rogers is just so good at wishing, it takes the whole world along.

Rogers looks down at the sketch and says, “Yeah.”

Now he can hear the noise of the clock in the living room because neither of them is even moving much and even those sounds are gone, so there’s just the tick of the clock that claims not to tick. And he says, “If there is a God,” slowly, finding each word in front of the other, “then I was right.” And then he adds, ”And if there isn’t, I was half-right.”

Rogers looks at him sharply, but he looks away to stare at the opposite wall and actually see it now, and the dent he must have left sometime recent, because he doesn’t think there’s anything he wants Rogers to see in his face and almost regrets saying anything at all. The supposedly silent clock is still ticking. His right leg is falling asleep. And Rogers is still sitting there.

“Yeah, well.” Rogers taps the pencil against the pad, holding it again, moving it through the fingers of both hands like there’s some comfort in it. “Start running, you never stop.”

The wall is cold and his leg is falling asleep and that is probably the stupidest thing he remembers hearing anyone say; after a minute he looks at Rogers one more time and asks, “How did you live long enough to be an experiment?”

Rogers’ mouth quirks and then falls back. “You. Mostly.” The pencil drops to the floor, clatters, and Rogers picks it up. “And I’m stubborn.”

“Me, and stubborn.” He should probably eat. He thinks that. He should probably eat. Maybe try chasing unconsciousness again. “That’s a fucking terrible arsenal.”

Rogers shrugs. “Got me this far.”

“And this is anywhere you want to be?” That comes out fast, like it’s been waiting, and then he’s dizzy afterwards; he pinches the bridge of his nose and adds, “If you say yes, you’re an idiot.”

“Yeah?” When the dizziness passes Rogers is standing in front of him, extending a hand. “Someone used to call me that a lot, too. Come on, Bucky, get up and put a shirt on, you’re freezing.”

Still dizzy, he reaches out his left hand to take Rogers' and pushes off the ground with his right. It probably won't feel worse.

Besides, he is cold.

A shirt helps with the cold; the coffee Rogers makes helps with the distance in his head, once he can make himself take the cup and drink any of it, and even though it's still not right.

He ends up sitting on the floor of the dining-room, back against the wall. He remembers, looking at the half-empty cup, that the word he's looking for is dissociation, the word for what this is, the distance, the unreal, the way he can't think. And he is hungry, and that vertigo doesn't help.

When he gets up to fill up the mug in his hands, he adds more sugar than he normally would. It takes down the dizziness for a little while.
Rogers turns on the radio and then sits at the dining-room table, sketching again. It's hard to parse the program's words and turn them into meaning, but the woman's voice doesn't grate and the patterns of her speech don't set off the wrong chords in his head. He can't sleep, but he closes his eyes and rests his head against the wall anyway.

Better than nothing, for now.
Chapter 5

Their building is a mix of two and three-bedroom, one to one-and-a-half bathroom condos, with a mix of owners and renters, and it allows pets for both owners and renters. That makes the turnover pretty low - low enough that Steve got his place because someone was leaving to marry a fiancé who already had four kids and a house, and Steve doesn't actually want to think about how much Tony had to have offered the three potential neighbours to convince them to leave.

Steve knows a few of the remaining neighbours by now: there's a vet student who lives on the first floor with her nervous rescue greyhounds and a gigantic long-haired cat, a middle-aged ballet teacher who, if given half an opportunity, will trap you into having tea, eating cookies and possibly promising to help her set up a stage for the ballet studio's summer in-the-park performance, a couple of young couples - two expecting babies - and some small families with pre-teen daughters who all seem to live in each other's back pockets, go to the same school, and spend all their time in deep emotional turmoil about fictional teenage or pseudo-teenage (some of them being vampires, but otherwise indistinguishable from the rest) boys.

Sometimes Steve wonders how much continuity there is with this stuff; by the time the period of deep emotional turmoil over boys happened back when he and Bucky were kids, the world had already been split into girls, boys and special cases, often by people's mothers and grandmothers, and boys were firmly excluded from the secret lives of girls. Sometimes with brooms. He didn't remember so many of the boys causing the turmoil coming from books or movies back then, but maybe he just hadn't heard about it.

Either way, he doesn't actually mind the times that open windows mean he can hear the slamming of doors and high-pitched eruptions of "DID YOU JUST SEE WHAT SO-AND-SO DID ON SUCH-AND-SUCH SHOW?" usually followed by a lengthy discussion of motive, psychology and consequences. Honestly, some of it's really impressive for kids thirteen and younger, and what isn't is declared with so much confidence it's adorable instead of ridiculous.

Other than the ballet teacher, everyone is friendly but avoids being intrusive, and Steve's been more than a little preoccupied, so when there's a rare knock at the door and he opens it to find a dark-haired girl in jeans and a t-shirt that, to Steve, is just ever so slightly old for a girl her age (even if he couldn't tell you exactly why), he can't remember her name right away.

Fortunately, she doesn't hesitate to share.

"Hi!" she announces, and her voice identifies her as one of the girls he hears so often. "My name's Mercedes and I'm selling chocolates to raise money for my History Club's trip to Washington DC. I can tell you all about the stuff that you'll be helping to support us doing, which is totally all about improving our minds and is very educational," she adds, "but mostly they're good chocolates and we really want to go, and you probably don't want to stand here that long? So I have chocolate covered almonds, and raisins, and peanuts."

Steve remembers her now as the kid who lives a floor or two down, with a single mother and a brother who's sick a lot, and no one could ever say he doesn't have some easy and predictable buttons. Or that he doesn't still prefer to carry cash.

He means to buy three boxes, ends up buying nine (three of each) after Mercedes fills up the time it takes her to open the carry-box and dig out the cash envelope explaining why these chocolates are that great, being fair trade and organic and something else as well, and Mercedes leaves with the beaming smile of someone who's that much closer to the end of a job she doesn't really want to do.
Steve shakes his head and goes to finish making supper.

A day or so later, all but the raisins are gone, and Steve knows he didn't eat them. Bemused, he texts Sam and gets back a reply of, well, I guess chocolate's calories and nuts are protein, so go buy some more? I mean what have you got to lose - o no I have too much chocolate in the house whatever will I do. all else fails drop'em in one of the public spaces at Stark's they'll be gone in minutes.

Which, Steve supposes, is a point. It just means he has to think for a while to remember exactly which number Mercedes lives at.

Her little brother answers the door, a skinny six or seven year old wearing dark blue sweats, a Monsters Inc t-shirt and the round-eyed stare that generally lets Steve know he's been recognized. The boy is also rapidly followed by his mother, who's saying, "I know I told you don't answer the door by yourself - " and scowls at him, putting a hand on his shoulder and pulling him back before looking up and smiling at Steve, clearly trying to take the sting out of implying he might be a child-abducting threat.

"Sorry," she says, "I just worry."

"Not a problem," Steve says, because he understands completely; he hesitates and goes on, "ah - your daughter, Mercedes, was going from door to door with fundraising chocolates the other day? I . . . was just wondering if she had any more." He doesn't want to take up more of the lady's time than he has to - as far as Steve can tell it looks like he caught her in the middle of cooking.

"I actually have no idea," her mom says, and leans back to call, "Mercedes?" down the hall. When she gets no response, she sighs. "Go get your sister," she says to her son, "and remind her she's supposed to be able to hear me over the music on her headphones." To Steve she adds, "She's going to be deaf by thirty."

"I could hear you!" Mercedes says, coming protesting down the hallway, her brother right at her heels, "I was just almost finished on a level I been stuck on for days and you told me not to yell back - Hi!"

She's got a good turn of speed on her saleswoman face, Steve'll admit that.

"Our neighbour would like to know if you have any more of your fundraising chocolates," her mom tells her, and Mercedes bites her lip.

"Specifically almonds and peanuts," Steve adds, "but if they come in set packs that's fine."

"I got about seven left buuuut," Mercedes says, looking suddenly hopeful, "I can get more from Mr Li on Monday if you want? They're boxes of twenty-four of each kind actually, Mr Li just sends us home with them mixed so they're all spread around - ?"

"You can ask him for for one each of the nuts for me," Steve says, and immediately wondered if there's some kind of prize for who sells the most, because he's clearly made Mercedes' day. "And I'll take what you have now."

As Mercedes bounces off down the hall to her room, her mother smiles. "She's very excited about this trip," she says, "I think she's bothered everybody in this building and started on the one over where her friend could let her in. You might get a Christmas card."
"I think I'll survive," Steve says, smiling, as Mercedes bounces back with the chocolates and her little envelope of cash and change.

"Mercedes says you have a new roommate?" Mercedes' mom adds, by way of making friendly conversation as Mercedes tries to count out change without spilling everything all over the floor while her brother tries to pull her arm down to see how much she's made already. "Is he staying long?"

"Ah," Steve says, taken aback and also wondering exactly how she knew, seeing as he doesn't think Bucky's come in through the front door more than once. "Yeah, actually," and then he adds, "hopefully," and casually touches the wood of the frame, because right now he'll invest in superstition.

"That's good," she says, smiling at him. "I don't think anyone should live alone. Anyway, I'll get Mercedes to come along when she gets the boxes. If they call you and tell you that Washington burned down," she adds mock-darkly, "you'll know who to blame."

Steve does just about choke, but fortunately she's already closed the door.

Out of curiosity, Steve does some number-crunching on calories versus food value for the two chocolate covered nut types and it turns out that to be honest, for someone who needs as high a caloric intake as they do, these aren't a bad idea. He makes a mental note to keep his eye out for other kids selling this kind of thing more often; school-age kids are always fundraising for something.

On Monday afternoon Mercedes arrives cheerfully with the promised boxes, and seems slightly bemused that Steve gives her cash instead of a cheque.

It's not the last time before the kid's Washington trip Steve goes to find her. He doesn't mind.

*****

The more memory comes, the less he trusts it.

The walls of his room - the room where he sleeps - are covered in notes, the oldest on the backs of receipts and used envelopes, until Rogers noticed and started buying notebooks. They're in Russian; English mostly comes easiest to speak by now, but Russian is still easiest to write and it gives the illusion of privacy. Not that it matters. Images, feelings, events, the fucking pocket-knife, all pinned to the wall. Some of them in his best guess at order. Most of them not.

Memory is a liar. Or always might be - the worst kind of liar, the one who tells the truth half, or even most of the time. So you can't disbelieve everything. So you have to find some way to check.

Sometimes he can. What little is in order matches what he finds in books, records, documentaries, the internet. Morita and Dugan helped with their own biographies; they and the rest gave at least some answers to historians and researchers and people who wanted to make money off their story.

But all the books and biographies are only one step away from silent on either him or Rogers, beyond what official record and reports from when they were alive would say. The protection of the supposedly-dead might even be praiseworthy, loyal, except that now it leaves him with the same problem for most of the emerging fragments of war as he has with the peace before it: no way to test them without asking.
Without asking Rogers. And no way of testing whether or not Rogers lies. Or twists. Or -

And he can't.

Remembering isn't like drowning in mud anymore. Just walking through it. "Just". It shifts under him and throws him, sometimes into pits big enough to choke on again, sometimes just to crawl because he can't keep his feet.

And he wonders why the fuck he's doing this. He wonders why the fuck it matters, why it's important, crawling through the decayed remains of a man so long dead. Why the fuck he's here and what Rogers is fucking stupid enough to hope for. He doesn't have an answer. He doesn't know. But every time he's tried to walk away -

It doesn't work. He doesn't know why the fuck he's doing this, why it matters, but the further he gets from here the worse it - everything fractures, and he ends up back here as if something's dug into his brain, telling him that even if it isn't safe, everywhere else is worse.

He's not even sure why safe matters. Or what keeps him from driving steel through his temple and making everything, everything just shut up - so often all he wants, all he can ever think of wanting.

Some days the whys spill over and something breaks - glass, drywall, wood, pottery, anything. But not bodies. Not yet. Mostly Rogers is the only one here; Wilson's visits are brief and infrequent and if the suppressed wariness grates, Wilson is easy enough to avoid. The other people in the building are brief distractions, passing in and out of his attention only when he can't ignore them. The few people he's encountered when he leaves the building by any route but the roof, even more so.

It worries Rogers. Everything worries Rogers. He can read the worry written like a banner across Rogers' face and it twists something he still can't grasp or explain and he hates it. And the fragments twist around that something and he can't tell, can't tell what he actually remembers and what he's making up, or why he would make it up if he wanted to, but still.

But still.

Today the agitation is more than he can deal with: when Rogers gets tired of looking at a closed door and leaves, he shadows.

He's followed Rogers more than once. The destinations are repetitive: Stark Tower, an assisted residence, a cafe. Stark, Carter and a young woman of no significance (as far as he can see) who works behind the counter. Or a park to talk to Wilson where Rogers thinks he can't hear.

It scrapes sharp beyond reason across his nerves that Rogers hasn't caught him at this yet and the scraping makes him want to dig through his skull into his brain to make it stop. And he follows Rogers anyway. Wonders if Roger has any idea of the vulnerability, or how close death could get. It fucking near defies belief that the man is still alive.

(You, mostly. And I'm stubborn.)
Today it's Carter's assisted living.

The house is comfortable and shelters three like her, who know everything that happened to them as children and can't be relied on to remember ten minutes ago. And there's an irony he's aware of. Her place is paid for half by a pension that continues despite the bloody demise of SHIELD, and half by shared contributions from the third generation, the children of her children and her brother's children.

She rarely has a day without a visitor. Rogers is a frequent one, in an exercise of obvious masochism: if there were never another visit, she would never know, because to her Steve Rogers will always be dead. If she remembers between two visits, she's forgotten by the third. Eventually he will always slide back out of her mind.

Rogers still arrives at this house at least once a week.

Carter is a tangle of exasperation and suspicion in his head, one that he's always pushed away. He doesn't want it. The feelings don't come with memories, don't come with reasons and the mess of mixed remembered events is bad enough. Feelings without reason, the times his body reacts without thought are worse.

(But he still carries the pocket knife. He has it now. So many times he's nearly thrown it away, so many, but it stays.)

And today Carter must be lucid: Rogers stays more than two hours and leaves without looking miserable, heading in the direction of Stark Tower. And he almost follows.

Almost.

He stands across the street from the house for some time, maybe more than an hour. Nobody bothers noticing. Stand the right way, breathe right, and you're invisible: people can stare right at you and see nothing, and they do. Do everything right and you become an object they forget, not a person to catch their mind.

He's good at it.

When he goes in, he keeps both hands in the pockets of his sweatshirt, and lies to claim distant relation. The orderly acting as door-guard looks dubious and says well we'll have to see and disappears for a moment before coming back and leading him in.

She's old, of course. The picture on the computer-desk and the elusive shape of memory offers dark hair and red lips, bright eyes and smooth skin; the reality of now has the thin white hair and translucent, fragile skin of old age, without any habit of makeup. Today she's sitting up, watching TV; the orderly leaves him at the door with the retreat of the over-extended, and for a moment, he watches her.

Rogers loved her. Loves her. The first part is written through every history, every interview, every summary, but that doesn't matter; he knows anyway, past and present tense. The knowledge is sewn up with the exasperation, the suspicion, the mistrust and none of them have reasons, have events, have memories. Rogers loved her, which the whole world knew; Rogers loves her, and that's why he still comes, every week.

There are pictures on the table at bedside, other places in the room, of her younger self with children and adults: presumably she moved on and lived a life.
He almost leaves. And can't explain even to himself why he would have, any more than he can explain why he's here. But he's caught before he can walk away, because she looks up and his face isn't hidden, and it's only the present she forgets, not the past.

Damn her.

Her eyes and mouth become three circles for a moment; then she mouth's the surname Rogers so wants to be his, and he can only shrug.

She stares at him for more seconds than he bothers to count and then says, in a voice fuzzy with old age but diction still abrupt, British, educated, "Either you're somehow alive and young, or I've started hallucinating. Either way, you might as well come in."

He says, without thinking, "You invite your hallucinations into your room?" and wonders how, why, what called it. She shrugs. The motion looks stiff and painful. Her body's failing her, as well as her mind.

"Might as well," she says. And as he reluctantly steps into the room and crosses it to where she sits she watches him and says, "But you're not a hallucination, are you," without bothering to make it a question.

He answers anyway. "No," he says. She nods to the other chair with the stiffness of age; he hesitates, then sits.

"How?" she asks; he half-shrugs with his right-shoulder.

"HYDRA," he says, and doesn't want to say anymore, and she won't remember anyway. He has to look away from her face, staring at the cross-stitched cat over her shoulder instead, because the expression on it - pity, and other things - makes his left hand clench.

After a moment of silence, she says, "I'm so sorry," in a soft voice. After another silence he hears her sniff; he looks at her and away again, because he can't deal with her tears, either, even if they're only the faintest hint of water in her eyes. She sniffs again and says, in a tone he thinks is more familiar, "Bloody hell, being old is such a bugger. You turn back into a damn baby. Bloody embarrassing."

In his peripheral vision he can see her wiping her eyes with the back of her wrists. "Enough of that," she says. "To what do I owe the visit? To be honest," and now he looks back at her and there's a sardonic look to her eyes, "I never actually got the feeling you liked me all that much. I'm surprised you'd bother to hunt me down. I'm not even really worth assassinating anymore," she adds, thoughtfully. "Which you'd've thought would be a relief, but I sort of miss it. Told me I was doing a good job."

He says, "I don't know," and it's the answer to both. Maybe he didn't like her, maybe that's what the tangle means. She would remember better than he does.

A third silence stretches and then she sighs, and says, "Damn," and there are layers and layers to the curse, enough that he tilts his head to look at her and almost asked the question.

She took it from the movement, anyway. "I wish Steve were alive," she says, because she doesn't remember, even if today is a good day for her and her clouded brain. "Well, I'm sure you do, too," she adds quickly, looking down at her hands and their wrinkled skin and carefully cut nails, "but I suppose I mean I wish he knew. We were all afraid he was going to go after you, so to speak - well," she says again, a bit distantly, "I suppose he did, didn't he? Except apparently you weren't
there."

He doesn't answer. He doesn't have an answer. Just a hole opening behind his sternum, something stopping short of ache or going past it into something else. She shakes her head and says, "I'm sorry, that isn't fair, it's just - well, he crashed the Valkyrie and you know, he said to me what I tried to say to him after the train - I told him that if he respected you, he should respect that you chose to be there, to do what you did. So when he was crashing he said, Peggy, this is my choice." She sighs. "I keep wondering if I'll forget that, eventually, or if I'll finish dying first. I haven't yet."

She looks down at her hands, at the wrinkles of age but joints that look like they all still move easily. "I've always felt he would have fought harder to stay alive, if you'd been alive. I was actually very angry at you about that, for a long time, while I was grieving. I remember - " and her eyes stare into somewhere not here, "I remember I found him crying, you know. And I told him - " and she frowns, looking down now towards the carpet, as if trying to think of something. "I told him that if he respected you he should understand it was your choice . . . " She shakes her head, suddenly. "I'm sorry, dear," she says, her tone of voice changing, softening, and he thinks she's drifted, that she must think he's one of her grandchildren or her great-nephews. "I seem to have lost my train of thought, but just hang on a moment, I'll sort it out again . . . "

In the end, he leaves her there, still frowning at the carpet; he suspects when she looks up the past few minutes will be gone, and once was enough.

He goes up as soon as he can, to roof-tops where he's that much less likely to meet anyone, at all: all he ever sees up here are kids practicing parkour and they're easy enough to avoid, distances that would kill them easy for him.

When he gets to Rogers' building, he doesn't go down, doesn't go in. He sits on the roof against the air exhaust, knees drawn up and elbows resting on them, head in his hands, and tries to get control of breathing.

His head is full of an English pub and a black pit in his mind he's pretending isn't there, of the taste of scotch and laughter that can be a little bitter because St - because Rogers doesn't really understand bitterness, never has, and is so elated on success that you'd have to use a bullet to break through, or a tire-iron.

And he's . . . happy. There's an abyss in his head and on its edge he's happy and here and now that makes it hard to breathe and in his head Rogers -

It's hard to breathe and Steve Rogers looks so young and so proud and so hopeful, like someone that God's given every grace and in memory he's not going to touch that and in memory he won't let anyone else touch it either and -

After the Potomac he found somewhere to brace and put his shoulder where it belongs. Pain is only a context, but he remembers it anyway and feels -

Dislocation is easy to fix. There's a place to go back and the body wants it. The only difficulty is the pain. There are . . . few, very few pains he cares about. And right now thought grinds against something like bone against cavity, and he is afraid of this. Terrified of this.

There is a knife along his spine. There is a gun against his ankle. And right now he is less afraid of them and the darkness after than he is of anything else.

It just doesn't matter.
If you'd told him a year ago that showing up at Tony Stark's workshop on a regular basis would become part of his routine, and Tony Stark would turn out to be one of the most useful people he knew for other reasons than throwing money or engineering genius at problems, Steve would have assumed you were joking, or maybe from a different reality. And it is true that Stark still drives him crazy on a regular basis and that maybe one out of every four of his visits end with the two of them subtly or not so subtly implying that the other is a complete idiot and more than once they've had an outright shouting match.

But that doesn't seem to be the point. The point - well, the first point is that Tony's one of the most weirdly non-judgemental people Steve's ever known.

Oh, he'll make fun of you all right, but he makes fun of everyone and everything, including himself and anything else that comes to hand. But that's a surface-skin, and underneath it he seems to run very firmly on the basis of whatever gets you through a day. As long as it's not hurting people, who cares?

And just because he doesn't look like he's taking something seriously doesn't mean you can assume he really isn't, and he doesn't seem to give a damn what other people do and don't take seriously for their own part.

He also seems to understand, at bedrock level, that being so frustrated you could break everything in arms' reach doesn't really have to mean . . . . anything. There's a certain point where Steve knows Sam starts to worry - well, worry more than he does by default, which Steve is pretty sure is a lot - and then Steve feels both guilty and self-conscious, and uncomfortable with what's going through his head.

Tony doesn't seem to give a damn. Or maybe a better way, maybe the engineer's way of looking at it is that Tony's decided Steve is up to this project, and anything that comes from his direction, Tony assumes is just the same as him threatening to give his pet robots to a community college, or fire everyone in R&D: so much hot air, vented off to keep things from exploding, and otherwise not really important.

Whatever it is, Steve'll take it.

Tony's still tinkering - his word - with the flying car idea; when Steve pulls the door open this time, he stops, frowns at what's on the new table (the layout of the workshop doesn't stay the same, ever) and says, "Those look like the Insight Helicarrier engines."

"Yup," Tony says. He's got a headset on with a tiny rectangular screen a few inches in front of his left eye and is scowling at what he's working on. "They don't miniaturize well," he adds, "but they're worth messing around with for a bit. The thing is," Tony adds, sitting up and rolling out his shoulders, as if Steve's interrupted several hours' worth of cramped poking and prodding, "flying cars? Easy." He emphasizes the word with a brisk clap. "Build you one tomorrow. Flying car that doesn't subject anyone underneath it to a tornado or crushing pressure, doesn't need however many feet of runway, costs less than a couple thousand a day to operate and can be usefully manufactured for real people?"

"Less easy," Steve supplies. Tony gives him a wordless clearly gesture and flicks the car-sized repulsors.

"These things," he says. "Put'em on something as big as a helicarrier, they're only extremely expensive, because the whole damn thing is ridiculous to run anyway, you're barely adding
anything. Something like a personal vehicle, we pass ridiculous, fly out into ludicrous and end up in pointless. So." He gives Steve an off-kilter look. "How's your week going?"

Steve rubs his forehead, smiles ruefully. "That obvious?"

Tony looks like he's considering, like he's going to reply with *well only if people know you or sort of compared to usual*, maybe venture out into the sarcastic with *only to people with eyes*, but actually says, "Yeah. Come in, sit down - wait," he glances at the clock, "it's two o'clock, I'm hungry - JARVIS, find someone who's not doing anything useful and have them bring up something that tastes good."

It's about twenty minutes later that some kind of cinnamon-coffee-cake and yerba maté - Tony's current obsession of the week - arrive via a young man with the nervous look Steve's come to associate with "intern". That's about the time Steve realizes he's been complaining for more or less straight through those twenty minutes, and makes himself stop. The cake's a good excuse for that.

"See," Tony says through the back-end of a mouthful, "I made Happy detour to Burger King more or less the minute I got off the air-strip. It was awful - greasy, heavy, totally made me sick. I ate two of them and it was the best thing I'd ever eaten."

It catches Steve off-guard, like it always does, being reminded about Stark's captivity in Afghanistan. It shouldn't. He doesn't know why it keeps slipping his mind, sliding out of his mental biography of Tony Stark until it catches him off-balance like now, but it does.

Maybe that's the other reason he comes; maybe it sticks in his subconscious even if it won't stick in his conscious memory. Because intelligence community nicknames aside, in a lot of ways Bucky stopped being a *soldier* when he fell from the train and sometimes Steve thinks that matters. There are ways soldiers think, ways they relate to things; Steve and Sam both have them. Steve's not sure Bucky does anymore. Or if he does, they're buried deep under a lot of other stuff and the other stuff's what's in front of them here and now.

Tony either doesn't notice or pays no attention to Steve's momentary awkward lack of response, asks instead, "He like anything?"

"Coffee," Steve replies wryly. That, at least, had stuck: Bucky now drinks coffee the way Peggy and Monty used to drink their awful stewed tea, less like even a comforting drink and more like a liquid security blanket, turned to at every possible opportunity.

"Hn," Tony says. He shrugs. "Make everything coffee flavoured."

As so often with Tony, it's hard to tell whether or not he's being even remotely serious. Steve gives him a long look and when Tony stays blandly attentive says, "I don't think that would work."

"Probably not," Tony agrees. "But you might get some good expressions. If you do, Instagram them, you can make a locked account. That said," he adds, leaning forward and gesturing from the elbow with one hand, "there are a lot of things you *can* get coffee flavoured. Ice cream, granola bars, waffles, whatever. Get him a Starbucks card, coffee fraps'll do wonders for his calorie-count."

Steve opens his mouth to retort and then sighs. Tony quirks an eyebrow. "Mm?"

"I was going to say something about that only being useful to someone who leaves the house on ground level during the day," Steve says, dryly, "but then I remembered I haven't actually asked
him to do that yet, so that's probably not fair."

"There you go," Tony says, getting up to dump both of their paper plates in the recycling bin beside the door. "See here's the thing," he goes on, turning around where he is. "I wanted a cheeseburger. Because I could not think of any single thing that screamed America louder than a fast-food drive-thru cheeseburger. I don't even like them that much, but that wasn't the point. The point was, they told me I was home. That things were normal again. If I was eating a shitty Burger King burger, everything had to be okay. Same with beds," he goes on, wandering back in the direction of what he'd been working on before.

"What?" The sudden shift catches Steve off-guard.

"He still sleeping on the floor?" Tony asks, and doesn't wait for Steve's response before he says, "Thought so. Clearly still bugs you, too. So here's my question." He opens his arms. "Why does it matter? No - " he adds, quickly, holding his hands up palms out to stop Steve's response, not that Steve has one ready, "not rhetorical, serious question, why does it matter?"

Steve sighs and leans back, taking his mug with him. He's still definitely on the fence about yerba maté, but he doesn't hate it, so he keeps drinking. "I know you're going to tell me," he says. "Which means it is a rhetorical question."

"Okay," Tony grants, "on technicality yes, vulgar usage no, but allow me to enlighten you." Tony uses both hands side-by-side about a few inches apart to mark out the words as he says, "Bed equals home. And bed equals normal. Stability, permanence, security, all those things." Now he waves the words away.

"What would happen to you," Steve asks, "if someone stopped you from gesturing while you spoke? Tied your hands to your sides?" And yes, even he can recognize that as a verbal dodge, because the words hit a little heavy, but he's still curious. He's also still genuinely curious how Tony manages not to knock things off his workspace all the time, because he knows the man talks to JARVIS if nobody else is around to listen, and probably gestures just as much.

"Last time someone tried that I was seven," Tony replies. "I ended up biting the principal and getting sent to boarding school. Anyway. That's why it matters. Beds. Some people say, oh, it's because I'm not used to sleeping on soft things anymore! - nope," Tony says, dismissing that with another wave of his hand. "That's an excuse. Trust me, if you look you can find mattresses that make bare stone feel comfortably soft, in a variety of interesting patterns."

"How do you know?" Steve asks, not so much because he disbelieves Tony as because that sounded like the assurance of personal experience. The fact that Tony clears his throat and looks down at what he's tinkering with for a few seconds confirms that even before he answers.

"Because about two months after I got home Pepper got tired of coming to work and finding me sleeping in the kitchen or the bathroom," he says, "and I tried that line on her and she had one delivered." His mouth pulls to the side, humourlessly. "Managed to keep that one out of the tabloids. And even if you can't get a mattress for some reason, you can just take it off and stick a plank on the box-spring. But people would rather sleep on the floor." He makes a there-you-go gesture with the tool now in his hand.

"My point is," he goes on, skimming away while Steve tries to assimilate that, "if you start looking at it, the significance of beds is everywhere. You could build someone the most comfortable hotel room it is possible to imagine and they'd probably still talk about wanting to go home and sleep in their own bed - and if they don't, it's because they hate home and don't feel comfortable there. It's probably genetic, evolutionary, whatever - home, bed, safe, stable, normal." He taps the table. "The
place where you habitually sleep, except then it becomes part of the culture, and it becomes about the places people sleep, and what kind of people sleep in them. The bed your bed a grownup bed the marriage bed, whatever.

"Sometimes, that helps you feel normal. Other times, the part where you don't feel normal makes it grate and leads to nights of insomnia." He taps one of his virtual keyboards once or twice and adds, "That's my theory, anyway."

"So you're saying he doesn't want to sleep in a bed because he's not comfortable with the idea of 'normal'," Steve says. Tony doesn't look up from the display.

"Or safe. Or whatever. And that bugs you, because you want him to be. A lot. Completely understandable, probably unconscious. Because really, otherwise, why should you care? Not like he's going to wreck his back." Tony gives Steve a sardonic look. "Or like he's trying to make you sleep there with him."

Steve sighs and drinks some more of his maté. It gives him an excuse not to say anything, like about how Tony manages to be perceptive about everyone in the universe except himself.

"Want a suggestion?" Tony says after a while, breaking the silence. Steve blinks and looks up.

"You going to give it to me anyway?" Steve asks, dryly, and Tony waggles his hand.

"Maybe." He slides his cup into the machine and turns around and leans on the wall, arms folded, while the machine spits more coffee into his cup. "Try approaching normal obliquely. What else do people do in bed?" At Steve's frown Tony rolls his eyes and says, "No, not that, I mean - watching TV. Playing Candy Crush. Checking email."

Steve is pretty sure Tony's picking the ridiculously technological options on purpose, but merely offers, "Reading?" and Tony gives him an over-the-top tolerant look that says yeah, sure, if that's your idea of fun.

"The point is, forget the bed," Tony says. "Give him a bedside bookshelf or something. Same with the food. Bet you're trying to have meals - stop, just nag him into eating things." He pauses and sighs and says, "Look. For you, probably for Wilson, getting better means normal. For this, you probably need to throw that expectation out. Forget normal, I think I've said that before. Except, even more. There's some weird diet Pepper was doing for a while, years back, where you don't eat meals you just eat, like, a fist sized bunch of food every three hours. Try that. Try something else." His attention is slowly being absorbed by what he's working on, and he adds, "You, though," and shakes his current tool in Steve's direction without looking. "You eat meals. Try sleeping, too. You look like shit."

That's got to be his trick, Steve figures. Eventually, no matter what you do, you have to start laughing even if it's just in defeat. "Thanks," he says, and means it more than it probably sounds. "Any other advice?"

"No," Tony says, frowning, "but you could look around your feet for something that looks like an android's lollipop."

In a fit of Steve isn't even sure what, on the way home he stops at a hardware store and picks up one of those little bedside lights you screw into the wall and you can reposition, a small LED-lit disc you can point anyway you want on a swivel. When he gets home Bucky isn't there, so still in a
fit of he-doesn't-know-what Steve digs out his smaller drill and screws it into the wall right where it'll be over Bucky's shoulder if he sits or lies down in the closet.

Steve's not sure how serious Tony was. He's not sure how stupid taking advice from Tony Stark is. He's not even sure how much this counts as a slightly - okay more than *slightly* - passive aggressive gesture on his part. He does it anyway.

Then he makes tacos from a mix and sits down with Katrina Davies' (MD, PhD) late-life study of, forty years later, all the *other* 107th veterans who'd escaped captivity, or at least all of them who'd answered her letters and phone-calls. Other than the fact that it involves things HYDRA did, and that Davies appears to be well-regarded, Steve's not sure how useful it'll be and he's pretty sure it'll upset him, but it feels like that kind of night and at the very least he can get a few chapters in and eliminate it.

He doesn't turn on any music, and it's a quiet evening: he's pretty sure he hears the moment Bucky, having clearly seen Steve's in the dining room and so having avoided the balcony door, displaces the window in his room from the outside to get back in.

And then silence. And then something approximating the normal sounds of someone taking off boots and folding something up, except at about half the volume. And the silence again.

Steve realizes he's been staring at the same paragraph for at least a full minute and that it might as well be one of Bucky's handwritten Cyrillic notes for all he actually parses the words. And he keeps staring for another minute and a half at least, until Bucky's finished coming out of his room and walking down the hall making absolutely no noise at all, and is standing by the corner that makes a small gesture at dividing larger-living-room from smaller-dining-room, arms folded, and says, "The lamp."

Steve does his best to fake a disinterested shrug. "The one on the bedside table isn't doing you much good," he says, doing his best at a disinterested voice as well. His best probably isn't very good - his lack of talent for lying extends into being a terrible actor and always has - but he does it anyway.

Bucky doesn't say anything. After a beat or six of watching him out of his peripheral vision, and Bucky not doing anything but stand there and stare at him, Steve risks a look.

The look stops him. Bucky's right arm is a bit torn up again, implying he's been climbing or landing somewhere with sharp edges, but mostly it's . . . it's that the look that Bucky's giving him is opaque, unreadable, but not blank; that his jaw's tight but his eyes aren't distant and that he looks not so much like a wire about to break as much as . . .

Well. Like someone who's gotten far enough past frustration and exasperation that they've almost given up, but are giving up in really, really bad grace.

Just before the silence and the stare get so uncomfortable that Steve has to say something, Bucky's eyes turn upwards and he takes a breath, and Steve realizes Bucky *hadn't* been breathing before.

"How many fucking times," Bucky demands, looking at the wall and not Steve, "did you *actually* get sick and almost fucking die?"

And Steve blinks at him like an idiot for a bit, because it's the first time Bucky's ever asked a question that might be about memory. Actually it might be at least close to the first question Bucky's asked him since showing up here, but it's definitely the first question that might be about memory; up till now even if he could get Bucky to talk about what he might be remembering,
Steve hasn't been able to say anything about it, confirming or denying.

"Uh," he says. He tries to pull himself together, tries to comprehend what the question was and not that just that it's a question. "Um - a lot," he says, trying to remember things that, just for a second, feel like they happened to someone else, someone for whom aliens were things to read about and war was a distant drag on his sense of duty instead of an uncomfortably old friend. "Once a winter? Maybe twice, a couple of bad years. Then that one year I got influenza and then scarlet fever and -"

He stops because Bucky's lightly digging his right thumb and forefinger into his eyes and maybe one step away from laughing. Well. Kind of laughing. The painful kind. "You remember," Steve says, hazards very, very carefully. And adds, "It's probably as many times as you remember. If you're remembering a lot."

Bucky drops his hand and he looks different, like maybe he's given something up, something tired and resigned winning over the twisted-wire tightness and distance. "I remember," he says, "ordering you not to fucking die."

Steve's throat closes, and he tries to clear it; swallows and tries to keep his breath even. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah you used to do that a lot." And tries not to spend too much of his own mind remembering it in turn, so many times it blurs together into a spectrum of words so close to the same, over all the years of Bucky's face shifting and changing into more or less the one looking at him now.

Right now more than less, actually.

Bucky exhales all at once, drags his right hand over his face and turns, moves away. Steve is halfway through getting up to follow when the noise in the kitchen tells him where Bucky went, and he's surprised enough that he freezes for a second. Because it sounds like Bucky's actually getting himself food. It makes Steve hesitate to go look, in case he screws it up, but in the end he does go to see.

Bucky is getting himself food. Resentfully, like every one of the plate, the pan, the tortilla, the meat, the tomatoes and the cheese have personally offended him, but he is. Steve stands in the doorway between dining-room and kitchen for a second.

Bucky doesn't look up from one-handedly wrapping the taco with the same level of resentment; he just says, "Shut up."

"I wasn't going to say anything," Steve says, striving for mildly and completely undermining his own point by, well, saying something.

"Good," Bucky says. "Don't."

He's still fighting with something, Steve can see it. Fear, maybe, a kind of it, like he's hit the point where he can't not trust Steve to tell him things but doesn't like it. Steve pointing out that he doesn't lie, is pretty terrible at it when he tries, isn't going to help. The metaphorical equivalent of holding very still and not making any loud noises . . . might.

He hopes.

Bucky dumps his now-empty plate in the sink before he stops, both hands on the counter, and says, "You broke your arm and your leg. You were climbing a wall. I told you not to." The words are clipped and abrupt.
"Yeah," Steve says. "You were eleven," he offers, "I was ten. It was a dare - climb this garden wall, get a flower from inside to prove you did it. You told me not to do it, I tried, and I fell. I don't know who was angrier at me, you or my mom."

"You were lucky you didn't break your fucking head," Bucky says, distantly, staring at the sink like he's trying to stare through years and fog. Then he turns himself around, leans back on the counter and scrubs his face with his right hand. "Fuck," he says, softly, to himself. He pushes away from the counter, stalks to the living-room and throws himself on the couch, arms folded, glaring. Angry at something, defying something - maybe the inside of his own head, Steve figures.

He leaves it. He'll still be here, whenever the fight ends.
"Normal" changes abruptly this time, like a fault giving with one huge lurch and a few following stumbles. Some of them are better than others.

Some things are neutral, or don't change much at all: Bucky still reads everything, almost obsessively. He does seem to have more recognizable feelings about what he reads, and a handful of times Steve's seen a book fly across the room to hit wall or floor, or heard the tell-tale thud from inside Bucky's room. One or two get thrown and then picked up again; most of them don't. Steve's cautiously taking it as a good sign that the ones that get shunned are the ones he'd decided were useless, stupid or maliciously ignorant - or all three - and he'd read them all the way through.

(The Boy Who Was Raised As A Dog hits the wall on a regular basis until it's finished, but it always winds up open again. Steve's not sure if Bucky disagrees with what he's reading or if he's just angry about it, or some combination of both.)

Some of what he reads is in Russian, some in English, but some in Mandarin, Japanese and German as well. When at one point Steve asks him how many languages he speaks, Bucky shrugs. "No idea," he says. "I find out when I read something or hear something and know what it is."

Bucky starts adding TV and movies in, and Steve quietly sets up Netflix and iTunes for the TV, because getting new stuff in physical form involves either leaving the house at ground level or asking Steve, and Bucky's still reluctant to do either.

Then Steve makes the mistake of mentioning that to Tony and finds out just how ridiculously large a credit someone can put on an iTunes account.

He restricts himself to making an acid comment about it to Tony, who ignores him and says, "I just can't believe 'steven.grant.rogers' was still available. Seriously. Did you call in for that? Did they kick some poor jerk off his username for you? Because I could see that happening."

Steve doesn't actually wonder why in God's name he spends any time with Tony Stark, not anymore, but sometimes he likes to pretend he does, and this is one of them. Fortunately, this time Pepper is home and exercises her prerogative to kick Tony in the shin when she thinks he's being a jerk, and Steve pretends he doesn't actually think the ensuing conversation via facial expression and gesture is hilarious.

Pepper takes the elevator down with Steve on the pretext of picking something up that she forgot in one of the conference rooms, and - he suspects - actually more so that as soon as the elevator doors close she can sigh and say, "I'm sorry, Steve. I promise, he means to be helpful. He's just - " she gives a helpless shrug. "Tony."

"I know," Steve reassures her. "And honestly right now I think if I really wanted to disturb him, I could just say 'thank you' and leave it. Don't worry about it. Besides," he adds, "he might live to regret it. I know Bucky's going wholesale on decades of television right now."

Pepper gives him the carefully interested-but-not-invasive look she's perfected and asks, "How are things?" The elevator door opens at the level of the supposed conference room, and Steve walks with her because, well, why not?

"Fine," Steve says, and the thing about Pepper is she'd let him leave it at that but she'd also assume he was shutting the line of questioning down, so he shrugs and adds, "in relative terms."
Pepper's eyebrows raise. "I honestly can't tell if that sounds optimistic or not."

Steve genuinely likes Pepper Potts. He has more or less since they met. When they met, he also genuinely could not for the life of him figure out why someone like her would be involved with someone like Tony Stark, but back then he also hadn't spent several weeks having defensive conversations in his head, trying to explain to an imaginary Sam why . . . everything.

And he didn't know Tony quite as well.

And by now, he figures even if he couldn't make a solid guess anyway, he has absolutely no leg to stand on when it comes to wondering about who someone loves, or why, or how much. And it helps that Tony clearly worships the ground Pepper walks on, in his own special way.

But Steve does like her, and he respects her, so he shrugs as eloquently as he can, and she gives him the kind of sympathetic smile that says, *been there, done that.* "I think everything frustrates him right now," Steve says, and Pepper's look turns wry.

"You think he's angry," Pepper translates, opening the door to a conference room and, as it happens, pulling open a drawer in the piece of furniture that might be a desk or might have some technical business term Steve doesn't know and retrieving a USB drive. When Steve shrugs again in a kind of admission, she says, "Well. He does have a lot to be angry about," and slips the drive into her pocket.

"No argument from me," Steve says.

"Well," Pepper says again, letting Steve get the door this time since she doesn't have to show him which one to open, "if it helps, he's not drinking heavily, he hasn't declared a major festival to his ego, he's not completely destroying the house and he's probably not secretly dying without telling you - ooh." She stops and frowns. "You winced. Which one were you wincing at?"

"Destroying the house - just holes in walls," Steve says, thinking it might be nice not to show quite so much without meaning to. "Nothing we can't fix."

Pepper tilts her head and pushes the down button on the elevator for him. "We?" she asks, and then says, "Well. That's a good sign. And Steve - " she adds as he steps into the elevator and he automatically holds it with one hand to the door, even though he's pretty sure JARVIS isn't going to cut Pepper off mid-sentence. "You'll be getting an invitation in the mail pretty soon," she says. "Charity gala. Please think hard about coming, alright?"

She's harder to turn down than Tony, for different reasons; Steve says, "I promise I'll think about it," and then returns her wave as he lets the elevator door close.

"Shall I arrange a car for you, Captain Rogers?" JARVIS asks from the hidden speakers in the elevator roof, and Steve thinks about it before he shakes his head.

"No," he says. "Thank you, JARVIS. I'll make my own way tonight."

It isn't just holes in the walls, but it's also nothing that can't be fixed or replaced. And Bucky does have more than way too many reasons to be angry, things to be angry about. "Normal" now comes with a repair to something every couple days, a tub of drywall mud in the laundry cubby and a running supply of bandaids and gauze for when whatever it is cuts up Bucky's right arm.

But everything that gets broken is, well, a *thing.* Honestly as far as Steve can tell, the explosions
and the broken things bother Bucky more than they bother him: "normal" also comes with a lot of abruptly empty condo although, as far as Steve can tell, only in daylight now. As far as he can tell, too, Bucky still keeps to roof-tops and abandoned places, still doesn't want to have anything to do with people.

The indifference to the state of clothes, to the need for sleep, or to any kind of pain keeps on like it did before. Again at least as far as Steve can tell, as long as they cover him and keep him warm, Bucky couldn't care less about the clothes he wears, or which parts of his collection are showing holes or tears or wear. On the other hand, Steve figures that caring which ones are his and which are Steve's is progress on its own: there are at least a handful of shirts and pairs of jeans that Bucky definitely thinks of as his, if only out of habit, as opposed to just accepting Steve's division without comment.

And the aversion to cold is new and pretty pronounced. Bucky still doesn't really like chairs, but now if he's on the couch or the bed he'll have the blanket at least right to hand, and if he's decided to sit on the floor he's in the sun or right beside some other source of heat, no matter how warm it already seems to be.

(When Steve notices that despite this Bucky pretty much never wears socks, he asks, and gets a look that's half impatience and half mild confusion, like Bucky can't imagine how it could be something someone needs to ask. Then he goes back to the book on his lap and says, "Floor's wood. Socks slip."

Steve considers buying him some slippers, but given that at this point Bucky's more or less hoarded all the long-sleeved shirts and knows exactly where the sun falls over the course of the day, if he'd considered that a solution he probably would have just taken the ones in the closet that Steve never uses, because it never seems to be that cold.)

It doesn't even seem like Bucky feels the cold more than Steve does, as such. It's more like, if you took the range of temperature most people would think of as comfortable, Bucky cuts off the bottom third and would much, much rather be too hot than too cold.

Steve doesn't remember the feeling of freezing, either because he'd already been unconscious by then or just because he's blanked it out - but he only had the once and considering he crashed it is possible and even likely he wasn't awake to feel anything. He doesn't think Bucky got that grace. And if you had a preference, if you felt like you could, that seems like more than enough reason to prefer heat.

Which is it, in the end - Bucky's acting like a person. Angry, frustrated, unhappy and untrusting, sure - but those are things that people feel. Steve figures you call that progress, and a few broken things are a small price to pay. And he tells himself that. A lot.

Food, as a problem, is . . . erratic. Steve's still quiet on the subject of sleep, for now - at least these days he's pretty sure Bucky's getting a couple hours a night of actual sleep, and a few more of rest, and he doesn't think him interfering is going to do anything more than that. Food, though -

Some days it's fine. Some weeks it's fine. Well, fine if "fine" is defined as "grudgingly eating more or less the required amount of food and at most scowling about it." And then, abruptly, it isn't, and Steve hasn't figured out what the trigger is for the difference. Steve can still win the argument, whether by the force of logic or just because he won't give up, but at least a few times he thinks Bucky's getting close to throwing something at him.
Bucky's weight fluctuates with what kind of week it is, one where he'll eat when he's hungry or one where he resents everything he eats and it's all a fight - or Steve assumes it does, given that he has no idea how much Bucky actually weighs. It definitely looks like it fluctuates, because in terms of whatever regimen Bucky's putting himself through when he is out of the building, he doesn't change it based on anything.

"Need a perspective check?" Sam asks on the evening phone-call, sounding a lot more positive than Steve feels right at that moment. And Steve sighs, because he probably shouldn't need one, and he's pretty sure he knows what Sam's going to point out. But maybe it'll help to hear someone else say it, someone whose expertise on the subject he trusts.

"Yes," he says. "Actually I do."

"Figured," Sam says. "Then remember this time eight months ago he pretty much never talked, spent most of his time sitting more or less immobile in a corner somewhere, had maybe six or seven foods that didn't make him sick and only answered to his name because you were the one saying it and you'd keep saying it if he didn't. Three months ago you were still kind of worried you were gonna start seeing mysterious murders show up in the paper."

"Not re - " Steve starts, but it's kind of automatic and comes from the guilty feeling of disloyalty, and Sam cuts him off.

"Yeah, you were," Sam says. "Steve, I'd be worried about your common sense if you hadn't been - there's hope and loyalty and all that admirable shit, and then there's being completely wilfully blind to what's in front of you. And you're not worried now, and it's not because you've turned into an idiot between times. I know it doesn't feel like it, and I know the changes probably even make it harder for you because he's starting to look at least a little bit the person you remember, except hateful and miserable, but man, as far as measurable progress goes, this probably counts as being in the running for a miracle."

Steve lets out his breath in a huff and says, "I know. You're right. And I tell myself that."

"And it doesn't make it suck less," Sam finishes for him. "Yeah. I know." He pauses and adds, sounding a little bit cautious, "Any problems with resentment at all?"

"At me, specifically?" Steve gives a short laugh. "Kind of hard to separate that out from resenting the entire world. It's - "

He sighs, watches a couple kids playing what looks like tag, except tagging seems to be done by throwing a hand-sized ball at your friend as hard as you can; a little girl with a My Little Pony shirt and a determined expression appears to be winning. "Bucky hates not being in control," he says. "Of himself more than anything. When I found him in the HYDRA factory he could barely stand up, and it was less than a couple minutes before he was forcing himself to walk. By himself."

He's never actually told anyone that, or anything about it, and a small wary part of him, one that goes all the way back to being much too small with a mother who works too hard and too long and one friend in the world, twists up and wants to take it back, is pretty sure he's doing the wrong thing by sharing now.

But he's not seven and scared anymore. Much. Just that one part.

After another pause Sam says, "Yeah, you can see why he hates everything right now, then."

"Yeah," Steve says. The girl in the sparkly shirt successfully makes it to the last one un-tagged and
whoops in triumph, and despite everything Steve can't help smiling a bit. Apparently it means she's the next person to start out being "it", and she takes the ball and throws it hard at a taller boy with red hair; he yelps when it hits him on the shoulder. "I just wish I could fix it."

"Time," Sam says.

"Yeah, time heals all wounds," Steve says, a little surprised at his sourness himself. "It also kills us eventually, you know."

"Well somebody's pessimistic today," Sam remarks, mildly, and Steve makes a face which, over the phone, Sam of course can't see.

"Maybe a bit," he admits.

"Pepper told me she's inviting you to the Stark Gala thing they're throwing at the end of the week," Sam says. "Maybe you should go."

Steve almost starts laughing. "It's funny - have I told you she reminds me the most of the women who used to run their families when I was a kid? You really want someone to do something, you make sure everybody else knows you want them to. Eventually they give in under the sheer weight of expectation."

"Mom did the same thing," Sam tells him. "Maybe you should, though. Go have some canapés and let people be happy to see you, get Tony to irritate you some. How much have you actually been out of the house lately? And coffee runs don't count. Neither does grocery shopping. If I'm right, it's probably even less than you were out a couple months ago."

"Yeah, maybe," Steve admits. "I'll think about it."

"Yeah, that's what she said you said," Sam says, sounding amused. Steve rolls his eyes, which Sam still can't see, but he feels - reluctantly - a bit better humoured.

"Started flying to work yet?" Steve asks, kind of pointedly changing the subject, and he can hear the grin in Sam's voice when he answers.

"Nah," he says, "but I am officially the coolest grownup for twenty miles, easily. Haven't had to mow my own lawn in weeks."

Steve laughs.

Sam's flying stories are a good way to get cheerful pretty fast; the feeling lasts until Steve gets home, and it's empty with the lights all off, meaning it's been empty for a while.

Then he sighs, pinches the bridge of his nose, reminds himself of everything he and Sam just talked about and pulls some soup out of the freezer to thaw.

It's dark before Bucky comes home, but he comes home before Steve goes to sleep and heats up the soup Steve left for him, makes toast, eats like the entire world offends him by existing, puts the dishes in the dishwasher, pours a cup of coffee and microwaves it, and then goes to sit in his room, on the bed, reading.

Which is something. Steve'll take it.
Take ten breakable things. Pottery, porcelain, glass. Vases, glasses, mirrors, doesn't matter.

Make them all almost the same colour. Or make all of them every goddamn fucking colour.

Drop them onto a concrete floor, one after another. Make sure it's high enough, far enough, that some of the pieces might as well be sand or dust.

And then try to put the fucking things back together.

He doesn't miss the distance. He doesn't miss the echoes, being one step unreal, the whole world too fucking loud, too sharp too bright, everything disconnected like someone took the reel of film, hacked out pieces in the middle, burned through others and haphazardly glued everything back together, sometimes with pieces found on the floor from some other reel, old and scratched and stepped on.

First off to miss it, it'd have to finish going the fuck away, which it's not; all of it leaks in around the edges, tells him if he makes one mistake, takes one step wrong it's all waiting for him to drown in again. And secondly, he will never, ever fucking miss it, no matter how long it's gone for.

Doesn't mean he likes this much better. Or at all.

Walls start feeling like cages again, something in his gut convinced that if he can't see the sky he can't get out. Bars and locks and concrete walls. He spends more time outside, away from the building, avoiding people as much as he can.

Steve looks more and more worried again and that grates across Bucky's mind, so he avoids looking.

And maybe wandering makes it a given he'd end up at Stark's monument to himself, which isn't actually as bad as Steve makes it out to be. But for some reason he expects that. Not because he remembers anything concrete, just . . . he knows. One of the feelings it's hard to trace to a source, not least because it's kind of hard to ask someone, so why do I assume your opinions on architecture are pretty narrowly biased?

It's past the hour when expensive places that aren't restaurants are still open; there's only one guard at the desk, the others wandering around presumably being more useful than they look at a glance. The man at the desk is young, tall, blond and pale, and he stands up and smiles.

And if Bucky expected the Tower not to be as bad as Steve says, he doesn't expect to be greeted by name, for the guard to say, "Good evening, Mr Barnes. How can I help you?"

It makes him stop, look at the man with narrowed eyes; if the guard notices, he doesn't show. After a few beats Bucky says, "I'm looking for Stark."

He hadn't been, actually. Before the man said his name, he might have looked around at the closed doors of the main floor in the evening and left, another point added to the ones he knew. But he hadn't expected his name and now he's curious, maybe.

Now it's a challenge, maybe more honest.

The guard glances down at something like a projected computer terminal and says, "Mr Stark is . . .
in R&D, D44. The best way to get his attention is probably just to go up," he adds, voice dropping from trained employee to honest observation. "When he's working at night he tends to ignore his messages. The elevator on the left will take you up, and there's a map on each floor."

Bucky nods slightly and walks past the man, noting sidearm, knife, small calibre at his ankle. The others walking around had been more or less the same. Effective against a thief, maybe, but a little light to guard this tower and the attention it could get.

The elevator takes him up in silence except for a soft tone when it hits the right floor. The map on the wall illuminates softly when he steps out, as the elevator doors hiss very quietly closed again, showing a small dot where he's standing and another one at what turns out to be D44. Useful. And suspicious, at least to him.

One "wall" is entirely windows for a few steps, before the hallway runs deeper into the building and the rooms behind the doors on that side start getting the benefit of the light. D44's on that side, rather than the inner side, and he wonders if the difference is used systematically or just haphazard, like so much Stark seems to do.

Like so much Stark's father did, for that matter, or so his reading says. He only remembers dimly - mostly a sense of irritation and contempt, overlaid with forced patience and a sense of needing the man whether he liked it or not. Howard Stark casts shadows in Steve's brain, apparently, but not his.

The door to D44 has a screen beside it, displaying the word occupied with a dash and the name Stark beside it, and underneath block-letters saying PROJECT followed by a string of numbers and letters. Bucky brushes the touch-pad underneath it and the door clicks open, showing dim space beyond.

The space is high-ceilinged and open, the windows showing the night-city beyond, the air smells different, but laboratories, workshops have a look and Bucky feels his breath shorten and his heart-rate rise before his thoughts are derailed by the man on the other side of the room looking up, spreading his arms and proclaiming, "Ah-hah! Winter is coming!"

"...what?" Bucky says, jarred completely out of any thoughts as the lights come up and the windows turn to mirrors with the reflected light. It doesn't help his agitation but it doesn't hurt either, so he tries to ignore it. Focuses on the other person in the room.

The family resemblance is there, but Anthony Stark is a little shorter than his father, stockier, frame less frail. He's also in his mid-forties and it shows in his face and how he moves as he steps around his work-surface and waves the question away. "Sorry, couldn't resist - the whole Stark thing, it's this series - "

"I know," Bucky cuts him off. Stark stops and looks ... interested.

"Books or TV?" he asks and Bucky narrows his eyes. The interest is real. It just doesn't make much sense.

"Both," he says, and adds with deliberate irony, "I don't get out much."

He watches Stark as he crosses to half-sit on what looks like a desk; the movements are meant to look casual, open and relaxed, but they bring him a lot closer, Bucky notes, to computer-connected surfaces and as such probably to a number of panic buttons and programs.

Stark doesn't move quite like a fighter, but he doesn't move like most people, either. Probably the
effect of the suit; something like that would force its own patterns, its own adaptation. Supposedly, he destroyed all of those. Bucky'll believe he doesn't have a new one or one stashed away somewhere when someone presents his suit-less dead body to the world.

"So I've heard," Stark says. "Don't worry about it, 'out' is overrated anyway, this day and age, we've made 'in' pretty perfectable. And it was a pretty terrible joke, but also a lot of fun, so I'll probably do it again, but only in discreet company. Coffee?" And he moves again, this time to the side-table over by the wall. Bucky doesn't accept or decline.

It's hard to tell if the constant motion is from nervousness or if it's normal. Steve has a lot to say about Stark's distractibility and tendency to talk; the movement might come from the same place. Or it might not.

"Never read the books," Stark goes on, "but Pepper watches the show. I've told her to let me know if anyone sharing my surname ever seems to do something that isn't incredibly stupid and likely to get them killed." He shrugs. "So far, no luck."

The small machine on the side-table spits out coffee into a mug with a broken handle and Stark puts that one aside, puts an anonymous white stoneware mug where it was and hits another button. Stark pours soymilk into the cup that's obviously his, then takes the white one when it's full. "Anything in?" he asks.

"Sugar," Bucky says after considering for a minute whether or not he's going to take the coffee at all. "Three."

Stark spoons in what looks like raw unbleached cane sugar, leaves the spoon in after the last one and passes it over. Before he can start up another stream of chatter on who knows what subject - and whether or not Stark talks all the time anyway, that much is nervous, as is the hand that ends up in his pocket and Bucky wonder what he's got in there that he's looking to for reassurance - Bucky says, "Your security staff recognized me. And admitted me without question."

Stark leans on the wall. Stark seems to like to lean on things. He gives a humourless smile. "Just between you and me," he says, "complete honesty, no accusation intended but seriously if you were coming here to kill me, exactly how much extra time would any security staff I could possibly hire give me - thirty, forty seconds? Just a ballpark."

Bucky inclines his head slightly, and takes a sip of coffee. Stark gives him the humourless smile again. "Plus a bunch of expensive dead employees - yeah that's not actually enough time for a cold suit deploy. Yet," he adds, almost defensively. "Kind of pointless, get blood on the floors, stain the rugs. He shrugs. "Ma-y-ybe could alert Bruce fast enough but that'd wreck my building, and Pepper would complain."

"You thought it through," Bucky observes, as Stark starts to go back to the desk; Stark turns and he does actually use his hands to talk just as much as Steve says.

"My house did kind of get bombed by helicopters last year, and while I haven't threatened any terrorists since then - yet - it is me. I mean, who knows what's going to happen tomorrow?" He pulls open a small drawer and pulls out a bag of mixed nuts. He does offer them across the desk, but Bucky shakes his head minutely.

"Well," Stark adds, tossing a small handful into his mouth, "and the Insight thing did target me and my building, which I find kind of hurtful considering I told their kind of no-hoper engineers how to design their engines - and I'm still not sure what they planned to do about the incredibly angry Hulk that would have launched himself back up out of the wreckage - but I didn't actually provoke
that. Actively." He pauses. "That I remember. And I do a lot fewer things I'm too drunk to remember these days, Pepper also complains."

While the man talks Bucky scans the room, forcing himself to breathe more slowly than he wants to, ignoring the way he can feel his heart trying to crawl up his throat. The shape of the thing on the work-bench looks familiar and when Stark pauses to take a breath Bucky says, "Those are Wilson's."

Stark follows his line of sight and says, "Yep. Had to go back and design from the ground up since all the originals were destroyed and the Army wasn't answering my calls about their existing designs. Then again," he says, tossing another couple nuts into his mouth, "since I'm pretty sure that while Pararescue was using them they were originally designed to counter me, I can't say I'm that surprised." He takes a drink of coffee, and adds, "Which is also kind of hurtful, like it's not enough I gave the Air Force Rhodey's suit, they had to have secret special weapons too, but that's the military for you."

"They're effective," Bucky says, absently, meaning the wings. And then adds, "Fragile," as a counter-note.

"Yeeeah, mine should be a little less that," Stark replies. "There are definitely some design flaws I've corrected, and one of them is it'll take a wider range of damage to actually render the whole set inoperable."

Bucky thinks good but doesn't say it; considering by now Wilson's almost guaranteed to at least show up to back Steve in any stupid fight Steve gets into, it's been a worry nagging at the back of his mind how easy it was to pull Wilson out of the air. Not as much as it worries him how easy it is to shadow Steve, but still.

Stark's tilted his head, watching Bucky through slightly narrowed eyes; it's interest, not fear or suspicion, but given context that doesn't actually help. He's had a lot of experience being interesting. Mostly fear and suspicion have ended better for him.

"Any particular reason you decided to visit tonight?" Stark asks, after a minute.

"No," Bucky half-lies, mostly to see what Stark will do with it. Which is shrug. And Bucky still hasn't managed to catch sight of the speakers he knows have to be there, but he says, "Your AI's quiet," anyway. Takes a needle to the sore.

"I, ah, asked him to be," Stark says, and his voice is a little more cautious now. When Bucky looks at him he gives a different kind of shrug, less jaunty, more uncomfortable, and a little more honest. "All things considered, I wasn't sure how you'd react, decided there should maybe be some warning and context for the disembodied voice."

"Why did you build one?" Bucky asks, not bothering to cover up the fact that he's looking for the optics and receivers now.

"Accident," Stark replies, promptly, and Bucky gives him a disbelieving look.

"You accidentally made a self-aware computer," he says; this time Stark's smile is thin, but real.

"Actually I designed an extremely complicated program intended to run my house, my schedule, my security systems, my grocery list, and protect my personal databases, and keep me from having to hire a human other than Pepper to hang around my space and irritate me. Then - " he opens one hand. "JARVIS happened. Which turned out a lot better than I'd originally planned and so far at
least, he hasn't abandoned me to play international chess tournaments."

"I fear that compared to managing your life, sir, even international warfare would seem tedious," the AI says and maybe, Bucky thinks, his subconscious brought him here to test his self-control.

All of it.

It's like a razor-edge down his spine, discord of a voice where there shouldn't be a voice (where he thought he'd never have to hear that voice ag - no, not this voice, not here, not now, he is not doing this), it's like the screaming of metal tortured against metal except inside his head and it takes everything he has right now to stop with his right hand only on the handle of the knife at his back, not to draw it. To have that be the only startled motion he makes.

The effort almost comes with vertigo.

But at least now he knows where the speakers are, running along the join between ceiling and wall. They're either incredibly small or built right into the wall itself, and probably the same with the optics and any other sensory receptor, meaning that the AI wasn't added in afterwards; meaning Stark built his AI a home right into the bones of the building.

The line of thought is easier, makes it easier to breathe: assess, understand - Stark built his AI into the building and if you do that -

"Full control of all the doors," he says out loud, tracing the line of the wall with a look and noting the tiny glimmer hidden in the corners, which he guesses are the lenses, and which also seem to be part of the material structure rather than stuck on afterwards. "Control of power and brakes on the elevators. Electrical charge through the building embedded in the walls and control of the sprinkler system for increased coverage into areas without embedded electrical systems through water conduction." He shifts his gaze to Stark, who for once looks blank, caught without a reaction to perform. "Anything else?"

Stark rallies pretty well. "Ah, toxic inhalants and non-toxic gas sedation through the air filtration system," he says. "Pepper insisted we have one non-fatal method. Nice deduction."

"You're paranoid enough to think through how long it would take me to kill your security," Bucky says, "you're too paranoid not to make sure you could turn this place into a fortress." He turns to catch where the lenses are in the other corners and adds, "Especially not if Potts lives up there with you."

"True," Stark says and then frowns, gestures with one hand towards Bucky and says, "Look - did you want to talk in the hall, or something? Because to be honest you're kind of crawling up your own spine and you have been since you walked in here, and while it wounds my ego to say so I . . . really don't think it's me."

He's not wrong, but the hall isn't going to help; Bucky's having to push into the space around the edges of his thoughts to keep his left hand from closing, his right hand off the knife. He shakes his head slightly, still scanning the walls. "I'm leaving," he says.

"Or that," Stark says, "that works too. Come back any time, though," he adds, "there's plenty of floors that'd be less . . . stressful than this one. Rogers' floor has a pretty cool gym in it, if I do say so myself."

Bucky pauses at the door and frowns at Stark. "He has a floor?" he asks, without thinking, startled into it.
"Well, he never visits, but, yes," Stark says. "Top five floors but one, all Avengers, one each. I have considered renaming the Tower. By the way," he adds, as the door opens, "tell Rogers he should get back to Pepper about whether or not he wants to be anonymous or Captain America for the Gala - either's fine, she just wants to know. Pretty sure she texted him, pretty sure he's looking for an excuse to duck out and I don't think he should."

Bucky doesn't answer. Just lets the door close.

He takes the elevator, in the name of another masochistic test, and pushes it further by saying, "JARVIS," when he judges he's almost at ground level.

"Sir?" and the voice is polite and calm and helpful and also comes from the join between ceiling and wall. It must be able to see God-damn near everything.

"Why do you keep managing his life?"

There's a pause, and Bucky feels the elevator stop; the doors open, and only then does the computer-voice say, "I do not believe I would trust anyone else to do it correctly." And adds, "Have a good evening," as Bucky steps out.

For their sake he ignores the guards saying goodnight, and gets above street-level as soon and as fast as he can.

The invitation for the Gala that Stark mentioned is sitting on the computer desk when he comes in by the balcony door; he pulls it out from under the other semi-official looking mail it's hiding in and tosses it onto the kitchen table where Steve's sketching.

"You're going," Bucky says, "so you might as well text Potts back her answer."

Steve picks it up and looks at it; the worry-line between his eyebrows deepens for just a second before he clearly makes himself stop trying to frown. "I was thinking about it - " he starts.

"Steve," Bucky interrupts him. And when Steve stops in mid-word and stares at him with wide-eyed . . . something, it occurs to Bucky he probably hasn't used that name out loud yet.

He backs away from thinking about that; at least it made Steve shut up. "Just . . . text Potts her fucking answer," he says, and steps away from the kitchen table to throw himself on the couch and reach for the nearest of the fucking books he's working through.

"Yeah," Steve says softly, his eyes still big and wide. "Okay."

The first text might actually be to Potts; the next twenty-odd are definitely to Wilson. Bucky ignores the buzzing of phone against wood and has to stare at the page for a while before the Latin characters resolve into any kind of meaning.

When the day comes, they don't have a fight about whether or not Steve's going to Stark's gala (or whatever the fuck the man is throwing tonight) but probably only because Steve can't figure out a way to say he doesn't think he should go because he's worried about Bucky without being insulting or saying outright that he doesn't trust Bucky's judgement, and Steve's still too scared to actually have a fight with him.
Part of Bucky is really morbidly curious about whether he could actually push it all the way to that, until Steve has to come right out and say it (okay, say it for things other than previously acknowledged categories like have you eaten enough today or are you tired or are you in pain, but those are special cases); Bucky can see the thoughts behind Steve's eyes, marching in little expressions across his face as Steve tries to figure out how to reshape the bald statement I just don't think you're okay to be here alone no matter what you say into some kind of logical coup that doesn't bring it down to Steve's judgement versus Bucky's, or devolve into them shouting at each other.

He doesn't; he's not up to dealing with Steve's guilt afterwards; the worry is more than enough.

The not-a-fight starts when Bucky points out Steve's got all of two hours left to get ready, and keeps going all the way up until Steve's dressed (civillian, having decided to be as anonymous as he ever can be to anyone who's read a damn history book) and has his hand on the door. Even then, he hesitates and turns around, ready to speak.

"Jesus Christ, Steve," Bucky cuts him off, starting to lose what little patience he has, "if you ask me if I'm sure again I am going to throw something at your head and then you're still going. Yes, I'm sure. I'm completely positive. You want a fucking notarized document? Pretty sure the lawyer downstairs would whip one up, your choice of at least five fucking languages and three different fucking scripts."

Steve does the equivalent of shutting your mouth when you hadn't got quite far enough to open it yet, and in spite of everything still looks like he's having some kind of inner argument with himself. In the end he says, "Okay. I'll be back in a couple hours."

"Better not be," Bucky says to the closing door, and then stands in the hall and quietly counts in his head until he hears the faint ping of a text message from his phone, sitting on kitchen counter. He knows exactly what it's going to be before he reads it and it's not like Steve doesn't have reason to feel like he needs to remind Bucky to eat something, but -

There are some pretty strong smart-phone cases by now, but none of them are quite strong enough to keep his from shattering when it hits the tile backsplash in the kitchen, thrown hard from ten feet. Just strong enough to make it fucking unsatisfying, because all the pieces of the phone mostly stay in the cracked case instead of scattering across half the kitchen in a brittle explosion.

One of the tiles clatters down onto the stove in six or seven pieces. He can't remember if they have replacements for those. The phone doesn't really matter; the messages redirect to the tablet anyway, so unless he breaks that too he'll even still get them. He can get another phone. It's not like this is the first one he's broken anyway. Phones are fragile, the right size to grab and not something Steve's nostalgically attached to - they hit the wall a lot.

But he can't remember if there are anymore of those tiles.

He could look, but the moment passes - both the moment of concern, and the frustration that came before it. He leaves the broken things where they are and goes back to the living room.

Then he loses two hours.

Sort of.

There's no blackout; reality doesn't cut from one moment to one way too much later. Time . . . .keeps working. If he bothers thinking about it he can unroll all of the hundred and thirty seven minutes behind him, pinpointing when the siren outside faded into the distance or the stupid
hyperactive mutt on the second floor worked itself up into a barking frenzy.

When the tablet did chime softly, presumably Steve being worried.

The hours record themselves all neat and tidy but they slide from one into the other without any need for him to pay attention.

He's sitting on the floor in front of the couch, leaning on it. It's starting to get cool, to get cold, and that worms its way into his head and starts mewing for attention but for a while getting up and getting a sweatshirt isn't appealing enough for it to happen, to interrupt the slide of time for - because if he gets up he's going to be back in time, back in the world and his body and he doesn't feel like it right now.

His feet and the fingers of his right hand get chilled and autumn sunset gives in abruptly to autumn night with only the bathroom and Steve's bedroom lights switched on.

Bucky doesn't grudge the lost hours. He didn't want them anyway. Hard to tell about the visitor; maybe she's running out of patience or maybe she's getting cold too, maybe she just finally made a decision - something makes her move, anyway, finish making her way in through the kitchen window he can't actually see from here.

It has to be deliberate. She can't possibly think he wouldn't hear that, wouldn't notice the change in the air and the way it moves. At least, if she does he'll think a lot less of her. She’s been waiting and watching six days for him to be here alone. She’s clearly got something on her mind.

When she’s got her feet on the ground, he says, in Russian, “So what does the Black Widow want?”

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Steve does go. And, he’ll admit it - happily even - he does enjoy himself.

He never actually nails down what the whole thing is for. The Something Benefit for the Somebody Society, except somehow more convoluted; Pepper tries to explain, but Steve gets lost and eventually she concludes with, “Really, it’s an excuse for people to get some pictures inside Stark Tower without getting sued,” and a dry look. And there are a lot of photographers around, but they’re surprisingly polite.

Probably because of all the security standing very politely around ready for the slightest reason to unbelievably politely but firmly escort people to the door.

Tony's relationship with reporters and photographers is complicated: he pretty much courts them out in the street, but he's adamant that the second they step onto his property he's bringing the wrath of God down on their heads if they don't behave. Steve's gathered the non-disclosure agreements you have to sign to even be a janitor in Stark Tower are incredibly comprehensive, even if he also gathers the common-sense version comes down to, "If you're taking a selfie, you're probably fine; if you're taking a selfie in front of something recognizable, check with your supervisor; if you're taking a picture of guests, equipment, facilities or anything else, you're not fine. Don't do it."

It's kind of draconian and is a bit closer to the Stark army of lawyers - or any army of lawyers - than Steve's comfortable with, but he won't pretend it's not kind of a relief.
As usual, it’s interesting how many people don’t recognize him, are completely fooled by the lack of obvious signs saying Captain America Is Here - that, and how many of those who do seem to treat it like a kind of shared secret that gives them a happy glow inside, being very careful not to stare or draw attention to him, or them, beyond maybe a wink or a slight salute.

People like to feel special, he supposes, and it makes for a nicer evening for him. He only gets trapped once - by a politician, and that’s probably not a coincidence - and Elizabeth comes to his rescue, somehow linking her arm in his and getting him away from the man without insulting anyone or showing just how glad Steve was to go. It has something to do with how she smiles and the way she stands - not too bright and not too . . . anything, but somehow making everything she says the most reasonable idea in the world.

It’s still occasionally interesting to contrast that with how he knows for a fact that she once ran out in front of a tank and screamed at it to make it stop. And the minute their backs are to the guy, her eye-roll is expressive enough to require no further comment.

“Exactly,” Steve murmurs. “Thank you very much for the excuse to walk away. You look lovely by the way,” he adds, and she smiles a more genuine smile at him.

She’s wearing a lilac dress and an understated antique silver necklace with matching earrings and bangle, and it’s once again hard to believe that in terms of years actually lived, she’s just old enough to be his mother.

Until she gives him the look she gives him now, which is the knowing one and absolutely the kind his mother would have given him. Did give him, a lot, usually when he was trying and failing to lie to her about, say, how hungry he was or whether he needed new shoes. It's a mom look. As far as Steve knows, Elizabeth's never had children, but maybe years of graduate students amount to the same thing.

"And you look like a mix of worried and worried, with a little worried," and as Steve clears his throat she adds, "and happy." She smiles at him again when he looks down. "It's a good look on you. Something going right?"

"Everything's going fine," he says, and gets a raised eyebrow and clears his throat again, suddenly finding he's more than a little embarrassed - except it's not . . . just embarrassment, he realizes, there's a kind of protectiveness in there as well, defensiveness that doesn't come from feeling like he's done something wrong, but from -

Well. From not wanting something precious dirtied, really.

"You don't have to tell me," Elizabeth says; now that they're close to the edge of the room she lets go of his arm and turns as a server passes to lift two tumblers of something off the tray, handing one to Steve. It turns out to be bourbon, and good bourbon at that.

"It's funny," Steve remarks dryly, after the pause for both of them to sip their drinks, "how whenever you say that, I suddenly feel more comfortable about telling you."

"It's my charm," she says, and Steve laughs, and then looks out over the room, trying to decide how and whether to answer.

"It's not a big thing," he says. "Probably shouldn't make that much difference."

"Mm," Elizabeth says. She looks over the room, too; then she looks back at him, tilts her head, takes a deep breath and says, "Bruce always tucks his shirts in. Even his t-shirts. It looks
ridiculous, so I always untuck them. I was trying to drop him off to head off to New York, and I saw his shirt was tucked in and I untucked it." She exhales all at once and then says, a little quieter, "Actually at the time it broke my heart because I was sure I'd never see him again, but my point is, objectively little things can be more important than anyone else knows."

Steve thinks he sees how she does it, in that moment: how she offers vulnerability and it makes you feel like it's okay to be vulnerable, to match. And it's not like he hasn't wanted - "He started using my name," he says, quietly. "My Chr - my given name, I mean. Few days ago."

After a beat, Elizabeth reaches over and squeezes his nearer forearm. "That doesn't sound like a little thing," she says. "Not even from out here."

Steve breathes a little half-laugh. "It just sounds so stupid, out loud," he confesses. "I mean - "

"Not at all," Elizabeth says, patting his arm this time.

After a second or two Steve says, "It's funny - well, not funny, probably not even surprising, but I hadn't noticed feeling it before right, but now I am . . . completely terrified."

She stands up on her toes and kisses his cheek. "I have complete faith in your ability to handle terror, Steve," she says. "Your own, and most other people's. Now come talk to some nice people, I made sure to make Pepper invite a few."

One of Elizabeth's "nice people" is a PhD candidate in history who, after clearly building up her courage for about ten minutes, tentatively asks Steve if he'd mind her asking a couple questions about - of all things - show-business during the War.

It's so unexpected it's, well, charming honestly, and after about two minutes she's begging his pardon and apologizing and groping for the notepad in the purse that her friend - girlfriend, Steve amends pretty quickly, given how close they stood, how quickly she'd been able to lay her hands on the purse and just how resigned and patient she looked while the PhD candidate scrambled for a pen - handed her.

The impression's confirmed when about forty-five minutes later, when the PhD student stops for breath, the other woman puts an arm around her waist and says, "And now since you've already given Captain Rogers your email and this is a gala, not a seminar, we're going to let him talk to someone else for a while and go find some canapés."

The PhD student looks sheepish. "Sorry," she says.

"Not a problem," Steve says, "I don't mind - it's really not the thing most people want to know about, so it's kind of refreshing."

"Careful," says the girlfriend with a look of deep affection, "or you'll never get free." And then she steers the student away by that arm around her waist and Steve looks around to take another drink from a server with a quiet thank you. It could be annoying that alcohol was, basically, useless, but it did mean he could drink as much as he wanted of whatever he wanted without a second thought.

He's aware there's a guy standing behind him to his right, but he's still surprised when it's Barton's voice that says, "Well that was adorable."

Steve turns; it is Barton, dressed for the occasion and holding champagne, which he lifts in a kind of mock-toast. "Rogers," he says.
"Barton," Steve replies. "Pepper's keeping secrets, didn't know you were coming."

"Oh, we're gate-crashing," Barton replies smoothly. "Nat's a Russian heiress tonight, by the way. You missed the fantastic tantrum she threw when they weren't going to let us in without tickets, so they'd go get Pepper and she'd let us in.

Steve looks Barton briefly up and down, takes in the expensive clothes and watch and slight thin goatee, or whatever they called them nowadays. "American boyfriend?" he guesses.

"It's fun," Barton says, "I get to glower at people. She's over with Stark and Pepper, you can tell by Stark's sour expression."

"I find it really difficult to feel that sorry for him," Steve says, glancing over to take in Natasha with her hair in a waterfall of red curls over a body-hugging cream dress, and Barton smirks.

"Oh, likewise," he agrees. He gestures with his drink. "You're looking very under-the-radar tonight."

"Sometimes it's nice not to scream exactly who you are to everyone who catches you out of the corner of your eye," Steve replies wryly. "How long have you been in town?"

"Few days," Barton replies. "Nat had something she wanted to do, we heard about this and thought we'd crash. I think we're heading out again tomorrow."

"How is she?" Steve asks, more seriously and hoping he's not crossing a line by asking. Barton looks thoughtful for a minute, with no obvious signs of minding the question, and then tilts his hand one side to the other.

"Better than I was," he says. "Better than she was a year ago."

"Good," Steve says, and then, because curiosity gets the better of him, he asks, "What have you been doing?"

"Travelling," Barton replies. He grins. "Taking a vacation. Playing tourist. Occasionally getting would-be ambushed by HYDRA strays and feeding the local scavengers." His expression turns to false earnestness. "They seem really mad at Tasha for some reason."


"You know it really pisses them off when you call them Nazis," Barton says, looking amused. "Just a tip if you ever get a chance to use it. Mention Schmidt if you really want to see them froth."

"I'll keep it in mind," Steve replies, and then gestures towards Tony, Pepper and the vrais-Russian faux-heiress. "I think you're being summoned. I'd go, but I'm reliably informed I'm a terrible liar and I might give you away. Say hi for me."

Clint gives a mocking salute with his champagne glass and makes his way in the direction of Natasha's imperious gestures. And as conversations go, Steve decides to find that one reassuring.

By the time he lets Stark talk him into letting someone drive him home, Steve's honestly tired. It's not a bad tired. Actually, it's a good tired. But it's definitely tired, and tired makes it a lot easier to worry.
He’s spent all night refusing to fixate on the lack of any texts from the house; considering how he was when Steve left, there’s a reasonable chance Bucky turned his phone off and chucked it under an available piece of furniture and no reasonable chance, or at least no great likelihood that he’s dead or anything worse has happened.

Probably. Most likely.

There’s also next to no reasonable chance that Bucky’s sleeping, or that he ate real food over the course of the night, but as so many nights previous have demonstrated, that’s not actually going to kill him. At least not all at once.

When he pushes open the door and puts away his coat, Steve finds Bucky on the balcony, wrapped in a wool coat, sitting on the folding wooden chair and staring at the dark, the door still open to let the night air in and the day air out. There’s a mug beside him on the matching side table, steaming - probably coffee - and a mostly empty plate.

There’s also another dead phone on the floor (that would be number six), a broken tile from over the oven on the stove, and in the kitchen, the handle of a spoon - an ordinary dessert spoon, with the head snapped off at an angle to give it a rough point - buried several inches in the wall. And several dents, as if something hit the wall hard, but not hard enough to break through.

There’s something subtly off about them. And after a few seconds of frowning, Steve realizes what’s off is that they’re at the wrong height - not shoulder or body for Bucky but about right for -

“Natasha Romanoff sends her regards,” Bucky says from the balcony. “She’d’ve stayed but I think that guy she goes around with wanted to yell at her for giving him a heart attack.” He looks darkly amused with himself and shrugs while Steve stares at him. “Whoever made her earpiece has good isolation design. I could only hear parts of the conversation.”

"Barton,” Steve says, letting the brief shot of adrenaline settle, letting logistics calm him down. There really hasn't been enough time for Natasha and Clint to get from Stark Tower to here - Natasha was still playing Russian socialite and flirting outrageously when Steve left - which means they came here before going there, which means Steve knows they're both fine.

Steve looks at the spoon, the hole, the dents, and then Bucky. And out of all the next words that go through his head the ones he lets come out of his mouth are, “Do I even want to know?”

It gets him an ironic look, but that’s about all; Bucky doesn't move and his face doesn't really give anything away. “I don’t know,” he says. “Do you?”

This is a better mood than the one Steve left him in, at least, even if it’s still not the best; the humour might be snide, but there's no snarl and nothing Steve can see behind the verbal fencing’s malicious or twisted. After thinking about it, Steve leans balcony doorframe and says, “Yeah, I think I do. Since we’re down a spoon and all.”

He tosses the improvised shiv - because that’s what it is, no real two ways about it, the tip ragged with broken metal and probably just sharp enough to cut without ludicrous effort - to Bucky, who catches it out of the air.

“I was making a point,” he says, and after a second to get it, Steve gives him the obligatory disappointed sigh.

“That was a terrible pun, and you should be ashamed. A point about what?” he prods. "Why was Natasha here?”
Bucky’s amused look twists up a bit and he taps the point of the handle on the knuckles of his left hand, the high-pitched noise echoing a little.

He says, conversationally, “You know how just about everyone who knows you who knows about me pretty much guaranteed spends a lot of time strangling their clear and present desire to give me a graphic don’t hurt him or else speech? - except Stark, maybe he really doesn’t like you that much. Don’t,” he adds, when Steve opens his mouth; it's a guess, Steve knows it's a guess, but it's not a bad guess, and Tony is the only one that doesn't give off that feeling, just a little. “Doesn’t matter. They care about you, that’s fine. But the Black Widow either has less restraint or just less tact. I’m pretty sure it’d be fucking ludicrous to say she’s more honest.”

Steve really tries hard not to grimace, and tries not to worry in advance of slowly finding out what the hell actually happened. “Natasha can have some . . . unique ideas about . . . appropriate . . . ness,” he says, the statement trailing off, a bit awkward. He finishes dryly, “I’m pretty sure her heart is somewhere in the general vicinity of the right place, most of the time.”

Bucky smiles a brief, small, complicated smile, flipping the spoon handle through his fingers. “Like I said. I was making a point. A couple, actually.” He shifts so that he's looking at Steve more directly.

“What points, Buck?” Steve pushes, carefully, and Bucky’s amusement fades for a minute and he’s not looking at the handle or at Steve or even at the real world anymore; he’s looking through all of them to something else, something only he can see.

Steve knows the look he's wearing, and once upon a time - back when the worst fights they ever got into, correction, Steve got them into involved at the most small knives - he'd've considered it a bad sign. Now - now it's small change next to other looks he knows, but it's still on the dangerous end. The kind that would come up before Bucky's contribution to a plan probably solved the problems they were having, but increased the automatic, no-surrender-possible enemy body-count about three-fold.

“Firstly,” he says, “there is no or else.” The handle flips around point down in his right hand and he stabs it into the wood of the table; there's no anger or rancour in it, but the handle stays upright and standing, driven a couple inches in. "Not from her or any of the rest of them.”

He stares at the dark for a minute and then looks at Steve before he lets his expression change to something more amused again. “That,” he adds, “is the part that gave her sniper a heart attack, I think. It’s definitely the part that means I need to fix the wall tomorrow.”

Steve makes a mental note that he owes Clint Barton a drink. Maybe a bottle. Possibly a case. Actually, possibly there's no paying that one. But clearly Natasha's fine, or Barton'd've had something to say about it before.

“And secondly?” he prompts, and Bucky comes back to here and now from wherever it was he went. And Steve knows that look too. It's tired, and all the amusement is at himself, and most of it's not particularly nice.

Bucky reaches over to the plate that looks like it used to have food on it, and picks up the thing Steve hadn’t really bothered to look at, had figured was a crust or something else but now he can see is - well.

It’s Bucky’s pocket knife. The old one, the one Steve found, the one that still exists by sheer accident of his having lent it to Monty, the one that Steve tracked down, reclaimed, kept. The one that technically went missing off the mantelpiece the first night Bucky came here - though Steve
supposes it probably doesn’t count as missing if you’re almost sure you know where it went.

When Bucky taps it against his left hand, the sound is lower, quieter.

He looks at Steve for a minute and the distant look is back, but more like he’s looking into Steve or through Steve or back years, or something. Then he tosses the closed knife with a flick of his right wrist that sends it end over end towards Steve, who catches it against his chest.

“That when it comes to saving you from your own fucking idealism and your fucking martyr complex,” Bucky says, “and come to think of it everything else you get your stubborn ass into - I was here first.”

It takes a moment for those words to sink in. For them to reorient themselves enough to hammer in what they actually mean, what Bucky actually just said.

Admitted.

Claimed.

And when they do, for a minute Steve has to look away, stare down at the surface of the deck because otherwise he’s going to lose it, and it might be losing it in a good way but he still doesn’t think it’s a good idea, here, now. Considering the roundabout way of it, the carefulness, it’s probably not even a good idea to act like this moment is that much out of the ordinary. Probably. Maybe?

Honestly he doesn’t know. But it’s hard to breathe for a second and then Steve feels giddy and light-headed and he leans a bit harder on the door-frame.

And when he looks up Bucky’s still watching him and it’s pretty clear that he’s pretty transparent, and there’s probably a comment floating around in the air about him being a terrible liar.

“That,” he says carefully, “is fair. Definitely fair.”

It’s all he trusts himself to say, and he can see, or at least guesses he can see, that it was as much for Bucky to say as it was for him to hear, except maybe in different directions, and the entire world is a little fragile, and maybe it’s better not to push.

“Good,” Bucky says. “And yeah,” he says, jerking his head at the plate. “I ate something. So shut up.”

Steve comes the rest of the way out on the deck, leans on the railing and works hard to keep himself from beaming at the night. But he says, “You’re lucky Barton didn’t shoot you, you know.”

Bucky’s mouth quirks up. “I got her to follow me into the kitchen because that’s where he didn’t have a shot. Solid concrete and steel between him and us.”

Definitely a case.

"That was mean, Buck," Steve says, pushing his luck a little, and Bucky shrugs.

"I was in a bad mood," he says. "They'll both live."

Steve’s not completely sure what to do with the pocket-knife; in the end he puts it back where it
used to be, and it stays there.

When he thinks about it long enough, Steve thinks maybe it was a puzzle; and maybe now the puzzle's solved, so Bucky doesn't need that piece anymore. At least not to hide away or carry. It could stay where they could both see it.

He keeps that one to himself.

Works inspired by this: [podfic] your blue-eyed boys (1: someone's bound to get burned) by sallysparrow017

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