### Omega Rising: Avengers

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org) at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/17340968](http://archiveofourown.org/works/17340968).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/F, F/M, Gen, M/M, Multi, Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Marvel Cinematic Universe, Iron Man (Movies), The Avengers (Marvel Movies), Captain America (Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James “Bucky” Barnes/Steve Rogers, Steve Rogers/Tony Stark, James “Bucky” Barnes/Steve Rogers/Tony Stark, Clint Barton/Natasha Romanov, Loki/Thor (Marvel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Steve Rogers, Tony Stark, Natasha Romanov (Marvel), Clint Barton, Bruce Banner, Thor (Marvel), Loki (Marvel), James “Bucky” Barnes, Pepper Potts, Brock Rumlow, Nick Fury, Sam Wilson (Marvel), James Rhodes, Maria Hill, Barney Barton, Happy Hogan, Pietro Maximoff, Wanda Maximoff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Alpha/Omega, Non-Traditional Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Inspired by Roleplay/Roleplay Adaptation, Pepper Potts &amp; Tony Stark Friendship, Insecure Tony, Omega Steve Rogers, Tony Stark Has Issues, Snarky Tony Stark, Alpha Tony Stark, Heavy Angst, Smut, Epic Battles, Epic Love, Shameless Smut, Romance, Established Relationship, Established Steve Rogers/Tony Stark, Stony - Freeform, Stucky - Freeform, Drama &amp; Romance, Courtroom Drama, Action/Adventure, Steve Rogers and the 21st Century, Bottom Steve Rogers, Steve Rogers Feels, Soulmates, Soul Bond, Power Dynamics, Dom/sub Undertones, During Canon, Canon Compliant, The Avengers Are Good Bros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 5 of The Avengers Ultimate A/O AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2019-01-07 Updated: 2019-06-23 Chapters: 26/? Words: 135674</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Omega Rising: Avengers**

by [SapphoAndThamyris](http://archiveofourown.org/users/SapphoAndThamyris)

**Summary**

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

Omega Rising: Avengers is part 5 of the Omega Rising series and covers 2012, which sees the first assemblage of the Avengers as well as the return of Bucky.

Updates Saturdays.
Hello, my lovelies. I didn't forget about you; I had a busy holiday. Hope yours was good, too! I am also currently battling a HUGE bout with the flu.

In return for your patience, we have some presents for you for Part 5. First of all, we will shortly be announcing new names for the first 4 parts. If we select a name that you proposed, please contact us and we'll send you Marvel swag.

Also, we now have a Discord server for fans to talk and we will have an hour each week before chapter releases where you can come to talk to one or both of the authors about your questions, concerns, suggestions, or deep-seated resentments! Yay! The link is here: https://discord.gg/45X5A9f

Happy 2019. Now let's get this party started... - T
Steve had felt that, over the last few lazy spring months, it was easy to pretend everything was perfect. Aside from Tony's drinking, there was nothing else that really bothered him. Life was good, better than he ever thought it could be.

Then Steve was woken at 3 am with a phone call from Fury. He groaned. Okay, maybe life could be a little better.

He had not gotten one of these phone calls for months and his soldier's instincts kicked in immediately. No one ever called at 3 am with good news, after all.

"Steve--" Nick didn't sound tired at all, damn him. "--we need you to come back in to the Joint Dark Energy Mission Facility. Something strange is happening to the Tesseract and we want you to have a look at it."

Steve grumbled something rude. The JDEM Facility was all the way in the Mojave Desert, past Edwards Base, and it would be about a two-hour drive from Malibu. Steve had told them not to mess around with that damned cube. "...fine!" he hissed. "Alright. I'll be there."

He rolled over and kissed Tony noisily on the cheek. "Love you," he told him and then pulled away to get dressed.

He drove his Triumph to the base because it would be faster and it felt good to have the cool night air whipping around him. It helped wake him up. Unease roiled in his gut.

When he arrived at the base he knew something was... wrong. The scientists were too quiet, nervous. His escorts spoke in a sharp, clipped manner. Everyone seemed on edge and it took an unusually short amount of time to get Steve the necessary clearances to take him down to the warehouse where the Cube was stored. (Steve tried not to think about where Bucky might be. Somewhere on the base, perhaps even in this very building, asleep, unconscious.)

Steve stepped into the large, high-ceilinged room and nodded up at Clint, who looked a little on edge himself. The atmosphere was strange, unnerving. Everyone was far too awake for so early in the morning. "Hey," Steve said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"Hey yourself."

"So, what's up with the box?"

"It's turned into a door. They just won't believe me," Clint said, sighing. (The major who was escorting Steve scoffed a little; clearly, he didn't believe it, either.)

Steve turned to give the Tesseract a proper look. It sat on a stage in the middle of the room. It looked small, nestled in a little case set atop of a plain metal table, an array of instruments surrounding it. Its blue reminded Steve of Tony's arc reactor. Tony would know what some of the equipment in this warehouse was; Steve himself could only identify the table.

The energy around the cube was fluctuating; if he blinked too fast it almost looked like-- huh. Space window. "I mean, this looks bad. They should stop poking it with those things," offered Steve, who had already said as much probably a hundred times.

"I know! I told them that already," agreed Clint from the mezzanine that overlooked the main stage.
Steve turned at the sound of footsteps on the grated metal floor.

Nick Fury walked in, hands in his pockets, face stoic. "So, Captain, what do you see?"

"I, erm... thought I saw space window. For a second."

"Interesting."

"Wait, you've seen it too?" Clint asked, sitting up from where he was leaning against one of the rafters.

"What have you been seeing, Agent Barton?" Fury asked, raising a tremendous brow.

"Space window. What Steve said. I thought I was losing it, maybe. But if Steve is seeing it too!"

The Tesseract fluctuated again, it almost felt like it was saying hello.

Steve stepped closer, peering at it. Huh. It almost looked like--

"Steve!"

Steve blinked and realised he was standing right in front of it. When did he get so close? He frowned. He had no memory of walking over, of climbing the stairs up to the stage. He would never approach it. He knew how dangerous it was. So how...?

"Captain Rogers," asked one of the scientists, looking worried. "Please step back." She turned to Fury, whispering at him. "The energy spikes are through the roof, Director."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm moving," Steve said but he wasn't. He wasn't moving. Huh. That was weird.

Nick almost sounded nervous when he prompted, "Steven?"

Steve turned around to look at him and there was a strange look in his eyes. One the director hadn't seen before.

And then something-- no, someone-- came out of nowhere and the Tesseract's energy field blossomed. It was... beautiful. The room lit up. And this someone barrelled straight into Steve, knocking him down to the ground. They were heavy and cold. They were the most distinctly omega thing Steve had ever smelled. He knew they couldn't sense dominance like Alphas, but whatever the omega equivalent was, it was assaulting Steve's senses. That, and his head had just smacked into ground. Yay, he thought, dimly. Despite everything, he couldn't help but feel the slightest pang of smugness. Because he'd told them not to mess with that cube. He'd told them it was dangerous. And now they were about to see for themselves.

It was so bright. That was the first thing he noticed. In Thanos's world it had been dark, dark to the point of oppressing. But there so much colour here, so much noise. Yes. He loved it. Loki wanted to laugh' it almost felt like freedom. Except freedom was, of course, very much overrated.

The scepter weighed heavy in his hands, the armour heavy where it hung off his shoulders. Being a leader was heavy, yes. He had expected that. He accepted that burden with gratitude. He had been born to lead. He had always felt that, in his very bones.

The Tesseract was running through him. He was breathing it, encompassing it. It was addictive. It was a high. It was the truth.
He had come so far to get here. He had fallen so far. It was all meant to be.

They were shooting something at him. Pellets of some kind, perhaps. Whatever it was felt annoying as pinged off his armour. The Midgardians did not look best pleased at his entrance. What had they been expecting? They'd opened the Tesseract, practically invited him through. Such silly, simple minded creatures.

Loki was breathing a little heavily as he rose up from where he was crouched on the floor, forehead shiny with an unhealthy looking clamminess. And his eyes were a strange shade of blue. They didn't look natural, although nothing about him did. But he was smiling, teeth bared a fraction. Blue smoke coiled around him, his armour almost sizzling. It was a soft, gentle sound, before it was interrupted by gunfire.

He adjusted the grip on his scepter and twisted it, the Tesseract's energy warping through it and blasting a hole through the humans and the wall behind them.

There was a soft whizz past him and Loki's hand flew up, catching an arrow. One of the humans swore.

"Jesus Christ!"


Another blue blast of energy and the human was knocked down onto the floor. Loki looked down to see a blond man standing up. He was an omega but he looked strong; he was unnaturally tall and muscular; he almost reminded him of--

No. Don't think of him now.

"What the hell are you?" the blond man demanded, hands raised like he was ready for a fight. There was a trickle of red down the side of his temple. Such idiotic bravery.

"That--" Loki smiled, "is a very good question."

The blond man frowned and then Loki pointed the scepter at his chest. The blonde man's lips parted, eyes going wide. And then they took on an unhealthy blue glow. He gasped, like all the air had been knocked out of him.

"Steve!" yelled someone from above.

Oh, the arrow man was annoying. Loki deflected another projectile off of a barrier he raised with ease. Did this humans honestly think his primitive arrows were any good against Loki's sorcery?

He turned to the blond man, to 'Steve.'

"Go get the Tesseract." The said Tesseract appeared to be in the hands of a man in a black coat. He was putting it into some kind of box. Now that wouldn't do.

"I want to get Bucky," Steve told him.

Loki had no idea what that meant. He rolled his eyes. "Get the Tesseract first." Were humans so needy?

The arrow man was loading another arrow. Loki twisted his scepter in his grip again, the energy rippling around him and slamming into the archer and knocking him down to the ground. He walked
over to him, placing a foot on his chest before he touched the tip of his scepter to his chest.

"Do you know the quickest way out of here?" Loki asked, watching the archer's eyes light up with the same ghostly blue as before.

At the other side of the room Steve was advancing on Fury.

"Rogers! Snap out of it!"

Steve didn't seem hear him though, or if he did, he didn't respond. His movements were careful and measured. Not a second was wasted. He simply bent down, picking up a gun off one of the downed agents. Fury had the Tesseract in a case. He was backing away, trying to escape down the corridor. Steve lifted the gun, closed one eye and aimed.

He took the shot without hesitation and Fury fell down to the floor.

The soldier woke suddenly. There was no grogginess, nothing but alertness. Everything around him was crumpling, crashing, falling to pieces... it was like it was the end of the world.

He burst from his confined with a yell of effort and looked up and down the hall he was in. The floor was made of metal and the lights above were flickering; vibrations traveled up his very bones. Somewhere, he heard an explosion.

A pleasantly unalarmed female voice was telling everyone, calmly, to evacuate in an orderly fashion.

He turned right and began jogging, not sure where he was or where the exit was or what was happening. He bumped into a woman in a lab coat going the other way; she looked at him, then kept moving with a look of terror.

He turned at the next junction and slammed into two men in tactical gear carrying guns.

"Fuck!" said one.

"Forget it, leave him, get to the cube!"

They shouldered past each other; there was another explosion, one that felt like it was coming up from beneath the earth. An earthquake? All three of them jostled each other, separated, and went their separate ways.

He bumped into yet another person when he yanked open a door to a flight of stairs. A young omega was holding a girl in his arms.

"James!" he exclaimed.

The soldier tensed.

"It's me! Pietro! ...James, you know me, we're friends."

...was his name James? He pointed to himself questioningly

"Yes! You're James! Come on, hurry, we have to get out of here." The girl in his arms lolled her head a little and then looked up at him with red eyes that made a chill go down his spine. "I don't know what's happening but everything's falling apart and they're evacuating. Now we can escape. Come on, hurry..."
The soldier obediently followed the omega up the flight of stairs, the blinking emergency lights spilling red over the concrete and metal.

Tony woke gradually and groggily. It was May 1st. He rolled over, but Steve was gone. Oh well.

He walked down to the kitchen to make himself a drink and some breakfast. Over a plate of toast and apple jelly, he went through the calendar on his phone. Tomorrow he and Steve were scheduled to fly to New York to get the new Stark tower online, though the actual ceremonial opening wasn't until the following week. Pepper was extremely proud of it. She had been working herself to the bone to get the thing built; the original base of Stark Industries had been in New York but had been moved to California in the eighties because they'd simply outgrown it. Tony liked the idea of going back to their roots and the proposed tower in Manhattan looked fantastically gorgeous, in his opinion. Then again, he was biased, because it had his name in big lights on it and a bar on the top floor.

Donner swung by for lunch.

"Sorry, Don, Steve isn't here. He got called away last night on some mission or something. Very hush-hush," said Tony.

"Dabagadabagabbada," said Granite. Now more than four months old, she made a lot of nonsense noises. Tony felt she'd gotten moderately more interesting because she could at least raise her head and look around and seemed sort of curious.

"Dagga jabba, indeed," said Tony, sipping on his drink. "If you want you can stay and make me lunch, though."

"Oh... okay," said Donner, slinging a diaper bag onto the counter and then offering Granite to Tony.

"No, no, I don't like to hold--"

"It's fine, here, you can wear the sling." Donner put a sling around Tony's neck and popped the baby into it. She gurgled and stuck her fingers into her mouth. Tony frowned a little. He didn't want her to get drool on him and so far she was excellent at getting drool on things. She was still not presenting as statused, so they suspected she was a beta, though they couldn't really know for sure until puberty. Tony still felt her name was incredibly stupid. What were people supposed to call her for a nickname, Granny? (Most people affectionately called her Grant.)

Donner hummed as he went through the kitchen.

"So no word on what's up with Steve?"

"Nope. It's been a while since Fury pulled him away in the middle of the night. He's been itching to get out into the field, though," said Tony peacefully. "He'll probably be back this afternoon. How's Banksy?"

"Oh... you know, he's alright," said Donner mildly. Banksy spent most of his energy on the show, but since Boswell's death, his usual enthusiasm had been lackluster. Off-camera, he seemed older, more reserved.

"Mm," said Tony, turning back to his magazine. It had a feature article on the new Stark Tower, which would be run on 100% renewable, clean energy by May, 2012. Which was today. Tony angled the magazine up. "See that, Grant? That's my new tower. Isn't it awesome?"
Grant consider the page, reached for it, then, when Tony didn’t let her get her fat, glistening fingers on the page, began crying.

"...everyone's a critic," grumbled Tony.
"S-Steve. Don't do this," Fury wheezed. He was wearing a bullet-proof, vest which had taken the majority of the hit, but his breath had been knocked out of him, and he lay on the metal grating of the warehouse, the emergency lights blinking around him, his attention on the towering figure that approached him. Steve stood over him with his shoulders too straight and expression set. Nick looked like he was in pain but Steve didn't react to it. He tilted his head at him slowly, his eyes an awful shade of blue. "What- what did he do to you?"

Steve knelt down. He reached for the case with the Tesseract in it. He smiled. "He showed me the truth."

He heard footsteps and voices approaching. The whole building was trembling around them. Steve grabbed the case firmly and stood quickly, suddenly all business again. Then he walked away, or rather ran, disappearing just before Phil arrived.

"Director! Come on, we've go to get you out of here--" Phil grabbed Fury's shoulder, trying to get him to stand. "What happened?"

"Rogers. He shot me," Nick grunted.

"What?"

"Rogers and Barton. They're compromised. I don't have time to explain now; we have to get out of here."

"Where's the Tesseract?"

"They have it," Fury said heavily, a hand on Phil's arm. "Radio Hill. She- she has to try and stop them. Whatever it takes."

Phil nodded, eventually getting Fury to standing. "Hill? Rogers and Barton are compromised. They are leaving with an unknown individual. They have the Tesseract. You must stop them. Take--" He hesitated for only a split second. "Take the shot if you have to."

"Understood."

Steve didn't know how he knew. But he headed downstairs to the garage on instinct. He passed a few agents on the way down.

"Captain Rogers! We're evac--"

Steve smashed his head against the wall, not caring if he killed him, before elbowing the other man in the throat and knocking him down.

When he got down to the garage he found a trail of bodies in his wake. Bucky had already left the base. Steve could feel it in his bones. But it didn't matter, so long as he was safe. Steve could find him later. Or maybe Bucky would come back to him like he had before.

"Come on! We're going!" Clint was in the front of a vehicle, already starting it. It was a form of truck, heavy duty, designed for unforgiving terrain. The thick concrete walls of the garage shuddered around them. The creature that had come through the Tesseract was seated in the back of the truck,
looking worse for wear. He was breathing a little heavily.

"Are you alright?" Steve asked him, climbing into the truck, apparently interested in his welfare.

"I'll be fine, just go!" Loki snapped.

Steve placed the suitcase down. "I didn't find Bucky."

"Nothing good comes from Alphas," Loki assured him, voice low. Steve hadn't mentioned that Bucky was his, but it seemed this man understood. There was a hatred in Loki's eyes. A pure and unquestionable kind.

"Captain! Stop!"

Hill ran into the garage, gun in hand. She made to take a shot. A bullet whizzed past Steve's ear.

Loki seemed to jab the sceptre in his hand into the air and a blast of blue energy erupted from the tip, slamming into a car and making agent Hill duck out of the way. Clint slammed on the accelerator and took them out of the garage, taking a sharp turn down the tunnel, toward the exit.

"She'll follow," Clint said. And then he reached down, producing a pistol from his belt.

Steve took it.

He could see Hill's car in the distance and the tunnel collapsing behind her. The end of the tunnel looked dark, the sun not having quite yet risen in the sky. He tried to shoot out her tires but Clint was driving too quickly, taking them out of the base and making the truck groan in the process.

Loki was swaying a little where he was sat in the center of the truck. Steve could tell he was sick with something.

"Where now?" Clint asked.

"Somewhere safe," Loki said. "Somewhere they won't find us." And then he smiled a sickly kind of smile, his eyes glinting. "And then there is someone we need to find."

"Bucky?" Steve asked hopefully.

Loki rolled his eyes.

Steve was disappointed. No Bucky yet then.

The rumble of a helicopter ghosted overhead as they roared away from the facility. Loki placed a hand on Steve's shoulder and then stood, sceptre pointed at the sky.

They heard the helicopter crash a ways off in the distance with the crush of glass and the hiss of an engine.

Steve's phone started ringing in his pocket a few minutes later. He picked it up and dropped it out onto the dirt road without a second thought.

Tony bid Donner good-bye after lunch and went down to his shop to go through his e-mail, but got distracted and ended up working on his '67 Camaro instead.

He didn't realize how much time had passed until JARVIS alerted him. He looked up to find the sun
was setting.

He frowned. Steve had been gone all day. It was rare for him to be away for more than twenty-four (or even twelve) hours without telling Tony.

But Tony didn't feel especially fearful or upset. He tried to search for Steve's emotions, mixed into his own. He was well-aware that he and Steve's bond wasn't as strong as Steve's and Bucky's, that they were less tuned to each other. He was also aware that he and Steve weren't as good at parsing each other's feelings out at a distance. But there didn't seem to be any real cause for concern, so Tony went back to work, going to bed alone in the wee hours of the morning.

The next morning Tony waited as long as he could, but Steve didn't show. Finally, having already taken three frantic calls from Pepper, he got aboard the plane by himself.

"Where's the Cap?" asked Charlie.

Tony shrugged. "Off saving the world, probably. Let's fly. I got a building to light up."

The bruise on his ribs had turned an ugly shade of purpose, but Fury's face showed no emotion as he stood in front of the monitors of the war room.

"This isn't about control," he said calmly. "Wars aren't controlled, and that's what this is. War."

"So you're saying Asgard has declared war on us?" asked General Singh.


Singh scoffed. "We're to believe one man, working alone, brought down the entire Joint Dark Energy Mission Facility?"

"He's not a man," pointed out Fury.

"He's the brother of Thor, isn't he?"

"Who we've established is non-hostile. Our intelligence suggests he's back on Asgard, anyway. He can't help us. We need a response team, and I mean now. With the Tesseract at his disposal--"

"--is this about the Avengers Initiative, Nick?" asked councilwoman Hawley, frowning. "We appreciate the spirit of that initiative, but we shut it down for a good reason."

"This isn't about the Avengers! It's about--"

"They're a bunch of freaks," interrupt Malick. "Let's be clear on this. We're running the world's greatest security network and you want to send a group of people you barely have control over to do what, exactly? Take down a being with godlike powers? They're isolated, they're unbalanced... you'd have to be an idiot to trust them."

"You trust me, right babe?" asked Tony.

"Lord help me, I do," said Pepper. She was sitting on a couch in the penthouse of Stark Tower, legs crossed, window open to the helipad. Below her, the city lights sparkled.

Tony was on a radio; he was currently somewhere in the Atlantic, talking to her via satellite.
Inside the HUD, he was examining a pipeline transport that was lying on the ocean floor. His actual vision was murky and much of his sight was reliant on digital rendering of his surroundings. A small corner of the HUD was flashing, informing him that the suit was under a lot of pressure. Tony already knew that. He was, after all, underwater. A bar in his upper lefthand corner was monitoring the oxygen levels within the suit.

"I think I found the right one," he announced. "The Tower will either lose power or the building next door will."

"I think Six Flag's corporate offices are next door," said Pepper, peering out the window, down at the city.

"Oh. Well. I'm already cutting, so..." said Tony. He had done plenty of underwater laser experiments and it went flawlessly; the pipeline in front of him was cut in an instant.

"Oop! Power's out!" announced Pepper into his headset.

"Awesome. Okay, re-wiring it now," said Tony.

The RT node was about the size of an oil drum. They had already built the base and casing for it; it was just a matter of connecting the arc reactor to the wires. Tony's movements were sluggish, both because he was underwater and because he was in a heavy metal suit whose fingers lacked dexterity. But he managed to connect the right wires to the right ports and then sheath them within the casing, locking it down. Underwater, the RT node glowed pleasantly like a little lamp; a few confused fish zipped past.

"All done!" said Tony. "JARVIS, gimme some juice. I'm ready to come up for air." He hit the jets. The suit was pressurized so he didn't worry about his ascent; he shot up, and the moment he left the water he felt the familiar drop in his stomach, the sensation of weightlessness that meant he was airborne. The city shrank below him, a beautiful, glittering model skylight, and as Tony banked toward it, he saw the soft white-blue glow of his name flickering: STARK.

"Transition lines were disconnected. We're off the energy grid and you're lit up like a fuckin' beacon of self-sustaining, environmentally friendly energy. ...it's fucking beautiful, Pepper, you oughta see it. Like Christmas, only more me."

"I know you love you," said Pepper wryly, but Tony could hear the smile in her voice. "Which is why I don't know why you're not pushing harder on the public awareness campaign, frankly. We need much broader press coverage. I mean, I can talk to zoning about--"

"Pepper, stop. You're ruining it. We don't need public awareness, we're got my name up here in twelve-foot-tall lights. For crying out loud... you have no idea how to relax, do you?"

Pepper laughed.

Tony landed lightly on the helipad, lining himself up with the markings on the ground so that the gantry could disassemble his armor. He gave his head a shake as the mechanical arms pulled off the faceplate, the backplate, and finally the helmet.

Pepper was standing in front of him, leaning on one hip, in a denim skirt and a t-shirt. Tony grinned at her. "...what?"

"Nothing. I just love seeing your human side. ...want to pop the champagne?"

"You know I do!" Tony moved forward slowly, letting the gantry finish up. Moving too quickly
could cause harm to him... or worse, to the suit. He stepped out of the boots and ducked under a mechanical arm to follow Pepper into the penthouse. It was still relatively empty, though they’d moved in a few chairs and sofas, haphazardly arranging them.

Pepper offered Tony a bottle of champagne from a bucket on the table; beside it was her tablet, with live energy readouts from the building.

"How's she look?" asked Tony, craning to look at the tablet as he pulled the foil from the bottle.

"Holding steady."

"Sort of premature to have the champagne already chilled before you knew it was gonna work," said Tony.

"Oh, I knew it would work. ...didn't you?"

"Well, duh." There was a loud pop; the cork went flying and the bottle fizzed over. Tony sipped the froth away from the lip. "I mean, I was directly involved, and I am a genius, working with a genius--"

"Oh, stop."

"--no, really, you deserve the credit, you met with the architects, you procured the supplies, you did the boring legal stuff... this tower is your magnum opus, Pepper. Your baby."

"Wouldn't be possible without that," she said, pointing to Tony's chest.

"This old thing?" said Tony, pointing to his chest. He scoffed. "Oh, please. This was only a piece of the puzzle. No, Pepper, this tower is yours and you deserve credit where credit is due. You're at least twelve percent responsible." He sipped more champagne froth from the bottle.

Pepper frowned. "Excuse me? ...twelve percent?"

"Or fifteen, whatever."

"Twelve percent?"

"I mean, I did the heavy lifting, literally, and developed the arc reactor, and it was originally my company, and my name's on the side of it, but I mean--"

"You called this my baby. You called this my magnum opus."

"I thought we were teasing and now you sound mad," said Tony.

"Twelve percent? --and for heaven's sake, Tony, use a glass, stop drinking from the bottle like an alcoholic--"

"Alcoholics go to meetings."

Pepper was grabbing a glass for him when the elevator pinged.

"Uh-oh. That seems like kind of a major security liability," said Tony. "That's supposed to be my private--"

"Our private," grumbled Pepper.
Phil Coulson stepped out. Tony perked up, but Steve wasn't with him.

"Hi, Phil," said Pepper.

"JARVIS, did you let in Phil?" hollered Tony.

"Yes, sir, but it was unintentional. He overrode my security commands."

"What?!"

"Steve knows some of your codes," said Phil.

"Damn it, Rogers... what do you want?" snapped Tony. "We're celebrating."

"Good, I love celebrations."

"No, see, you're not invited. What do you want? Where's Steve?" demanded Tony in annoyance.

"You might want to sit down," said Phil.

Tony reached for the bottle. "...he's okay, right?" Phil held out a folder. Tony stared at it blankly. "I don't like people to hand me things."

Pepper sighed deeply, took the folder, handed Phil her champagne glass, handed Tony the folder, and then took his bottle.

Phil took a sip of the champagne. Pepper threw back the bottle and took a swig. Tony flipped open the folder glumly.

"...the Avengers?" he said in surprise. "I thought everyone was over that. And you guys told me you only wanted me to be, like, a consultant, after the whole thing in Cuba."

"What thing in Cuba?" asked Pepper.

"The thing where Steve broke that guy's leg."

"You know she doesn't have clearance, right?" asked Phil.

"You didn't tell me anything about Cuba."

"Yeah, no, they said they were only gonna keep me on as a consultant because they said I was volatile and self-obsessed and don't work well as part of a team and--"

"Oh, yes, that's absolutely true," agreed Pepper.

"Mr. Stark. We no longer especially care about personality profiles. We need to find Steve Rogers, and we might need Iron Man as well. ...want to come for a ride?"

"I'm not finished with my drink," said Tony grumpily.

"...I'll pack you a thermos," said Pepper, ruffling his hair.

"Father. Please."
Odin observed his son with a stern, critical eye, leaning one arm heavily on the armrest of his throne. It was not like Thor to grovel, or to plead, but here he was, anxious to retrieve his brother from Midgard, where they had learned from Heimdall that he had appeared and was gamiblings about, having a little temper tantrum. Odin had always known him to be spoiled. Loki was a delicate creature who had been coddled terribly. He was, after all, a fragile child. Not dim, no. Quite clever, actually. But small and slower to develop. Thor had outpaced in in every regard physically and Loki, nearly a millennium old, could still neither grow a beard nor wield a sword. Of course, it was not merely that he was a runt, but also an omega. It was a poor comparison; Odin, Thor, and Frigga were all themselves Alphas. Thor, who surely caddied about with his fair share of silly little omega women, would someday take an Alpha as his queen and, in turn, bear an Alpha himself. Loki was unique among the royal family and prone to wild mood swings that Odin did not especially understand. His wife was sympathetic but then, she had always doted on the gentler of her sons.

"Let him rule Midgard as he wishes. Why should he be denied it? Among them, he's powerful, he is as great as he imagines himself--"

"No, please. Father. He is misled. He is only taking the world I love as recompense for imagined slights. Midgard is under my protection, and we know him ill-suited to rulership. He is no warrior, or king. He is a scholar and an omega. He conquers only to destroy; his war is not righteous. Let me retrieve him."

"...my king." Frigga's voice was soft, tentative. "He speaks the truth. Loki is burdened by his emotions; he is sensitive. Surely he deserves to be corrected before he embarrass the Asgardian throne?"

Odin scoffed. "As though Asgard cares for the respect of Midgard."

Thor puffed up. "Midgard is a world which I have pledged my allegiance to. I will not let you speak poorly of it!"

"Mind yourself, Thor," warned Odin. "Entangling alliances can be a very dangerous thing, to a king. And besides, what business have we with Midgardrians? Loki will come to his senses in a century or so and return to us, licking his wounds, tail between his legs."

"Father, I ask you to indulge me in a treasured hobby. Midgard is dear to my heart, as is my wayward brother. Let me go to there and talk sense to him. I am sure I can convince him to end his foolish campaign. While the respect of the Midgardians may mean little to you, it is at least a chance for me to practice my diplomacy," said Thor. "And," he added slyly, "it would make Mother happy."

Odin glanced to Frigga. "Would it, my queen?"

"What makes a woman happier than to hold her son to her breast and know he is safe?" she replied. Odin heaved a sigh. "Very well. Go and fetch him. ...if only to practice your diplomacy."

"Thank you, Father." Thor approached the throne and gave his father a kiss on the cheek.

"Please bring him home," whispered Frigga softly, reaching for Thor. He embraced her.

"Yes, Mother."

"...bring a cloak, I'm sure it's chilly on Midgard."

"No, Mother, it's--"
"I'll pack you a lunch."

Thor groaned. He was a thousand years old, hardly a boy anymore, but still she fussled over him like he was child. He sulked in the throne room while she went to fetch his armor, embarrassed by the spectacle; it was not as if he was going to fight a war. Only to speak to and retrieve his misguided brother, who was a weakling and an omega besides. Finding him and taking him home would be a simple task that would be no trouble; he imagined he would be home in time for dinner.
Space was huge, empty and aching. But seeing more of it hadn't made Loki a better or more humbled person. If anything, it had made him more arrogant. He saw stupidity and foolishness every which way he turned. Since falling from the rainbow bridge he'd seen a lot. He'd spent much time amongst the Vanir, disguised, of course. They were his mother's people.

Well, no--

Not his mother.

They taught him magic that Asgard hadn't. They were kinder to omegas than Asgard was. Loki was less looked down on. Despite being able to shapeshift and distort his image, the one thing Loki could never hide was his status. And that had always infuriated him to no end. Thor had always thought he was better, and then their biology had proven it.

Vanir magic taught Loki to step through worlds. Shifting through planes was complicated. The way the magic fluttered around Loki felt like it had a life of its own. They had warned him not to wander too far from home. But the joke was on them, because Loki didn't have a home. He could wander as far as he wanted.

But he wandered too far. And he paid the price. Or, he discovered an opportunity. The chance to destroy Thor's precious planet? What more could he ever want?

What more, right?

"Y-you know what will happen to you if you fail. You will pay the greatest of prices. You will suffer like no one else has suffered before--"

"Boss?"

Loki's eyes snapped open. One of the humans had a hand on his shoulder. Why did they keep touching him!? They were down in a sewer. It smelt awful, frankly, but the archer had insisted it was the only place they couldn't be tracked. Travelling through the galaxy had lowered Loki's standards a little, but this was... urgh. He was a prince. His birthright was to be a ruler. And here he was, in a sewer. It was infuriating.

He looked over at the Tesseract, set up on same apparatus that had come from inside the case. Its blue, ghoulish light called to him. Loki's hands twitched by his sides and he stood, walking over. They had collected a few other men on the way, a couple of police officers off of the streets. Loki felt these puppets might come in handy.

All omegas and betas. No Alphas.

It seemed Loki was holding a grudge. Perhaps to an entire status. Perhaps to just one of them.

"So what does Selvig know?" asked the archer.

"He knows how to open the portal permanently. Despite being human I am of the understanding that he is... rather clever." Loki smiled. He was fond of clever beings.

As soon as the blond returned with Selvig, he'd be able to figure out just how clever he really was.
Erik Selvig was trying to have a quiet evening. He'd put on the TV for an old rerun of a cooking show, he'd ordered himself Chinese (it was his cheat day) and he was already in silk pajamas (because Erik knew how to treat himself). So when Captain America literally smashed through his window, he wasn't exactly pleased.

"Oh, God!" Erik was up in an instant, and Chinese was all over the floor. Oh no.

Steve had jumped through the pane like it was nothing and apparently had no concern for the shards of glass in his hair. His eyes shone an unnatural, electric blue.

"Captain?" prompted Erik when Steve began walking towards him. Erik began walking backwards. He laughed awkwardly when his back hit the wall. "Can I, er, help you?"

"Yes."

"Well, what do you need?"

"I need you to come with me."

"Is this... is this to do with SHIELD? Has something happened with the Tesseract? Is Thor--"

"Yes. Exactly, doctor. We need you to help with the Tesseract."

"Oh. Heh. Of course. So... why did you break my window?"

"I'm sorry?" Steve tilted his head.

"You could have just... used the front door."

"Oh." Steve looked surprised, like the idea genuinely hadn't occurred to him. He smiled and Erik didn't like it. It was unnerving. It was... deadly. "Well," said Steve, sounding cheery. "Now I know for next time. Come."

"Let me just get dressed."

"Now." Steve's voice left no room for argument.

Erik looked disturbed as he sat in the car next to Steve. The car was a cheap model; it had a picture of a family on the front window. It was very clearly stolen. Erik swallowed. But he knew better than to run from Captain America. His eyes were... so blue. "So, what are you trying to do with the Tesseract?" he asked, hoping for some clarification.

"Save the world," Steve told him.

Erik blinked. "Eh. Alright. ...I was hoping for a more... specific...?"

Steve was silent.

"Where are we going now? To the Tesseract?"

"Yes," Steve hummed. For a split second, his vacant expression changed; his brow furrowed. "But I was hoping to find Bucky first."

"Who's Bucky?"

Steve sent him a look like Erik was stupid. Like he'd just asked what country Steve was born in.
Then he turned back to the road and put his foot down on the pedal, expression set.

They were passing by the shops near Erik's house when he heard the sirens. A police car whizzed down the road and grounded to a halt before them, the tarmac squealing in pain. Steve looked annoyed as he stopped the car.

He opened the car door. "What's the problem, officers?"

Two men got out. Both white and middle-aged, perhaps in their early fifties. One of them sighed and put his hands on his hips. The other one frowned at Steve.

"Hang on, is that Captain America?"

"I don't care who he is. That's a stolen car."

Erik thought about making a run for it.

But then Steve had grabbed the first officer's head and smashed it against the hood of the car. There was a lot of blood. The other man reached for his gun but Steve was quicker. He grabbed the gun, broke his hand and then emptied two rounds into his chest. There was nothing on Steve's face, his expression blank. Erik seized up in the car, absolutely terrified. Around them there was screaming. Steve didn't respond to that either. He just moved, grabbing the edge of the police car before flipping it over so the road was clear.

The officer whose head he had smashed was groaning on the ground. The other man was silent.

"Fuck," Erik whispered.

Steve got back into the car. There was blood on his hands. He put the gun on the front shelf and he smiled at Erik with all-American sweetness. "Sorry about that, doctor."

He turned on the radio and hummed along to it as they drove off.

The moment they were down in the sewers, the Tesseract lighting up the dank walls, Erik's expression shifted from terrified and confused to terrified and recognizing. "Thor's brother," he choked out.

Loki moved inhumanly fast, grabbing the doctor by the neck and holding him up. There was a venomous look in his eyes. "Don't ever--" he hissed, squeezing tighter. The doctor garbled, clawing at his neck, wheezing for breath. "--call me that."

He dropped the man on the floor and then promptly pressed the sceptre against his chest. Erik's lips parted and his eyes glowed blue; the fear left his face. Then he smiled.

"I need you to learn how to use the Tesseract," Loki stated, leaning on his scepter.

Erik laughed, stumbling over to the cube as he caught his breath back. "Yes-- yes, yes--" He gripped the edge of the crate it was placed upon so tightly his knuckles turned white. Erik laughed again; it was a pure and happy sound. "It's beautiful."

"Just work out what we need, so we can wield its power," Loki said, sounding impatient. He stared around at all of them. This hadn't been what he'd imagined. Maybe he'd expected too much glory. The humans were not fascinated by him, however; it was the cube that grabbed their attention. When Thor had come to earth all the Midgardians had been tripping over their feet to please him. But not
Loki.

He was sick of Alphas getting respect they didn't deserve.

Hours later Erik yelled, his voice echoing through the moist stone tunnels. Clint had been cleaning out his guns. Steve had been drawing. Loki had apparently been thinking but all Steve had seen him do was pace about in the corner and talk to himself. He muttered a lot but Steve could still catch words.

"...stupid Thor..."

"...have no idea...."

"...fools and traitors..."

"...my birthright..."

Erik's shout got everyone's attention; Steve tossed his notepad into the water, no longer interested in his doodling. He only wanted to serve. He stared adoringly at Loki while Erik described what he needed.

Apparently they had to go to Stuttgart. Loki informed Steve would have make a distraction. Which was definitely something he could do.

Hours later, in the control room of SHIELD helicarrier #3, an agent burst in, grinning in excitement. "Captain America just posted a selfie from Stuttgart!" he announced. A murmur of shock rippled through the room.

Tony hadn't needed telling twice to go with Phil. Not once he knew his mate was possibly in danger. He had left Malibu to go to SHIELD, where they showed him pictures of the JDE Mission Facility. It was in ruins. The Tesseract-- and Steve-- were missing.

Tony hadn't wasted time; he had demanded Phil take him to where ever the action was. And it was sign of how worried SHIELD was that they didn't argue; they flew him out to helicarrier #3 immediately.

He stalked across the vast expanse of the helicarrier's deck, paying no mind to the F-35A Lightning II they passed, though he made a mental note to check it out later. He had dressed hastily. To the casual eye, Tony looked well put-together. He had a suit jacket over his shirt, which was tucked in, and he was wearing a tie. But it was tied in a hasty half-Windsor, the only knot Tony knew very well, and one he wouldn't normally be caught dead wearing in public. At his side was a gleaming red suitcase.

"Since we know he was last with the Tesseract, our plan is to track its location, which should be easy, given how much power it radiates," said Phil calmly as he led Tony briskly into the control room. Tony's eyes flicked around, taking in the screens, the controls, the dozens of agents operating them. Or at least pretending to. Tony gathered the power generation of the helicarrier from one screen (holy sh!t), a log of incoming flights (two: a Quinjet and a routine supply drop), and noted two employees slacking off and a third nodding at his panel despite a cup of coffee on the desk beside him.

"It emits what, gamma radiation?" asked Tony.

"Yes. We're bringing in an expert on the subject," said Phil. "We're also going to require access to
all Stark satellites and--"

"Done. Done, whatever, done," said Tony hastily. "Just find my mate, okay?"

His stomach was twisting with anxiety that was his own. He had felt no especial sense of fear or pain from Steve, which he supposed was a good thing. Truthfully, he wasn't feeling much of Steve at all. Just the ever-present tie of their bond. But nothing he wouldn't have felt if Steve were, say, out for a casual run with Sam.

When a man burst in with his phone, every looked over with surprise.

"Steve... posted a selfie?" repeated Phil, as if he hadn't heard correctly.

"Yes. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook... he's in Stuttgart."

"Maybe this was a midunderstanding," said Tony, who wasn't sure why on earth Steve would run off with some guy who had stolen the Tesseract and then announce his location to the whole world.

A moment later Fury came in, trailed by two familiar faces. Natasha was in a red shirt and dark leather jacket that Tony normally would have found worthy of a wolf-whistle, but he was more interested in the other man, who was in a rumpled brown suit and wrinkled, dark blue shirt.

"Dr. Robert Banner?"

The man cringed slightly. "Please, call me Bruce," he said, quietly.

"Oh, wow! I'm a huge fan of your work! You wrote that paper on inverse Compton scattering, didn't you?"

The doctor smiled shyly and let Tony grab his hand to shake it. "Yes... yes, thank you."

"And you did that thing in 2005 with, uh, uh, what was it, recoilless nuclear resonance fluorescence?"

The doctor smiled a little more. "Yes, myself and my colleague, Betty Ross--"

"And you turned into a giant green rage monster and destroyed half of Culver College! Ha, ha! Man, you have no idea the profits I made on that one!"

Bruce cringed noticeably and pulled his hand away. Fury and Coulson frowned at Tony.

"Dr. Banner is here to help us locate the Tesseract," said Fury calmly.

"Well, it's obviously in Stuttgart, isn't it? Let's go!" said Tony. He gave the nearest panel a whack with the palm of his hand; the man at the controls, the one who was nodding off, jerked awake and glared at Tony.

"I never thought I'd say this, but Stark's right. Let's go," said Natasha with a curt nod.

"Oh-- but-- this isn't a submarine, is it?" asked Bruce, picking at the cuticle of his thumbnail. "I just-- putting me in a submerged, pressurized metal container... seems a bit..."

"It'll be great, shut up," said Tony.

The floor beneath them rumbled and on a few monitors above them, lift fans mounted on the sides of the carrier began to turn, facing down. There was another sharp rumble and suddenly they were
moving. Not down, but up.

"Oh. Oh, no. This is much worse," said Banner. "Are there seatbelts, or...?"

Maria Hill stalked into the command room, casting a look around at the viewscreens and the dozens of technicians monitoring them, then turned to Fury with a nod. "We're at lock, sir."

Fury nodded. "Good. Let's get the cloaking up and head east. Dr. Banner, thank you for joining us."

"You didn't give me much choice. After all this...?"

"Once the Tesseract is back in our hands, you're free to go." He turned to Tony. "Stark. We're sweeping every wirelessly accessible camera on the planet. Cell phones, laptops--"

"On it," said Tony with delight. "If it's connected to a satellite, I can hack it. I could spy out of a microwave if it had a camera in it."

"Good Banner, we need your to help identify--"

Banner had pulled a pair of glasses from his pocket and was wiping them on the end of his shirt. "Right, gamma ray cluster patterns. If we think it's in Stuttgart, that helps narrow it down. Call every lab in Germany, every college with a spectrometer, and have them put them on the roof. We can calibrate them for gamma rays and I can get a tracking algorithm that can recognize--"

"I love this guy!" exclaimed Tony.

"They have Clint, too," said Natasha in a low voice.

Tony frowned a little. "Steve doesn't feel distressed, though."

"Neither does Clint. Which I find distressing."

Tony shrugged a tiny bit. "Maybe everything's in control. Maybe he already rescued the Tesseract. ...look at his selfie, Natasha. He looks okay." He pulled up Steve's picture on his phone.

Steve was smiling.

Yet-- a tingle went up Tony's spine-- there was something not quite right about that smile.

"Come on. I'll show you two to the lab," said Natasha.

Tony put away his phone and followed, trying to convince himself that Natasha was wrong and that there was nothing amiss about Steve's strange, vacant grin.

They would always laugh at him. Fandral, Hogun, Sif and Volstagg. All Alphas. All warriors. Loki would never be good enough for him. They wouldn't let him spar with them, and when they did, they refused to teach Loki anything. They just kicked him down or used dirty tricks. They patronized him and they treated him as a child. So Loki got better at magic, learned how to create duplicates of himself. Then they accused him of cheating. Ha!

"Sometimes I think you're too smart for your own good, Loki," his mother had sighed. He was five hundred years old and had been caught sneaking apples out of Idun's garden. He was forced to give them all back (although Loki had eaten one and snuck Thor another one). They had been friends when they were younger, or at least, closer. But then they'd grown apart. Thor had hung out with his
friends more, taken an interest in girls and omegas, and Loki had holed away inside libraries with his books and spells.

When Loki had turned eight hundred they had stopped taking Loki on hunts with them.

"It's not appropriate for someone of your kind," Thor had told him, slinging his crossbow onto his back.

Loki stood, furious with his back straight in the corner of his room, his hands balled up into his fists. "What do you mean? I'm good. Maybe I don't have your aim but I have silencing and calming spells and--"

"It's just not your place Loki," Thor said. "You should be thinking about marriage. You know, motherly things."

Then Loki threw a bottle at his head and stormed out.

"Loki!" Thor sounded furious.

"You're an ass, Thor!"

"I'll tell mother about this!"

Loki hadn't responded, shoulders in a tight line as he turned the corner.

"What are you thinking about?" Steve asked as they headed over the rooftops towards the building in question. "You have that look."

"What look?" sneered Loki.

"You think a lot. You're not here a lot of the time. You're somewhere else... do you have an Alpha?"

"No!" Loki snapped, almost too quickly. His hair was too long for Steve to see if there was anything on the back of his neck. Steve could not sense whether or not he was bonded; he got the impression Loki used magic to hide as much of his status as he could. As a result, his smell was uncanny and strange.

"Are omegas treated very differently to where you're from?"

Loki pressed his lips into a thin line. "They never let you forget about it." They jumped to another rooftop, Loki's magic twisting the air around them to help with the push. "So it's time we did the same for them."

Steve was dressed in black tactical gear. He wasn't sure what Loki was dressed in; his appearance seemed to change however and whenever he wanted it to. He didn't have much for weaponry but he didn't need it. It was Clint who was on the serious mission here. "I'll get the eyeball. You do crowd control," Loki told him as they slipped down the fire escape. Using magic he unlocked the window from the other side, keeping their entrance quiet.

"What eyeball?"

"Don't ask questions, blond," snapped Loki. "Just do as you're told."

"Yes sir."

They headed down the main stairwell, Loki's clothing having shifted to formal evening wear, his
A man was about to pass them; he looked up, nodded to Loki, then frowned at Steve, clearly confused. Loki spun around and thwacked him over the head. Unhealthy blue eyes glinted with something akin to mania, and he flashed Steve a smile. "Show time... go. You know what to do."

Steve jumped down the stairwell, vaulting over the balustrade with ease, and landed heavily. He headed straight to the nearest security guard, disarming him just as the "Hey, is that Captain America?" left his lips. He spoke in German, a language Steve was passingly familiar with. He grabbed the gun off of him, flicked off the safety, and turned to shoot another guard straight in the head. At the same time Loki landed on man, straddling him on a table before jamming some kind of device into his head. People all around them were screaming and running toward the exits. Loki left the man on the table, his job done. As he turned, his tuxedo evaporated; armor shimmered around him, a horned helmet adorning his head.

Which, frankly, looked ridiculous. But Steve didn't comment. "Did you take that man's eyeball?" he asked.

"Don't ask questions. Disarm that guard."

"Yes, sir."

The guests were rushing out of the ballroom in a stampede. Steve shot another security guard as he turned a corner, pulling the trigger without hesitation. He followed Loki toward the outside; Loki parted the crowd with ease. He had created many images of himself, clustering the crowd together, herding it as if it were a group of sheep instead of terrified people in eveningwear.

Steve checked the chamber of his gun to see how many rounds he had left, not really interested in the proceedings. He trusted Loki knew what he was doing.

Loki did know, of course. He had been dreaming of his moment for centuries. The moment he would claim rule.

"KNEEL!" He bellowed. An awkward silence followed. "...KNIEN!" There we go. Everyone started getting on their knees and Steve was really unsure how to proceed. There was a look of delight on Loki's face. The event hadn't had all that much security. And Loki appeared to be enjoying himself. Yet something here felt wrong. And now that he wasn't being directed, Steve felt... a little useless. He lifted a hand and realised his face was wet with one of the guard's blood.

He wondered, idly, where Bucky was.

"You're kidding me," said Tony.

He and Bruce had been rigging up all sorts of toys and Natasha had just breezed in to inform them they knew where to go. That Steve and the hostile entity were in the same place, some gala in Stuttgart. They were at a concert hall; Tony's elaborate hacking and tracking cellphones was no longer needed.

"Suit up," she said to Tony. He didn't need told; he was already grabbing his red metal suitcase.

"What about me? What do I do?" asked Bruce.

"Stay there and practice your Lamaze breathing exercises or whatever you do," said Tony, loosening his tie. "Time to rock n' roll."
For Tony's entrance to Stuttgart in "The Avengers," they played AC/DC's "Shoot to Thrill." However, I opted to change that to something more thematically appropriate for Loki. I highly recommend you listen to Seether's "Fake It" here as you read this segment: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gy8HPSIFXEM

Also, the writers would like to thank all of the readers for their comments; reading your theories about what's going to happen is extremely entertaining.

Steve, with his superior hearing, heard it first. He looked up into the night sky, squinting, and a second later, all of the Lokis did as well. Above them, jets roaring, a small plane was approaching. Steve knew this jet; it was SHIELD. He felt a mild hint of annoyance that they would dare to interrupt Loki during moment when his glorious reign over Earth was just beginning. Didn't they understand he was their new king?

Natasha maneuvered the jet down and hovered. She reached for the comm. "Loki. Stand down."

She hadn't expected him to, and he didn't. They had been given a very quick briefing about him, brief because no one knew much about him. He was tricky, clever, and had powers they could only dream of. But Natasha had a machine gun so she felt like they were probably evenly matched. Also, Stark was supposed to be there.

...supposed to be.

"...Stark?" she called into her headset. She had a good view of the square but didn't want to fire unless she had to. For one thing, there were tall buildings on all sides, and for another, there were a lot of civilians clustered around. And though she wouldn't admit it, she could see Steve down there, too. She didn't want to risk hitting him. Even though the line of sight was straight, it wasn't perfect. It was night and there was a lit-up fountain casting some very distracting reflections. "Stark?" she repeated.

"What?"

"...where are you? He's not standing down."

"I'm trying to get some AC/DC downloaded."

"...what."

"I'm trying to get some AC/DC downloaded. All I have on me right now is Seether and--"

"Stark! Get your ass over here!"

Loki laughed as the jet arrived, evidently delighted at the attention he was receiving. But then he noticed one of the men wasn't kneeling. He jabbed his sceptre at him "You," he said, apparently unconcerned at the machine gun being pointed at him from above. There was no guarantee he even understood what it was. "Kneel."
The man looked old. Late eighties. "I will not kneel for a man like you," he said, voice weary. "There was have been men like you before. And there will be more. I will not kneel for you, or for them."

One of Loki's illusions stepped forward and practically growled. "There are no men like me."

The tip of his sceptre glowed, and Steve didn't think he just--

He ran and he jumped and he stepped between them.

Loki looked absolutely furious.

"He didn't do anything wrong," Steve said, blinking slowly. The words came out woodenly, like the very concept of the man's innocence confused him. After all, obeying Loki was what they should all strive for. They should all want to serve him, and this old man had defied him. But Steve felt he shouldn't be punished. He knew it to be true.

He was trying to figure out a way to articulate his thoughts, this paradox-- that the man was innocent even though he was defiant-- but his attention was arrested abruptly. He heard music in the background and he felt something-- a tug in his chest.

Steve turned around and saw...

He frowned. The man in the armour looked familiar. An Alpha. Yes, his Alpha--

Oh.

He was his, wasn't he? Steve had an Alpha. Or did he just... used to?

"Kill him," Loki told him with a side ways glance. Did he know that was Steve's Alpha? Probably. He had known about Bucky.

Bucky was Steve's Alpha. So this other Alpha couldn't be his.

Tony had planned to make a dramatic entrance to the city square but unfortunately, Natasha was yelling at him in their comms. Tony hit the jets to his suit with a grumble. "Shoot to Thrill" had not finished downloading so he would have to play what he had.

"What the--" In the jet, Natasha's screens scrambled. A moment later her speakers were blaring Seether.

"You should know that the lies won't hide your falls; no sense in hiding all of yours. You gave up on your dreams alo-o-ong the way. Yeah! Good God, you're comin' up with reasons; good God, you're draggin' it out; good God, it's the changing of the seasons--"

"STARK!" yelled Natasha.

Heads turned as a bright light trailed through the sky, a shooting star, and a second later, several jets of flame flared and a man was hanging in the air, bright red and gold, a metal automaton, still blasting rock music at them.

"--I feel so raped, so follow me down! And just fake it if you're out of direction; fake it if you don't belong. Fake it if you feel like an infection. Wh-o-oa... you're such a fuckin' hypocrite!"

Tony saw Steve, watching him. Loki casually commanded Steve to kill him. Ha. As if Steve
would listen to Loki.

Tony held up a hand; it glowed blue and a moment later Loki was blasted backwards with a surprised yell. "Kill him!" he repeated furiously.

Steve didn't hesitate. He made a running jump, landing on the armor whilst it was still in the air, and made to punch him straight in the face of his helmet, his expression set.

Tony was hovering three or four meters above the ground, but Steve took a running leap and a moment later Tony was completely destabilized; the two of them wobbled in the air and then crashed into the fountain, the crowd shrieking and ducking and covering their heads.

Tony sat up inelegantly in the water, legs splayed; he pulled off his faceplate. "Steve! What the fuck are you doing? It's me! Steve!"

Steve's fist was cocked back and he was staring directly into Tony's eyes, his expression unfocused, and suddenly Tony felt a coil of fear.

"Steve," he repeated, quieter; he reached up, slowly, with his hands still engulfed in their metal gloves, and touched Steve's hand. Not the right one that was aimed at his exposed face, but the left one, at his side, the one with the band on it. "It's me. Your mate, Steve."

Natasha, in the jet, managed to get ahold of her systems and shut off the fucking music. "Stark!" she yelled into her intercom. "Put your faceplace back on; Rogers is compromised!"

Tony didn't move. He sat in the suit in the fountain, face exposed, and stared up at Steve, at the hard set of his jawline and the tension in his fist. Surely... surely his mate would never hurt him on purpose?

"...Steve?"

Loki often misbehaved. Frigga always said he acted out to get attention. Well, he couldn't deny it. But then, his once-mother couldn't deny that it had worked either. The more Thor's friends teased him the more he retaliated. The worst prank he ever pulled was on Sif. He was always jealous of her. She was triumphant and beautiful and always stole away Thor's attention. She was also famous for her beautiful golden hair. Her and Thor would sometimes joke about all the blonde children they'd have. It made Loki feel sick.

So one night Loki had shifted into a flea. A harmless little flea. And he'd snuck into Sif's room and--

She woke with a scream the next morning to find all her hair left on the pillow. She blamed it on Loki instantly and everyone believed her.

"He's jealous of me Thor! I told you!"

Sif's hair did grow back. But it grew back black and coarse. It was never what it was. Loki felt a sick sense of satisfaction. That had showed her.

But Odin insisted that Loki was punished properly for his misbehaviour.

They put bands on his arms for a month. They blocked his magic. Loki felt like he was suffocated, like he couldn't breathe. Without magic a fundamental part of him was gone. He went so far as to beg Odin to take them away, to let him return to himself. But his pseudo-father insisted that he learn a lesson.
When they took the bands away they made Loki kneel first. Thor watched from the corner of the room but he made sure to keep his head high.

"I hope you are happy with yourself, brother," Thor had rumbled, arms crossed over his chest.

Loki had simply walked away without even looking at him. Their relationship never quite recovered from that incident.

Thor really didn't understand, if he thought Loki had done it to make himself happy. If only life were so simple.

They had been sat down in the sewers, waiting for Selvig to reach his revelation when Loki had told him: "Every time they make you kneel, it's just to humiliate you." Steve frowned. "They say you're equal here? Well, you're not. Because Alphas will never kneel for you. We are expected to submit, but not them? Well, we won't submit any more. We will not make things easy for them any more."

Steve was going to hit Tony as they landed in the fountain. He really was. He was ready, his arm pulled back to land a skull-rattling punch. But then the other pulled his face plate off and--

Steve blinked, slowly, his eyes still glowing an unsettling shade of blue.

He hesitated.

The water was seeping through his clothes. It was cold. The blood on his face had dried and now it was itchy. Steve swallowed, fist still hovering in the air.

"I..." Steve tried to speak and then he frowned.

This Alpha had knelt.

He'd knelt in the dust once, outside of a military base. He'd knelt once in a restaurant, in England. Loki was wrong. Alphas knelt.

But Loki couldn't be wrong...

When Steve managed to speak again, his voice trembled. "I will never kneel for you again," Steve whispered vehemently and then he punched Tony in the arc reactor and promptly tried to rip off his chest plate.

"Tony!" Natasha sounded stressed over comms. "Subdue him! Or I'm going to have to take a shot."

Steve's fist punched his chest and, if not for the suit, probably would have utterly destroyed the arc reactor.

The sudden blow had hurt almost as much as the words.

"Fuck!"

Steve's hands were scrambling over the suit, trying to find purchase on the armor to tear it off his body.

Tony struggled to grab him, but Steve's reflexes were too fast.

"JARVIS! JARVIS, analyze-- fuck-- analyze his patterns, take over, get him down!" shouted Tony. "But don't hurt him!"
A second later, JARVIS obeyed; Tony was no longer in control. The suit was. It grabbed one of Steve's wrists and he squalled like a cat; Tony's other arm wrapped around his waist and he dragged Steve to the ground.

He could hear laughter.

He looked up.

Before him was an omega with a pinched, pale face, sparkling emerald eyes and silky black hair. He was dressed in draping black and green robes and on his head was a glittering gold helmet. He was an omega but his smell was like nothing Tony had ever experienced before. His smell was... powerful. It crackled like electricity around him and Tony was surprised to find his hackles rising, which had never happened the presence of anyone except another Alpha.

"What the fuck did you do to him?" yelled Tony, who was still wrestling with Steve. The trick wasn't subduing him; it was doing so without hurting him. Tony could have just shoved his head into the water and held him there but he knew how Steve was about drowning and he couldn't stand to do that to his mate, even now, while Steve was still trying to fight him.

Tony felt sick; Steve had punched him right in the chest and could have killed him if not for the suit; Tony had to get away as soon as possible to check the reactor, make sure it was operating okay and his heart wasn't going to stop suddenly; but first he had to deal with Steve, with Loki, with--

Tony gave up. He gave Steve a solid crack on the side of the head, and Steve wobbled, dazed; he gave him a second, and Steve fell. Tony grabbed him immediately, pulling him from the water and draping his body over the side, then turned to Loki. He flipped every weapon system he had; the rockets, the guns, every last little projectile hidden away in the suit; he turned to Loki and the suit unfolded every hidden gem in its arsenal, pointing at him.

"Loki," said Tony, spitting out the name like it was a curse. Despite all of the destruction and death the little omega before him had caused, his name was still adorable, like Donner or Cupid or Vixen. "What is that, your fucking omega name? I'm so sick of these reindeer names! Anywaays, it's your move, asshole; ball's in your court. I will blow you straight back to hell if you don't surrender, unconditionally, right now."

The raven-haired omega grinned at him, cheekily, and a moment later, he was putting up his hands, still smiling, like this was all a joke.

And at Tony's feet, Steve's limp form lay half-submerged in the fountain, blood trickling from his head and staining the water pink.

It was awkward as Natasha stepped forward, holding cuffs, which she snapped onto Loki's wrists. The crowd was staring, gawking, slowly dispersing around them, the police officers around them directing them away. One of the officers walked up to Natasha and Tony. "We have five casualties inside," he said. Natasha nodded sombrely.

Loki was grinning, looking terribly proud of himself, as they marched him onto the jet. Tony carried Steve in his arms, his body twitching a little.

"I do hope you haven't done any permanent damage," Loki said, sounding entirely disingenuous as Natasha shoved him down into one of the seats. He watched Tony with a sort of gleeful curiosity.

"Don't try anything or I will end you," Natasha stated flatly.

"Clint said you were feisty," Loki hummed, blue eyes glinting. Natasha gripped his hair and
wrenched his head back. He was still smiling through the pain.

"Where is he?"

"Oh I haven't the foggiest," Loki told her, sounding too innocent.

Natasha swore in Russian and let him go before moving back into the pilot seat.

Steve woke up as they were setting off, still in Tony's arm. And he... he just started screaming.

His eyes looked normal. Or at least, they no longer glowed. But Steve's expression was one of unimaginable horror. He was shaking.

"I killed them! Oh my God! I killed them! I killed so many people! N-no..."

And then he began to cry, clinging to Tony like he was a life line. He saw the dint he'd left in the armor and traced it with trembling fingers. "I...I hurt you," Steve whispered.

It was like he'd been drowning and had just broken through the surface. His head throbbed but he didn't care. All Steve could think about was the people he'd killed. The SHIELD agents. The police officers. The security guards. And he'd done it all unflinchingly, all without a second thought.

He stared over at Loki, who was smiling at him. Steve went to lunge at the omega, but Tony held him back.

"Now, now." Loki said. "My mother always told me violence is never the answer.

Steve was so furious he was trembling. Angry tears streamed down his cheeks. He practically growled. He'd never felt so empty in his life when the Tesseract's energy had been inside of him. He'd been a puppet, a vessel. But he'd still...he'd killed people, with his bare hands.

All that muttering about the truth. The only truth Steve had discovered was that he truly was the killer they'd intended him to be.

"Steve... oh, Steve..." Tony clung to Steve as he wailed, then tried to lunge at Loki, then went back to wailing, a high, keening sound. Loki didn't look the slightest bit bothered by it. Tony wasn't angry. Mostly he was concerned, concerned for the wellness of his mate and desperate to take off the suit and check the arc reactor. His heart was pounding fast and hard, and Tony could almost imagine the shrapnel worming into him; there was a tiny dent on the chest plate, just on the edge of the reactor, and if the socket was compromised then Tony was screwed. But the suit was designed to protect it and Tony wouldn't know if anything had been damaged until he took the damn thing off, which he could not do without a gantry.

Thunder rumbled in the sky and for a brief second Loki looked unsettled. He glanced up, brows raising. Natasha huffed softly. "What's wrong, scared of a little thunder?"

Loki's hands fidgeted in his lap. "I'm not overly fond of what follows..."

Tony took a small, mean bit of happiness when Loki began fidgeting in response to the crack of thunder.

"What, if you get wet, do you melt?" sneered Tony.

"--this came out of nowhere," muttered Natasha. "Our navigation is scrambled. Stark, can you--"

She never finished. There was a second, deafening crack accompanied with a flash of blinding
white light, and everyone in the Quinjet was thrown to the side. Tony was distantly aware they'd just been struck by lightning; a moment later, the back hatch of the Quinjet was open and the inside was outside, cold, hard wind billowing around them, everything not tied down flying out into the dark, stormy sky.

And standing in the outline of the open hatch was a man, broad-shouldered, impossibly tall, hair and cape fluttered. Before anyone could even determine whether or not he was real, he took two long strides into the cargo hold, scruffed Loki, who was still handcuffed, and then turned and fell out of the open hatch, disappearing into the sky.

"Who the hell-- who's that guy? Did everyone else see that?" yelled Tony over the roaring wind.

"Another Asgardian," shouted Natasha back.

"Hostile?" shouted Tony.

"Don't know; doesn't matter! If he kills Loki or frees Loki or takes him anywhere, we'll lose the Tesseract! We need a plan of attack!"

Tony shoved his helmet down, heard the click as it locked onto the armor. Righteous fury was coursing through his veins; seeing Steve, feeling him, had given him an adrenaline rush like no other. A desire to fight. To kill.

He clicked on his faceplate; the eyes lit up as his HUD came online. "How's this for a plan? Attack!" yelled Tony, and he dove out of the back of the plane.

"STARK!" shrieked Natasha, but it was too late; Iron Man had dropped, plunging downward into the storm after Loki.

Thor threw him none-too-gently onto the rocky crag of a mountain; Loki looked up with an ugly grin. Thor raised Mjölnir and for a split second, a shadow of fear crossed over his brother's face. Thor brought down the hammer, releasing the chains on his brother's wrists, and then tossed it down; the mountain trembled.

"I thought you dead." Thor reached for him and grabbed him, yanking his brother to him, embracing him. "Do you have any idea how our mother grieved? How we mourned for you? Do you have no consideration for anyone but yourself?" Loki's body was tense in his grip, refusing to return the hug.

Thor let him go. "What is your quarrel with me, brother? We were raised together, played together, fought together... do you remember none of that? Does that count for nothing? Yes, Father told her of your true parentage, but is not the blood of battle thicker than the water of the womb? You are still my brother. The throne would suit you ill, Loki. You are young than me, and weaker; you are no true warrior and an omega besides. But you remain a prince. You could be my trusted advisor, Loki, until you find yourself an Alpha and produce your whelps! We know you to be clever. Why use your wits to attack this world? For petty vengeance? Please, Loki. Give up this poisonous dream, and come home."

They had brought his shield. Or rather, Tony had. It was propped up in the corner of the jet. Thoughtful, Steve thought. "What's Asgardian mean?" he hollered at Natasha after watching Tony fly off into the night. He moved automatically, grabbing a parachute and strapping it on.

"They're kind of like gods," Natasha told him. "Steve, I wouldn't-- you're hurt."
There was a steady trickle of blood down the side of his temple. Steve grabbed his shield, holding it tight like a life line. He shut his eyes, screwing them closed as he remembered the feeling of smashing the officer's head into the hood of his car. He remembered the squish of brains and the heat of the blood. The smell and the texture, it made him want to throw up--

"There's only one god, Nat. And as far as I'm aware, he doesn't look like that." Steve hoped God would forgive him.

Natasha sent him a look over her shoulder. "Steve-- it wasn't your fault."

Steve met her gaze and said nothing, his jaw tense and eyes still rimmed red. And then he turned and dropped out into the night sky, the cold air whipping around him as he fell.

Loki laughed gently, and it was almost a sweet sound, as Thor pulled him up. Even Thor's status wouldn't let his forget his privilege. He was dominant, very dominant. So much so that it was an assault on the senses at first. "What is my quarrel with you?" Loki echoed, smiling a little, but it didn't meet his eyes. "I spent my entire life living in your shadow Thor. You always thought you were better than me. We were friends, maybe, once. I remember you competing with me at every turn. I remember you never letting me forget what you were and I were and where I belonged."

Then he shoved against Thor's chest. "I do not want whelps you pig! Is that all you think me good for? Advice and babies? Why can't I lead? Why must you always come first? I will attack what I like! I will not having you controlling me anymore!" Loki's hands curled into angry fists by his sides and he stepped up to Thor, hissing into his face. "You think it is so simple, but you have no idea what you're really dealing with. This is bigger than us, than you-- I know you find that concept hard to comprehend," he sneered.

Loki turned away, his expression barer than it had been for a very long time. "...I have no home to go to," he breathed, voice low.

Thor's jaw almost dropped. "...Loki," he said, softly. The anger rolling off of his brother was palpable. "Loki... my brother... you listen." His voice grew hard. "You listen well. I--"

There was a whistle and something hard and bright red and impossibly fast smashed into Thor; he fell out of sight down the sheer cliff face, leaving Loki standing there by himself, with only Mjölnir for company.

Thor was too surprised by the sudden assault to gather his wits; he and his assailant landed hard on the ground. It was a cool night and they were in an evergreen forest, which Thor found surprising. His experience with Midgard had previously been a hot, dry desert. He had had no idea that Midgard was such a varied place.

He rose, turning to the metal creature that had slammed into him.

"How dare you touch me!" he shouted.

"How dare you take my stuff!" shouted Tony back, pulling off his face plate to yell at the man before him

He immediately regretted it.

The man, the Asgardian, was tall and muscular, with a strong jaw and flowing blond hair. Along with a short blond beard, he resembled, to Tony, a lion crossed with a California surfer. He was dressed in armor, not armor like Tony's, but plated silver stuff like you'd see at a Renn Faire, and to
top it off, a fucking cape, an actual red cape.

But his appearance didn't matter one bit. The moment Tony took off his face plate he was hit with the pheromones rolling off the Asgardian. And it was like nothing he had ever experienced before.

To the unstated, to betas, the concept of dominance was a difficult one. It was not fixed but nonetheless, Tony found it helpful to explain it to Pepper on a 1-10 scale. He, for example, was a two or three. His father was an eight or nine, and Obie had also been an eight or nine. Strictly speaking, Obie was more dominant, but again, that shifted based on things like territory and social situation and posturing. Obie was naturally more dominant, but he made himself submissive in social situations, letting Howard take over as he was more charming and outgoing and naturally gifted at giving pitches. In the boardroom, Obadiah took the reins.

That being said, Tony had always been able to give Pepper an idea of dominance using the over-simplified scale. Natasha was a seven or eight, as was Rhodey. Boswell had been a surprising five. Malick was probably a high six or low seven, though his posturing indicated he felt more dominant. The moment Tony took off the face plate, he realized he had never known true dominance.

The Asgardian wasn't a perfect ten, or even an eleven. No. He was at least a hundredfold more dominant than anyone Tony had ever encountered. In a microsecond Tony's body reacted; his hackles flattened immediately, his gaze fell to the ground in submission. He felt like a beta, like an omega himself; he felt like he had when he was entering his teens and walked into a room with his father. (Dominance did not present at all until puberty. Tony could still remember the first time he loped downstairs for breakfast and was suddenly hit with the smallness, the threat, of a more dominant Alpha.)

Tony was frozen to the spot, suddenly a teenager again in the wake of his father, only worse, far worse. He wanted to lie on the ground before this Alpha and beg forgiveness for hitting him. He wanted to slink away and hide. He felt his balls tighten with fear and a moment later a warm stream of liquid of his leg. Contrary to what he told Pepper, this particular model of suit was not designed to be urinated in.

The Asgardian barely even looked at him once he had taken the faceplate off. As easily as Tony could immediately tell this creature had god-like levels of dominance, so he could tell that he was vastly superior. Initially he had supposed this mechanical man to be some sort of clever, perhaps enchanted automaton, a golem of sorts. But it was only a man in armor and, like all humans, he was pitiful.

"Be gone," said Thor, giving him a little shooing motion. "You know not what you are dealing with."

"...Shakespeare in the Park?" guessed Tony glibly. His voice cracked. Oh, God, it really was like he was a teenager all over again.

The Asgardian's brow furrowed.

"...what are you supposed to be, some-- some kind of steampunk Superman? Nice cape. Doth Mother know your wearth her drapes?"

"How dare you speak of my mother!" roared Thor.

Tony would have pissed himself again if he had anything left in him. He took a staggering step back, putting his head down, breathing hard, his posture submissive.
"This is beyond you, metal man! Go home! This does not concern you! Loki is my brother and shall face Asgardian justice! He is misled and needs to be returned to his own world!"

"You can have him," said Tony, trying to force himself to look up and make eye contact. His body wouldn't let him. "But we want the Tesseract. So until you-- you give that back-- he-- he has to stay with us." He clamped his face plate back on.

Thor sighed. Foolish mortal. He did not have time for this nonsense.

He raised a hand; the sky cracked, and Mjölnir flew into his hand. He gave it a single, gentle swing and it flew at the human in his armor; the two went flying.

Tony felt his back slam into what he suspected was a tree. "Ow," he said weakly, slipping down and hitting a few branches before thumping onto the ground. He climbed unsteadily to his feet, head swimming.

Steve had managed to fall into the trees, slowing his descent and landing with a surprisingly light step a little ways off from them. He listened in on the exchange. He could tell something was off in the sound of Tony's voice; he could feel some strange and new sensation tugging at his chest. He frowned and slunk forward through the trees, shield in his grip. And then it hit him, a wave of pheromones so strong it was hard to breathe. Steve breathed in and out. Once, twice, three times. His legs shook a little. If he hadn't been bonded, this would have been harder. But his body didn't automatically defer to just any Alpha. The scent was not his mate therefore Steve's body did not respond to it, even if subconsciously he wanted to.

He crept further through the trees, trying to see what the Asgardian was using. Was that a hammer? Then lightning cracked down from the sky and Steve remembered what Natasha had said about them being gods.

He swallowed. Huh.

And then Steve saw Tony get flung into a tree by said hammer. Oh no. He wasn't having that.

Tony sent out a repulsor blast and Mjölnir tore into another tree near his mate's head. The hammer seemed to fly through the air and return to Thor's hand. How on earth was that possible? Was it through magnets? Steve didn't know; even Earth's technology was foreign to him nowadays.

But Thor was making to charge at Tony again, or rather swing down his hammer, and Steve didn't think, he just--

The hammer trembled against the surface of the shield as it slammed down onto it, the pressure from the hit pressing Steve into the floor and vibrating through his very being. Thor seemed momentarily stumped, apparently not expecting Steve's intrusion.

Steve slowly lowered the shield as he stood. "That's enough," he told Thor, his 'Cap' voice very much on.

Thor laughed. "Is some kind of joke? You think you could best me, really?"

"Don't test me," Steve muttered. "I've kind of had a shitty day."

"I didn't know Midgardians let omegas fight their battles--"

But Thor didn't get to finish his sentence. Steve practically roared at him and then he charged before he slammed his shield into Thor's face. And then into his shoulder. The sort of hit that would kill a
normal person. He just knocked Thor down to the ground, however, but Steve kept going. All his frustration, all his anger, all his fury at what Loki had made him do came pouring out.

"That=-" Another hit. "--is--" Another hit. "--ENOUGH!"

Steve dropped the shield down next to Thor's head, blue eyes bright. He was breathing heavily.

Thor laughed, albeit a little wearily.

"I am the Captain," Steve said, voice set as he fixed him with a steely look. "And you will do as I say. We are taking Loki until we get the Tesseract back and then maybe, maybe we will let you take him. But only if you ask nicely."

Then Steve kicked his shield back up into his grip and slotted it onto his back. He looked up and spotted Loki watching from an outcrop in the rock, head in his hands, elbows on his knees, and feet dangling the air. He was smiling sweetly, his head tilted. Loki looked far too pleased with himself. Steve didn't like it.

Tony stepped forward. Oh, motherfucker, now Steve was involved.

Tony stepped in front of Steve, to shield him. It was ridiculous. A slightly larger kitten trying to shield a smaller kitten from a fucking wolf.

"We-- we're taking Loki back to-- Fury now," said Tony, voice cracking again. God damn it.

Thor's head cocked. "Fury? ...Nick Fury of SHIELD?"

"...you know him?"

"Yes, yes, he and his servant, Phil Coulson."

Tony wanted to yell that Phil wasn't a servant but the words stuck in his throat and he nodded dumbly.

"Very well. I shall accompany you and my brother to meet with SHIELD, and we shall reach a compromise that befits both of us. You fought well." Thor was clearly patronizing him, but Tony just nodded dumbly again.

Thor turned. "LOKI!" he roared.

Loki was still smiling down at them cheerily.

"I shall meet you in your ship," said Thor with a nod, and held out a hand.

His hammer snapped into it; he flung it up and went with it.

Tony took off his face plate and stared, pale-faced. "The f-fuck?" he managed.

Eye on the prize, he reminded himself. "Come on, Steve." He scooped Steve into his arms and hit the heel jets, lifting off. The QuinJet was hovering over them, hatch open; he darted inside. Thor and Loki were sitting side-by-side. Thor looked too big for the enclosed space. Loki was sitting primly, still smiling sweetly.

Natasha turned in the pilot's seat; her face was pale, her eyes downcast. Neither Tony nor Steve had ever seen her submissive before, but clearly, she, like Tony, was deeply affected by Thor's presence.
Thor surveyed the cargo area like a captain surveying his ship. It was a strange method of transportation, in his mind. Nothing was pulling it. Thor was partial to goats, himself, because they were hardy and clever creatures. But Midgardians had their own ways of doing things.

"I'll, ah-- I'll radio Fury to let him know we-- we have..." said Natasha, voice small. She trailed off.

Tony sat across from Loki, faceplate still on, expression blank. He kept a hand on the back of Steve's neck. The metal was cool.

"You two are together?" Thor observed, watching Tony and Steve stand closer together. After days apart the intimacy of it was evidently important. He pointed at Steve. "And yet you are in... charge?"

"Yes," Steve said, expression dead-pan set.

"And these Alphas, they follow you?"

"Yes," Steve repeated, sounding less patient than before. "And you better fall into line too," he told him eyes narrowing. Then he moved to sit down, his head spinning a little. Thor's presence certainly didn't help nor did the, what felt like, concussion. Steve let out a soft huff, leaning against Thor heavily. Loki was still smiling. Steve wanted to punch him in the teeth.

The ride back was quiet and tired. Loki said nothing, thankfully, but Steve didn't feeling pleased with himself. Everything felt wrong to Steve. Loki was too clever to simply sit quietly as they took him in; Steve knew he must be planning something, but he could not think of what. He could think of nothing but the innocent lives that he had taken under Loki's control. That, he knew, would haunt him for a long, long time.
When they arrived on the helicarrier there was an entourage of agents at the ready to escort Loki to his cell. "Do come find me later, brother," he told him, a sly kind of smile on his lips as he pulled away. The way he used the term 'brother' was mocking, disingenuous.

A few agents lingered by Steve and Phil stepped forward. "Captain... are you..? Is he-- safe?"

"I'm myself again," Steve assured him, looking tried.

"I'm fine, I--"

"Steve, you're covered in blood." Phil turned to Tony. "Get him down to medical. Fury will want to see him as soon as possible. Steve, you have tell us everything you know. Your insight will be invaluable right now."

Steve nodded, looking sombre.

Tony, still in his Iron Man armor, wasted no time in throwing Steve over his shoulder and carrying him down to the medical bay despite Steve's weak protests. There was no doubt in Tony's mind that Steve had a concussion.

"Steve. Steve, listen to me. I'm not mad at you," said Tony gently as he set Steve down on a cot. "I need to go take my suit off, okay? My gear's in the lab. You lay down, take it easy, and I'll be back. I have to figure out what's going on with Draco Malfoy up there. Fury's interrogating him now so we can get the Tesseract back, and-- and Natasha's mate." He couldn't quite bring himself to say Clint's name.

There was a heavy seed of guilt in his stomach that came from the deep sense of relief he had from having Steve back, and knowing that Natasha's mate was still missing, and that she was probably panicking.

Tony patted Steve gently and then went to go get out of his suit. Banner was in the lab, glasses perched on his nose, reading.

"They're interrogating Loki. Fury is, I mean. Wanna go watch?"

Bruce shook his head. "No. No, ah, I prefer to keep to myself."

"C'mon, it'll be fun," demanded Tony as he stripped off the bodysuit he was wearing under the armor.

Bruce looked away, slightly embarrassed, as Tony pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Tony believed the best defense was a good offense, which is why he was pushing Bruce was hard. He didn't want the other to look over and see either his scars or that fact that he'd pissed himself when he first met Thor. "Come on, doc, he might say something useful about the cube!"

Bruce's shoulders sagged a little and he got up.

Tony led him through the halls toward the nearest room with monitors, which was blessedly just down the hall. The interior of the helicarrier was not at all unlike a submarine, actually, with narrow
halls and low ceilings and lots of metal. When Tony walked into the small viewing room, he was immediately assaulted all over again by Thor's presence. Natasha was sitting in a metal chair at the table, head down demurely; Thor was perched on the edge of the table, still wearing a fucking cape, legs spread, looking like he owned the place. Phil was standing along the wall, posture straight, hands clasped before him, practically drooling in Thor's direction.

Once Tony was able to pull his eyes away from Thor, he turned his attention to one of several mounted screens in the room. The audio was scratchy. Tony, who had gotten used to the narrow confines of the helicarrier, was surprised to see Fury in a warehouse-sized room. There was a large, clear partition between he and Loki; Loki was standing there smiling like he'd just told some fantastic joke and was waiting for Fury to get it.

"...threatening us with war, coming in here and stealing a force you can't control--" Fury was lecturing him.

"As if we can," muttered Tony.

"--you talk about peace and freedom and then kill 'cause it's fun. You have no idea just how desperate we humans can get, or what we're capable of when you back us into a corner."

Still, Loki was smiling.

"Lemme know if you want a magazine or something, Your Majesty," said Fury sarcastically, turning away.

"Doesn't sound like he gave anything up," said Tony slowly. Beside him, Bruce adjusted his glasses, peering closely at the monitors.

"He didn't," confirmed Phil. "If anything, he's going out of his way to draw things out. Not sure what his game is... Thor, what do you think?"

Thor took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. "He... has an army. The Chitauri. They're not of Asgard or any world known; they are powerful soldiers, with advanced armor and weapons, and flawlessly coordinated as a single hive mind. He means to lead them against your people. They will win him the earth. In return, I suspect, for the Tesseract."

"Why would a bunch of cybernetically enhanced termites want the cube?" asked Natasha with a frown.

"I know not."

"Well, that at least explains why Loki wants it," said Bruce, taking off his glasses to polish them on his shirt. "He's got to build a portal for them to come through; who knows how many light-years away they are? That's what he needs Erik Selvig for."

Thor turned and fixed him with a stern, sharp look. "Selvig?" he repeated.

Everyone in the room looked alarmed.

"...the... the astrophysicist that went missing," said Bruce weakly.

"I know him. He is my friend."

Natasha looked over, not quite meeting his eyes. "Well, bad news. Loki has him under some sort of mind control. Plus one of ours."
"But now we have Loki," pointed out Tony.

Phil shook his head. "Why would Loki want to get captured? He can't lead an army from here."

Bruce shrugged. "Maybe don't read too much into it? His brain's a bag full of cats. You can smell the crazy on him. I doubt he knows--"

"Mind your tongue!" bellowed Thor.

Natasha's head dropped and she covered the back of her neck; Tony cringed and shrank against the wall.

"Loki may be beyond reason, but he is of Asgard, and he's my brother."

There was a short, awkward silence.

Natasha looked up, clearly irritated at herself for her automatic reflex to Thor's raised voice. "...he killed eighty people in two days," she informed him dryly.

"He's adopted," said Thor quickly, as if they were worried they might think he was crazy, too.

"Don't worry, Thrash, no one here thinks you're nuts. I mean, you're wearing a cape, so... we don't think you're any more nuts than that," said Tony. He paced, snapping his fingers. "So Loki has mind-control powers with his Staff of Charisma, which I assume also has a plus-two defense against necromancers, and he's bringing an army to earth, some Men in Black shit, and he's doing it by using the Tesseract. And I assume he stole the iridium as a stabilizing agent to keep the portal from collapsing and destroying everything around it, like at the JDE Mission Facility."

Phil let out a sound of protest. "How do you know about that?"

"I hacked your e-mail. Your password was BravoCap1. Adorable. So, anyways, Loki's got his minions and the cube, and all he needs to do is stabilize its power. He's got the iridium and frankly, the rest of the raw materials Clint can get his hands on pretty easily by raiding any major college's chem lab cabinets. So the only major component he would still need is a power source, something with insanely high energy density."

Everyone looked impressed. Next to Phil, Maria Hill raised an eyebrow. "So you're an expert in thermonuclear astrophysics and space-time now?"

"Only since yesterday," said Tony breezily.

"...he'd have to heat that cube to a hundred and twenty million Kelvin just to break through the Coulomb barrier. Nothing on earth has that kind of power, short of a nuclear warhead," said Bruce.

"Unless Selvig has figured out how to stabilize the quantum tunneling effect."

"Well, he could do that if he could achieve heavy ion fusion using, say, a nuclear reactor," countered Bruce.

Tony's face split into a grin. "Bruce, where have you been all my life? God, I love you, it's so refreshing to talk to someone who can actually speak English. Also the whole losing-control-and-smashing-everything-while-wearing-cut-offs, I love that, too."

"Jesus, Tony, do you have a filter?" asked Phil.

"No, I'm just happy to see you. By the way, everyone's noticed your erection. Also that guy's
playing Pac Man on his phone."

One of the agents hovering by a screen looked up guiltily. Phil shifted uncomfortably. "--you know I'm not bonded."

"Well, you and Thor can go to the movies later. Bruce! Let's go poke Loki's magical whammy stick. It's obviously linked to the cube somehow and maybe we can figure out what the hell is going on with that thing. You! Phone guy! What level are you on?"

The agent with the phone looked even more embarrassed. "...apple."


"He's spirited," observed Thor.

"He's distracting himself because your brother made his mate almost kill him," spat out Natasha, rising. "I'm going to see Steve. ...Phil... seriously."

Phil crossed his legs.

In medical, Steve sat on his cot, staring at the unadorned wall across from him. It was clear he was distraught. He was pale, and his eyes were glassy; he had a bandage wrapped around his head despite his insistence that he healed quickly and it was only a bruise. He was too still where he was sat on the bed, a permanent frown etched onto his features. Natasha knew what it was like to carry the weight of regret, of murder. She hadn't quite experience magical mind control but she had experienced something like it. On some level she knew what Steve was going through and she knew that overcoming something like could take years. But they didn't have years. They needed Steve now.

She took the seat beside his cot and tried to offer him a smile. An agent was stood a little ways off, a gun in hand, just in case. "You certainly showed Thor back there," she said, trying to make him smile. Steve did not smile.

"They said that the concussion was mild," Steve said quietly. "Should be ready for the field in a couple of hours."

"Steve--" Natasha put a hand on his arm. "--it wasn't you. Not you, okay? I know you hurt people. I know you felt that. But the truth is, it could have been any one of us. You let this tear you apart, then you let Loki win."

Steve's jaw tensed a little.

"This isn't about winning or losing Nat," Steve murmured. "I already lost. Doesn't matter if I meant to do it or not. I still did it. I still took people away from their families and I had no right. I had no right to do that."

Natasha went quiet for a moment.

"I don't know who I was. I couldn't feel Tony anymore, I didn't even think about him. All I could think about was Bucky." Her grip tightened on his arm. "He got out. I know he did. I felt it. He's okay."

"But it means he's on the run again," Natasha observed. Steve nodded.
"So Tony isn't safe anymore. But right now we have to focus on Loki. And whatever he wants to bring with him." He could see the look in Natasha's eye. She didn't have to ask. "Clint is okay. He was fine last I saw him. He was just... like me. I'd say a solid punch to the head will probably bring him back."

Phil knocked on the corner of the door and stepped in. "Hello, Captain. How's it going?"

"They say I'll be good in a few hours."

"Good," Phil nodded. He was holding a bag. He set it down by the foot of the bed. "I have your uniform."

Steve blinked, surprised. "So... we're back on the initiative then, huh? Officially?"

"The world is under threat. Official doesn't matter. We need you, Captain. You can make your apologies after this mess is over." Phil said. "Get in the suit; it'll make you feel better."

Phil was right. It did. Natasha helped him get dressed; they were past the point of being shy around each other now. He was a little wobbly on his feet. She helped Steve steady himself as he strapped up the front. He grabbed the shield, fixing it onto his back. The weight was familiar, comforting. He instantly felt better for it. He was Captain America now. He didn't have to worry about being Steve Rogers right this minute.

He unwrapped the bandage from around his head, chucking it into a bin on his way out of the infirmary. It was already beginning to heal, the small cut there having stopped bleeding thanks to the pressure bandage. It was already scabbing over.

He stepped into one of the helicarrier's research labs to find Tony and Bruce mulling over the sceptre. Bruce spotted him and walked over. "Nice to finally meet you, Captain," he said, shaking Steve's hand. Steve shook it back. His handshake wasn't very firm.

"You too," Steve assured him. He spotted Thor in the corner of the room, the onslaught of pheromones less assaulting then they had been before.

"Apparently Loki is saying he'll only speak to Thor," Phil said, hand on his ear piece.

"Doesn't mean other people can't be in the room," Natasha pointed out, standing up. Steve stared at the sceptre. His left eye twitched. "Steve? You wanna give him a piece of your mind?"

"I don't think it's a good idea." Loki knew too much about him. Knew about Bucky. Steve didn't see how he could help in an interrogation scenario. Steve was subconsciously standing close to Tony, not wanting to be too far from him right now. "But he wanted to be captured. I'm sure of that much. And he really hates Alphas. Like... really hates them." He glanced back over to Thor. "Is that something to do with you?" Steve didn't know why but he was feeling confrontational. Well, more so than usual.

Thor looked surprised that Steve was speaking to him directly. He turned to Tony. "He's an unusual one, isn't he?"

If anyone else had asked that, Tony would have bristled. But his hackles remained flat on his neck. "...what'd you mean?" he demanded, trying to act tougher than he felt.

"He's very... direct," said Thor. "But in answer to your question--" He was still talking to Tony, not Steve. To Thor, who was used to Asgadian levels of dominance, Tony and Natasha were practically the same. "--no, I can think of no quarrel he might have with me. We are brothers and have been
companions for over a millennium. Perhaps he is experiencing some sort of preheat that is making him hot-blooded and ill-tempered. He was always prone to mood swings, you know, being an omega. Perhaps he still holds a grudge for me because of my coronation. Being the second son and an omega besides weighs on his mind; he fancies himself fit for the throne.” Thor's face broke into a grin and he chuckled at the idea. An omega and a runt and a second son on the throne... *ha.* Loki had obviously spent too much time in his books, filling his heads with fairy tales and silly ideas. Even if you put aside Loki's true parentage, he had no right to the throne whatsoever, and the thought that he had ever even considered it was laughable.

Thor sobered quickly. "I shall talk to him. Sooner or later he will calm down. You, girl! You may come with me if you wish."

"*Girl?*" repeated Natasha, shocked.

"And you as well, warrior! I admire your armor; human ingenuity is so fascinating."

"Th-thanks," said Tony, who cast a desperate look over to Natasha. She looked back at him, wide-eyed.

Thor was already sweeping out of the room, red cape billowing, expecting them to follow.

"Girl!" repeated Natasha under her breath, scrambling after him.

"Wait! You don't even know where you're going!" protested Phil weakly, scurrying after him. Thor had been treating Phil like a servant so far, ordering him to get him a beer ("No beer? I suppose mead will do, then.") and demanding various bits of information. Phil, normally fairly assertive, had been tripping over himself to acquiesce, gooey-eyed with admiration. Natasha would have found it obnoxious but she was in such a submissive stance she didn't feel she had any right to snap at him. Thor's dominance was taking everyone a lot of getting used to. The only people who acted normally around him were the betas.

Steve was practically fuming as he watched Thor leave, his hands in tight fists by his sides. Bruce watched him almost curiously. When they had all left on the way to Loki's cage the line of Steve's shoulders relaxed visibly. There was something about Thor's dominance that made Steve want to respond to it, to *challenge* it. He had to stop himself from jumping onto his back and pushing him onto the floor, pinning him down. There was nothing sexual about it. At least, that was what he told himself.

Maybe Steve just really wanted his respect, or at least, to prove that he was an equal.

"Feels like you're back in the forties, right?" Bruce tried to joke, an awkward sort of smile on his features.

"If he asks me to kneel I'm gonna punch him in the dick," Steve growled and that made Bruce laugh. It was an unsure but warm kind of sound. "I'm gonna go watch," he decided, and then slipped out of the room and towards the monitors which looked over Loki's cage.
Loki was seated leaning against the glass, legs folded one of the over. His hands were in the air and magic glinted from his fingertips. He appeared to be caught up in his own antics, the glittering blue and green energy in the air making the shape of a bat. Loki had spotted one when he'd been perusing around Midgard at night. He found the creatures rather cute with their big ears and pinched features. Not that Loki would ever admit to finding something cute.

It was not that Loki was becoming soft. He was just bored. Magic never failed to entertain him. It had always kept him company, especially when Thor had not.

He heard the footsteps and smiled, not looking away from his bat; out of the corner of his eye, he saw Thor enter, followed by a small group of Midgardians. One of them strode up to the wall of Loki's cage.

The bat screeched and slammed into the glass right in front of Tony's face. Loki laughed as he imagined the Midgardian jumping, and moved to stand in one smooth motion, hands clasped behind his back. His eyes scanned over his small audience.

"Where's our dear captain?"

"I think he's seen enough of you for one day," Phil pointed out dryly, gaze darting between Loki and Thor. Loki seemed quite content to ignore his brother for now, despite being the one to summon him here. Perhaps it was a power play.

Loki smiled. And then he shifted, his entire being rippling. And then before them stood Steve, clad in his uniform. It was unsettling. Something about his expression was off.

He walked around the cage for a moment, then stopped, directly facing Tony.

"Where's Bucky?" Loki asked in Steve's voice, a perfect mimicry. "Where is he? I want to find him. ...Norns, I only had to hear that about a million times."

The hair on the back of Tony's neck prickled despite Thor's presence. "Fuck you," he snarled; the Steve on the other side of the glass grinned sweetly at him.

"You know, I didn't even realise he had two Alphas, because he never even mentioned you."

"Brother," said Thor warningly. "Stop these childish games. You requested my audience and now you have it. Speak. What is it that compels you to tease these mortals? They've done nothing to you." He turned to Tony. "He's lying," he reassured him.

Then he considered. "Probably," he added. "...two Alphas," he added to himself in a murmur,
clearly finding this idea disturbing.

Tony's neck prickled harder. "The only thing we want to find is the Tesseract. Tell us where you hid it and we'll let you go."

"Surely you're not so far gone that you cannot see what's before you?" Thor swept a hand around the warehouse. "They have you in a cage, Loki! A well-built one, too. Your magic is useless here, and you are without your scepter or any of your allies. But I, your brother and your merciful king, have come to return you home. I understand that it is only because of your delicate sensibilities that you are so distraught, and I do not blame you."

"MERCIFUL?!" Loki echoed and slammed his fist against the glass, making it tremble. The illusion of Steve shuddered away and Loki was left standing there, breathless and angry, his blue eyes shining with an unhealthy glow. Perhaps Thor would look closer, he would notice they were not the usual green they had been before. "You have never shown me mercy in your life! You were always set on humiliating me; you never let me forget!"

"No harm's been done; come home, and you shall be forgiven," said Thor, in a soothing voice that implied he felt outbursts on Loki's part were normal and best ignored.

"Eighty people dead," snapped Natasha in annoyance behind him.

"Minor harm has been done," corrected Thor. "Nonetheless, I am king now and I would happily pardon this tantrum of yours if you'd only kneel for me and apologize. It is a very small thing to ask. And then we can leave Midgard and you can return to Mother and your books."

"TANTRUM? He's trying to take over the world!" said Tony, rounding on Thor.

Thor blinked. "Oh, yes, but-- well, he hasn't, yet, has he? No permanent--"

"Eighty people are dead!" repeated Natasha.

Thor ignored her and turned to Loki pleadingly. "Kneel, brother," he asked softly.

Loki started laughing with what appeared to be genuine amusement. He sounded manic, his shoulders shaking. Perhaps there was even a tear in his eye. And then he looked up, meeting Thor's gaze. "I would rather die. And I remember what happened last time I knelt for you... I would not make the same mistake again!"

"What does that mean?" Natasha asked. Loki rounded on her. His eyes narrowed. And then he growled. His magic sizzled around him, hissing softly. "I told your precious mate to put an arrow in your heart the moment he sees you... I would not make the same mistake again!"

"You think there is a reason for everything. For all this." Loki murmured, leaning closer. "Maybe I just enjoy it. Ever considered that?"

Thor stared imperiously on the other side of the glass, a tiny frown on his lips. "Why? Why do you enjoy quarreling with the Midgardians? Because it makes you feel powerful, to manipulate them? This, brother, is precisely why the throne would not suit you! You think yourself better than the humans, you think them beneath you. I, too, was guilty of such vanity. But enslavement does not
make one a righteous king, only a tyrant. And you are better than that, Loki. I know this. Even on this world, you cannot be what you want. You are an omega and that is simply the way of the world. Your kind was designed to serve and to kneel. But you are still a prince. Why can't you--"

"Did it make you feel powerful?" Loki seethed. "When I knelt for you?" He slammed his hand against the glass again, still breathing heavily. It seemed Thor's presence incensed him.

"Clint does not kneel." Natasha's voice quivered, just a little. But her head was up and she was glaring at both Thor and Loki.

"Yeah, Steve neither! Except in the bedroom!" said Tony.

"Jesus, Tony, seriously," muttered Natasha in a low voice.

"Perhaps he only does not kneel for you because you're only a secondary Alpha," said Thor dismissively.

Tony opened his mouth, then closed it. Whatever he had been about to say disappeared and his face got that blank look it got when he was hiding real hurt. He looked down, away from Loki, away from Thor.

Loki grinned.

Natasha walked over and slammed a fist against the glass. "Tell me where Barton is!" she shouted. In a second, she composed herself. "This isn't about him being my mate. This isn't about love. You and I both know love is for children and fools. This is about erasing a debt I owe him. I don't care about SHIELD, or even earth. I care about Barton. He's one person, he's nothing to you. Make a deal with me. Even you can understand personal pride, can't you?"

Loki was still grinning ear-to-ear. "Perhaps I, too, have learned to care about Barton. Perhaps I care so much about him that I would rather put him out of his misery than return him to his bed-swerving hoydon of an Alpha. The best he could do, I assume, considering his limitations."

"ты чё, сука, охуел, бля?! What the hell is wrong with you, you monster!"

Loki's grin widened. Her upset clearly entertained him. "Oh I am not the real monster here," he assured her, voice low and expression almost predatory. "Don't act as though I'm the biggest threat you face. This cage wasn't meant for me at all, was it? Lucky you had it. Unlucky, of course, should the real monster show face. But I'm sure you clever little Midgardians have a plan for such an event, don't you?" He sniggered; his hands flexed by his sides, a spark of magic flickering at his fingertips. "As for Barton, I don't know where he is, anyway. Barton is wherever he chooses to be."

"You're controlling him," Phil stated flatly.

"I merely showed him the truth," Loki shrugged.

"You made Steve kill people."

"And maybe that's because he's a killer." Loki growled, eyes glinting with something sinister.

_Maybe that's because he's a killer._

Upstairs Steve was watching the exchange through a screen. His knuckles were white against the edge of the desk.
Loki was right. How many people had Steve killed in his life time? Hundreds? The serum didn't just give Steve the power to live, it gave him the power to take lives too. And he could never, in good conscience, believe he'd never abused his strength more than once.

And he could see Tony's hurt, he could feel it--

And he also wanted to punch Thor in the face. Jesus. Steve was going to show him.

He headed downstairs. This wasn't about Loki anymore. This was about reassuring Tony, and putting Thor in his goddamn place.

"Show us the back of your neck," demanded Natasha abruptly. Loki suddenly looked furious again.

"NO!"

"Why not?"

Loki said nothing, glaring at Thor venomously.

Thor huffed a little. "Loki. You know you and I do not share parentage. Arrangements could be made. If you would come and be my omega and my advisor, it would be almost as good as ruling yourself! You know an omega cannot take the throne, but you could be by my right-hand side. Would that not be honor enough for you? You've hardly deserved it. You're not battle-proven, you are gentle, and besides that, you are an omega, and young and smaller than me. I want to give you all that I can, brother. And still, you turn up your nose at me. ...perhaps you really are mad." He turned to Natasha apologetically. "This is the fault of my family. He should have been paired to an Alpha centuries ago but due to his. ...unique circumstances, we were unable to find him a suitable mate."

"UNIQUE CIRCUMSTANCES?!!" Loki echoed, practically screaming now, his face twisted up in rage. "Is that what they call it now?" Loki laughed, the sound of it hollow. He was half bent over, tears at the corners of his eyes. He wheezed, his merriment forced and crazed in its intensity.

Natasha didn't seem to be listening. Her brows were knitted; she had a faraway look on her face. "...Banner," she said suddenly. She looked around the room as if seeing it for the first time. "That's your plan. You want to unleash Banner. Clint told you all about him, didn't he? This cage... this wasn't even built for Loki in the first place, was it? Phil?" She rounded on him. "...Phil?!"

Phil hesitated. "...it was a... precautionary measure."

Natasha's eyes narrowed. "You promised me! You sons of bitches told me that he was only being extracted as a consultant! I reassured him!"

"Again, it was only a precautionary measure, and--"

"You and Fury lied to me! What else are you hiding, huh? Anything else about this little mission that you maybe should have told me?"

"Oh, please, Romanoff, it's not as though you don't do your fair share of lying," said Phil in annoyance.

Natasha let out a frustrated scoff and grabbed Phil's earpiece. "Romanoff to lab. Bruce, stay there, I'm coming up, we need to talk." She dropped the earpiece. "Unbelievable." She whipped around and began to stride out, then turned. "Thank you for your cooperation," she said to Loki, before banging open the door and leaving.
Loki was evidently furious at having given up the game to Natasha. His eyes were wild and his hands were balled by his sides. He was seething, teeth bared. Goddammit. A fucking Midgardian had outsmarted him. And a woman too! Although Loki had to give credit where credit was due... she was clever. It was a shame she had not been at the base too. Her and the archer would have made a formidable team.

"Your mate has an arrow waiting for you, you slatternly hedge whore!" he yelled.

Natasha didn't turn back; as she exited, Steve walked in, and Tony could immediately sense his anger. He had not thought it was possible for Steve to feel more angry, but Loki's parting words to Natasha had done it.

Thor watched all this calmly. His eyes met Steve's. "Another upset omega. ...Stark, was it?"

"Tony Stark," said Tony meekly.

"Tony Stark, please remove your omega. He's clearly upset." He turned back to Loki. "Your plan has been revealed, Loki. Your game is over now. Kneel for me or I will come in there and bend your knees myself. Then we will return to Asgard. I would prefer if you returned as my companion and not as my prisoner."

"Oh, yes, you'd like that, wouldn't you? As if I'd cooperate with you, after what you did, you apeish, gibfaced brute. Stupid little Thor! Father didn't blame you-- no. Oh no. He blamed me. ME. But YOU were the one that ruined me, Thor! Innocent little Thor. Too Alpha for his own good. Doesn't know what he's doing. It's not his fault-- oh no, it's Loki. Loki should have known he was going into preheat. Shouldn't have been walking around. You know what Thor? Fuck you! And fuck all of you! You have no idea--" He was punching the glass with ever inflection. Steve was pretty sure he saw blood.

"I do," Steve said. He sent a sideways glance at Thor. "And call me omega again and I'll punch your teeth in. I have a name, and a title. I'm a person, not a status."

Thor blinked at him, more than a little surprised.

"And if you go in there and try make him kneel--" Steve took one step closer to him. He jabbed a finger against his chest. Thor was the same height as him. "--then I will end you."

He thought about Gideon, grabbing him by the scruff and forcing him onto his knees. Loki might have been a murderer, insane. But Steve would not watch it done to someone else. They would not stoop to that level.

"You will never get through to him like this. You talk to him as if he lesser. So why should he listen to you? He will never listen to you, not until you see him as an equal. As the same. He's just as much a person as you are. Leading is nothing to do with status. A good leader understands that status does not matter. That is why you would both make poor kings."

Then Steve turned to Loki, who still looked furious, but was no longer punching the glass.

"Just because something awful has happened to you, it does not give you the right to hurt and kill other people."

Loki stared at him. "I've never had the 'right' to do anything," he muttered. "So I just decided I do whatever I wanted instead. I was born wrong from my very first day. I'm a mistake. So mistakes are what I am destined to make, might as well have some fun whilst I'm doing it."
Tony disagreed strongly with Loki's idea that destiny was a thing, that a person couldn't change. He also felt his logic was critically flawed. If Loki thought that he was making a mistake, which is what he was suggesting, then why was he doing it at all? And there was something psychotic about saying he was having *fun* killing people.

But something else Loki had said had floated to the surface of his mind, and his eyes widened.

"O-oo-o hhhhh!" said Tony suddenly. "I get it! Loki's freaking out because-- oh my God, that is *fucked up*!"

"Stark!" hissed Phil.

Thor pinched the bridge of his nose. "How many times must I apologize to you? That was centuries ago and now I offer you to rule with me, and you-- excuse me, Tony Stark, please control your omega." Thor didn't look at all impressed by Steve. Surprised, certainly, that an omega would threaten him. Where was his primary Alpha. Thor cast a look around, then turned to Phil. "Go fetch his primary Alpha. He and Loki are only upsetting each other."

"Apologise! Ha! You can't *take it back* Thor! That's how it works," Loki snapped. There was a reason he had started growing his hair long. At first, he'd hated it. But then his face had grown into it.

Tony eased between Thor and Steve; Steve had that righteous anger about him and Tony knew that Steve was someone who was prone to fighting regardless of the consequences. "Hey... guys... let's just step back, okay?" He didn't like being this close to Thor. His hackles had flattened like they were trying to hide and he felt the urge to pee again. He put a hand on Steve's chest and gave him a very gentle, suggestive push.

He mostly just wanted to leave.

"Steve, come on. Please." Tony tugged his sleeve.

Thor waved a hand at them dismissively. "Yes, go. Leave us. I will take care of my brother."

The only reason Steve didn't sock Thor in the jaw was because Tony stepped between them. He was positively fuming. He didn't step back when Tony pushed at his chest, his eyes still set on Thor's face. "I'm not letting you in that cage," Steve stated firmly.

"Steve, it's okay. I've got the controls," Phil said softly.

Steve whipped around. The way Phil was staring at Thor didn't convince him of much. "I'll be keeping an eye via CCTV." He pointed a finger at Thor. "I'm gonna find you later and I'm gonna *kick your ass,* " he promised him, even more enthused when he saw Thor smirk at him as he finally let Tony push him out.

The minute they were outside Steve let out a ragged, frustrated breath.

"What is wrong with him?!" he demanded, fisting a hand in his hair. "Jesus Christ! He doesn't even think I'm a person, Tony!" Steve started pacing down the hall. He looked about ready to punch a wall. "We can't trust him. They're both insane. They're both fucking nuts."

"Okay... listen... you're right. You're right, they're both crazy, I mean, they're aliens..." said Tony soothingly, nervously. God, he did *not* like being around either of them. "Let's just let them work it out and go back to Neptune or where ever the hell they came from... come on... you gotta talk to Natasha..." Tony was hoping to redirect Steve's anger into something more productive. "There's a
CCTV up in the lab, you can watch them from there, okay... come on..."

He had hoped to recover his confidence once in the hallway, but he couldn't. Thor's dominance, Steve's anger... and perhaps worst of all, Loki's words that had sliced right to his core. *He never even mentioned you.*

Tony walked back up to the lab, shoulders sagging. He could never stand up to Thor for his mate, be as dominant as he needed to be. He was pathetic.

In the lab, Bruce was sitting on one of the benches; Natasha was on a stool.

"Hey, weren't you supposed to be like... calibrating stuff? Setting up an algorithm?" asked Tony.

"Done," said Bruce calmly. "The model's locked and we're sweeping for the signature now. When we get a hit, we'll have the location within half a mile. Can't keep secrets from me." His eyes narrowed and he looked up, catching Tony's eyes. "So. They built a cage. What was your hand in that?"

"Me?!" cried Tony. "I didn't--"

"Oh, give me a break, Stark. I know you've been working with Reed Richards on that offshore prison for mutants--"

"Yeah, bad guys! I'm a consultant, he consulted me!"

"And here you had everyone believing you'd given up the old life," sneered Natasha, rising. Her eyes flashed. She grabbed something off the bench and practically shoved it into Tony's arms. It was an assault rifle.

"What the hell's this?" asked Tony.

"Don't play dumb, Stark! You were involved in Phase Two all along, weren't you? That's why SHIELD's been letting you and Steve get away with everything."

"I seriously have no idea what the fuck you're talking about," protested Tony, hoisting up the rifle and looking it over. He let out an appreciative whistle. "Wow. This is a helluva gun."

"Yeah, the JDE Mission Facility's apparently been developing your weapons--"

"I had nothing to do with this!"

"--using the cube's energy."

"Nat, I swear, I didn't know. ...these are energy weapons... this is like the Next Gen stuff I was making back in 2009," observed Tony, examining the rifle. He looked up. "Nat, would Steve let me anywhere near that fucking thing? Come on. I didn't know anything about this." The color was draining from Steve's face, which helped Tony's case more than anything Tony could have said.

The door slammed; the four of them looked up. Fury was standing there with Thor.

On the grainy CCTV monitor, Loki was sitting placidly, cross-legged, in the middle of his cell, waiting patiently.

"Who gave you that?" said Fury in alarm. "--listen, just because we've been researching the Tesseract and its applications doesn't mean that we aren't taking every precaution--"
"Precautions like you took with me?" said Bruce, voice dangerously quiet, rising.

"... maybe you might wanna think about removing yourself from this environment, Dr. Banner?" said Fury.

Bruce let out a barking laugh. "Why, because my cage is currently occupied? You know, I was pretty far removed, I was all the way in Calcutta and then you brought me here against my will by manipulating me and lying to me. Now I'd like some real answers, like why SHIELD is using the Tesseract to build weapons of mass destruction."

"Look, man, it's an arms race out there. With Stark out of the game, we had to do something, and--don't give me that look!" snapped Fury. "One year ago, earth had a visitor from another planet who had a grudge match that leveled a small town. Obliterated it. We learned that we're not alone and that we are hopelessly outgunned. You see him?" He pointed to Thor. "He's using a hammer and he could still squish us all like ants."

"But my people want nothing but peace with your planet!" protested Thor.

"Does your brother know that yet?" asked Natasha, crossing her arms.

"You're not the only people out there, are you? And, you're not the only threat. The world is filling up with people who can't be matched or controlled, who need--"

"Like mutants?" interrupted Bruce. "Like monsters? Monsters like me?"

"You can hardly blame us," said Thor, looking offended. "Your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it, and his allies. It is the signal to all the realms that the earth is ready for a higher form of war; it's hardly a coincidence that Loki arrived if you were using its power to develop weapons."

"Oh, so we're asking for it?" asked Natasha, quivering with anger.

"You came here long before we ever started Phase Two," said Nick to Thor. "You forced our hand; we couldn't wait for the next--"

"Nuclear deterrents are always a good way to calm everyone down. Right up there with lock-ins at the rec center," said Tony glibly.

"Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark?"

Tony's hackles finally pricked. "How is this about me now? I can't believe I'm say thing, but this is about you lying to all of us. You lied to Steve about using the Tesseract, you lied to Bruce about the cage, you lied to--"

"I thought humans were more evolved than this," said Thor scathingly. "While you all quibble like children, my brother--"

"Excuse me, did we come to your planet and blow stuff up?" snapped Fury.

"Speaking as the authority on blowing stuff up--" began Tony.

"Did you really think you could treat us like this? Huh? Treat us like pawns? Barton's out there and what are you doing about it?" shouted Natasha, standing up.

"How naive--" began Fury, but Natasha cut him off.

"I mean, I know Steve and Tony are on the watchlist, but--"
"Wait, I'm on another watchlist?" said Tony, blinking.

"You put Captain America on a watchlist?" said Bruce.

"Which watchlist?" asked Tony in alarm.

"The national security threats--"

"Wait, so I'm on a watchlist but you're allowed to drag me and Steve off any time you need us for a mission?" interrupted Tony.

"ENOUGH!" Steve shouted and everyone's heads whipped around to stare at him. The scepter glinted on the table. It felt like it was winking at him. "You need to get control of yourselves. Arguing like this won't get us anywhere."

"What, and you will? You killed how many people under Loki's--" Natasha began, and then she snapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes wide. "Steve-- oh, God. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it. I don't know what's coming over me."

"Maybe it's..." Bruce looked sideways, towards the scepter.

"I think we should take time to clear our heads," Fury said. "You need time to--"

"We won't just let this slide Nick," Steve warned and it wasn't Loki's scepter that was infuriating him. "You carry on with this Phase Two bullshit, then after all this Loki stuff, I'm out. Okay? I won't stand for it. I'm all for protecting humans and Americans, but not if we become unAmerican in the process. I trusted you. I trusted you and I--" Steve hesitated. "Doesn't matter now." And then he pulled away, walking out with his shoulders in a tight line. Natasha rushed out after him.

"Steve. Steve. I didn't mean it--"

"Just drop it Nat. I know you didn't. I just... I need some time. Please just leave me be."

Steve thought back to when he'd thought of Nick like a father figure. Ha. He'd been childish, an idiot. Nick was a spy, through and through, and Steve never should have trusted him. He always had a goal in mind. He was playing a game. Maybe he was one of the people who was stopping Steve from getting sterilised; maybe he--

Steve pushed through door after door until he found a generator room. It was quiet, the only sound the whir of the machinery. He sank down to the floor, his mind swimming. He could feel Tony walking towards him, or thought he was. Steve swallowed, curling in on himself.

He heard the door open and swallowed thickly.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. Steve's gaze was fixed on the floor. "I'm sorry I fucked up. I'm sorry I hit you, back in Stuttgart. I'm sorry I didn't... look, my mind was in a bad place. I wasn't in control of my thoughts. I'm sorry."

There was nothing he could say to make it better. Steve's mind had been on Bucky. It was a good thing he hadn't found him too, he...he didn't know what he would have done. Something irreversible perhaps.

"Tony?" Steve turned around, realising he hadn't heard him. But he could have sworn he felt his mate step into the room.
Tony edged into the room and sat.

He didn't look up.

"Is it true?" Tony's voice was tiny. "...is it true, Steve? That you never mentioned me? ...you can tell the truth. I know you and... him... have a stronger bond." Tony twisted the band on his left hand, staring down into his lap. "You can feel it, how Thor is. How... dominant. I mean, I literally pissed myself looking him in the eye the first time." Tony let out a harsh laugh. "I'm... I'm not very dominant. Everyone knows that. Being a low-ranking Alpha is worse than being a beta. Omegas don't want you, and other Alphas treat you like shit." There was a pause. "Maybe that's why I always chased after beta women. They can't tell, y'know?"

Tony lapsed into silence again.

"I didn't develop those weapons. But it's my fault they exist. I... I planted that seed. Next Gen, in 2009, we unveiled that right before Afghanistan. Energy pulses. RT node-based assault rifles. It's my fault. Yeah, I stopped making weapons, but my ideas... well. Pandora's box, y'know?"

Another pause.

"You can tell me the truth." Tony's voice was low. Submissive. "You only thought about him, didn't you? He's your primary Alpha. No matter what we say, deep down... your body... it prefers him. He's more dominant and I'm... well... let's face it, Steve, I'm.... I'm a really crap Alpha, biologically speaking. Dad was always embarrassed by me. You? You're a great omega. I know you were small, and sick. But you... you have this spark, this confidence. You look Alphas in the eye. That's why they chose you for that program. ...you have no idea..."

Tony laughed harshly.

"...you have no idea what it was like for me, to hit puberty. To suddenly just... just sense all the guys at my school were... were so much more dominant. To feel Dad's disappointment. We were close, you know, when I was a kid. We'd work in the shop together. Then one day, I came downstairs, and... and both our hackles went up, and we looked at each other, right in the eye, and-- and you know, I dropped my gaze instantly. I just-- I just completely went submissive. And I could tell how disappointed he was that I was so weak. And-- and Nat already told me how-- how your other-- how Bucky is. He's-- he's even more dominant than her, right?"

Tony was choking up a little.

He lapsed into silence, tracing the little diamonds stamped into the metal floor.

Steve's silence said everything. Yes, it's true. He couldn't quite meet Tony's gaze, his expression crumpled. Steve swallowed thickly and clasped his hands in his lap, knuckles white. He felt awful. "I want you," Steve pointed out softly. When he'd been around Tony Steve had never even thought about it. He hadn't started measuring up dominance in his head. Sometimes other Alphas were around, like Justin or Rhodey, but Steve never compared. He only really started paying attention once people hit T'challa or Thor levels. T'challa had reminded him, oddly, of Bucky. Their pheromones had been similar.

In the army, though, he'd been surrounded by so many Alphas with so many different levels of dominance; there was a point when it stopped mattering to Steve. But it was evident Tony himself could never reach that point.

Really, if he was with a beta woman (Pepper) he wouldn't have to deal with this. Steve felt bad for
dragging this shit onto him.

"How dominant is he?" pressed Tony. "More than Romanoff?"

"Bucky is somewhere between Natasha and Prince T'challa," Steve murmured in affirmation. "I... sometimes I hear him talking to me," Steve admitted, gaze on Tony's hands as they moved across the floor, tracing the cool metal. "I can feel his thoughts, through the bond. And I felt awful, Tony. I was torturing him. Every heat I was making him wake up in a cryo tube and he was so confused and hurt and he-- I'm not sure how much longer I could have lived with that," Steve whispered. "I'm sorry, I just--" Steve ran a hand over his face. "Everything with him is instinctual. And the Tesseract doesn't like you to think. You just do. Please don't let this affect us," he asked softly.

But Steve full well knew that it already had.

"Tony, like I said in there. I'm not just a status. I'm a person. I'm more than my instincts."

"But that's how you and I bonded, wasn't it?" challenged Tony. "We're scent-mates. We pair-bonded and we didn't even really know each other, Steve. Shit. I don't even know you now."

Steve didn't have to see Tony's pain to feel it. To feel it clawing deep inside his chest and dragging him down, making him shudder. He swallowed, wanting to refute Tony, reassure him but--

"It's okay," mumbled Tony, staring at his hands in his lap. "I know you... love him."

Tony's face was blank, a careful poker face designed not to show what he was feeling. But for those that knew him, that expression was just as bad as him bawling his eyes out.

It was true. Tony could feel it himself. Just like Steve could feel his love for Pepper. Or even just Rhodey or Happy. He couldn't hide his betrayal even if he wanted to. They could feel each other's emotions and Steve couldn't lie and say he didn't love Bucky. He did; he always had.

Tony looked up to catch Steve's eye and suddenly changed the subject. "So what are we gonna do about all these Phase Two weapons?"

Steve never got a chance to answer. There was suddenly a massive explosion and the room tilted, throwing the two of them against the wall. Instantly, emergency alarms were going off, along with a fire extinguishing system, covering everything in a mist of foam.

"What the hell?" said Tony in alarm.

Agent Hill's voice came on the intercom. "Attention all units. Ship six-six-one-bravo has landed and has at least one hostile. Number three engine is down. We are at a level seven; this is not a drill."

Tony scrambled to his feet in alarm. "Aren't we like thirty thousand feet in the air?" he said. "Don't we need engines to, um, not fall to our death?" He offered Steve a hand to get up.

Steve took the offered hand and stood, feeling sad when Tony's hand slipped away from his moments later.

"You get on the engine," he said. "I'll get on the intrusion." Steve raised a hand to his comm unit. "Phil, are you still with Loki?"

"Yep. Don't worry. Not moving."

"Good. Keep an eye on him."
"...guys. Code Green. You might want to get upstairs--" Natasha began but then her voice was drowned out by the tremble of gunfire. Steve didn't wait any longer. He sprinted towards the stairs. The bullets weren't the only problem. It was what was going to happen to Banner if he got hit by one of them.
Casualties and Losses

As chaos interrupted over the comms, and the alarms went off, and agents scrambled to get to their stations, inside of his cage, Loki was grinning at Phil, looking positively thrilled with himself.

"We know you've done this," Phil said. He was holding a rather impressive-looking gun. Cute, thought Loki. As if he feared human weapons. Ha. "Whatever you're up to, it's not going to work, Loki."

"And why's that?"

"Because you don't care about the end goal. You just like the chaos."

Loki's eyes glinted. "Surely then, by that logic, I am already winning?" He twisted around on his heel when he heard the unseemly plod of his brother's feet.

He didn't turn around to greet him, hands clasped neatly behind his back. He could see him in the reflection of the glass but did not care to face him at the moment. Not yet.

"Careful, brother," he murmured, voice suddenly very soft. "You don't want to miss the show..."

"...be careful, Steve," said Tony, then darted off to the lab to get his suit. It was waiting for him in all its shining glory, the back open like a pair of beetle's wings, just waiting to be stepped into. Tony wasted no time in slipping his limbs into the legs and arms, and waited impatiently as the suit folded around him, clicking its interlocking plates into place, locking them, taking its sweet time.

"JARVIS!" hollered Tony the moment the HUD came online. "We gotta do some engine repair. Can you find me some blueprints for the SHIELD helicarrier? They're probably with all that classified stuff we hacked into last year."

"Of course, sir," said JARVIS.

"Link me up to all the comms, I need to know what's happening..."

Tony had no sooner said it than it was done; suddenly, the inside of his helmet was buzzing with dozens of conversations.

"--can we get a run--"

"--Agent Barton--"

"--loose turbine with overloaded--"

"--detention center--"

"--recalibrate and head south--"

"--listing to port--"

Things did not sound promising. Worse, most of the chatter was overlaid with bouts of shouting, gunfire, alarms, and fire extinguishers. Tony found Engine 3's control and maintenance room easily. It was the room with the giant hole in it.
"Shit," said Tony. He jumped out of the hole, hitting the jets on the heels of his hands and grabbing onto the side of the engine fan. He peeked inside. The damage was immediately, obviously apparent.

"Super conducting cooling system is offline; debris is lodged in the rotors," said JARVIS helpfully.

"I know how to diagnose a turbine, Jarv," said Tony, frowning. He looked back over his shoulder at the open engine room; anything not bolted down had long since been lost. But the important things, the control panels, were all in place.

"Hey, anyone there?" called Tony into the helmet. "I need help in Engine Room 3." The fix was, in theory, easy. But Tony couldn't read control panel read-outs if he was working on the engine and without knowing which relays were overloaded, he couldn't get the cooling system back online, which was critical if he wanted the turbine to be turned on without frying itself to a crisp.

"Kinda busy!" hollered Natasha; Tony heard clanging and a lion-like roar in the background. Shit. Was that Thor? Tony couldn't think of anything else that could make such a noise...

Thor, of course, was on the other side of the glass, staring at his brother angrily. "You fool! You arrogant, selfish fool! Do you have any idea the chaos you've unleashed? And for what? For a brief laugh?" He slammed a fist against the glass. "I stood up to Father for you, and this is how you repay me? ...if you were not my brother, I would surely have lost patience with you by now!" He turned and swept out, cape flapping dramatically, not acknowledging Phil at any point.

Steve had gone upstairs to try and find the intrusion and was met with a corridor full of men in black. Bullets started flying and Steve quickly backed away, throwing his shield so it bounced off the wall and around the corner back into the corridor. He heard a few grunts as it hit its target(s) and then followed straight after. There was no time to determine who was friend or who was foe; the whole ship was going down, the floor tilting noticeably, and Steve couldn't risk any sort of long engagement with hostiles. Better to knock everyone down and sort 'em out later.

He jumped up, catching the guy he'd missed with a kick to the jaw before grabbed his gun and twisted around. More bullets flew, but Steve was already on the floor, aiming at the last two men at the end and emptying rounds into their legs. When he got close he kicked their guns away. He recognised the unhealthy blue glow in their eyes. "Where's Barton?" he asked.

The guy who he'd kicked blinked up at him dazedly, eyes no longer blue. "L-Loki."

Steve was about to head back down to the cage when he heard Tony on the comms. "Tony-- alright, Engine Room #3. I'm on my way. Direct me?"

Soon he found the room, recognising it by the undeniable hole in the wall. Steve swallowed, shield on his back as he crept towards it. He stepped out onto the balcony-type ledge that led outside and Steve's throat went dry.

Don't look down. Don't look down.

He'd never been afraid of heights but he'd also never been this high up during the day. Most of the times he'd flung himself from an airplane, it had been under the cover of darkness, when he couldn't see just how high up he was.

He looked across instead of down. A few meters away, on the north wall, he could see a control panel that was blinking angrily. There was a flash of red to his left; Tony throwing some loose pieces of metal out of the turbine. Seeing him flying around in the air was alarming when he thought
about just how high up they were. The suit usually looked so strong, solid...but right now, this high up, he looked vulnerable. "I'm here," he told him over comms, figuring he wouldn't hear him over the wind. "What do you need?" he called out.

"A miracle would be nice."

"Fresh out of those. ...what's the next best thing?"

Loki sighed fondly as he watched Thor leave, hands still behind his back. "I'm not sure you can lose your patience if you did not have any to begin with," he murmured, almost to himself. Then he glanced sideways over to Phil who was still holding that ridiculous gun. "You know," he breathed, stepping up towards the glass. "I'm very good at illusions."

"That's nice," Phil said, sounding entirely disingenuous.

Loki smiled sweetly and tilted his head. He looked like he was perhaps pretty once but now there was an ugliness warped into every expression he pulled. There was a bitterness in him he could not hide.

"So I could have walked out of this cage hours ago, and you wouldn't have even noticed."

"That's impossible."

"Is it?" Loki whispered, still smiling. "Would you like to find out?"

Phil's eyes narrowed. "The only thing I plan to find out is what the hell this gun does if you put a toe out of line. I'm guessing it won't be pleasant. I'm not in the mood for any more riddles or tricks. If you value your life, then don't push me."


Then Phil let out a choking sound and the image of Loki inside the cage flickered. With a further push the tip of his sceptre poked through and Loki leaned forward, his lips brushing against Phil's ear. "You made the mistake of thinking my brother is worth your respect. He is not. He is worth nothing. You are worth nothing. You thought a mere plane of glass could stop my magic? You are fools."

Tony would have honestly preferred to see anyone at all except Steve. First of all, he didn't like the idea of his mate standing in the open engine control room, thirty thousand feet above the ocean. Second, he was still hurting from Loki's comment. But he needed to keep a clear head. Just think of him as Captain America, Tony instructed himself mentally. Problem number three: Captain America was from the forties. He probably didn't have an especially good idea of how the engines of a helicarrier worked. Tony would have to talk to him like he was stupid.

"Okay," said Tony slowly, "go over to the engine control panel and tell me which relays are in the overload position. Reset those relays-- it's like flipping a breaker switch-- then tell me when the readout is at 100%. I'm going to jump-start the rotors, give 'em a little push once I get all this crap out of here; there's at least three blades intact so we should be able to get it spinning. You'll have to stand by the manual operation lever and reverse polarity to disengage the magnetic pull. You got all that, Cap?"

Tony already knew he'd lost Steve somewhere along the line.
He thought about radioing for someone else, but things sounded like they had gotten a hell of a lot worse inside. Tony had had to turn down the volume of his earpiece; through bouts of roaring, cracking, and explosions, he could hear the occasional shouted orders from Maria Hill: "Escort 606, can you lure him to Shuttle Level 2? ...we have a parameter breach in the medical bay. ...storage room 6V is compromised. ...Barton spotted, he's heading toward the detention center."

When Tony railed off a load of information it felt to Steve like he was speaking a totally different language. "Right. Okay... okay. I think-- I think I got it," he said loudly through comms, trying to keep his voice above the wind. It took a few tries but Steve managed to fiddle with the controls until he eventually started to see a percentage flickering on a screen, gradually increasing.

Tony clung on to the edge of the turbine with one hand, using his wrist-mounted laser to cut away pieces of the cracked hull from the rotor blades. The thing was scratched all to hell but once cleared, he was almost positive he could get it to--

"Steve? Is my output going up, or down?"

"Yeah! I've got it. It's at 9--"

The whole ship suddenly shifted dramatically and Tony's laser went wide, cutting away part of one of the rotor blades, as he grabbed onto the turbine automatically to keep from falling. As if he had anything to worry about; he could fly. But Steve--

"STEVE!" he yelled, looking over. Steve had managed to grab onto a loose cable to keep from getting thrown loose.

"Engine 1 is offline! Barton's in the system!" shouted Hill into Tony's earpiece.

"Shit! JARVIS! JARVIS, can you try to override that, can you get in?" yelled Tony.

"Yes, sir. Estimate breach time is six hours."

"I don't have six hours, JARVIS!"

"Rome wasn't built in a day, sir," said JARVIS, sounding miffed. "SHIELD's systems are quite advanced."

"You piece of shit! Forget it! Just keep analyzing the structural integrity of these rotors, if we can get this thing going we can at least have a soft crash!" Tony scrambled into the turbine like a rat into a tin can; the rotor blades were each easily twenty feet tall and standing within the engine, Tony felt like he was in a blender. He took a deep, ragged breath. "Steve?"

When the ship lurched, Steve flew into the air, through the gap in the blown apart railing. He grabbed wildly and found a cable, his heart hammering away in his chest. If not for his enhanced reflexes and strength, he would have been dead. That was too close. Way too close. The air was whipping around and Steve heard the cable strain. He grit his teeth and planted one hand in front of the other until he could get a foot back on the balcony. With a grunt Steve heaved himself back onto the balcony. He let out a shuddered breath.

"I'm okay. I'm good," he told Tony and slowly pushed himself up.

"Steve, are you at the manual operation shut-off lever? I need you to literally hold that and let go on my word. No pressure but if you fuck up I'm going to get shredded in here."

"It's at 100%. I'm headed to the lever," Steve said a little breathlessly, running over to the lever. It
was red and looked dangerous. The thought of Tony getting shredded was not a comforting one. "Okay--" He closed his hands around it and pushed down. "I'm holding it."

"Great, all you need to do is get ready to pull it down on my signal."

"No problem." Steve waited. A minute passed, then another.

Tony shoved his shoulder into one of the blades and pushed. The metal grated against metal, the remaining bits of debris getting pushed around. Tony clenched his teeth against the harsh sound, slowly moving the blades. Once he got the first push in, he got some momentum and it became easier, the suit needing less power. Within one rotation he was using the jets, pushing the rotors with the force of them, picking up speed.

Steve heard a sudden, familiar ping of metal on metal.

He ducked down instinctively; several more bullets whizzed over his head. With his free hand he grabbed his shield and tried to hold it up, protecting himself. The bullets pinged off, but they were getting closer. "Tony! Tony I can't--" Steve ducked down just as another volley of bullets flew right over his head.

He let go of the lever. Steve threw his shield and it hit one of the men on the opposite balcony before it bounced back. A man appeared behind him. He smacked him with the face of his shield as it returned to his grip before grabbing the man's gun. "Minor distraction on my end!" he yelled.

"Minor distraction? God damn it, Steve, I need you in about fifteen seconds!"

Tony had to admit: he panicked.

"Steve? Steve!" he shouted. "Steve, are you there? Steve, these things are picking up speed, and I need--"

Actually the rotors were picking up speed at an alarming rate. Steve had obviously let go of the lever. Shit.

"--Steve, quick, I need you to grab the lever, Steve! Lever! ...Steve!"

"I'm being as quick as I can!" he told Tony, aiming at the soldiers. But it was hard to get a good sight on them; they had the advantage. "Tony, I can't-- just wait--"

Steve was still talking to him, which meant he wasn't dead, but also, the engine was on, and suddenly Tony wasn't pushing it. *It was pushing him*. He still had the jets on, but suddenly the rotor behind him had caught up and he was being shoved, not able to keep up with the turbine. The suit had never been designed to fly this fast in such a cramped area. His foot and hip boosters were designed to give him thrust over a much further distance, and he could only hit them so hard in his confines; he was being buffeted against the metal walls as he tried to keep up with the rotating blades.

"Lever! Steve! Now!"

The suit was small and the turbine was generating lift on its own, dragging him inward, downward, toward the bottom of the sharp, spinning blades--

*His Alpha.* He had to protect him. He had to. Steve slid over to the edge of the balcony, almost falling off again. He got a sight on them and managed to get a few shots in. Steve caught the last man in the shoulder and threw the gun down before sprinting back over to the lever. He grabbed it and
pulled it back harshly.

There was a tiny shudder and Tony hit the jets as hard as he could; for a split-second, the rotors slowed, fighting against suddenly reversed magnetism, and Tony shot out of the turbine like a bat out of hell. He wasn't looking where he was going and slammed into the side of the helicarrier, hard, hard enough to stun him momentarily. The suit traced a baffled scribble in the air, a moth on windcurrents, before Tony managed to right himself.

"Tony-- Tony, are you okay?! Tony, are you there?"

Steve was yelling in his ear.

"Yeah! Steve, yeah, no, I'm here, I'm out, I'm alive--"

Tony turned to the ship, hovering in the air. He was completely disoriented; the HUD was struggling to maintain the horizon line within the helmet, and Tony's own eyes were making things complicated; the ship was tilted at a completely insane angle and losing altitude, righting itself slowly, but too slowly. Engine 3 was staggered and Engine 1 was clearly not working now, either, causing the whole thing to tip drunkenly in the air toward the port bow.

Tony angled his palms and shot towards the hole in the control room; Steve was gripping onto the edge of a control panel, arms popping with muscles.

"Steve, it's working but Engine 1's offline, and we're still losing altitude. Unless he drop a ton of weight, fast, we're going to crash."

Past them, a fighter plane blew past, and Tony caught a glimpse of something impossibly huge on the wing, something ugly and grey-green, a half-naked gorilla, King Kong in the flesh, tearing off the wings while roaring; the pilot ejected and both the plane and the monster dropped out of sight, plummeting toward the ground.

"--okay, that probably helped, but we still need to jettison some shit!" yelled Tony after a beat.

Phil, ever-composed and ever-calm, didn't flinch. The shock was too great. He barely even made a noise. Loki's lips, soft and dry and cold, moved over his skin and the sceptre pierced his flesh. He blinked in shock.

"No!"

Thor flung himself into the room, charging at his brother. The impact never came. He went through the image of Loki without so much as a breeze of air. It was like they were children all over again, sparring, and Loki was doing what he did best: using Thor's own momentum against him.

Before Thor could turn he realized he'd charged right into Loki's cell.

He whipped around. Two Lokis were smirking at him.

Thor brought down his hammer on the glass; the ship vibrated with the impact, but the glass barely cracked.

Infernal humans, too clever for their own good. Whatever material the cage was made of, it was designed with withstand incredible force. *Inhuman* amounts of force.

"Let me out at once! Leave that mortal be!" shouted Thor, enraged. Loki was still smirking.
Phil opened his mouth as if to speak, but the only thing that came out was a large, moist, glistening bubble of red. It grew, then popped, leaving specks of blood over Phil's chin.

"Phil Coulson!" shouted Thor, giving the cage another smash. Still, only a thin spiderweb of cracks, though the rest of the ship shuddered violently. "Loki! Damn it, Loki! You fool, you'll kill us all! Phil! Phil!"

Phil eyes roved over to Thor in mild surprise; he was still standing there, frozen, holding his silly human weapon that probably only shot pellets or some other thing, and Loki was grinning, watching, unconcerned, free. There was a cold iciness in his eyes and Thor felt his hackles rise. This was not his brother. No. His eyes were all wrong, the expression on his face deranged.

They had been close, once.

Perhaps too close.

Yes, that was Thor's fault. He and Loki had grown up side by side, best friends. They had not thought much of their statuses. Or at least, Thor had not. He knew Loki was an omega, like the servants, but because Loki was a prince, everyone treated him differently. And Thor, for whatever reason, never questioned the presence of an omega in the royal family, no more than he questioned why Loki was so dark when the rest of them were so fair. In retrospect, he should have known at the very beginning. Loki was different, strange, the black sheep. As they got older, the differences grew more and more pronounced. Thor grew up and out, bulking up, growing out his beard, wielding ever-larger weapons, while Loki remained small and boyish, his face feminine, or at least androgynous. Still, their mother treated them the same. But Odin spent more time with Thor, preparing him to take the throne, and Loki was left to his own devices in the library. More and more often, he was barred from meetings of war, from audiences in the throneroom, because it was not befitting his status; as children they had had run of the palace, but as they turned into men, Loki was more and more often left alone.

Thor had never meant to ignore him. He'd merely been too caught up in his own lessons, basking in his noble calling. He'd never known of Loki's bitterness.

And then, when Thor was five hundred and sixty-seven and Loki was four ninety, it had happened.

It had been an innocent accident.

He was in preheat, his scent scintillating, seductive, and he and Thor had ended up in his bedchambers, comparing notes on their lessons; Loki had been secretly practicing wielding daggers with their mother and Thor had required Loki's assistance in learning a long and complicated list of sigils of their allies; it felt good to again be brothers and friends and share each other's company.

They had both wanted it, Thor had thought. It had been nothing more than a pair of foolish boys trying something out, just as they'd practiced sparring techniques and magic on each other. Loki had knelt and it had been wonderful, amazing, the vision of him with his straight back and the unblemished porcelain skin of his exposed neck. Thor's hand had been on his head and Loki and leaned on his thigh, and then-- this was the part Thor barely even remembered, really-- he had scruffed Loki and tossed him over the wolfskin spread of his bed and bitten him. And Loki had arched into it, mewling, and then, suddenly--

Neither had understood, or appreciated, bonding. Thor certainly had bedded a few maidens (no longer maidens) by that time. But never an omega, and never one in heat or preheat.

How it had startled them, the sudden presence of another.
They were suddenly close, closer than any two people had any right to be. Thor was suddenly closer to him than any of his friends, closer to him even than Sif, so close he could feel him, practically hear his thoughts, though they were in no language he spoke--

The two of them had panicked, of course. Oh, of course. They were brothers; it was obscene; they had merely been playing, experimenting, and suddenly they were bonded. They had tried to solve it themselves; Loki had tried to fix it with his magic but could not; after several hours they had gone to find Frigga, gripping each other's hands and fearfully reassuring each other.

They had found Odin instead and Thor would never forget his fury... not at Thor, but at Loki. For... what were his words... being ruined. At Loki, for "corrupting my son."

Later, Thor would realize the terribly implication, that he was his father's son and that Loki was not.

They'd sent Loki away for several weeks after that and Thor had been given over to the care of some Varin priestesses, who taught him to meditate, to distance the bond. Eventually he was able to sever it. Those weeks were confusing and lonely. Though far apart, he could feel Loki's pain and hurt and confusion and remorse. There were only fleeting moments of happiness, and, once or twice, other feelings... during Loki's proper heat, Thor felt his arousal and knew Loki could feel his own in response, and he retired to his chambers to guiltily take pleasure from his own hand, hating himself for it, feeling Loki's shame as well.

When Loki returned they were no longer bonded. But on Loki's neck remained the scar. He was tarnished.

He grew his hair long. He lashed out, growing jealous of Sif, even assaulting her and cutting her hair, stalking around the palace angrily, avoiding Thor. Things could never be the same. Thor apologized but as decades and centuries passed, he eventually stopped to focus on the throne and Loki seemed... well, he kept to himself, but at least he seemed less bitter.

Thor had never seen any of this coming.

Within the cell, his shoulders sagged.

"Loki. Brother. Please. I'm sorry," he said.

He knew even as the words left his mouth that Loki had no mercy in his heart. Why should he? Thor had shown him none. From that very first day, Thor had stood silent while Odin screamed at him for being bonded. Thor had held his brother's hand but had not interjected, as he should have. He had also not interjected when Loki had been punished for cutting Sif's hair; he had watched them punish and humiliate his brother and had felt that it was just.

Now, staring into those ghostly blue eyes, their glacial fury, Thor was struck with a deep, unrelenting sense of personal failure.

He could ask to be let out, but when Loki had begged for Thor to go to Odin and remove the bonds on his wrists, Thor had refused. Now he was being refused in turn.

Thor's eyes darted over to the switch and the button, the one Fury had so casually demonstrated to Loki. The one that released the cage, the one that would send it plummeting to earth.

...Loki wouldn't... he couldn't...?

"...brother?" Thor's voice betrayed his concern. Loki looked triumphant. And Phil, poor Phil Coulson, treasured servant, stood there skewered on his scepter, wordless, motionless, as frozen as
"Can we not fix the other engine?" Steve asked, relieved to see Tony alive and okay next to him. Well, the suit looked a little battered, but Steve could only hope Tony therefore didn't take the brunt of it. He raised a hand to his ear. "Hill. We're falling. Tony says we need to lose weight, and fast. We'll try and fix the engine, but just in case--"

"We'll get every jet in the air that we can!" Maria yelled back over comms. "But with Banner out in the air there's a risk. We don't want to send our men out to die."

"If we all stay on this carrier we're doing to die too," Steve said, already sprinting towards the other failing engine per per Tony's instruction. "We either have to stay in the air or somehow land."

"--landing is not an option right now."

"So we fix it. Coulson. How's Loki?"

Steve frowned at the lack of response. He grabbed his shield, holding it up as he heard the patter of feet down the corridor.

"...Coulson?"

Loki pulled a face at Coulson dying on the floor, blood blossoming across his white shirt, as if the sight was somehow grotesque and unexpected. He adjusted his grip on the sceptre and looked up when Thor spoke again. There was a steeliness in his gaze that had not been there before. Loki swallowed, walking over to the eject button. He didn't speak to him. He reached out to press it, not even hesitating and then he just--

He stopped, his hand frozen in the air like some invisible force had reached out and grabbed him. Loki's face looked conflicted. His left eye twitched. Thor spoke again, but he didn't really hear it. Something along the lines of please, brother.

Could he really do this? Murder a helpless prisoner? A prisoner who was his brother? Once, even, his mate?

"It's too late now," he whispered.

Loki's eyes flickered up to Thor's face.

"Don't you see? Don't you get it?" Loki's voice quivered in the air. "It's always been too late for you, Thor."

His brow furrowed together a little. "This is about more than just you and me now anyway." Loki exhaled slowly, closing his eyes. "I survived my fall."

Then Loki managed a smile; it didn't quite meet his eyes. "Let's see if you survive yours." He slammed his hand down on the button and the cage was gone, plummeting into the air. He stared at the empty space where his brother had once stood. His once-brother.

And Loki felt nothing.
Natasha groaned as she pushed herself up, kicking away a heavy pipe from off her other leg. She could hear gunfire in the distance and the echo of the Hulk's roar. She raised a hand to her ear. Everything ached and she could feel blood trickling down the side of her face, hot and wet. "Black Widow. Checking in."

"Engine 1 is offline. Me and Tony are trying to fix it. I--" It was Steve's voice.

"--the cage has been ejected." Hill's voice cut in.

"What? Hill, we need that cage!"

"Sorry, Widow, but it's gone, along with its contents."

"Loki, right?" Steve said.

"No..." Maria said, her voice too quiet. "Not Loki."

"Do we know who was in it?" Natasha asked, slowly standing up with a huff. She pushed her hair back behind her ears. She could hear footsteps coming down to her lower level. Fuck. Her gun was lost somewhere in the fight with Banner. Natasha moved quickly, pressing her back to the wall so she could catch anyone coming down the corridor by surprise.

The cage meant for the Hulk plummeted from the helicarrier, leaving behind nothing but a void where it had once been. The sudden rush of cold air hit Phil, hard. He blinked and turned to Loki, aiming one of SHIELD's Phase 2 guns at him.

"You. You're going to lose. You're at a disadvantage. You don't have... you don't have the one thing... that you truly need... to win."

Loki cocked an eyebrow. "And what is that? Some silly little human weapon?"

"Conviction," said Phil, voice steady.

He pulled the trigger.

Loki went flying, and so did Phil; the recoil was insane. He slammed against the far wall and slid down, leaving a smear of red on the metal. "Huh," he said mildly, sounding impressed.

"Huh," agreed a dazed Loki, staring across the room at the fragile, broken human body before him.

He'd been intent on getting to Engine Room 4 when his orders shifted.

Suddenly, he was aware, somehow, that his leader, that his friend, had been shot. That they were not as safe as they had thought.

Didn't matter. Enough chaos had been sown. The aircraft was staggered, the Avengers scattered.

Barton turned to find Loki. Instead, he came face-to-face with Natasha.

He had orders to kill. With cat-like reflexes, he reached behind him, grabbed an arrow from his
quiver, and nocked it.

She flew at him, grabbed his wrists, yanking away his bow; he reached for the knife he knew she kept on her ankle. Natasha's foot came up and she kicked him in the face, then followed with a sharp knee; he felt something warm pouring from his nose.

He grunted and took a swing; she ducked, caught his arm, and twisted. He fell to his knees.

Loki had warned him of this. Of how Alphas would force you down--

"I'm sorry!" she screeched.

"Let me go, bitch!" He managed to snag her ankle and the two crashed to the ground.

He scrambled for his bow; she kicked it away. He grabbed the knife from its sheath in her ankle and got up, swiping; she twisted away.

"Clint! Clint, stop!"

"Fuck you! I'm not your slave!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He plowed into her and the two crashed to the ground again. Clint's hand came down; hers went up. The knife stopped less than six inches from her throat.

He grunted with effort, trying to stab her.

"Clint-- stop--" she gasped, arms shaking with the effort of keeping the knife from her face.

"Not--your--omega--" he grunted with effort.

The knife was getting closer-- closer-- as soon as he killed her, he could return to his rightful master, his true leader, another omega who understood how they had been manipulated and scorned by Alphas for their whole lives--

Natasha leaned forward suddenly and bit his wrist. Hard.

Clint let out a shriek of surprise and dropped the knife. Natasha squirmed out from under him; he tried to grab her legs, but she wrapped them around his neck and began boxing his ears.

*A memory. The smell of whiskey. The blow, followed by ringing silence. The scribbled note they passed him at the doctor's. Barney grabbing his face and the words that were barely heard, barely understood: "Look at me. Look at me. Make everything something to hit with, and then hit him until he stops." The smell of hay.*

Clint shrieked again, trying to cover his head. Natasha grabbed his hands, flipping the two of them over so that they were on their backs, her legs still locked around his neck, her hands grabbing his wrists.

"Clint! Stop!"

"Let me go!"

"Clint!" Natasha yanked him up, grabbed his head, and slammed him into the wall.
Clint stopped moving, dazed. He blinked at her. "...Natasha?"

She was crying.

"I'm sorry!"

She grabbed his head and banged it against the metal floor.

Steve and Tony were running through the halls, the emergency lights flashing. Tony could restart Engine 1 manually. Even with it on, the plane was crippled; Engine 3 needed real repairs. Not the quick fix Tony had given it. He might as well have been using duct tape (which, to be fair, worked great for fast patches; he'd used it on both planes and suits before).

Their intercomms crackled.

"This is Black Widow to command, I have Barton, he's down--"

"This is Fury to command, Phil Coulson down."

"This is command to medical, we need paramedics on bridge detention, stat."

"This is medic response team three, we're on deck with some of Hulk's, can't respond, over."

"Medic response team two, we're on our way to the central detention level, ETA is two minutes."

"Roger, on their way, Widow, what's your location?"

"The coolant room on level 4, next to Engine Room one, Barton's unconscious."

"Coulson's bleeding out, I need paramedics now!"

"Copy, Fury."

"He's bleeding out!"

"Widow to medics team five-- Widow to medic team six--"

"Medic team one, we can't respond, we casualties from engineer bay six, sorry, over and out."

Tony was swearing softly under his breath, over and over, listening to the panic unfold. No one seemed to know where Loki was, if he was even still aboard, but it hardly mattered because he had done his job and done it well. They were in complete chaos.

He made it to Engine Room 1 with Steve, passing Natasha crouched over Clint in the hallway, her body protectively splayed over his, which was limp.

Engine 1 wasn't damaged, merely offline. Tony tore in, flipping twitches, shoving technicians out of the way, still swearing, still wearing the suit because he couldn't get it off and even if he could, he wouldn't have wanted to, he didn't want to be here, he needed the suit between him and the world, needed to view everything thrown a screen because otherwise it was all too loud and too close and too real.

A screen blinked on the monitor before him.

*Engine 1: Operational.*
The room erupted into cheers.

"Command to Fury--" said Maria into the comms. "Command to Fury-- are the paramedics--"

"Medic team two, we're here, Commander."

"Widow to six-- please--"

A wave of static, and sudden there was Fury's voice, clear as day, filled with forced calm.

"They called it."

The comms went briefly silent.

Tony stared at the monitor in front of him, unseeing.

Hill's voice came in. "Command to medic team 2. You've done all you can. Go-- go get Barton."

"Medic team 2 to Widow. We're on our way."

"You lost Coulson?" asked Natasha, voice brittle.

"On our way," repeated the head of the medical team, without any other response.

The comms went mute.

Tony turned to stare at Steve, unbelieving. How the fuck...?

No. Impossible.

The words over the comms took a moment to sink in. Tony gave him a look and then it hit Steve-- hit him as hard as the ocean had when he'd plummeted down into it. Fuck. No. That couldn't be right. That couldn't be--

Before Steve knew what he was doing, he was running back up to the deck up top. Tony was yelling something to him. He didn't hear it. Steve was seeing red. He was trembling with a kind of fury he hadn't felt in a very long time. It was akin to how he'd felt after watching Bucky fall from the train.

_Somebody had to pay._

"Urgh. Ew." Loki waved a hand, a wall of magic slamming into a group of SHIELD agents and throwing them up against a nearby wall. Minions rushed around him. Loki didn't know any of their names. The archer had been lost, which was a shame, but he had served his purpose. Loki still had Selvig waiting for him and ultimately he was the only one who had really mattered. Bullets flew across the tarmac as Loki walked out of the carrier interior. They pinged off his armour irritatingly. Were human weapons designed to annoy rather than maim? It was rather seeming that way.

Loki stepped onto one of the jets they had waiting for him. He turned back to see the chaos he had ensued and smiled, blue eyes glinting a ghoulish kind of colour. How could Loki possibly lose?

He had already won.

He settled into the back of the jet, letting one of his puppets take the controls. He was certain he could fly a simple Midgardian craft but felt no need to do so. He'd earned a little sit-down for his
accomplishments on the helicarrier.

When they took off into the air, Loki caught himself glancing out through one of the windows, perhaps trying to spot Thor. But then he pushed the curiosity (not concern!) aside and looked away. Thor was impenetrable, unshakable, irredeemably and unapologetically immortal. He wouldn't have died.

And even if he had, it wouldn't have mattered... right?

Loki was no citizen of Asgard so why should he care if the king (not his king!) died?

And then the jet shook, something hitting its side hard. "Boss! We've got a problem with--"

Glass shattered and the Captain appeared. Loki had gotten lost in his thoughts and had forgotten about this annoying, patriotic little gnat.

Admittedly, he was surprised. The jet was already in the air. He must have leaped on at the last moment, and he must be incredibly strong, to be clinging to the side of a QuinJet in flight.

Steve shoved one of Loki's minion's head into the dashboard; blood spewed out. He threw his shield at another. Loki sighed, loudly, and stood like Steve was providing him with great inconvenience. The Captain looked angry, his eyes bright with a righteous kind of fury. And then he ran at Loki, fists upright, face twisted, and Norns, yes, he was strong, he was grabbing Loki to slam him against the wall, he was stronger than most humans and Loki would, if he were mortal, perhaps feel just a little bit threatened.

But Loki was not Midgardian.

Loki grunted, pushing Steve off of him with a blast of magic.

"You killed him! You fucking kill him!" He was clawing at Loki's face. He got a punch in. It hurt. Loki summoned up his magic and threw the human away from him. Gods. Annoying thing.

Steve got up, yet again, enraged, ready to rush Loki over and over.

Loki gave him another shove, toward the cockpit, this time.

And then he watched impassively as the Captain's eyes went wide, and he was flung right through the glass hole he'd made in the first place.

Tony went after Steve, mind numb, buzzing with confusion.

But Steve was too furious to even notice him. Considerably shorter than Steve, Tony clanged after him, but the suit wasn't exactly designed for running marathons. Steve quickly outpaced him. Where the hell did he think he was going, anyway?

Tony gave up trying to go after him and went instead toward the bridge, the central command center.

His comm was crackling with action once more.

"--this is Navigation to Command. We're flying low and slow, dead in the air. External comms are down and we're flying based on sight here."

"Well, at least we're not on the ground. Get us toward the nearest base."
"Roger, I think we can land on the parade ground at VMI. Based on landmarks we're about four hundred miles south of New York but can't confirm."

"This is Flight Control to Command, does Cargo 615 have clearance to leave? 'Cause it just left."

"Security team Foxtrot, Loki left in Cargo 615. Repeat, Loki's escaped."

Tony froze mid-step.

Oh, God. He suddenly knew exactly where Steve was. On the deck, probably getting shot at. The fucking idiot.

He hauled ass toward the deck. When he finally slammed one of the doors open, it was a breath of fresh air; he hit all six jets, the boosters on his hips, the jets on his hands and feet, and corkscrewed up into the air.

Navigation had not been kidding about them flying low. They were probably less than ten thousand feet up, less than a person would even open a parachute at if they were skydiving. There were three jets in the air, two escorting them, one hauling ass northward.

Tony scanned the deck, trying to find Steve. The deck was chaos, with paramedics and pilots and maintenance teams stumbling over each other, trying to work on the ship and help fallen men. It was a warzone. Tony was breathing hard and heavy, trying not to think about Kunar or the hospital in Jalalabad, trying not to remember the searing hot sun of Afghanistan, even though the heat waves rolling off the tarmac from the sun was all too familiar.

None of the men down were Steve; he couldn't see Steve and panic was seizing him.

The third jet ejected someone. Tony caught it out of the corner of his eye, the form tumbling, free-falling through the air like a ragdoll. And he realized it wasn't his panic at all. It was their panic.

Tony dove, heart in his throat. He could not think of anything except math.

On earth, objects in free fall in a vacuum will accelerate at approximately 9.8 m/s², independent of mass. But he had air resistance on his side. Terminal velocity was about 53 meters per second. But you reached half of that in only three seconds and less than ten seconds to reach 9/10ths of that. If they were at 10,000 feet then he had sixty seconds, one minute, to grab Steve before he hit the ground, and in the time he'd taken to calculate, the two of them were already rushing toward the ground and the highway, once a thread, was now a ribbon, the cars growing from the size of ants to the size of beetles to the size of toy cars to--

It had all happened so quickly. One moment he was smashing into their jet (the fact that he'd made the jump to it alone demonstrated inhuman abilities) and then next Loki was throwing him out of it. Loki had been like Thor. Even when Steve had thrown all his strength into a hit, it hadn't mattered. Loki had looked at him with utter nonchalance. He hadn't even known Phil's name.

He had been a good person, a wholesome person who had been there for Steve before anyone else. And now he was dead. Gone. And Loki didn't even care. He wouldn't even remember his name because he hadn't bothered to get it in the first place.

Steve had not felt such fury in such a very long time. But Loki was using his magic, a force against him which he couldn't really comprehend and before Steve knew it, he was falling.

Well, fuck.
So this was how he was going to die. Huh. Honestly, Steve hadn't seen this coming. Honestly, he was reckless, but usually not on this level. Maybe it was it being controlled by the tesseract before. Steve had been closing to snapping anyway and Phil's death had been the last straw.

Had Phil known he was about to die, as Steve currently knew he was about to die?

Dying in battle, sure, he could have imagined that. But falling to his death? No, he'd never in a million years pictured it like this. It was an ironic, fitting end, in a way. This was how he'd lost Bucky. Was this how Bucky had experienced it?

The air was whipping around him and Steve realised these would be the last thoughts before he hit the ground. It was sobering and intimidating and overwhelming; he hoped Tony would be able to forgive him for this.

And, distantly, he hoped that Bucky would be okay.

But then suddenly Tony was there and he was all around him.

JARVIS was alarming at him because he was diving too fast, but he ignored it.

They were at less than 400 feet when they reached him.

Tony collided against Steve in the air. But they couldn't just stop; after all, it was the impact that killed a person, not the speed.

He scooped Steve up and they went sideways, Tony trying to slow them down as they tumbled toward the ground.

It goddamn hurt. It felt like Steve was being punched by the armour as Tony's arms encompassed him. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't really see. He was just aware of the fact that they were still falling but he was no longer going to die. Tony was here, and he'd saved him.

They hit the ground going less than twenty miles an hour, which was pretty good, considering they'd started at 120 and had been tangled together. Tony didn't bother trying to make an elegant touchdown; he wrapped his arms around Steve and let the suit take the impact, slamming his back into the ground and sliding a good ways along the road before they stopped.

They were in a completely average suburban neighborhood.

Tony ripped off his helmet, threw it onto the ground with a loud clang, and turned to Steve.

"YOU STUPID FUCKER, ARE YOU TRYING TO GET KILLED?" he shrieked.

A woman hurried out of her house with a cell phone and took a picture of them.

Steve gasped and it was like he could breathe again. The landing hurt but the pain was good. It meant he was alive.

Steve actually flinched when the face plate pinged against the ground near his face and he was met with Tony's angry expression. Rightfully so.

He swallowed thickly.

Then Steve glanced over and saw the woman videoing them. "Are you serious right now!?"

Looking sheepish, she slunk away. But many people had their faces in windows or peering out of
their doors. Steve and Tony made quite a loud landing.

Steve sat up, slowly, curling over himself. He rubbed a hand over his face. His shield hung heavy on his back. "I just--" His face crumpled. "He killed him. And he didn't even care."

"SO WHAT, YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST JUMP OUT OF A FUCKING PLANE, STEVEN?" screamed Tony.

His veins were pumping adrenaline through his body, which ached like it hadn't ached in a long, long time, and his hackles were up, and he was-- he was fucking furious.

He had nearly been killed and Phil was dead and he'd just barely saved his mate. And all of his fear was now being channeled into rage, now that Steve was safe. Tony hadn't been this angry for a long, long time.

Yeah, Steve got into a lot of scraps, but goddamn, how stupid did he have to be to throw himself off a plane at a magical being of unimaginable power?

He couldn't even remember addressing Steve as "Steven." He was so mad he wanted to hit something. Not Steve. No. He felt a strong sense of protectiveness; his omega had nearly died, his mate, his one and only mate... but for once in their lives, Tony had been the powerful one. He'd been in a position to actually save him, and he had.

In the suit, Tony was the Alpha he wanted to be.

Of course now that Steve was okay, Tony was losing his mind.

"DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW CLOSE YOU CAME TO THE GROUND? WHAT IF I HADN'T SEEN YOU? YOU WERE LESS THEN THREE SECONDS FROM HITTING THE GROUND YOU STUPID IDIOT!"

Tony had stomped up to Steve; in the boots they were actually almost the same height and Tony could look him in the eye. Not that it mattered because Steve was sitting in the middle of the road, his shield beside him, curled up miserably. Steve's eyes flicked up and down, meeting Tony's and then looking down in submissive, over and over, while Tony screamed and towered over him.

"YOU CAN'T JUST JUMP OFF A PLANE, STEVE! YOU COULD HAVE BEEN KILLED! I COULD HAVE LOST YOU! I CAN'T ALWAYS BE COMING UP FROM THE DOCKS TO SAVE YOUR SCRAWNY ASS, YOU PUNK! YOU GOTTA STOP ACTING STUPID! YOU COULD HAVE BEEN KILLED!"

Tony took a breath and reached up to wipe his face; his hand was shaking. All of him was shaking.

"Less than. Three. Seconds!" he hissed. "That's how close you were, Steve! And then what, huh? Then-- then you'd be dead." He dropped to his knees and grabbed Steve and yanked him roughly into an embrace, burying his face into his hair.

Tony had never actually screamed at him like this before. Steve didn't think he'd ever felt his mate be so angry, let alone at him. It was a strange experience. It made him want to curl on himself. He didn't know whether it was better to look at Tony's face or the ground. He wasn't sure what his mate wanted. There was nothing he could really do to make the situation 'okay', per se. Steve was shaking a little, both with the shock that he'd just nearly died, and that he'd made Tony so furious.

He didn't feel like a captain, he just felt... foolish. Like a child being berated.
He let out a shuddering breath when Tony pulled him close. Steve slumped against him, letting out a quiet sound as he tucked his face against Tony's neck. The smell of him was comforting. Steve closed his eyes for a brief moment and focused on feeling alive.

Behind him, a car honked.

Tony looked up in annoyance.

"Hey, get outta the road!"

"I'm Iron Man, you douche canoe!" yelled Tony to the driver of the BMW.

"Yeah, well, I'm late for work, Iron Man! So move!" He honked again.

Tony scooped up Steve into his arms like a baby, grabbed the shield in one hand and his helmet in the other, and clanked off toward the sidewalk.

A pair of kids were selling lemonade at a stand.

"You want some lemonade?" asked one, offering Tony a paper cup.

"Yeah. Yes. Thank you," said Tony gratefully, dumping Steve, the shield, and his helmet onto the ground and reaching for the lemonade. He was seriously concerned he might have a heart attack. His heart was throbbing so fast it was practically humming.

"That'll be 50 cents," informed one of the girls.

"Are you serious right now?!"

"I'm sorry," Steve told the girl as she handed him lemonade. "I don't have any money on me." It was hard to speak. His voice was thick and his throat felt swollen from the threat of tears.

"That's okay. I like your shield," she told him, handing Steve a glass. He downed it in one. It tasted so good he thought he might goddamn cry.

Steve leaned his head against Tony's metal shoulder. "I'm-- I'm sorry," he croaked out. "I didn't think. It's been so long since I lost someone. I f-forgot what it felt like."

Tony put his hand roughly on Steve's shoulder.

He was still mad but Steve was acting so deferential, and he'd already screamed himself hoarse.

He took another cup of lemonade without asking.

"We've got to get back to the helicarrier and figure out a plan. We already lost Banner and Thor," said Tony. "We need to find out if Barton's okay and what the hell Fury wants us to do now. Loki and Selvig are still out there and they have the scepter and the Tesseract. We can't save the world if we're skydiving without parachutes, okay?" He looked up.

The blue sky was clear. The helicarrier had long since continued its tired journey north.

"I don't know how to contact them, but SHIELD's got a base in Washington. We can probably get there in two or three hours." He turned to the two little girls. "You can contact Stark Industries and just send me an invoice for the drinks. ...do your parents have gin? I could make a shandy or something."
"Don't you need special permission to sell alcohol?" asked one of them.

"...not to superheroes," lied Tony.

"I don't know how gin looks."

"Forget it, then. Steve, get on." Steve looked confused. Tony picked up his helmet. "I'm gonna give to a piggyback. The fastest way to get there is by flying. We can go one-twenty and straight... make that three-hour trip into a thirty-minute one. We might even beat the helicarrier, if it makes it all the way to D.C. If not there's a military base around here it can land at. But I think D.C. is our best bet."

Steve nodded, a serious look falling over his face as he climbed on. He would have felt silly, if flying with Tony didn't sound like an awesome experience in general. Although it was pretty hard to feel excited by anything right now. Steve was experiencing varying degrees of sad and angry. All he could see was Loki's arrogant and thoughtless face staring back at him, waving a hand at Steve as if he were a fly as his magic knocked him back into oblivion. All he could think of was Phil, dying alone.

Tony must have felt Steve's grief through their bond, because he paused before putting on his helmet and clamping on the faceplate. He looked over his shoulder at Steve, and with uncharacteristic seriousness, said, "I liked Phil too. ...now get on me, like a baby monkey. We've got to go save the world."
They landed at the DC base in under thirty minutes, and everything was chaos. Of course, people recognised them. Their arrival was unexpected but quickly accepted. Agents were flitting around everywhere; Loki's name was a constant murmur. A curse, a prayer.

And then Steve heard a familiar voice.

"Yo! Steve-o!" It was Sam. Oh, he was so fucking glad to see Sam. Sam had a strange-looking pack strapped onto his back and goggles on his forehead. He looked like he meant business in some kind of red and black suit. "They told me you guys were screwing things up. Figured you needed a soldier to help you clear up the mess."

"Thought you were retired?" Steve shot back.

"Hey, I make exceptions if it's gonna make me look cool." Sam walked over and clapped a hand on Steve's shoulder, squeezing tightly. Suddenly, his expression turned serious.

"It's good to see you both in one piece."

He'd heard about Phil then.

"Do you know if we have a location on Selvig?" Steve asked, and Sam looked confused and then shrugged.

"Sorry. At this point you guys still probably know more than I do."

Natasha hovered in the doorway. Clint was sitting up in bed, his legs dangling over the edge and his head bent over. There was a fierce bruise blooming on his temple from where she'd hit him. She felt a huge surge of protectiveness and yet felt... hesitant. The last she'd touched him she'd been slamming his head into a floor and crying. It had been ugly and dirty and loud and--

This moment felt so quiet in comparison. She was almost afraid to break the silence.

Natasha exhaled softly and stepped forwards, sitting down next to him on the bed as she turned to look at him.

"How are you feeling?" she asked in a whisper.

Clint looked up at Natasha. She was staring at him with concern.

He pointed to his ear, then signed, clumsily.
I think you broke my hearing aid.

"Sorry. ...it's going to be okay."

How is this okay? Do you know what it's like to have someone in your head, pulling on your brain like a puppet's strings, playing with you, unmaking you as a person?

Natasha nodded.

How many agents did I kill? How many men I've worked with? How many friends?

"Don't." Natasha switched over to signing, still speaking, looking him in the eye. "You can't think that way, when someone controls you. I've been there. Barney's been there. You can't do that to yourself, Clint. We're up against shit they never could have prepared us for."

So he got away?

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

He's close to opening the portal. We don't have much time left. We have to stop him.

"We?"

Clint shrugged and nodded. Yeah. Whoever's left.

"Whoever's left."

...yeah. Clint mimed shooting an arrow, then added, I'd feel better.

Natasha smiled and sat down beside him. "Now you sound like you."

I'm sorry, Natasha. About what I said.

"It wasn't you. Forget it. I'm just glad I have my mate back. Let's gear up. It's going to be another hell of a day..."

________________________________________

Tony, Steve, and Sam found themselves in a briefing room. It was just them.

"So what we know is, Loki needs to open a wormhole to bring in an unstoppable army... and he has everything he needs to do for that except a power source," said Sam.

"Which would have to be something on par with a nuclear reaction to give the cube enough juice," confirmed Tony. "I don't know if he has any specific plans. Until Clint gets here to tell us. Assuming that he's not dead."

The room grew uncomfortably silent.

They'd been waiting around for a while; the helicarrier was on its way. The three of them had made coffee. Tony had managed to get someone to get him some cheap whiskey to put in his, but he was still shaking.

He jumped when Fury came in, tailed by a half-dozen others. Tony recognized Hill, and felt a sense of relief when he spotted Natasha and Clint come in, too.

"Captain," he said tersely, throwing some cards down on the table. They scattered. "This is Leo
Fitz, Grant Ward, Melinda May—"Melinda looked like she had been crying. "—Brock Rumlow, and Jack Rollins. Fitz, Ward, and May are on our technical team. Brock and Jack are part of STRIKE Team Delta. Gentleman, this is Sam Wilson, special pilot, one of our fringe members."

Tony leaned in to look at the cards, then recoiled.

They were collector cards and they had Steve's picture on them, along with smears of blood.

"Here's the situation. No sugar-coating it. We've lost the cube. We've lost Loki. We've lost Banner. We've lost Thor. Yes, we have the very small arsenal of weapons we built with the Tesseract, but it's not enough. It was never meant to be. That the my idea behind the Avengers Initiative. To fight the battles that needed more than just weapons. To fight the battles that needed people, remarkable people. Because, and Steve Rogers knows this, you win wars with people, not guns. No matter how good your guns are, you need people, too. At least that's how we were thinking when we came up with it at the time. And Phil Coulson, he believed in that right up until he died. Believed in heroes... in a small group of individuals to change the world. I guess that's why he liked you so much, Captain. It's an old-fashioned idea."

"Now what?" asked Natasha. She sounded tired, like she hadn't slept for days. She probably hadn't.

"Beats me. You four are the best we have left," he said, gesturing to Tony and the other three people.

"What, you couldn't get-- I don't know-- Reed Richards or something?" protested Tony.

"What, we're not good enough for you, Stark?" said Grant in annoyance.

"Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?" asked Maria to Tony.

Tony's jaw dropped and he barked out a laugh. "Soldier? Soldier? I'm not a soldier! I'm a retired businessman! Are you fucking kidding me? I'm not marching to Fury's fife."

"This isn't about SHIELD," said Brock sternly, cutting off Fury. "It's about humanity. Loki's a dangerous maniac who needs to be stopped. You can walk out that door if you want to, feeling all big for protesting The Man, but that won't bring Coulson back and it wouldn't be what he wanted."

Tony's brow furrowed.

Brock was a lot more dominant than him.

"Find. Let's find the fucking cube, then."

There was a sudden crack of thunder, one that made the lights flicker and the building tremble.

Everyone looked up in shock.

The door, which had been locked, smashed open and Thor amped in.

Brock Rumlow gasped like someone had punched him in the throat and covered the back of his neck, looking down.

"I am returned!" announced Thor.

"Congratulations," said Fury flatly. "Where's Loki?"

"I do not know. But I think we can find him. I know how he thinks."
"Do you? The guy seems crazy," said Tony. "He knows what he's up against us but he seems to be excited to engage us. Like, he clearly wants a fight--"

"Yes, precisely! He wants to win, an inarguable win. He wants everyone to see how special and powerful he is. He wants an audience."

"Like in Stuttgart," said Fury, looking more interested.

"Stuttgart was nothing," said Tony dismissively. "Stuttgart was like a bus ad with Loki's name on it. When he opens the portal, it'll be a world fair with fucking fireworks and shit. Loki's a full-tilt diva. He wants flowers, he wants parades, he wants music, he wants a monument built in the skies with his name plastered in big, bright lights-- ah, shit. I think I know where he is."

"I think I've got it working!" Selvig's eyes were such a bright blue it was hard to make out the pupils. He had built some complicated contraption Loki didn't really understand and was fiddling with wires and gods knew what else. He was frowning at readings on a screen and then pulling an excitement expression. He comprehended the Tesseract in a way none of the other humans had. He saw it for what it is. Loki even mused that the human saw more of it than he did, which was almost impossible in itself.

"So where is my portal?" Loki demanded. He was in his full armour, even with the horns. Perhaps to humans they might look ridiculous. But in Asgard it had been a sign of status. And also (it had been revealed) his mother's attempt at echoing his Jotun heritage. In his Jotun form (not that Loki would ever voluntarily wear it) he had a natural set of horns that curved up over his head. His helmet had been a gesture to his parentage.

Frigga could be awfully thoughtful; it was... annoying. Made her harder to dismiss than the rest.

"Haha! I've done! I've done it!" Eric exclaimed and a bright light shot out from the tesseract's surface. Loki craned his head up as he watched it pierce the sky. And then he saw it- the flicker of space. Darkness and stars. Loki smiled. A familiar sight that almost reminded him of home now.

He walked up to the human and clasped his arm briefly. "You should be proud, doctor," Loki told him, voice velvet soft. And then he looked up again to see small black shapes moving through the portal they'd just opened. Loki grinned a wicked grin.

"And so," Loki murmured to himself. "It begins."

"Our first priority is getting people out. We can have a small strike team focused on the cube, but right now I figure we can't stop whatever Loki's planned entirely. There will be collateral and it is our job to try and reduce it. Protecting the people comes first." They were in a van headed towards Stark tower, if that's where Loki actually was. Sam and Tony were in the air above them but they could hear over ear pieces. Brock was sat next to Thor and looked like he was just about ready to shit himself.

"We've co-ordinated with the police," May said. "They've already started evacuation. But this an incredibly densely populated area. We won't get nearly enough people out in time." Despite her having worked with Steve before, there was no acknowledgement of it. The missions they'd done for Fury were evidently very hush hush, even when the world was ending.

"And what are fighting exactly?" Brock asked, probably wondering if the gun in his lap was going to do the job.
"Don't worry," Thor said, patting his knee. Brock practically squeaked. "You will not be fighting Asgardians."

"Er, guys-" It was Sam over comms. "There's a hole in the sky."

And there goddamn was. The van stopped and they piled out, weapons at the ready. There was an actual hole in the sky. The streets right by Stark tower had been cleared, but it wasn't enough. May had been right. Steve stared up at the sky and he was space. And he could have sworn it was the same purplish and blue planets he'd been back in the forties, when the tesseract had smashed into a wall and Schmidt had tried to tear him apart. If he hadn't lost his faith in the ice, Steve was pretty goddamn sure he would have lost it right in that moment.

Black shapes were moving through the sky. They had ships, or some form of transport device. And then...then something bigger. Big ships, huge. But they didn't move like ships. Almost like snakes-

"Okay," Fitz said. "That's new." The guy didn't look like a soldier. But Steve guessed they needed scientists too right now.

"Right." Steve moved to step onto a car like it was easy as climbing stairs. "I want Tony and Sam and Thor in the sky, dealing with the brunt of the attack before it hits the ground. I also want people to pin point a location for the cube. Clint," he made sure to face him so he could read his lips. "I want you up top. Somewhere you can shoot good. May and Ward, I want you to head south, help co-ordinate evacuations for now. Rumlow and Rollins, I want you dealing with these friendlies when they hit the ground. And Nat, you get Fitz to that cube, and you close that hole."

"Is this the bit where you do an inspirational speech about how we're lovely and shit?" Sam asked, trying to joke but Steve could hear something else in his voice. Something like an excitement and fear all in one.

Steve cracked a smile. "I dunno, I've seen prettier."

"Steve... I gotta go up to the tower. I gotta see if I can see the cube, or... him," said Tony in a low voice. He reached out and put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Don't fucking put yourself in danger. Please, Steve. Promise me."

"I promise Tony," Steve murmured. He reached up briefly, his fingers brushing against the face plate.

Thor cleared his throat, loudly, and everyone turned toward him.

"Why are we following the instructions of an omega?"

"'Cause he's the Captain," said Natasha, and she and Clint moved out.

A set of mechanical wings unfolded from Sam's back and he shot upward with a loud whoosh of displaced air; Brock gave Steve a small nod of approval and then cocked his rifle, he and Rollins loping away.

Thor opened his mouth to protest, but was interrupted by the buzzing, sputtering arrival of a small scooter.

A man in a rumple t-shirt and khakis was on it.

"...Bruce?" said Tony in shock.
"Uh, yeah. Hi. Sorry I'm late. ...where do you, ah... want me?" he asked meekly, then added, "Captain."

Thor's jaw dropped.

"Welcome to earth," said Tony sarcastically, before powering his jets and following Sam into the sky. And Steve watched the two of them fly away, his heart in his throat.

What civilians there were, they were scattered, running for shelter. The streets did not look like a good place to be, but that was not where Tony was needed. Not really. Where he was needed literally had his name on it.

Dr. Selvig was on the roof, holding a CMS device, eyes shining.

"Dr. Selvig!" yelled Tony, dropping lightly onto the roof. "Dr. Selvig, stop! Shut it down!"

Selvig turned and on his face was a big, haunting grin. "It's too late. I can't stop her. She wants to show us something. Something new and beautiful and bigger than us all."

Tony realized he was talking about the cube, and his skin crawled.

He lifted up a repulsor, drummed his fingers in the air to power it up, and fired.

The energy from his boosters shattered with a deafening crack, throwing back him and Selvig.

The cube glowed with a contented blue energy, entirely unaffected.

"Fuck," said Tony. "JARVIS, that barrier--"

"Impenetrable at this time," said JARVIS. "Made of pure plasma energy."

"Why didn't you tell me that before I shot it?"

"I thought you were shooting at Dr. Selvig, sir."

"God, JARVIS! ...Selvig! Where is Loki?"

Selvig's grin widened. "Our king is downstairs."

Again, Tony's skin crawled.

He was in the Mark IV and he needed to ditch it. It had taken too much damage. The only suit he had powerful enough to possibly combat Loki was probably the Mark VII, which had two prototypes: one back in Malibu, and one here in the tower.

"JARVIS, can you activate the Mark VII? I might need it real soon," said Tony, dropping off the side of the building toward the helipad.

"Sir, the Mark VII is still not fully operational. I cannot recommend deploying it; its success rate for retrieval and fitting onto you is only sixty-eight percent, assuming you are standing still."

"Too late. It's going to have to work," said Tony. He stood on the marks on the ground and let the gantry unlock and pull away his armor.

He walked in slowly, descending the steps to the penthouse. It was quiet. Too quiet. Everyone in the Tower must have been evac--
A pair of footsteps approached and there was Loki, crowed with horns, holding his scepter. He looked both surprised and delighted that Tony had taken off the suit.

"Hi. Tony. I'm, uh, I'm the guy who's normally in the red flying armor. I'm here to threaten you?"

Loki stared at him as he walked over to the bar.

_Oh please, oh please, oh God please..._ Yes! Thank Tesla, thank Turing. Tony had left the Colantatte bracelets, his honing device for the Mark VII, behind the bar; when he and Pepper had gotten the Tower online, he had been playing around with them, showing her how he could get the gauntlets to come to him and latch on.

Casually, he put them on. "You want a drink? ...I kind of need one. Been a long day," he said, pulling out two glasses and pouring himself some scotch.

"Midgardian alcohol is like water to me," Loki snipped. He'd sadly discovered that fact when he'd been hankering for wine and tried some that Clint had smuggled him back to the sewers. The alcohol content was so weak it may as well have been made for children!

"I'm sorry, I'm confused," Loki breathed, voice soft and eyes narrowing at Tony. "What part of this is supposed to threaten me?"

He sipped his scotch, then began pouring himself another. "Are you _sure_ you don't want a drink? This stuff is like twelve grand a bottle. Oh, well. More for me."

Loki smiled then, his eyes glinting. "Is this because I threw your idiotic mate off a plane?"

"You know, honestly, I haven't had time to examine that yet," said Tony pleasantly. "I mean, it could definitely be a factor. I don't like it when people throw my mate off planes. He's fine, though. He and the others are out there right now. ...we call ourselves the Avengers. ...this is the threat part I was telling you about. I'm threatening you. You didn't break us up, Yoko. We've got like twelve SHIELD agents... plus your brother the demigod and Steve, the super-soldier, at least two or three master assassins, and every single one of them has a chip on their shoulder. Oh! And me. There's me, too, I'm here. And as you pointed out, you threw my mate off a plane, so, yeah, I'm kinda pissed off, I guess. My point is, there's no throne, there's no glory, there's no parade at the end of this for you. It's over. You're finished. We're either gonna protect the earth or avenge it. But either way, you're toast."

"I want you with me Bruce," Steve said. "I'm gonna try and keep back the brunt of it, if I can. Although if you could...spare some fire power I could go help with evacuations. Maybe. So are you going to fight like this or...?"

"Don't worry Captain. I got it under control," Bruce said, sounding strangely calm. Steve glanced over to see Thor hesitating.

"Fall into line," Steve told him and then he pulled him on his own helmet. He heard the soft swoosh of Thor heading up into the sky, following his orders, and smiled to himself.
Tony walked slowly over to Loki. He didn't want to spook him. He just wanted to get close enough and then activate the armor and punch him into the ground. He had never planned to end up in his own penthouse alone with a demi-god with unspeakably powerful mind-control abilities, but here he was. Drinking a scotch and trying to figure out how to punch it in the face.

Loki watched him warily, probably aware that he was woefully under-prepared for their confrontation.

"You, um, you don't seem very threatened," noted Tony.

"I just don't see how I should be worried about all your precious friends," Loki seethed, "when they'll be too busy fighting you!" He lifted his sceptre and pressed the tip against Tony's chest. Awkwardly, nothing happened.

Tony froze when Loki raised the scepter and brought it to his chest.

Did Loki know that he could impale him? That Tony would be killed within minutes if anything happened to--

No. Loki was just... poking it. Huh.

Tony shifted uncomfortably. He felt like Loki might as well be palming his crotch.

"What are you trying to-- stop that," said Tony, pushing away the scepter.

Loki let out a frustrated huff and tried again.

"I... I don't understand," Loki murmured with a frown.

Loki poked him again. The tip of it went tink against the face of the reactor.

"Seriously, stop, you're tickling me-- are you-- are you trying to mind control me? ...oh my God, this must be really embarrassing. Performance anxiety, huh?"

Loki was becoming increasingly annoyed. Ah well, he should really just follow the example that he set before.

Loki grabbed Tony by the front of his t-shirt, hoisting him up. And then he turned and flung Tony straight out of the window.

Loki let out a soft exhale. Ah yes. That felt better.

Tony had readied himself for a lot of things, but not for the shocking strength of the scrawny, frankly gaunt-looking omega. One minute he'd been sipping scotch, and a moment later, he was being hauled toward a window and flung out of it like a ragdoll.

"JARVIS!" shrieked Tony. "ACTIVATE! ACTIVATE MARK VII, NOW, JARVIS, ACTIVATE!"

He heard the roar of jets behind him but had no time to appreciate it before he was flung out of the penthouse.
A million thoughts flashed through his mind: How he had yelled at Steve and was dying the same death he was so scared of Steve dying; how he'd never even tried falafel; whether or not you could experience vertigo when you were 59 stories up, 800 feet. At a terminal velocity of about 176 feet per second he'd hit the ground in 4.5 seconds and it was rushing up to greet him, and the last thing he'd see would be a combination of the pavement and of his own name, STARK, glittering above.

Something smashed into the back of his head, dazing him; he felt something on his hand and for some reason wondered if it was his phone, if he was holding it, but no, it was enveloping him, holding his hand—no time to think about it because something else was slamming into his chest, knocking the wind out of him, and suddenly JARVIS was alarming in his ear—alarming that the suit was not secure, not locked, and also he was on a collision course and he was about to hit the ground and emergency autopilot was taking over, and Tony cause a confused, jumbled glimpse of taxis and street bins overflowing with trash and people with horrified looks on their faces pointing up and then--

And then he was jetting down the street in a spiral corkscrew, pulling 8 Gs, according to the screen read-outs, all of which were flashing and alarming and warning him against whatever the fuck he was doing, which was nothing, he wasn't in control, he was just hitting the palm jets automatically, swerving crazily around the canyons created by all the high-rises of downtown Manhattan while trying not to puke or pass out.

*The Mark VII.*

It had never been designed to latch onto Tony while he was in motion, certainly not while he was free-falling at 120 miles per hour. And yet somehow, miraculously, it was clamping on, trying to lock the plates together, every booster blazing to keep him from falling.

Tony burst into nervous, hysterical laughter as he flew down the street. "Hahahahaha HAAAAA JARVIS! JARVIS! I'M ALIVE!"

"Very good, sir," said JARVIS. "Might I recommend landing? The suit is unstable."

"HAAHAHA!" shrieked Tony. "Yes-- yeah! Find a place to land, find-- find an ally and-- yes! Hahahaha! Oh my God, oh my God, it worked, thank tech, oh my God, I'm alive! Ha-ha-ha!"

He banked upward and half-landed, half-crashed onto the top of a fire escape, rolling across the roof of a building.

He ripped off the helmet, hair a sweaty mess, face red, still giggling, eyes wide with fear.

Clint looked over. "What the hell happened to you?"

Tony was giggling too hard to respond.

From the helmet, JARVIS's ever-calm voice informed him that Load Tray 3 was jammed.

Tony pried off one of the plates on his forearm; a piece of his t-shirt had gotten pulled into the suit, which was trying to lock itself around the cloth and shredding up the fabric. Tony wiggled it out and then clapped the plate closed; it whirred mechanically with a sound like an office printer and then locked back into place.

Clint stared at him incredulously. "'Load Tray 3'? " he repeated. "Tony, are you... are you using printer drivers in that thing?"

"A driver's a driver," said Tony with a shrug, hauling himself to his feet.
Now motionless, the suit was re-adjusting itself around him, plates clicking up and down, on and off, snuggling into their tabs and snapping closed properly.

"So you're telling me we're gonna fight that with a suit made up of old printer parts?" said Clint, pointing upward.

A hole had opened up in the sky and from it were pouring... fuck, they were like giant bugs, giant flying alien bugs, all sharp edges and evil, glittering chitin. There were hundreds-- no, thousands of them. The blemish in the sky was inky black and glittering with stars, and the creatures pouring from it like water from a popped balloon, swarming into the city. Tony heard an explosion to his right, then to his left; fire and stone were raining down with the aliens, storefronts were ablaze, people were running and screaming, cars were crashing and erupting. They were at war. In the middle of posh Manhattan, they were at war, war like Tony had only ever seen in far-away places.

"...well, we also have a bow and arrow," pointed out Tony, grabbing the helmet off the ground. "Good luck, Robin Hood." He jammed the helmet back on and then angled his palms and heels down, flying off the roof, back towards the tower. Hopefully Loki was still there... hopefully...

There was a loud boom and the QuinJet blew past him; a second crack followed it and the whole suit tingled uncomfortably. The sky had darkened with clouds; streaks of lightning covered it and suddenly Tony was side-by-side with Thor, who was holding his hammer and soaring beside Tony like it was perfectly normal for people to fly.

Tony slowed a bit and yanked off the faceplate, keeping a tight grip on it.

"THOR?" he yelled.

"WARRIOR STARK! YOU GO TO THE PORTAL, I SHALL DEAL WITH MY BROTHER!"

"...JUST TONY. WARRIOR STARK WAS MY DAD'S NAME," shouted back Tony. "HE'S OVER AT THE TOWER WITH SELVIG."

"DRAW THEM TO AN OPEN AREA AND LET THE ARCHERS ON YOUR SHIP PICK THEM OFF," shouted Thor.

"WE ONLY HAVE ONE ARCHER BUT I GET WHAT YOU'RE SAYING, I'LL LINE 'EM UP," hollered Tony. He clamped the faceplate back on and changed course. Thor's flapping red cape disappeared into the sky and Tony had to admit... what Thor lacked in subtly, he made up for in style.

So Steve was fighting aliens.

It was a weird concept to wrap his head around but the familiar thrum of gun fire and tremble from explosions helped bring about a sense of familiarity. War, it seemed, was a universal language. And it was certainly easier to hit things that didn't look human. Steve was down on the ground with Rollins and Rumlow; Banner was punching a ship to pieces that a few of the Chitauri had come down on. The foot soldiers were currently spewing out, being kept in check by Rollins, who was wielding a heavy-duty machine gun and laying down suppressing fire. His biceps were bulging with holding the weight of the thing and withstanding the recoil as a wall of bullets tore into the Chitauri troops.

They were huge, taller than Steve. Their skin looked mottled and it was hard to tell where they ended and their armour began. They had guns, or something like them. The bullets looked like little orbs of light but when one crashed into a car near Steve it almost turned it onto its side.
Oh dear.

Steve and Rumlow were fighting side by side, their previous conflicts forgotten, their statuses no longer important. All that mattered was keeping the waves of Chitauri quarantined.

"Captain! We need help with evac--" It was May. "There's too many! We're getting surrounded and we have an overturned bus."

"Give me a minute."

There was about seven Chitauri left but Rollins had had to take cover behind a car. Rumlow had an assault rifle and was a bit further back, attempting to make headshots, picking them off with a brutal efficiency that would no doubt grow worse as time wore on. Steve had seen it; Steve knew. Snipers got fatigued and that was when perimeters crumbled.

Steve made a running jump at the group and smacked into the nearest Chitauri with the face of his shield, knocking the creature down before he twisted around. He had a knife Natasha had given him (a replacement for the ones she had given him for his birthday and he had consequently lost in Yemen.)

He stabbed one through the eye (he thought it was an eye) and that seemed to do it. One of the aliens made to grab at Steve and was holding something menacing and pointy-looking but Rumlow hit home and caught it in the head. With the group distracted Rollins managed to re-emerge and picked off the ones further away from Steve. Steve twisted around and hit another one back with his shield before Brock finished it off.

"Hold ground boys! I'll be back!" Steve assured him, knocking over the last Chitauri on his way around Stark tower to the opposite side. He nodded to Brock as he left. He and Rumlow had a complicated relationship, but at that moment, Steve had to admit... he was grateful to have a good sniper on his back.

Unfortunately, his run around was soon interrupted by another group of Chitauri that had just landed. There was only three of them but they were all shooting at Steve. He dove behind a car, and the windows of it smashed over his head, raining glass all over him.

"Fuck."

Steve was stuck. He couldn't pop out with getting shot.

And then a Chitauri soldier appeared on some sort of solo ship in front of him. Steve grabbed his shield, holding it in front of him. It shot at his feet, prowling closer. Now he really was stuck between a rock and a hard place, and unless some miracle back-up arrived soon--

A loud shot echoed out, the noise heavy with the powerful sound of a sniper rifle. The Chitauri soldier in front of him collapsed, a strange blue blood oozing out from his head.

Three more shots followed and Steve gingerly peeked over the car. All three aliens were down. It wasn't Nat, was it? He wasn't sure who else would using a sniper rifle. Steve glared up at the buildings above.

He saw a glint of silver. Or at least, he thought he did. Maybe he imagined it.

"Captain!" It was May.

Steve was drawn back to the matter at hand. He raised a hand to his ear. "On my way, agent."
Tony was banked around a skyscraper, thrumming along at 80% power, luring over a dozen of the creatures after him. They were riding little chariot-like ships with mounted guns and Tony winced every time they took a shot at him. Avoiding the blasts were easy, but the buildings around them were taking a lot of collateral damage. And who knew who was still inside said buildings. Tony didn't want to think about it.

"Iron Man to Widow! I've got a tail on me that I need you to clean up, I'm turning north on Park!"

"I thought you hated code names?"

"Now isn't the time, Widow!"

"Copy, got my guns ready, waiting on you, pokey."

Tony blew up Park; behind him, he heard the barking staccato of a mounted automatic. He left in his wake a pile of dead.

"Nice shooting, Widow. Is that a Stark gun?"

"Now that you mention it, no, it's Hammer Industries."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Stark, watch yourself!"

Tony cut the jets and dropped; a pair of Chitauri, racing toward him, collided in the air and tumbled to the ground. Tony re-engaged his boosters and sped off toward the Tower.

Thor was standing on the edge of it, staring at the portal.

Out of it slithered a creature, twisting in the air like a snake, large enough to swallow a semi. Covered in scales or plates, it had a gaping mouth; it let out a roar.

"...Jörmungandr!" said Thor.

"Bless you," said Tony. "Um, I'm just gonna keep... punching the little guys. I'll let you deal with the Leviathan. Where's Loki?"

"I shall speak to Loki myself Go, Tony. You are not powerful enough."

"You know, Thor, dominance isn't every--"

Thor pushed him off the building. Tony caught himself quickly and looked up, yelling. "What is it with your family and throwing people off of buildings?!

Thor ignored him, sweeping into the penthouse.

Loki was a broken window, hands behind his back, surveying the battle outside.

"Loki! Brother! Look, look at the destruction you sow. This will not end with your rule. It will end with ashes, Loki, only ashes. You must stop them. What good is a kingdom to you if the kingdom is naught but a wasteland?" Thor strode over, gripping Mjölnir, ready to fight if he needed to.

Outside, the fight was in full swing; the Quinjet had taken damage to a wing and Natasha had set it
down (okay, crashed it) just outside of Union Station. She rolled out with pistols firing, bringing down a Chitauri soldier and taking away the gun from him. Or her. Hard to tell, actually.

"The aliens have energy rifles!" she reported.

"Good thing we have Clint up there with a bow and arrow!" said Tony into his comm.

"Oh, fuck you, Stark! You're the one whose mate is using a shield!"

Tony didn't have a response, because his stomach knotted. Shit. Where was Steve? He was vulnerable... Tony had to go protect him.

I must protect him. That was the only thought running through the soldier's mind as he scrambled down the fire escape, his rifle slung over his shoulder.

He and the twins had left Nevada two days ago, boarding a plane for New York, ironically to go to the Stark Tower's grand opening. They had not expected... this. The tower could hardly open next week if it was destroyed now, which seemed like a likely possibility. The city was a warzone.

But the soldier was very good at war. He was in his element. And he didn't care for the tower or really for anything, except for one person.

He found that person by an overturned bus, helping people out.

He wasted no time or pretense; he strode up behind him, grabbed him around the waist, and slammed him against the side of the bus.

The civilians screamed.

"Steve! ...what in the hell d'you think you're doing, huh? Do you have any idea how dangerous it is out here, you punk?" The words came naturally. He must have said them a hundred times.

His head turned at the whoosh of jet; an automaton was descending on them, bright red, its eyes mean, narrow slits.

He shoved Steve behind him.

Tony yanked off his face plate. "Steve! What in the hell d'you think you're doing, huh? Do you have any idea how dangerous-- who the hell is-- BUCKY!"

The soldier bared his teeth and snarled.

Tony snarled back. "Get away from my mate!"

"He's my mate!"

"No, he's my mate!"

"You're not dominant enough for him!"

"Yeah, well... I got both my arms!"

"Huh?" The soldier blinked and looked down, then up again, clearly baffled. "What happened to my arm?"

Behind Tony, a Chitauri soldier dropped from the sky with a wet, crunchy splat on the pavement.
"Hawkeye to Iron Man and Captain America, why are you two just standing there?! Is that the Winter Soldier? Stop talking and start shooting, I can't keep you covered indefinitely!"

"Not now, Clint!" snapped Tony. "JARVIS, mute comm! ...back off, Barnes!" He held up a palm, the RT node already glowing.

The soldier heaved up his rifle, already cocked. "You're nothing but a weak Ace in a suit! Take away the suit, what are you?"

"Um, a genius billionaire hero philanthropist with two yachts who recently discovered a new element," said Tony. "I'm a big fucking deal, actually. And-- and that's one of my guns you're holding, what the hell!"

"I don't see your name on it," sneered the soldier childishly.

"It's printed right on the side!"

Another Chitauri soldier fell to the ground between them.

"Uh, guys?!" yelled Clint into Steve's comm.

"ALRIGHT!"

Steve shoved past Bucky's shoulder heavily and went to stand between them, consciously knowing he could block a blast from Tony or a bullet from Bucky if he had to. He was shaking a little, his emotions going into overdrive. Steve let out a shuddered breath. He could feel Tony's anger trembling in his own bones and Bucky's surge of protectiveness. Normally he would be concerned about protecting them from each other. But this wasn't about them right now.

"I don't give a shit who's more dominant than who, or who has two fucking arms! Alright? The world is ending and you're going to follow orders or jog on. No, Tony-- nothing. I don't want to hear it." Steve held a hand up, and then one to Bucky too. "Zip it. You want to be helpful? Want to prove you shouldn't be put back into cryo? Then get your ass up a roof and shoot like I know you can. sergeant."

"ДА, СЭР!" said Bucky sharply, responding easily to taking orders from a person in an officer's uniform (or at least something like it).

"And you get back up in the sky and help Thor with those goddamn snake things!" Steve told Tony flatly. "Do you both understand?"

Steve was going into captain mode. Because 'Steve' was too much to deal with right now. He couldn't deal with the end of the world and his mates having it out right now. His heart was in his throat and he really wished his helmet could hide more of his face right now so he could better hide his emotions.

Tony still hadn't replied. "Do you both understand?!" Steve snapped.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," grumbled Tony, glaring at Bucky.

Bucky ignored him completely and suddenly leaned forward, grabbed the back of Steve's neck, and kissed him on the mouth. "For good luck," he said, giving Steve the easy, quirky little grin he used to give all the girls in the dance clubs that made them swoon.

Tony's jaw dropped. "Barnes, you son of a bitch!" But Bucky was already loping back over to the
fire escape to get a good vantage point.

Steve's comm crackled. "So, Cap... is that your type?" came Sam's voice. "Guys with prosthetic metal arms? No judgement, but... it's kind of specific. Also if anyone wants to come up here and help me I'd appreciate it."

"We are talking about this!" hissed Tony, jabbing a finger at Steve warningly. He clapped over his faceplate and hit the thrusters before Steve could try to talk himself out of being in trouble.

The nerve.

At least Tony knew it wouldn't be in the news. No one probably cared how many Alphas Steve had, considering the world was ending.

There were at least three-- no, now there were four-- of what Steve had dubbed "snake things." By Tony's eyeballed estimation, they were probably 300 feet longer, three times that of a blue whale. They undulated in the air, with Chitauri soldiers scrabbling over them, dropping off into the streets and onto buildings. Tony had no idea how to "deal" with them, as Steve had instructed. How the fuck did you deal with a whale-sized alien creature that also appeared to be wearing chitinous armor and was bristling with alien weapons?

One of them was slithering serenely up Broadway, floating through the air like a Chinese dragon on New Year's, seemingly weightless.

Tony flew parallel to it along 7th, catching glimpses of its mass through the alleyways.

"JARVIS, any soft spots?"

"Analyzing, sir," said JARVIS impatiently.

"Fuck it, let's just... let's just get in front of it and give it all we've got." Tony thrust forward and cut in front of the thing.

He wasn't sure how it navigated. For something its size, it was... shocking elegant, really. It was wearing a helmet-like thing on its... "head...?" but it didn't really seem to have any eyes.

Tony pulled up a grenade launcher and some mini-rockets and began shooting indiscriminately. Normally, in Tony's experience, things died when you shot them in the face.

The creature roared in irritation, and one of its fin-like appendages flung wide, crashed into a building in a shower of glass and concrete.

"Okay! Got its attention!" said Tony enthusiastically. "...step two...! Uh..." The creature was turning its terrible, sightless face toward him, clearly enraged. Tony knew when he'd been beat; he twisted in the air and blasted off, up and out, away from the monster, at a loss as to how to bring it down.
Loki’s gaze was distant as it shifted over to Thor's face. Thor stood before him at the top of Stark Tower, feet planted, while the battle raged below them. "You do not understand," he said softly. He knew Thor had not died during the fall. Unlike his brother, he could not break off the bond; he could not forget it entirely. Loki would have felt it if he had died. Just like he felt it when he did... other things. Urgh.

"It's too late. I told you already, Thor. You must learn to listen better," Loki stepped towards him, sceptre clutched in one hand. "Now fight me."

He raised his sceptre between them both, the tip a menacing blue.

"You already ruined me for the rest of the worlds Thor. Might as well finish the job!"

Thor refused to back back, but also refused to move forward.

The tip of Loki’s staff glinted cruelly.

"Brother, I refuse to fight you. I come to appeal to you, as my-- as my childhood playmate, as my friend, as my confidante-- please--"

Loki moved.

Thor responded automatically, reflexively, bringing up his hammer to block the blow.

Thankfully Loki had never had good aim. But then, neither had Thor. His preference had always been one-handed weapons, bashing people with maces or shields or warhammers or claymores. He could shoot a bow, yes, but it was usually at a grazing deer, not a moving target. Loki was small and quick and clever, shooting off energy at him from that forsaken staff, and Thor, who had always previously enjoyed sparring with his little brother, found himself desperately calling for Loki to stop, to come to his senses and stop.

But Loki did not stop.

Thor knew no other way; diplomacy had failed him.

He approached Loki and managed to grab his hair, throwing him to the ground ferociously. Loki flailed; Thor kicked; his brother was thrown several feet across the floor.

"You must close the portal, you imbecile! They're causing utter mayhem! Do you have any idea--"

Loki pointed his staff and shot at Thor; Thor ducked and heard the tinkling of glass behind him.

No point in using any more words.

Thor charged up the nearest stairs. If only he could destroy the cube...

It sat innocently on the roof, glowing serenely cyan, its energy coming on in waves that made Thor's hackles prickle.

Beside it stood a man, staring up at the sky.

"Erik Selvig!" shouted Thor, gratefully.
The man turned slowly, slowly, slowly, his eyes blown wide, glowing an unnatural blue. A single tear ran down his cheek.

"It's so lovely, isn't it?" he said vaguely, then turned and took two steps, straight off the edge of the building.

"NO!" shouted Thor, charging toward him.

He reached the edge and looked down, and had nearly plummeted down himself when a man with metal wings soared past, grabbing Selvig's body out of the air.

"Falcon to Widow. Just grabbed one of Loki's crones off the edge of Stark Tower. He's talking in Swedish."

"Widow to Falcon, Roger that. Probably Selvig. He might be the only one who knows how to close the portal No way we'll win this with more of those snake guys pouring in. Stark, how's it going?"

"Oh, good, good... one of them's following me home. Can I keep him?"

"Hawkeye to Widow, hostiles approaching from your three o' clock! ...y'know, this reminds me of Budapest."

"Widow to Hawkeye. ...you and I remember Budapest very differently. Over and out."

The chatter poured over the comms, but Steve was barely paying it any mind. His attention was focused on Bucky, who was loping off, gun over his shoulder, as if he'd never left.

Steve felt a little weak at the knees, despite himself, as Bucky walked away. And that smile. That smile had always driven Steve crazy. His mouth was tingling strangely and he wasn't quite sure what to do with himself in that moment. Melinda walked up beside him, reloading her gun. "Did the Winter Soldier just kiss you?"

"...think so."

"He's probably killed more people than I have," she offered, like it was a fun piece of trivia. Probably. Jesus Christ. Agent May was both awesome and terrifying.

"The police forces are coming in. We've got evac covered, Cap. You go get 'em."

Steve nodded and ran back around to the front of the tower. He couldn't help but notice, as he went, the multiple Chitauri dropping around him with a bullet in their head. Something tugged in Steve's chest.

*It was just after they'd rescued Bucky from his camp. Steve was worried about him. His Alpha wasn't talking to him. Maybe he didn't like Steve now he was big, but he hadn't touched him when he was small either. Maybe he would just never be...right.*

*But Steve was worried about Bucky. He didn't look well. He was pale and shivery and he kept snapping at people like he hadn't got enough sleep. When they headed out for their next mission, Bucky seemed to be coming too, a sniper rifle slung over his shoulder.*

"Bucky...James." Steve huffed softly. "I don't know if it's a good idea, you-"

Bucky interrupted him. "I always watch your back Steve."
"But-"

"No buts. No matter what." He tapped his rifle. "I got your back."

"Where are we on getting that portal closed?" Steve asked over comms.

"I've got Fitz up here. And Selvig. Problem is--"

The impact of the fall seemed to have shaken Selvig up a little. Sam set him carefully down on the roof, Natasha shooting a Chitauri in the air that tried to grab onto one of his wings. Fitz looked positively terrified and clung to his gun tightly, his knuckles white. "Doctor?" Natasha tried hopefully. Selvig's eyes no longer so insanely blue.

He blinked and wheezed, clutching at his chest. "No no no..."

It was actually Fitz who took the initiative, kneeling down in front of him. "Erik, right? We've got to get this portal closed, else we're screwed. You opened it." Selvig almost seemed to flinch. "Do you know how to close it?"

"There's... there's... I put in a fail safe. I was ready. I--"

"A fail safe?" Natasha said. "What is it? Erik! What is it?"

"I don't--" Eric frowned like he was in pain.

"We have to get that portal closed," Fitz explained patiently, voice calm. "We can't fight them all, Erik. Please. Try to remember."

Back around the front of the tower Steve found Rollins and Rumlow looking a little rough. He could see Banner smashing about in the distance. "Have we got a way to deal with these snake things yet?" Steve asked, watching Banner charging through the street towards one of them.

"I dunno," Sam said, whipping through the air above them. "But I have a feeling Bruce has got this one in the bag."

Steve didn't get a chance to watch as they were hit by a hoard of them. They were Chitauri everywhere and all he could keep doing was hitting things with his shield. At some point he picked up one of their energy weapons, a blade-like thing, but eventually it seemed to break after it had decapitated the fifth one of them. Steve was soaked in sweat and alien blood.

"Natasha!" Steve decapitated another one with the edge of his shield with a filthy kind of crunch. "Do we have an answer to the portal yet?!"

Loki growled in frustration when Thor ran away from him. How dare he?! How dare he not give Loki the proper fight he deserves! He let out a huff, gripping his sceptre tightly. He walked out onto the edge of the tower's balcony, glass crinkling under foot. He watched the humans fighting the Chitauri and sneered. Fools.

He spotted a load of them around the Tesseract. It didn't matter. They couldn't close it now.

He might as well join in the fray. Fight on the ground with the rest of them, see the defeat in their eyes for himself.
Loki jumped and used his magic to soften the landing. He slammed his sceptre onto the ground and a pulse of energy rippled outwards, knocking back the two humans and the Chitauri. But the one in blue and red (who, frankly, looked ridiculous) stood strong. He flinched a little, but that was all.

Ah yes, the one he threw out of the plane.

Steve roared. And then he charged at him.

"Come on, Erik, come on!" begged Natasha.

Erik was holding his head, moaning.

She looked up sharply at the sound of approaching footsteps. A man in a tight blue jumpsuit with pepper-grey hair was striding toward them.

"Hi. Dr. Richards," he said succinctly. "I understand we're trying to close the portal and it's being held open by the Tesseract?" There was a whoosh of jets and Iron Man dropped beside them with a clank. He pulled off his faceplate; he was breathing heavily.

"Dr. Richards," he said with a curt nod.

"Dr. Stark," replied Richards.

"I don't have a doctorate, actually."

"Really?" said Richards in surprise.

"Guys!" snapped Natasha.

"Right. Closing the portal," said Tony quickly. He glanced behind him. "I think I lost him."

"Lost who?" asked Richards.

A Leviathan snaked past, roaring; the Hulk dropped out of nowhere, punching its head; the thing writhed in pain, rolled, and crashed into the building on the other end of the street, showering them with debris. They all ducked.

"Him," said Tony. "Anyway, the cube is surrounded by plasma energy. Nothing can get through it. We gotta figure out a way to close it. ...are the others here? I haven't seen your wife."

"Yeah, they're on the ground," said Richards. "A bunch of mutants are down there fighting tooth and nail, but the hostiles still outnumber us. Unless we close or bottleneck the portal, we're not going to win. Can we overload the CMS? What if you go shut down the tower's reactor?"

Tony shook his head. "No, the cube is self-sustaining at this point, Loki only needed the RT node to jump-start it. Not even a nuclear blast could get through to that cube. There's nothing on earth that's powerful enough to--"

"The scepter!" shouted Selvig.

Everyone's head turned.

"The scepter! You can penetrate the cube's defenses with Loki's scepter!"

"Oh, well, great. That should be a piece of cake, it's not like Loki is really attached to his scepter or
"anything," said Tony sarcastically.

"Hawkeye to Iron Man. We've got 5 snake guys in the air. Can you turn them in? They can't bank worth a damn so I need you to turn them back before they get too far... we're trying to keep things tight."

"Do we have a perimeter, Hawkeye? Also, why didn't you tell me that was your omega name?"

"Shut up, Stark. Yeah, there's... sort of a perimeter. 39th, 49th, Third, and Fifth. But it's hard keeping them in. The National Guard's here but when the perimeter gets breached they're getting a ton of casualties."

"Shit. Okay, coming!" called Tony. He clamped the faceplate back on. "Richards, where are yours?"

"Over on Fifth. You?"

"Sort of all over the place."

"The Defenders and the X-Team have 39th. Who's north?"

"Beats the hell out of me. It could be the Crips for all I care, as long as they're holding," said Tony. "Widow, I'm gonna go turn one of those snake things over here. Think you can take it down?"

"With what?!"

"Not my problem!"

Tony dropped off the edge of the building, flying due south. "Iron Man to Cap, we think we can possibly hit the cube and close the portal if we get our hands on the scepter."

On 49th Street, Wanda and Pietro were standing on the rooftop of their hotel, watching, pale, as a battle raged over the city.

Below them, a Chitauri soldier swiped at a man; he disappeared in a cloud of black smoke and reappeared beside him. The soldier fired; again, he vanished and re-appeared.

"Why are the mutants fighting?" asked Wanda, brow furrowing.

"This is their home too, even if they're not treated well," said Pietro. "...I hope James is okay."

"I'm sure he's fine," said Wanda, squinting and moving her hand. Below them, the Chitauri soldier slammed into an invisible wall and dropped to the ground.

The mutant looked up at them. "THANKS, AVENGERS!"

"WE'RE NOT AVENGERS!" yelled down Pietro angrily.

"X-MEN?!"

"NO, NOTHING! WE'RE SOKOVIAN!"

"OH! WELL, THANKS!"

"Incoming," said Pietro.
Above them, a ship was blazing past.

Wanda twisted her hands; the ship slammed into the side of a building and erupted into flames. She had brought down plenty of Su-27s and MiG-29s in Sokovia; she knew a thing or two about combat. "It's like home," she said.

"The last time I checked, we didn't have aliens," said Pietro. He pointed to the sky. "I see Stark."

"We can't kill Stark now. He's helping. And he might be the only one who knows how to close the portal," said Wanda. "We have to wait until..."

"Until what?" said Pietro. "Until they carpet-bomb the city?"

"They wouldn't do that in America."

"Sister, you have no idea what a person would do when backed into a corner," replied Pietro darkly.

"Oh, I think I have some idea," said Wanda mildly, tensing her fingers and throwing another plane into a building.

"The city's lost. We have no choice," said Pierce sternly.

The council had voted and the vote had been a tie. They were arguing now, trying to break it.

"You're talking about killing millions of people," said Hawley.

"Your own people. Americans," pointed out Yin.

"So what, we let the enemy continue to come? We have to nip this in the bud," said Sigh. "We are not talking about only New York, but the whole world. The extraterrestrials will not stop. We must do it. Right now, you have a rogue group of mutants fighting them off... it won't last much longer."

"You know, most mutants live in New York. Razing the city would solve our little mutant problem as well," said Malick.

"Jesus Christ, Malick!" cried Hawley. "What the bloody hell is wrong with you?"

Pierce raised a hand. "Now isn't the time to mince words. He's right. We may kill six million people and take out most of the American mutants, but there's hardly an alternative. Shall we vote again? We're running out of time."

They voted anonymously. It came back 6-2.

Pierce called Fury.

"Director. We've made a decision. ...we need a full evac on the city."

"...you can't be serious. You're going to do it? That's a stupid-ass decision. You can't possibly--"

"We can, and we have. Get your men out of there, Fury."

"Until I'm absolutely certain my team can't hold it, I'm not going to order a nuclear strike against a civilian population!"

"And you don't have to. We will," said Pierce placidly. "Give the order for a full evacuation. We're
giving you an hour, Fury."

He ended the call, leaving Fury dumbfounded, staring at his phone's black screen.

"Working on it." Steve ducked down, another sphere of blue energy smacking into the surface of his shield. Loki let out a frustrated groan, apparently unhappy that vibranium could withstand the force of his sceptre. He rolled away from another blast. "I get that you're angry, Loki! But this isn't proving anything! You're just proving exactly what they want--" Another blast. "--that your status makes you weak. That you're impressionable. That you're not your own person. You're here of another man's bidding, huh? Well, did you want be here, or are you just doing what you're told?"

Loki's eye twitched.

"Thor thinks you're lesser than him, inferior. That you need coddling, controlling. Everything you're doing now is just proving him right."

"Shut up!" Loki went in for closer quarters. The sharp tip of his sceptre dragged across the surface of Steve's shield and let out a foul sound, the shriek of metal on metal.

"I know what it feels like--" Steve continued. "--to be pushed away, rejected. To have a bond distanced. I know what it feels like to not feel loved. I know what it feels like to not think you're good enough for your Alpha, or have them want something else."

"You have no idea what it feels like to be me!" Loki growled and knocked Steve back onto the floor. He raised his shield and knocked away a hit. "You're a stupid little human, and I am a god!"

"You--" Loki practically roared at him. "--you will be silent!"

Steve threw his shield at Loki's legs hard and knocked him over. He bounced up and then kicked the sceptre away from him.

"Get your filthy hands off--"

"Steve!"

When Steve looked up to see Natasha riding the back of some Chitauri chariot in the air, he couldn't even pretend to be surprised. He just reacted. He grabbed the sceptre, lifted it up, and she snatched it up from his hand before zooming back up towards the cube.

"No!" Loki looked enraged, blue eyes bulging.

Steve kicked his shield back up into his grip, ignoring Loki as he screamed at him from the floor. He made to stand, a hand outstretched towards Steve, magic curling at his fingertips-- and then Bruce, no-- Hulk -- barged right into him and crashed him into the nearest building wall.

Well, that was certainly an effective way of dealing with him.

"Avengers--" Fury's voice came over the comms. It was serious. Too serious. "We have a problem."
"We have a solution for the cube. Should be closed within the next ten minutes, sir," reported Steve.

"No. You don't understand. You have a nuke headed your way."

"What?" Steve's stomach dropped. "Did you just say...a nuke?"

"...it stands for nuclear weapon. It's a bomb," explained Fury, who suddenly wondered if Steve had been caught up on that part of history yet. "The WSC just gave us an hour to clear the city."

"We can't possibly clear the city in an hour; we're barely even holding the city!" shouted Clint.

"A nuke won't close the portal or destroy the cube!" shouted Tony. "They can't do that... the fallout would be catastrophic!"

"If they do that, Loki wins," said Sam seriously.

"Listen, I know, I know! I'm just telling you what they told--"

"Widow, I need back-up, I'm bringing a party to you."

"I can't, I have the scepter and like a dozen goons on my tail!"

"Hawkeye to Widow, take them down 42nd. The Winter Soldier and I can pick them off for you."

"The Winter Soldier?" repeated Fury.

"Yeah, no, things got weird," said Hawkeye. "Try to negotiate with them. We're holding our ground. They can't nuke us. ...Iron Man, I need some help over here!"

"Sorry, buddy, I've got a snake-guy following me. You're on your own."

Clint was right; they couldn't bank well. He darted around buildings while one of them roared after him, crashing clumsily into buildings. The amount of destruction it was going was catastrophic, but Tony had nothing in his arsenal that could get past the armor it was wearing. How did you fight an armored flying beast the size of three blue whales, anyway? He was like Captain Ahab or Jonah or Pinocchio, up against a force like this.

Wait a second.

"JARVIS! Those things are organic, right? I mean, as far as we can tell, they're carbon-based lifeforms?"

"Yes, sir."

"...remember Jonah and the whale?"

"I don't believe that was likely a nonfiction account," said JARVIS.

Tony had already turned. If this worked it would be awesome and if not...

He shot forward. The beast roared against. In a second Tony was in its mouth, shooting down its gullet, and the whole world was dark and slimy and quivering.

He let loose every rocket, laser, and gun he had. Around him, the beast roared; inside the suit, Tony was shaken so hard his HUD began sputtering. The viewscreen was scrambled; Tony was shooting from his palm repulsors, clawing desperately, nothing but static on his comm.
Suddenly he erupted into the air in a shower of liquids. The beast was roaring, spewing more of the same liquid from its mouth; it smashed onto the ground, rolling, writhing, dying a painful, slow death.

"Oh, God," moaned Tony. He was completely covered in sticky mucous. "I'm gonna get like eight kinds of space AIDS, I just know it..."

"Hawkeye to Cap. You know, Barnes isn't a half-bad shot. But he's low on ammo. Can someone get him one of those energy rifles?"

"Falcon to Hawkeye, I'm in the air, I can drop some off. How's evac coming?"

"Evac?! We're just trying to keep them contained! There's no evac! Fury's gotta talk some sense into the council or we're all going to be killed. Speaking of being killed, hostiles just rounded up at least eighty civilians, they're in the 42nd bank, past Madison. There's a subway stop nearby they can get into if you can pull off the soldiers... Cap, can you handle it? Barnes says he'll cover you."

"Oh, like fun he won't!" snapped Tony. "I will cover him!"

"Like fun?" repeated Natasha.

"I live with Steve, okay, I've picked up some old-timey phrases, shut up. Steve, where are you? I can come pick you."

"Hawkeye to Iron Man. Take Barnes. He's a good shot."

"I don't want to work with--"

"Tony, stop thinking with your fucking knot and go save those people!" shouted Natasha.

Damn her, thought Tony grouchily. He hated when she was right.

"I'm already headed there." Steve said. He'd taken Bruce's bike the minute he'd heard the location. It felt oddly comforting to be back on a bike again, even if it was only fleeting. There was something reassuring about the rumble of engine between his legs. "People can feel free to join." He didn't really like the idea of Tony and Bucky working together... but he supposed the end of the world did call for one or two miracles.

Steve jumped off the bike and headed inside the bank, shield clutched tightly in one hand. The minute he was through the door he heard gunfire and raised his shield but soon realised it wasn't being aimed at him when the screams followed. All the people were bunched together in the foyer, dirty and terrified as Chitauri prowled around them. Many of them lay dead on the floor or bleeding out.

"Tony? You here?" Stupid question. Steve could feel he was getting close. "I need you to create a distraction outside. Then I can try and get people out. There's a hole in a wall downstairs, but if they notice I'm here first they might just start shooting. Tony, if you could lure them out, and then..." He could feel him outside too. "...Bucky can pick them off."

An awkward silence followed.

Steve sighed. "Nick? They have released that nuke thing already, have they?"

No answer either. Dammit.
"Fury? You there? ...Nick? Hello?"

Tony shot toward the location Barton had mentioned. His comm crackled. On the ground, he spotted a glint of silver; Bucky was running down the street, a rifle in his arms. Tony briefly considered shooting him.

"I'm outside-- we're outside, Cap," said Tony. "What sort of distraction should I-- SHIT!" A Chitauri craft slammed into him and the two went tumbling through the air; Tony's foot was caught in a gear and the Chitauri soldier's arm had gotten broken. Both of them accelerated and crashed into the windows of the bank; human and Chitauri faces alike looked up as Iron Man, bright red and glinting, fought with the Chitauri soldier. Both still hopelessly tangled in the small ship, they were like two cats in a bag.

They crashed back out; several of the Chitauri guards darted after them.

On the deck of the helicarrier, a lone pilot sat in his cockpit.

"Director Fury is no longer in command. Override order, seven-Alpha-eleven."

"Seven-Alpha-eleven, confirmed. Preparing for take-off."

In a command room on base, Hill dropped the headphones she was wearing. "Nick! Sir! There's a bird in motion, taking off from the helicarrier deck."

"Fuck!"

"Attention personnel: we have a rogue bird. We need to shut it down. Repeat: take-off is not authorized. Rogue bird!!"

Nick Fury pelted down the hall. He knew full well what the payload was. They weren't giving him an hour, as promised. They were doing it now.

He slammed open the nearest door; the crippled helicarrier had been put down on the airfield and he could see a jet moving along the taxiway. He shouldered an airtronic RPG-7 and took aim. It was a long shot; Hawkeye could have made it, but there was no Hawkeye here.

He took it.

The grenade took off the tail-end of the jet; it skidded dangerously toward the edge of the deck but didn't fall.

Fury's shoulders relaxed.

A second jet suddenly accelerated down the deck. Fury lifted the launcher again, but it was too late.

"Hill to Fury! Hill to Fury! Do you copy? Did you stop it?"

Fury lifted his hand to his ear. "No. There's a package incoming. It'll be there in a few minutes."
It had been a few minutes, but it felt like an eternity.

The Hulk had Loki by the leg and was flinging him around like a doll, completely out of control, frenzied.

"BANNER! STOP!"

The Hulk paused; his fist, larger than a ham, still wrapped around Loki’s ankle. He looked up.

Thor stood there, hands out.

"Please. Leave him be."

"Puny gods!" roared Hulk, charging.

Thor tried to duck but only managed to offset the blow. It was like getting hit with a mace by Volstagg. Staggered, he darted around the beast toward his brother and threw his body over Loki’s protectively.

The Hulk let out another roar.

Behind them, from the window, came several energy blasts. The Hulk turned back, distracted. Hundreds of Chitauri riders were hovering there; they began firing. The Hulk screamed with rage, more annoyed than injured, and charged out the window at them, swatting at them like a bear fighting off a hive of bees.

The penthouse was quiet. Thor shifted slightly, trying to look down at Loki. "...are you injured?" A stupid question. Yes, of course he was, they both were, everyone was.

His decision had been automatic. An omega in trouble, of course he would throw himself over him.

He climbed painfully to his feet and stuck out a hand, offering it to Loki, who lay there pale and wide-eyed, in a crater shaped not unlike himself.

"Bucky! Now!"

Rifle blasts shuddered through the air and the Chitauri soldiers fell as they darted out of the bank. Steve rushed inside. The soldiers left inside turned to him but one was making to cut into a group of civilians with an energy blade.

"No!"

Steve jumped off the balcony and landed between them, throwing up his shield; sparks erupted on its surface.

Steve smacked into its face (did they have faces?) with his shield and knocked it back before shoving its own energy blade into its chest. Steve pointed to the hole in the wall. "Everyone, get out!" People looked panicked as they rushed toward the escape. "Buck, I need you to cover them out in the street," he said, hand on his ear piece before he ran up the balcony to deal with the few soldiers left. Fortunately, they were mostly distracted by Tony wrestling with one of their own outside.
Steve caught the first one off-guard and knocked the gun from the other's hands before he smashed its face. His shield was covered in blue, sticky blood by the time he pulled away.

Then Steve flipped back down, helping the last few civilians get to safely.

"Get off of me!" Loki shoved at Thor's chest. He huffed as he sat up, dusting off his arms before standing with a wobble.

His eyes were no longer blue. They were green again. There was a small cut from the Hulk's ministrations, a trail of blood down his cheek and curling down the dip of his chin.

"You're not allowed to care now!" Loki hit his shoulder. "You're not suddenly allowed to care now!" His voice was breaking. He sounded exhausted, tired. Loki was bent over a little. "No..." He whispered, shaking his head. "Not now."

Thor watched him, Mjölnir sitting a little ways off. But Thor made no move toward it.

"I never stopped caring, Loki!" He had meant it to be quiet, but his voice rung through the trashed penthouse. He lowered it. "I never stopped. I-- I always thought highly of you. But what could I do? Five hundred years ago, I ruined you. I had to distance the bond. It wasn't to be, we're brothers, even if we remained bonded, we could never mate, I could never please you in heat, it was be an abomination. I wanted only for you to be happy. I had to distance the bond, or else you'd never be content, and I would never be able to take the throne. I did it for you and I did it for Asgard. Surely you don't think any of it was my own desire? I..." Thor trailed off, staring at Loki, unable to continue.

Was he the villain in all this? He, Thor, son of Odin and king of Asgard?

"You think me vile, don't you?" said Thor in a low voice. It was a shocking revelation. He was Thor, damn it, everyone worshiped him. "You think me to be a small-minded and power-hungry fool who cares nothing for his brother, even though we suckled at the same breast and grew up, side-by-side, sharing everything. ...Loki, how could you think so ill of me? You were always the clever one, the quick-witted one. You were always the one more eloquent than I. Do you think I had no awareness of that? That I was so dull that I could not even appreciate what magnificent talents you had, what a silver tongue? I did not ask you to come back to Asgard as my adviser in some sort of... of desperate appeal to your ego. I asked you because I'm in sore need of advising and you're the cleverest I know. I know I've offended you but only because my words are clumsy and I lack your prowess in diplomacy. Please, brother. ...please forgive me."

Tony crashed to the ground with the Chitauri, trying to punch or blast his way out of the tangle. More soldiers were approaching, but none even got close. They dropped, one after the other, until none were left, and Tony was lying there under the wreckage of the Chitauri's little hoverboard thing, trying to get up.

He heard the crunch of gravel and looked up. Bucky was slinging his rifle over his shoulder like it was a perfectly natural motion.

Tony got up, kicking off the Chitauri craft. He was still trying to think up something scathing to say when Steve hurried out, the shield covered in sticky bits.

God, all three of them looked like hell.

Their comms crackled. "Fury to Avengers. Incoming aircraft with payload. You hear me? You've
got a missile heading straight for the city."

"Shit! How long?" asked Tony.

"Three minutes, four, max. Stark, you're the only one with the flight capability and maneuverability to intersect it. You think you can get it?"

"What? No!" cried Tony. "Where the hell am I going to take it? How many megatons is it? Even if I drop it in the bay, the fallout will still kill pretty much everyone in the city."

"Shit. Well can't you and Banner and Richards disarm it?"

The Hulk stomped past them, roaring and flinging Chitauri, automobiles, and anything else he could get his hands on.

"I'm not sure Dr. Banner is in the mood right now!" yelled Tony.

"Sir? My orders?" asked Bucky tentatively, looking at Steve.

"Well, think of something! Isn't that what you do, Mr. Consultant?"

"Fuck! Fuck! Okay!" shouted Tony. "I'll... I'll come up with something!"

"Widow to Avengers. I have the scepter. If I close the portal, can they call it off?"

"Fury to Widow. No, it's too late for that."

Tony went rigid. "Don't close that portal!"

"Are you insane, Stark?! They're still coming!"

"Leave it open for another five, okay? I have an idea. JARVIS, put everything we got into the thrusters!" He didn't wait; he launched himself into the sky. Three minutes, Fury had said, and they'd already wasted one of those precious minutes arguing.

---

"I cannot forgive you," Loki whispered. "It doesn't matter if I can. It doesn't make a difference. It's too late, don't you see? I can't go home." Loki actually acknowledging Asgard as home was arguably process. He kept his gaze on the floor, not on Thor's face. It was hard to look at him for this conversation. The golden illusion of his armour had faded, leaving him in mute greens and blacks that were covered in scratches and dirt. "Father will want to punish me. Thanos will want to punish me. I have no one to turn to now."

Finally, Loki's gaze flickered up to Thor's face. "I was always meant to end up here. Don't you see that?"

---

"Tony! Tony no!"

Steve knew what he was going to do. Tony was reckless and stupid and even if he didn't want to admit it, he was a hero. And he was goddamn going to get himself killed saving the rest of them. "Tony!" Steve's scream echoed through the air uselessly. No. He was going up there to die.

It wasn't supposed to end like this. Steve saw the shape of Tony's suit meet with something else in the sky. Fuck. Steve was shaking.
He felt Bucky walking up next to him. "He's going to die," Steve whispered, his voice trembling in the air.

"I'm ready to close the portal once you're out Tony," Natasha announced through comms.

"Fuck," Clint swore. "What if Tony doesn't have enough time?"

"Then... then we have to close it anyway," Sam murmured. "Stark, you know this could be a one way trip, right? And Cap, you got more friendlies headed your way. You and Winter better get ready."

"Don't worry about me getting out, Widow, just close the goddamn thing before the nuke goes off!" shouted Tony. "Cap, give Winter your comm."

Steve was screaming in his ear and Tony did not think he could handle listening to his mate screaming right now.

"Give it to him now, Steve!"

He soared over the smoking, broken city, toward the warhead. It was speeding along, perfectly straight; he grabbed it by one of the fins and, with every ounce of effort in the suit, wrenched it off-course. He accelerated. No telling how much longer before the thing went off. His mind was blank, utterly blank.

His comm crackled with a scuffle. Steve had been screaming; suddenly there was a new voice.

"...hello?"

"James?" Tony's voice cracked. "Take care of him."

"Yes, sir."

"JARVIS, mute all comms." He didn't want to hear them, whatever they had to say.

"Shall I place any outgoing calls, sir?"

"Might as well... try Pepper..." He just wanted to know she was safe, away from the city.

Tony didn't want to save the world. Contrary to what he told the press, Tony only cared about saving a handful of people in it. Pepper was one of those people. She deserved to know it.

The phone rang. Once, twice, three times. Fuck it, she was probably glued to a television screen, like everyone else in the world.

The hole in the sky, the tear in the very fabric of reality, was dark and glittering with unfamiliar stars. Tony should know. He knew the stars well; he had a telescope in his room; he'd always loved space.

The second he entered it, the phone call ended. She hadn't picked up.

The HUD scrambled and went dead.

"JARVIS?"

The AI was off. The jets sputtered, unable to work with any oxygen.
And before him was a massive chitinous ship, its body a ribbon of jagged, plated edges. It sailed silently through the sky, a cold, airless void, one impossibly far from Earth. The transmissions scrambled and went dark; the rockets, without any atmosphere, followed, and he was floating in his silent sarcophagus, watching the ship, or was it a creature, maneuvering impossibly through the nothingness, tinier beings buzzing around it like a hive, the only sound his own breath, shallow and too fast, the blood rushing in his ears, the knowledge that his suit was never designed for this; it was airtight, yes, so he would likely suffocate before he froze, unless that terrible being noticed him first, noticed the glint of metal in that impossibly dark void, noticing him floating, helpless, in that vast open space without any place to hide, no ability to run; the space around him was endless, inconceivably large, infinite, something not even his mind could conceive, something so terrible and ancient, where only unnatural, abominations like this great insectoid before him could exist, and he found himself mentally pleading with him, almost hysterically, not to turn, not to see him, not to be noticed, but it was too late, because somehow, despite there being no noise, no movement, it knew, it had found him, and it was turning its leviathan mass toward him, opening its maw, another dark and infinite and cold place from where there was no return--

The missile had left his hands and was floating away.

Good-bye, thought Tony mildly. He was shivering inside the suit and if the HUD was on, it would probably have been alerting him that he was in freefall, that his pressure was too low, that his CO2 levels were spiking and oxygen failing...

If he wasn't eaten, would the suit drift forever with his dead body in it? Would it eventually get sucked into a sun or a black hole? Or would it crash into something solid first, and the remains would lie there for the rest of time, without anyone ever knowing his final resting place?

Tony closed his eyes, like a child, as if by closing them, maybe, just maybe, the thing wouldn't notice him.

He was lucky. Because if his eyes had been open when the bomb went off, he would have been permanently blinded. Even with his eyes closed, his field of vision lit up, bright white, brighter than anything imaginable, and the force of it hit him like a sucker punch, shoving him back impossibly fast.

Math: Fifty percent of a weapon's power was in the blast radius, and maybe a third was thermal radiation. A B53 was ninemegatons with a blast radius of, oh, three to four miles. The blast effect would kill any unprotected person in about a ten-mile radius, though Tony, in the suit, had some form of protection. And within two-and-a-half miles, he would probably be getting a dose of about 500 rem ion radiation, which had a fifty to ninety percent chance of killing him, too.

But he wasn't dead.

Inexplicably, he was alive. How was he alive?

Again. Math. The missile, probably some Titan II knock-off, had a max speed of what, fifteen thousand miles an hour? The bomb had been traveling at at least half that, though it had definitely lost some of its speed when Tony had snagged it and altered the course. Half and half meant it had been going about three thousand. One or two thousand, conservatively, but certainly more than the sound barrier, at 767 mph. So if the missile was going 1000 mph when Tony entered the wormhole and he'd been here for, say, thirty seconds, again being conservative... it was already five hundred miles away.

He was outside of the blast range. Way, way, way outside of it.
He would get to freeze to death after all!

Or suffocate. Whatever. Already the suit was getting stuffy, and Tony was gasping for air, and his head was getting light-headed. The numbers danced in his head and he floated, pushed by the bomb's blast, going to sleep for what was probably the last time.

"No! No! Tony!"

Steve was screaming. He wouldn't stop screaming. He couldn't feel it. The moment Tony slipped through that worm hole, the bond disappeared. He couldn't feel Tony anymore. There was a point when he dropped down his knees and he felt sick; the only thing that stopped Steve's head from hitting the floor was Bucky's arms around him.

He was distantly aware of Chitauri hitting the ground around them.

Steve was pretty sure Bucky said his name.

Then he screamed and burst out of Bucky's arms and flung himself at the nearest Chitauri soldier. Steve didn't even use his shield. He hit it with his bare hands; he punched them and tore into them. And he screamed.

When the last one was dead it was like emerging out of water and finally being able to breathe. Steve dropped down onto his knees, his hands stained blue and eyes glazed over.

"Steve." It was Natasha's voice. "I have to close the portal."

Steve stared at the body in front of him.

"...Steve?"

Steve slumped forward, his hands on the ground. "Close it," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

His hands curled into fists in the dirt.

Steve screwed his eyes shut.

And then he felt it. His eyes flew open. Steve looked up and he saw him, he felt--

The portal closed as Tony slipped out through the portal. But he wasn't flying, no, he was falling. Fuck. He was falling.

"Someone catch him!"

"Dude. I can't catch him. I'm sorry. He's too heavy," Sam said.

"Thor! Banner! Goddamn someone!"

Steve made to run towards him and then he stopped. He stumbled. And then he felt a twinge in his gut. Steve stuttered and gasped, gripping at his side. Fuck.

Oh. Oh no.

"Bucky--"
Bucky held on to Steve, clung to him for dear life as Steve screamed himself hoarse.

"Steve. Steve, stop!" he cried, gripping his mate. Steve was keeling over. Bucky made sure he had a solid grip on Steve before bringing his other hand up to the comm in his ear. "This is Barnes to-- to-- anyone, please, catch him! Someone has to have flight capabilities--"

"Widow to Falcon, can you slow him down, is he conscious?"

"Falcon to Stark! Falcon to Stark! No, he's out, he's completely out."

"Shit, shit, shit, Thor and Banner don't have comms... Falcon, can you get one of them--"

"No, I don't even even know where they are!"

The suit was plummeting to earth like a rock. Usually so lithe and elegant and flexible in the air, without any of its systems on, it was nothing more than a solid chunk of metal.

"Don't look," said Bucky, grabbing Steve and forcing his face into his chest.

Outside, several Chitauri soldiers dropped from the sky. Thor turned. Everywhere, the Chitauri were suddenly collapsing, as if someone had snapped their necks all at once. Above, the portal wobbled in the air and suddenly began collapsing in on itself, growing smaller and smaller.

Thor turned back to Loki, standing there shaking, small, boyish, in tattered robes. "Loki. It is over. They've won."

It occurred to Thor, suddenly, distantly, that they had been taking orders from that Captain fellow... the one who was an omega. They had been led by an omega and they'd won. Omegas had no place on the battlefield, yet... he'd been a worthy opponent, that one.

And then Thor's mind turned to the desert, to Jane Foster and her friend. Thor had initially thought the girl a servant. Why not? She carried papers and equipment about for Jane, and she was an omega. But when Thor had casually referred to her as such, Jane had gotten angry-- "Darcy isn't a servant, she's an intern, and my friend!" At the time, it had confused Thor; he supposed "intern" was perhaps some special class of servant and had not mentioned it again.

But gradually he was realizing that on earth, people had very different expectations indeed for omegas.

He looked back to his brother, his poor, defeated brother, who, doomed from birth, had only ever known Asgard.

Thor approached him and wrapped an arm around him. "Loki. You must come home. We will treat you well, even as a prisoner; you are, after all, royalty. ...this war is over. The Midgardians are a resilient people and you underestimated them, as I underestimated you. I know I cannot undo what's done but please, I beg you... hear my apology. Let us be brothers again. Please."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something coming out of the portal. By the gods, would they ever stop?

...suddenly he realized the thing was not an enemy. It was bright red. It was falling. And not slowing.

Cursing in Norse, Thor grabbed Mjölnir from the ground and swung, flying out the window toward
The Hulk had been punching one of the Leviathans like a punching bag when it went limp, collapsing along with every Chitauri soldier. He turned, lunging, pushing off the crashing beast, but there was nothing left to fight. In an instant, the battle was over.

He raised an arm and grunted in irritation at a sudden burst of sunlight from above. He looked up. The portal was shrinking, tunneling in on itself, and it was no longer black but white-hot, and it was growing ever-smaller, the sky pinching it closed. He stared, mouth gaping.

From the portal, a tiny black speck fell.

The last of the Chitauri?

He clawed his way up a building, not caring at the damage he was doing nor the pricking of broken glass and jagged concrete and sharp rebar. Up and up, as the black speck glinted in the sun, a red star, a--

_Oh, wow! I'm a huge fan of your work!_

_Bruce, where have you been all my life?_

His gut coiled with anger, even more rage than he'd felt previously. Tony was falling; Tony was dead; but he would not let him land in the dirt like a pile of scrap metal. Not Tony, the only person who'd ever treated his work with a modicum of respect.

He scrambled upward, trying to make it toward him, as if catching him would make any difference now, as if--

He leapt. They were seven, eight hundred feet in the air; he grabbed the limp figure, slowing it, and the two of them sped toward the ground together. He flailed out an arm, grabbing for some purchase on the side of a building, tearing it to shreds, leaving another scar on the already-battered city. They slid down at an angle, Hulk clinging to the suit like a child holding a doll; he hit the ground with an earth-rattling thump.

He was in the intersection of what had once been Madison Avenue, but was now nothing more than a torn-up, post-apocalyptic mess of ruined pavement, overturned cars, smoke, and fire.

He tossed the limp figure on the ground.

There was a rumble; Thor landed.

"Tony? Tony!" He strode over and fumbled with the helmet, unsure of how the Hel Midgardian technology worked.

He managed to get the faceplate off; Tony's face was limp and empty.

He gave him a shake. _"Tony Stark! ...Tony Stark, awaken!"

Bucky and Steve held hands as they pelted through the streets toward where the Hulk and Tony had landed.

They passed Brock and Jack, who followed, one of them exclaiming something about the Winter Soldier.
The armor was beaten to hell, covered in smoke and soot, with ample dints and scratches, the once-sleek designed looking like it had been... well. Through war.

Tony's face was placid.

"Tony Stark!" Thor looked up at Steve and Bucky. "Is he alive?" The question was directed toward Steve. "Does he live? Can you feel him?"

The Hulk let out a roar.

Tony's eyes snapped open at the sound of a lion-like roar, and he was simultaneously hit with a complete assault on his senses, the smell of another Alpha's pheromones, too strong, too close.

He promptly urinated.

"What the hell? What happened? Am I dead? How come I keep pissing myself?"

The Hulk's shoulders sagged; his skin rippled like water and suddenly he was shrinking, turning paler and paler. Within seconds, there was no more Hulk, only a naked Bruce, blinking in the smoke of the broken city, looking down at Tony.

"--oh, gross, you're naked."

"Said the guy who just pissed himself."

"We won," said Thor. "We are triumphant, thanks to your valor--"

Tony was too disoriented to understand. "What? Alright. Hey. ...yay, I guess. Okay. Good job. Go, team. You know what, let's, uh, let's... just... take some personal time, maybe, grab a bite to eat... I've never even tried falafel... I think there's a shawarma joint two or three blocks from here... I need to try... okay." He didn't move from the ground.

Thor offered Bruce his cape. Bruce tied it around his waist.

Steve dropped down onto the ground next to Tony, cupping his hands in his face. His blue eyes were wide and fearful, a smile ghosting onto his features despite the fact that he looked like he might cry. Steve swept the pads of thumbs over Tony's cheeks, feeling the warmth there. He let out a shuddered breath. "Don't you ever do that again," he whispered. Steve pressed a hand against the suit's chest. "You're not allowed to pull that kind of shit."

"Food actually sounds pretty sweet to me," Clint said, swinging his bow over his shoulder as he neared them. Steve took one of the suit's arms and helped Tony stand up. It was heavy and even with his strength his arms ached. It had been a long day.

But at the end of it, he was still standing. And so were both of his Alphas.
Hello everyone! Tony here. As you might have noticed, I missed our usual weekend update. My apologies. The last month has been very difficult for me in my personal life. I will post the next chapter sometime in the next 24 hours; I appreciate your patience, understanding, and readership. - Tony

Yo dawg, I heard you liked updates. So I put an update in your update and here it is... the update is below. :) - T

In the rubble of his once-familiar home, Steve stood, the bodies of the dead around him. It was a bizarre moment in time; his past and future had finally collided into one baffling, paradoxical thing. He knew New York, but not this New York. He knew battle, but not this battle. He knew Bucky and he knew a Stark, but not this Bucky, and not this Stark.

He was exhausted from fighting, dizzy and hot, but also strangely excited with the post-battle rush. They had won; they were safe. The world had a dream-like quality to it. Or maybe it was just all the smoke in the air.

"What are we doing with him?" Rumlow asked, watching Bucky warily.

"You're not putting him back in-- aw, horsefeathers." Steve twitched a little and rubbed at his temple.

"Steve? You okay? Are you hurt?" It was Natasha.

"We're all hurt," Steve said. There was a sensation in his gut, a slow uncoiling of heat. He knew it well.

...it wasn't just the thrill of battle.

And he had to get the hell out of here.


She frowned.

"Report." Fury's voice came through the comms. "Are all friendlies down?"

"Yes, sir," Sam assured him. "But we got a hell of a clean up job ahead of us." He looked up at the Stark tower where only the ‘A’ remained. "But everyone is clear to move in for evac. I repeat, no more friendlies, sir."

"Good job everyone." Fury sounded tired.

"We should probably go back and pick up Loki at some point, wherever the hell he is," Rollins pointed out.

"Without the scepter he should be less of a threat," Steve agreed. He was trying to stand up straight
but it wasn't really happening. He supposed, at least, he couldn't go blind this time. But with both of
them awake and in the same vicinity... things could also go a lot worse. Steve needed to get out. And
quick. He let Natasha take his hand when she reached for it. He trusted her right now.

But he also didn't trust any of them with Bucky. God, he felt conflicted. Steve couldn't just go... but
he also really couldn't stay.

"Steve--" Natasha tugged on his hand. She sent Clint a sideways look. "--come on, let's go find a
car."

Tony staggered on his feet, fighting nausea.

Clint frowned at Natasha. "Find a car? Are you joking, Nat?" He swept his arm around the street, at
the overturned, smoking cars. "A car, even if we could find one that ran, wouldn't navigate through
this."

"Clint," she said sharply, jerking her head toward Steve. She was holding onto his hand
protectively. Bucky had slipped his right hand into Steve's other hand. His left was holding the strap
of the rifle still slung over his shoulder.

"I'm going to go scout out a path for emergency services," said Falcon. "Rumlow, Rollins, can you
start a sweep? We need to confirm all hostiles are really dead."

"I shall retrieve my brother," said Thor.

"Okay, Loki can be given over to Rollins when you have him," said Natasha. "SHIELD will take
him from there-- Tony, where the hell are you going?" Tony was staggering down the street, still in
the suit, like he was sleep-walking.

"I told you, I need shawarma."

"And the Winter Soldier?" demanded Rumlow, to Natasha.

She rubbed her temples. "I-- I don't know."

"Tony, wait!" called Bruce. "You need medical attention, you can't just--"

Tony ignored him, stumbling through the broken street.

"--that man really wants... shawarma," said Bucky, who had never heard of such a thing.

"Shit. I'll stay with Steve and-- and Barnes," said Natasha.

"Rumlow to Fury. Please advise," said Rumlow, squinting at them suspiciously.

"Fury to all Rumlow. ...let 'em do whatever the hell they want. They've earned it."

Natash cast a look to Steve. "...how soon?" He didn't yet smell like he was in preheat, but she'd
already figured it out. Cramping was an early sign; Clint got it too. And Steve's last heat had been in
December. Now it was May. Five months... about right, for someone with Steve's metabolism.

"I'm gonna order without you guys!" shouted Tony down the block, stumbling, bumping into a trash
can, and knocking it over. He fell over with it like a drunk staggering home after a long night at the
bar.

Bruce looked at them in alarm. "How soon what? What are you guys-- he's got a concussion, he
Tony had already picked himself up and was continuing on his slow, painful pilgrimage.

Natasha swore again. "Fine! Fifteen minutes and then we have to get out of here." She gave Steve's hand a tug.

Five minutes later, Tony (suit on, helmet under his arm), Bruce (wearing only Thor's cape), Steve, Bucky, Natasha, and Clint were walking into the damaged storefront of a small restaurant called "Shawarma Palace."

There was a rumble and Thor landed behind them.

"...what is this?" he asked.

"Shawarma," said Tony in a daze. "I... I almost died and I've never even tried falafel." His boots crunched over broken glass.

"What's falafel?" asked Bucky.

"So... let me just get this straight... Steve's 'type' is brunet guys with mech prosthetics who have never tried falafel? That's... seriously incredibly specific," said Clint.

From behind the counter, a woman peeked out at them, eyes wide.

"I need falafel," said Tony, still sounding like he wasn't quite there. "I need... I need a falafel wrap... and some lamb shawarma... and... one for everyone, okay... need some falafel."

"Tony, don't you want to sit down?" asked Bruce.

"Nuh-uh. Gotta... gotta get lunch first. ...oh... and a Diet Coke."

"But the aliens," protested the woman, still taking cover behind the counter.

"No, yeah, we won... they're dead... yay, team... falafel," said Tony distantly.

She got up, slowly, nervously.

"Tony, can't we just-- okay, no, you really want that falafel," said Bruce, giving up.

A moment later the seven of them were sitting at a wobbly table, having gathered up some chairs and crowded them around it. Thor examined a piece of pita bread and popped it into his mouth.

Natasha was watched Steve in alarm, and kept glancing over at Bucky, who was chewing idly on a falafel wrap.

"Do you remember me?" she asked.

"No," said Bucky.

"You shot me. In the stomach."

"Were you a target?"

"No. The guy behind me was.

"Ah," said Bucky, nodding. That made sense.
Clint leaned back, looking from Tony to Bucky, on either side of Steve. "So... um... what's the, uh... plan... with...?"

"I, for one, think the Captain is an excellent leader for an omega!" said Thor loudly. "If he chooses to have two Alphas, so be it!"

"Wait, what?" said Tony and Bucky simultaneously. Both of them were eating a wrap.

"My falafel has drywall in it," observed Bruce.

"No refunds!" hollered one of the employees from the back, who was trying to sweep up the debris all over the floor.

"Mine's okay," said Natasha, chewing slowly.

"Yeah, it's okay," agreed Clint.

"I'm a little underwhelmed."

"Yeah, me too. ...did you get chicken or lamb? Switch with me."

"Can I use your toilet?" Steve asked suddenly, wanting to escape the incredibly awkward situation he had found himself literally sandwiched between. The shop owner blinked at Steve with wide eyes. He was in his Cap uniform and covered in blue blood. He must have made for quite the sight.

"Er. Sure."

Steve stumbled into the toilet and went about washing the blood off of his hands. It didn't smell like human blood. It lacked the same coppery tang. And then he ducked his head down, washing his face too and splashing it with cold water. He exhaled slowly and looked up in the mirror, meeting his own gaze. Tony and Bucky were both sat at table, essentially eating together. The day really was full of surprises.

He had about ten minutes, tops. Then Tony and Bucky would notice the smell. And then they would probably try to kill each other.

Steve was about to step back out when he hesitated. He suddenly thought he could call Phil. He would know what to do, he would have got Steve out safe, he would have--

But now he couldn't.

Steve remembered Phil begging him on the phone to not tell Clint and Natasha about Barney Barton and the questionable role that the WSC, and Malick specifically, had had in his captivity, about the lies that had been kept. It might as well have been Phil's dying wish. Whatever reserves Steve had were gone. He had to honour the man's choices.

Although right now Steve was apparently facing a pretty tricky choice of his own.

He stepped back out of the bathroom and everyone looked at him.

"Just give me some food. I'm goddamn starving."

Steve inhaled about three wraps. Falafel was never really his cup of tea. (Aria was obsessed with it, though.) He needed food, especially if he was about to go into--

Shit.
A spasm twisted in his gut. Steve gripped the edge the table and a bit of it snapped off in his hand. He would have felt bad but one of the store windows had a car wheel through it, so...

He cleared his throat and gave Natasha a look.

She stood quickly, all business. "Come on Steve. Let's go."

Steve left, leaving an open seat between Tony and Bucky.

Tony gave Bucky a sideways glance, appraising him. Bucky looked up and caught his eye.

"...war Alpha?"

"What?"

"You know. War Alpha. Steve needed someone to take care of him, and I was off fighting Krauts, so he let you take care of him."

"Oh." Tony tried to wrap his head around this. "...well, we actually sort of... the war ended, we won. ...you know those aliens weren't Germans, right?"

Bucky looked hopelessly confused.

Steve stomped out of the bathroom; Natasha rose very suddenly and reached for him.

Tony and Bucky both rose, knocking over the table and all the food, growling at her.

"My baba ghanoush!" cried Thor in dismay.

Natasha held her hands up. "I'm not touching him, boys, I'm just... we need to leave, okay? It's time to go home."

"Back off!" snapped Bucky.

"Yeah, beat it, Romanoff! Who put you in charge?" snarled Tony.

"Tony." Natasha didn't bother to appeal to Bucky at all. "Tony... when was Steve's last heat?"

"In December, but I don't see why-- oh, *fuck*, really? *Now?*

Natasha nodded.

"Okay. Shit...can we get a jet?"

"I don't know if they'll let you leave New York, considering..." Natasha swept a hand around.

"Why would we leave New York?" asked Bucky, baffled. Hadn't she just said they were going home?

"What about him?" demanded Tony, gesturing vaguely toward Bucky.

"You could always--"

"*Clint!" hissed Natasha warningly.

"--spit roast--"
"CLINT!"

"I like spit roasts," offered Thor pleasantly, who had picked up a wrap from the floor and was eating it contentedly.

"I don't think we're talking about the same kind of spitroast," said Clint.

"He has to go back in cryo, obviously," Tony, ignoring them.

"Are you talking about me?" asked Bucky in alarm, eyes widening. "You-- you're going to freeze me again? P-please don't. Please don't do that. I-- I followed your orders, Captain, didn't I? Please don't put me back in there. It's cold and dark and-- and-- and it's like the bottom of that ravine all over again. Don't you know what it's like to be in the dark and think you're freezing to death? Please don't put me back there."

"Damn it," muttered Tony, who could see Steve's brow soften with sympathy. Bucky just had to bring the whole dying-in-ice thing isn't this, didn't he? "Nat, you stay with Bucky, I'll go with Ste--"

"No, no, I'll go with Steve," said Bucky, taking Steve's hand.

Tony took his other hand. "Uh, no, you stay with Natasha and I stay with Steve."

Bucky's hackles rose. "I'm not losing him again."

Both of them tightened their grips on Steve's hands.

"I say that Steve Rogers, mighty omega warrior, deserves two mechanical men in his bedchambers!" said Thor loudly.

Bruce spat out some of his wrap.

Natasha glared at him. "You are not helping!"

Clint was laughing uncontrollably and Bruce was trying to hide his smile behind his hand.

"No, no, I agree with Thor, Steve should--"

"Shut up, Barton, what do you know about threesomes, anyway?" shouted Tony.

Clint only laughed harder.

Natasha gently shoved Steve toward the door. "No one's having a threesome right now, okay, we just all nearly got killed, so what Steve needs is--"

"--protection!" said Tony and Bucky at the same time, lunging at Steve.

Natasha jumped out of the way as the two of them both tried to pick up Steve at the same time. Between Bucky's arm and Tony's suit, Steve was almost immediately in their arms, both of them trying to carry him out. They were facing each other, inches from each other's faces, with Steve sandwiched between them.

"Let him go."

"No, you let him go."

They tugged back and forth for a moment.
Clint was in tears from laughing so hard, and Bruce was trying and failing abysmally not to look amused. "I'm glad I'm a beta," confessed Bruce mildly.

"Mortal love is such a beautiful, fragile thing," sighed Thor romantically.

"Let me go!" With an rather undignified wiggle Steve squirmed out of their grip and landed on the floor. Both of them looked horrified and moved to grab him again. Steve kicked them away. "No! We're not doing this."

And this talk of threesomes was not helping. Steve, of course, found the idea rather appealing. Come on, he was only human. But he knew neither of them certainly did and Steve didn't have to be told what a 'spit roast' was. He was pretty sure he could work it out from Clint's giggling. Jesus Christ.

"No one is putting Bucky back in cryostasis," Steve took a step back from them, hands out. "And you two aren't going to fight, okay? But I can't be here right now and watch you two duke it out. So I'm just gonna go with Natasha... Stop looking at me like that! This is hard for me." Steve huffed softly. Natasha slipped out behind Tony and walked over to Steve's side.

"SHIELD sent a car. Should be here soon," she told him. As if on cue a black car round the corner. It was a Land Rover, the wheels bouncing over spots of debris as it made its way towards them. "Come on Steve."

"I'm sorry. I can't do this right now," Steve said again and then made to get in the car once it parked. His hands were shaking. And, goddammit, he hadn't managed to get off all the blood. There was still thin lines of blue left in the grooves of his nails.

"...no!" cried Tony and Bucky in unison. Both of them hurried after Steve.

Tony clapped a hand on his shoulder; Bucky grabbed his hand.

"She's not your Alpha!" said Tony.

"You can't go with her!" agreed Bucky.

"Please don't leave."

"Not with her."

"I can't lose you again."

"I nearly died."

"We won't fight," said Bucky.

"We'll be good!" agreed Tony quickly.

"We're pals now," said Bucky, slinging an arm around Tony's shoulders.

"Don't touch me," snarled Tony.

Bucky quickly pulled his arm away, but repeated, "We won't fight. Please don't leave, Stevie. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, we're sorry. We promise not to fight."

Bucky and Tony both stood there, shoulder to shoulder, looking at Steve pleadingly.
The agent in the front of the car opened his door and stood up to look at them over the top of the car. "My God! Is that the Winter Soldier?"

Bucky turned and looked behind him in alarm.

Natasha pinched the bridge of her nose. "You two are only saying you won't fight because you're focused on Steve. You'll both go feral once he's in heat. We can't risk--"

"Please, Stevie," begged Bucky.

"I love you, Pookie," said Tony. "We can go back to the Tower, have a nice easy bath--"

"--Brooklyn, turn on the record player, relax--"

Both of them were begging shamelessly. Both of their faces were covered in dirt and ash. Steve could hear Clint still laughing like a hyena through the broken window of the restaurant.

"Please, Stevie, if your war Alpha means that much to you, I'll-- I'll get used to him," said Bucky. "Besides, we know our places, it won't even matter, I'm way more dominant--"

"Shut up, Barnes!" hissed Tony. "I'm not that submissive."

"I mean, you are--"

"No I'm not!"

"You are," interjected Natasha.

Tony whipped around, hackles spiked. "Stay out of this, Romanoff! How would you like it if me and Bucky here tried to take your mate, huh?"

"I'd like it!" called Clint from inside.

Steve sighed and slumped against the car. God. He was too tired for this shit. He ran a hand over his face.

"Guys... just stop it. Neither of you really mean this. I don't for a minute believe it either could deal with what you're suggesting, or actually want it. You just don't want to lose me. But you're not losing me. You just don't get to share this heat with me, okay? Because someone will get hurt and I don't want to be responsible for that."

God, it hurt to be so responsible right now. Steve really was very tired. "So now I'm get in the car and go somewhere safe, alright?" he said, unable to keep his weariness from his voice.

Neither of them looked enthused at the idea, that was for sure.

"Look, I can't be responsible for either of you getting hurt, alright? And if one of you got killed... I would never be able to forgive the other. I mean it." Steve tried to pull a serious face. "Now are you gonna let me leave?"

When Steve asked if they were going to let him leave, they both shook their heads.

"And yes Buck. Tony does mean that much me. I love him. Got it?"

When he said he loved Tony, immediately, he felt a pang of happiness from Tony and a pang of sadness from Bucky.
"What if we both promise not to mate you?" asked Tony.

"Yeah, how 'bout that?" chimed in Bucky, clinging to Steve's hand again. "I-- I don't want to lose you, Stevie, please, I've been lookin' everywhere for you since that guy with the eyepatch nabbed me. Every time I let you out of my sight, I can't find you again, and-- and-- and I miss you. Please, Stevie."

"I nearly died," repeated Tony.

"Steve," said Natasha.

"We'll both just agree not to mate him, but why can't we stay with him?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"I've been around Steve in heat plenty of times. Remember that crappy little one-bedroom place we had back in the thirties, Steve? Huh? I'm real good at--"

"Yeah, Barnes is a virgin and everything!"

Bucky frowned slightly. "I mean, I'm... I'm not a virgin."

"Well, compared to me you probably are."

"Counting women, omegas, or both?"

Natasha pinched the bridge of her nose. "Boys. Stop." She turned to Steve. "I can stay here with them. You go."

"No! Please! Steve, they'll put me back into that ice chamber-- please, Stevie!" cried Bucky, looking alarmed. "I'll be that or the chair, please, I don't wanna go back, I-- I only just started remembering stuff! I won't leave you again!" He flung himself past Natasha, literally diving for Steve and clinging onto his leg. "If you wanna get rid of me, you'll have to-- to-- to knock me out, 'cause I'm not goin' without a fight!"

"Well, you're crazy if you think I'm leaving my omega with his ex."

"He's my omega and I'm not an ex," snarled Bucky from the ground. Tony was pleased that his hackles actually went up; before this, Tony's dominance had registered as so low that Barnes hadn't been reacting to it, which felt a bit insulting to Tony, whose hackles had been up ever since Bucky had thrown an arm around him.

"We can't take you to the base, Steve. Not with... him," said Natasha. "There's a safehouse in the Bronx but... I don't think I can leave you alone with them, unsupervised. In heat, you won't be able to... you know. Make good decisions." She didn't add that Bucky was actually extremely dominant. Slightly more than her, even, though barely. He was like crack cocaine to an omega in heat.

"Tiberius," said Tony, trying to snap his fingers in the suit. It didn't work. He pointed to Steve. "What if we get Tiberius? Then can we please spent your heat with you? Ty can babysit us. Please, please, please, we'll be good." Halfway through his begging, he caught a whiff of Steve's preheat and he felt his legs go weak. His mouth watered. Bucky was still clinging to Steve's leg; Tony growled and tried to kick him off. Bucky scrambled away.

"I'm not the one with the problem, he's tryin'a kick me!"
"We're scent mates!" yelled Tony.

"Well, we've known each other since we were five!" yelled Bucky back.

"My God, they're like children," said the SHIELD agent who was driving the car, watching them, fascinated. He was a beta.

"Yeah, no, there's a reason omegas don't get multiple Alphas. Jealousy is a really big problem for us," said Natasha, crossing her arms. "How about this. How about you two come with me, and we let Steve go be by himself, and we can give you both phones so you can check in on him any time you like? Stark, you need to get out of the suit, and--"

"Stark?" said Bucky in confusion, craning his neck to look up at Tony.

Tony bristled. No doubt Bucky's poor, fractured mind was thinking of Howard. "Tony Stark," he clarified.

Bucky's brow knotted like he was trying to remember something. "Stark... huh," he said after a long moment.

"Okay... come on, unclench..." said Natasha, kneeling in the rubble to pry Bucky's fingers off of Steve's leg. She looked up. "Steve. Go. We can handle them."

Bucky whined loudly. "Steve... please... please, Steve, I don't want them to put me back in the chair, I wanna remember you--"

"Steve..." whined Tony, getting another whiff of Steve's scent. Gah, it was alluring. There was literally no aphrodisiac in the world. "...Steve, c'mon, didn't McDermott say that... that when you're stressed out or whatever, you only have really light heats? Remember the last one? Today was awful, I'm sure it would be easy to handle--"

"Both of you, stop it, stop pestering him!" snapped Natasha. "He's allowed to have a heat by himself, alright?! Barnes, stop biting me!" (Bucky had begun gnawing her hand in response to her forcibly removing his hand from Steve's leg.)

Around them, the city was filling with the sounds of choppers, sirens, shouting; open flames were still flickering in some spots and the air was hazy with dust. The amount of sensory input was making Tony anxious and he wanted nothing more than to take off the suit, take a shower, and crawl into bed. But he didn't want to do it alone. After all that had happened, Tony wanted, no, he needed his mate. His whole body was shaking with a repressed panic attack and he was starting to regret all the falafel he'd eaten minutes earlier.

Bucky didn't look much better.

Now that they were quibbling over such a minor, hum-drum issue, reality was sinking in. The reality of how many were dead, of how many close calls there had been.

"Stark? Stark, we need to get you to a hospital." Natasha's voice sounded distant.

"No. No hospitals. No doctors," said Tony firmly. He'd always hated doctors and he doubted any of them could do anything about him going through a wormhole.

"Stark, I'm serious, you're a wreck. You got your falafel. Now we need to get your serious medical--"
"No," repeated Tony stubbornly.

Natasha threw up her hands in exasperation. Both Tony and Bucky looked like they'd been to hell and back; both were pale-faced and clammy and shivering, and both were being annoying stubborn and were fixated on Steve, their rock in the storm.

"Nat, you've got to promise me you won't let them put him in cryo--" Steve said, clutching her hand tight.

"I won't. You have my word."

"And get Tony Pepper. He needs her right now, if I can't be here."

Natasha nodded again.

The minute his foot was free Steve got into the car. The agent started the engine. He stared at Bucky and Tony, who looked heart broken, and he wished there was something he could to do to make it all okay. But there wasn't. He couldn't choose between them. Not like this. That would feel even more cruel. "I'm so sorry," was all he said as he closed the door.

The agent hit the pedal and took them away, and Steve felt like he was gonna be sick.

"Pretty crazy, huh?" the agent said.

"Right," Steve hummed as the car bumped over alien corpses strewn across the street. "Pretty crazy."

He was fidgeting a little. He could feel his pre-heat beginning to hit him. "Oh. This is for you. Widow said to bring it," said the agent from the phone, turning.

The agent dropped a phone in his lap. So Bucky and Tony could talk to him. And presumably Natasha too. God, them calling in heat would be bad idea though... he was bound to say some screwed up shit. And the worst thing was, Bucky would feel it more. Like he felt everything more. Without Tony close to him Steve wasn't even sure how aware of the heat he would be. But Steve's heats before had been enough to wake Bucky up from cryo sleep. He was scared about how he was going to cope with it.

"If you could choose without hurting anyone, do you think you would?" the agent asked.

Steve didn't answer.

The driving had been exhausting. They had a few more hours to go but Steve had wanted to take a break. They were in the middle of nowhere so it wasn't hard to find somewhere to hide the car. They were in a forest of sorts, the trees loosely packed together and tall, their pine needles littering the floor. Steve found a clearing.

Bucky leaned against a tree and Steve laid out on the floor, his head resting against his thigh. He closed his eyes at the sensation of fingers running through his hair, flesh, not metal. It felt like something akin to peace. It felt like home. And Steve instantly felt guilty for it. Love was so complicated and messy and sometimes Steve felt like it turned him into a bad person.

"W-when I first woke up from the ice I had amnesia," he told him, voice wet. "I didn't remember
everything. I didn't remember you falling. I kept demanding to see you, asking where you were. I thought maybe you'd cut off the bond because you thought I was dead and that's why I wasn't feeling you so much. I wouldn't stop asking after you."

"Then, about two weeks in, I just broke down crying on Coulson. And he held me while I cried on the goddamn floor. And I told him you had to be dead. Because there ain't no other reason in the world you wouldn't have come to see me."

Bucky's arms around him tightened and for just a moment, they both felt warm.
They got to the safe house and it was as expected. Dull and dreary. Normally Steve would have asked Phil to come watch over him in this kind of situation; he didn't know who he could turn to now. The agent from the car was awkward and nosy. Steve didn't like him.

"There will be agents on rotation watching the house from outside," he told Steve. "But no one in the house. You'll have complete privacy. Food and drink is fully stocked. And there's... er, stuff in the bedroom. Whatever you need. And if you do decide to invite one of your Alphas around, tell Widow so she can warn the agents in advance. Otherwise they won't let anyone in here."

Steve nodded. "Thanks. Thank you. I really appreciate this."

"No problem Cap."

He remembered Dugan sitting outside that rotting building for him in France, clutching a shot gun, and he smiled a little.

Steve peeled off his uniform and threw it in the washing machine before going to take a shower. He was jittery with his pre-heat. He found a few cuts and bruises on himself (okay, more than a few) but there was nothing serious. He patched himself up with the med kit from inside the house and then began searching through the clothes to find something that would fit him.

Eventually he found a tee and some board shorts. He supposed once the heat was in full swing and he had the house to himself he could walk around naked anyway. God, a heat by himself...

They were awful and Steve hated them. He'd just helped save the world. He didn't deserve this.

Steve slid down against one of the walls and rested his head on his forearms, closing his eyes shut.

Fuck.

Now that there was no one around to see his weakness, he could finally indulge in it: a rare luxury.
"--best pals," finished Bucky.

"I dunno. Maybe he's funny. Y'know, they say lots of acers and fairies join the army."

"What? No they don't, it's the navy where they take all the queers. Dum Dum seems alright," said Bucky.

"Okay, so maybe he's just smarter than you. Anyways he's the only one who's not drooling all over Steve. ...it's not a competition. None of us can have him. He's our captain. It'd be wrong."

Bucky had scoffed at that.

But he never did get Steve. In truth, they didn't talk much off the battlefield. It was too hard. Bucky pieced together everything that had happened and spent a lot of time sulking, injured, because their bond wasn't what it had once been, and the mark had disappeared. He didn't know whether Zola had ruined him, or whether Howard had ruined Steve, or what combination. He only knew there was a strange, cold distance between them.

But even then... even then, they had always been tuned to each other, coordinating their actions and movements flawlessly. Bucky always knew where Steve was. That was just how it was.

Bucky and Tony watched the car driving away, shoulders sagging, faces covered in dust, utterly heart-broken.

The moment the car rounded the corner, they rounded on each other.

"This is your fault!"

The two lunged at each other. Natasha jumped back in alarm. She didn't bother trying to separate them. Natasha was fast, quick, and deadly. Among humans, she was one of the best assassins in the world. But Bucky had super-human strength, or something like it, plus his left arm, and Tony was still in the suit. Getting between them would be stupid.

Instead, she hollered for Thor, who lumbered out, scruffed both of them, and yanked them apart.

"ENOUGH!" he bellowed.

Both Tony and Bucky instantly froze, their hackles flattening, eyes wide. Natasha wasn't even the one being yelled at, and still, she flinched reflexively.

"Thank you, Thor. Tony. Time to take the suit off. Barnes. You stay with me, okay?"

Both nodded meekly.

"I need to get my stuff," said Bucky in a low voice.

"What stuff?" demanded Tony, eyes narrowing. He was imagining a weapon stockpile.

"My backpack," said Bucky.

"Okay," said Natasha soothingly. "Tony, you go back to the Tower, take off the suit... Barnes and I will go retrieve... what's in the backpack, Barnes?"

"My notebooks," said Bucky.

Well, that sounded innocent enough. Just to be safe, though, she called for Clint. If Barnes tried
anything, or snapped, Clint was a quick draw, and he could shoot him.

Tony tried to get to the tower but his rockets weren't working well. The suit was ruined. He staggered off, dragging himself; Bruce walked after him, cringing as his bare feet padded over the torn pavement, strewn with glass.

Once separated, both Alphas calmed significantly.

"So..." said Bruce awkwardly.

"Pretty long day," said Tony. "...you wanna grab one of those energy rifles and take it apart? I've got ten floors of R&D labs in the tower... lots of toys... might be fun."

"Okay," said Bruce. "Better the devil you know then the one you don't, right?" He snagged up one of the Chitauri weapons on the ground.

Though the armor was non-gantry, Tony didn't want to take it off without being in the tower. For his own mental well-being. Besides, the armor was designed to assemble, not disassemble; once off, it would be a pile of parts. It couldn't return to the tower; it could only come to Tony. He made a mental note to fix that.

Across town, Natasha, Clint, and Bucky were walking along the ruined streets, where the occasional, lone, dazed civilians wandered past.

"So, Barnes--"

"Bucky. My name is Bucky."

"Okay. Bucky. Er... how much do you... remember?"

"Everything," said Bucky immediately.

"What year is it?" demanded Clint.

"Nineteen--" began Bucky.

"Uh, no, it's 2012."

Bucky fell silent, picking through the rubble, brow furrowed with concentration, lost in his own thoughts.

It took them hours to get to 49th. There was a hotel, heavily damaged; Bucky went in.

The moment they walked into the hotel room, Natasha and Clint could tell he had not been living alone.

"...who were you with?" asked Natasha.

Bucky opened his mouth, but seemed confused. "I... I don't know. The omega and the girl."

"Those guys trying to kill Stark," said Clint. "They must have escaped JDE Mission Facility together. ...they've clearly left the roost." He poked around; there was a half-eaten sandwich on the bed and some used, rumpled towels on the floor.

Bucky grabbed a backpack and slung it over his shoulder.
"Hold on. Let me see what's in that," demanded Natasha.

"No!"

"Yes! I'm not letting you take in that package without searching it."

Grudgingly, Bucky opened in. Inside were four spiral notebooks. Three black and one blue.

"...okay," said Natasha. She didn't even want to ask what was in them.

They left the hotel, and Bucky turned down the block, heading north.

"Hey, wait! What do you think you're going?"

"Steve," said Bucky.

"No. No, Bar-- Bucky. Remember, Steve needs some alone time...?"

"I can feel him. He needs me," said Bucky, still staring north. Natasha knew he was headed right toward the safehouse and there was no doubt in her mind that he could probably find it if he really wanted to. It was a rare and remarkable thing for a bonded pair to be close enough to actually locate each other with that level of precision, but Bucky's conviction was apparent.

"How 'bout you call him? Remember? You have phones?" She pushed a small, black glass rectangle into his hands.

Bucky stared down at it in confusion.

Natasha pressed a button on the side, then moved her finger across the face of the rectangle. The glass showed a picture of a desert.

"...you have no idea what this is, do you? It's a phone, Bucky."

"Ah," said Bucky. He put the thing to his ear. "Hello, operator? ...operator?"

"Oh, this is gonna be fun," said Clint, rolling his eyes.

Natasha heaved a sigh. "Yeah...fun."

"Your brother's through here." Hill looked washed out and frankly exhausted. But she was still walking around with purpose, her back straight and expression set. She didn't look like a woman anyone would want to mess with. She lead Thor through a series of hallways in the SHIELD facility till they eventually reached some sort of holding cell. It was nothing near the caliber they'd built for Banner, but it was significant. The glass walls were lined with metal bars. But again, they had nothing which could effectively block Loki's magic. It was a 'technology' they could not yet understand. So agents stood around the cell, all armed.

"He hasn't moved since Rollins brought him in," one of the agents informed both Thor and Hill.

Loki was sat cross legged on the floor. He looked worse than Maria did. His pale skin looked almost deathly and his hair was wild. He was staring straight ahead at a fixed point in the glass. He didn't look up when Thor walked in.

"The council have said they are happy for you to take him," Maria told Thor. "But they want to keep the scepter. To study it."
At that, Loki looked up, his green eyes bright with a bitter sort of laughter.

The phone he'd been given started ringing. Steve picked it up. He was still on the floor. He had been for thirty minutes. "Steve." It was Natasha. "Bucky wants to speak to you." "I can't." "Steve. He'll come to you if you don't speak to him. He can find the way," she was lowering her voice a little. Pointless. Bucky had super serum hearing too, right? "You know he can." "I'm not strong enough Nat." "Steve..." "I can't say no to him. Especially not now." "Well either talk to him now, or in person later." Steve sighed. "Fine. Fine. Okay. Did you call Pepper? Could you just send her a text, something? I don't want Tony to be alone right now." "...Alright. I'll text her, but I can't promise anything. So I can pass you over to Bucky?" "Yeah. Okay. Yes." Natasha passed the phone back over to Bucky, sending Clint a look over the Alpha's shoulder at the same time. "You can speak to him." "...Steve?" said Bucky hesitantly into the black glass rectangle. He had some misgivings about this thing actually being a phone or working. It didn't even have any antennae! He was shocked not only to hear Steve's voice but also at how incredibly clear it was. "Steve! ...are you okay? Are you safe?" He gripped the rectangle tightly. "Do you need anything?"

Bucky knew he had a shitty memory, that he was broken and that his brain didn't always work correctly. But around Steve, at least, he felt... normalish. And he could vaguely remember long nights in the winter, when Steve would go into weak preheats, how Steve would whimper and follow him around begging, and what a terrible temptation it was, what an awful fucking burden to say no, over and over and over.

"...you have real heats now, don't you? ...Stevie, gosh, you have no idea, I-- I used to pray every night for you to get better, to-- to heal up and now you're-- I'm so happy you're not sick anymore. Now we can have a real life together, and-- and with the war over and everything-- I mean, I think I took a couple of whacks in the head but I'm sure I'll be right as rain once I get some real American food into me. Can I come over yet? Do you need me? You just say the word and I'll--"

On Steve's end, his phone buzzed in his hand.

Tony was calling while Bucky rambled excitedly.

In Stark tower, he paced impatiently, finally free from the suit. His penthouse was fucking trashed, along with more than half of the lab space. He'd managed to locate an unbroken bottle of scotch. Bruce protested against him drinking after his ordeal but Tony ignored him. He put away several swigs, vomited up falafel and liquor, and then flopped onto one of the dust-covered couched, breathing heavily, arm over his face. "I need Steve," he'd managed.
"Natasha said Pepper is coming, but all air traffic is grounded, so she's taking a car. She'll be here in a few hours," offered Bruce.

"You don't get it, do you? Pepper's my best friend and my Jiminy Cricket but she's not my mate."

There was a loud whoosh of jets and Tony panicked, scrambling behind the sofa and peeking up over it.

An Iron Man suit had landed.

Rhodey flipped open the face plate.

"I'm here!" he announced.

Tony relaxed. "Battle's over, buddy."

"But-- but War Machine--"

"Battle's over," repeated Tony wearily.

"But I flew here all the way from California as soon as I heard about the portal opening."

"What, did you stop for some Taco Bell on the way? We cleaned up the city like an hour ago."

"Cleaned up?" repeated Rhodey, cocking an eyebrow.

"...poor choice of words, I'll admit," said Tony.

"Where's Steve?"

Tony's hackles rose. "Going into heat. And no one will let me see him 'cause his other mate showed up and is ruining everything."

"...other mate?"

"Bucky Barnes, alias Winter Soldier. The guy who everyone thought died but turned out to be in cryo and under HYDRA mind control."

"Yeesh. You can't just do a normal relationship, can you?"

"Bucky was bonded to him back in the forties but since both of them got turned into G.I. Popsicles, I guess they didn't even realize they were still bonded. Then Barnes force-bonded him back in Yemen and now--"

"Hold on. Are you sure he was forced?" interrupted Rhodey.

The silence that blanketed the room was palpable.

"--shut up. Anyway, now Bucky's here and Steve won't let SHIELD put him back into cryo and I don't know what to do. The guy's crazy dominant, Rhodey. Like, more than you or Natasha."

Rhodey whistled. "...rough. Well, I don't think he's probably in the frame of mind for a real relationship, if that helps."

"None of us are, genius. Me and Steve are both complete basket cases."

Rhodey clanked over to the couch; Tony passed him the bottle. "Y'know, Sam works with the VA."
They probably have treatment programs for vets like him. Hey, frown all you want, Tony, but he's an American soldier. All the shit that the Winter Soldier did wasn't really him, was it? He's got, like, super-PTSD. He's a decorated POW... they'll find a spot for him."

"And what about me n' Steve?"

Rhodey shrugged awkwardly in the suit. "Guess you guys gotta work it out. It's not like you're the first trio in the world. Maybe you can... go to couples' counseling or something."

Tony threw up his hands. "We're not a couple, we're a trio!...but we're not even a trio, we're a couple of couples!"

"Yeah, and you gotta learn to deal with that. Whether you like it or not, you're partially bonded to Barnes, through Steve."

"Are you trying to make me throw up again? 'Cause you're gonna make me throw up again. ...I'm gonna call Steve."

"Aw, leave him alone, Tony," protested Rhodey, but Tony was already dialing.

"Leave us."

The guards hesitated only briefly, but Thor's voice left no room for argument. They shuffled out, leaving Thor and Loki alone.

The room was frightfully bare.

Thor sat down in the middle of it, aware of his size. His brother had always been sprite-like. Loki was staring off into the middle distance again, looking thoroughly shell-shocked.

"...I have negotiated with the Midgardians for your release. You are coming back to Asgard, with me. You understand that it is as a prisoner. I'm sorry, Loki."

Loki didn't move.

Thor reached out and put a hand on the back of his neck, pulling him over, knocking their foreheads together. Forcing Loki to look into his eyes.

Loki's eyes were wide; they blinked, emerald green, cat-like, their beauty unearthly.

"That wasn't you." Thor stated it as a simple fact. "You are headstrong and mischievous and full of trickery and deception. But cruelty? Destruction? No...you were misled...I wish, brother, you'd been able to surrender. I wish... well. I wish for many things." Thor pulled his head back and stroked Loki's hair gently, like their mother would have, if she were present. She had tried to contact him; he had ignored her. That should have been Thor's first indication of how far his brother had strayed. How had he missed the warning signs? He was so stupid. Hundreds, probably thousands were dead. Perhaps even ten thousand. Who knew, yet?

Thor wanted to ask forgiveness, yet felt he didn't deserve it. He was a god-king, yet he had no right to that. Not yet and perhaps not ever. He'd ruined Loki in one foolish, boyish moment, and dismissed how terribly it must have hurt him, to feel so betrayed by someone so close to him.

Thor looked down. He had thought to give Loki his forgiveness, but now the statement felt disingenuous. What right had he to act like he was better than Loki? Loki had been right. Thor had
always looked down on him, somewhat, as an omega. And also as a... well... a weakling, to be frank. He fought with knives, like a woman, and his body had stubbornly refused to age normally. A result, Thor now knew, of his true parentage. Jotunns didn't grow beards. Certainly, Loki was a master of disguises and illusions, but he could not hold unnatural shapes forever. He would always return to this: thin, pale, boyish, slight, every inch of him screaming "runt!" Had they not taken him in, he might very well have been left for dead. Thor did not remember Loki entering their household. Loki had come as a baby and Thor had been only a toddler himself, still being dandled at his mother's knee; Loki had, in Thor's memory, always been there. And though he knew that he and Loki shared no blood, he could not help but think of him as anything other than his brother, even though it was now clear how vastly different they were.

"...tell me how I may help you, brother," said Thor softly. "...let me ease your burden. At least a little. Your pain is mine. This has been a dark day for the Odinsons."

Loki was tired. Too tired to fight him. He let Thor tug his head onto his shoulder, let him stroke his hair. It almost felt nice. He closed his eyes again. He was so...very, very tired. Usually his magic would sustain him but Loki hadn't really slept since he'd touched down on earth days ago.

"Remember when I tried to kill all the Jötunn?" He almost sounded like he was trying to make a joke. "That was pretty destructive, no?"

Loki's voice was quiet. Too quiet. It lacked the usual smoothness and wit it had once held.

He stared down at his hands in his lap. Loki felt empty, emotionless. Maybe he should have felt guilt, but he didn't. The humans were silly but they had won their battle, earned it, he supposed. Thanos wanted the whole planet. They should count themselves lucky they only lost a city. Loki knew that Thor was biased when it came to him. Yes, he often treated Loki as inferior but... he also let Loki get away with a lot. Especially when they were younger, Thor would often take the fall for the little pranks Loki liked to pull. And even now he was trying to ease Loki's pain, bare some of the problem, even though really it had nothing to do with him.

It almost made him want to warn Thor about the scepter.

But Loki was selfish and Thor had given him the floor to make requests. He was not going to waste his requests on selfless warnings when he could be saving his own skin.

"Just... in prison, please make sure I have my magic," Loki murmured. Without his magic, he would surely go insane. It was his barrier between himself and the outside world. He needed it. It was a warm weight in his chest and he could not bare it being ripped away from him once more. With his magic he was never truly alone and he was never truly defenseless. "If they do not let me keep my magic, then I do not want to live," Loki stated matter-of-factly. Because, in that moment, it was true. Magic was his lifeline; Loki loved it as he'd never loved anything or anyone else. Love was a fool's sentiment, not one he reflected upon, much; for Loki, it had been ruined centuries ago, when his older brother had accidentally bonded them and ruined his life forever.
Mild CW: When Bucky meets Sam he is unintentionally racist. Considering he grew up in the 1930s, his outdated terminology is historically accurate. If it makes you uncomfortable, good. Racism should make you uncomfortable.

Bucky's thrum of anxiety was palpable, and Steve could feel it in his gut, lying just below his heat. Sitting alone in the safe house, all he could do was reassure Bucky by phone. It didn't feel like enough.

"I'm okay. I'm safe. I'm fine. I don't need anything. I got food and water and--" Steve cleared his throat. Bucky sounded so genuinely concerned. It made his heart ache. "Yeah. I have real heats now, Buck. They kind of suck, actually. Not all they're cracked up to be. But I'm fine. I promise. I'll be fine." He ran a hand over his face and slumped down until he was laid out on the floor, staring up at the yellowing ceiling. Steve exhaled slowly as Bucky asked if he was needed. "I do need you but you can't come over." Steve swallowed down the lump in his throat. "I'm sorry Buck. The situation is messy and complicated and I love Tony too and I'm not gonna hurt him like this. So I need you to stay with Nat, okay? I need you to stay safe with her and Clint. They'll look after you. You can get better. I know you can. But the war's been over a while... like, 70 years a while. You need some time to adjust before you even start to begin to think about what you want."

"But I know what I want! I want exactly what you want. I wanna be together!" protested Bucky. "Please, Stevie. You're my good boy, and I love--"

Steve's phone started buzzing. "Buck, stay on the line, I'll just be a minute--"

Steve put Bucky on hold and then answered Tony's call. God, this was so complicated.

"Hey," Steve said, his voice too quiet. He closed his eyes and tried to just listen to Tony's breathing. "You should be in hospital. So I really hope you're calling from hospital right now, else I'm gonna be pissed." But Steve didn't sound angry. He just sounded tired and concerned. He exhaled slowly. "You can't come over Tony. It's a bad idea."

"...I'm not in the hospital, what're they gonna do, tell me there's something wrong with my heart? No shit, it's filled with metal confetti," snapped Tony irritably. His voice softened. "Being with you would be better than any hospital. I-- I did that for-- for you and Pepper and-- y'know. Not for earth. Just for a couple of people. I love you, omega. Please. We won't have to tell Barnes."

"Jesus, Tony," said Rhodey. "This is shameless, even for you."

"It doesn't matter if we tell him! He'll be able to feel it. Hell Tony, I think he can feel when I take a piss. If we have sex, we're having sex with him too. He can still feel it. It's too much Tony. I'm sorry-"

"I nearly died, I get to be a little selfish right now! Steve, please--" Tony choked on the words a little bit. Suddenly he felt like there was something obstructing his airway. Wordlessly, he held out the phone to Bruce, who took it.
"Hi. ...Steve? Sorry, Tony is-- uh--"

"He's having a panic attack," said Rhody calmly, who'd seen this before. "Let me get this armor off and I'll take care of it."

"Tony? Tony! Are you okay? Oh my-- Rhody? Will he be alright?!"

But Rhody wasn't replying. The phone had been put down.

Steve instructed him to stay on the line and suddenly he was... gone.

"I think it's broken," said Bucky after a moment.

"No, you're just on hold. He's on the other line," said Natasha. Bucky looked baffled; Clint shook his head in exasperation.

His attention no longer held by the phone, Bucky promptly began marching again, his gait brisk and steady.

"Barnes, stop!" Natasha and Clint went hurrying after him; he was trekking firmly north, his face fixed with determination.

"I can feel him. He's desperate. He needs me."

"No, Barnes, you can't--"

"Unless Dugan's standing outside with a shotgun, I'm not gonna leave him hanging this time," said Bucky, shaking his head.

He was damned if he was going to get this close and then let Steve slip out of his fingers again.

"Bucky, you gotta understand, Tony--" began Clint.

"Yes, yes, I know. His war Alpha. It's fine. I don't blame him," said Bucky, waving off the omega. "Steve'll come to his senses, I'm sure. After all, I'm more dominant. Me and him, we're... we're soulmates, practically, we've been together all our lives, and--"

"You know he and Tony are scent-mates, right?" asked Natasha.

Bucky frowned but didn't stop trekking through the burned-out city. "We'll figure it out."

"I don't think the forties were especially okay with trios," said Clint. "I mean, non-traditional trios."

"Steve can figure it out... after his heat. Barnes, stop!" Natasha was contemplating getting out a taser, but she didn't want Bucky to go hostile, and she also didn't want to hurt him, because Steve would feel it, emotionally, and she didn't want to do that to him. But she didn't see how else to stop him.

Distantly, in the background, Steve could hear Rhody talking to Tony. He could hear the soothing tone, even without clear words and the gentle click and slide of the armor as it was being removed. Steve felt awful. He could feel a dull sense of panic twisting in his own gut and there was nothing he could do about it. There was nothing he could do to make it go away.

Steve let out a shaky breath and switched back over to the other line. "Bucky? You there?"
He could hear Clint and Natasha arguing with him. Oh dear. Not good.

"Bucky? You better not be headed over here--"

"Bu--"

"No buts." Steve cut him off before he could speak. "I told you what I wanted. I'm not gonna choose between you. And if you come to the house I'm in you know what'll happen and that ain't fair Buck because I'm not in my right mind. We need to figure this out. I need to get you help. But all that is going to happen after my heat, okay?" He could feel Bucky's confusion and disappointment. Steve felt awful all over again. He was failing both his Alphas right now...

"I need you to promise that you're gonna give me the space I ask for, alright? You're gonna have a few days to yourself so you're gonna spend them wisely. You're gonna talk to Sam Wilson about the counseling you need. You're gonna learn how to use a tablet and you're gonna read up on stuff you've missed, alright? I want you to try and adjust. To and try work out what you're doing and what you really want. ...I need you to promise Bucky. I need to hear you say it. You're not gonna come to me, alright?"

Steve sounded sad. Maybe like he was crying a little, because he was. He'd been separated from Bucky for over 70 years. In the forties this was all he'd ever goddamn wanted. And now he was pushing him away.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. But I can't-- I can't do this right now. I know you need me, but Tony needs me too."

Bucky's heart ached. His expression of steely determination had not changed, but tears were streaming down his face. Steve's tears.

"But-- but I don't want help. I just want you," he said meekly.

Clearly, Steve was putting his foot down.

"Okay," said Bucky. "I-- I promise, I'll give you space, but only if you promise you'll come back. And-- what were my orders again?"

He stopped and sat on the ground to pull out his backpack and get one of his notebooks. He wrote Steve's instructions down:

- Talk to Sam Wilson.
- Learn to use a tablet.
- Catch up on the stuff I've missed.

"Steve, I-- I love you," said Bucky miserably before they got off.

He stared down at the notebook in his hands, then, sighing, put it away and got up. "Okay. We need to locate Sam Wilson and procure a tablet," he announced, all business again. Tears were still sliding down his face but they were not his own; his expression wasn't sad. Obviously, he was picking up on Steve's emotions.

He turned and began heading south.

"Hey Falcon?" called Natasha into her earpiece. "Bucky wants to meet you. ...Bucky, where are you going?"

"Oh, that's-- that's a terrible idea," protested Natasha. But Bucky could not be dissuaded otherwise. He marched through the streets with his jaw set and his eyes staring straight ahead.

Sam met them a few blocks away. He lighted gently on the ground, a pair of massive mechanical wings on his back, and pushed his goggles up on his head. "Hi. Heard I had a fanclub."

"Bucky. This is Sam Wilson."

"Oh! You're a negro!" said Bucky in surprise.

Everyone exchanged an uncomfortable glance.

"Er-- no one says that anymore," said Sam, sticking out a hand.

Bucky shook it. "Steve said I have to talk to you. Also, I need a tablet."

"...sure. Right now, any agent not at the field is being rounded up and brought back to base so we can start getting statements. Well, that, and medical treatment. How 'bout we get you a bed and some food?"

"And a tablet," said Bucky, stubbornly.

"Right, and a tablet."

Bucky had one, lone request, other than getting a tablet: he wanted to room with Stark.

Universally, it was agreed this was a terrible idea. But Bucky would absolutely not be swayed. He wanted to see Tony. His logic was simple: Steve liked Tony, so he wanted to oversee Tony for Steve. Besides, if Steve went back to Tony, he'd be there to intercept him.

In the end, it was easier to just give in. The nearest hospital was the VA on 23rd and it was jam-packed with people, many literally on cots in the hall, clutching broken limbs and holding bloody rags to their heads, covered in dust and with dazed looks on their faces. Not even Tony was expected to be given a separate room, but he was too out of it to protest. Despite his occasional sarcastic jabs and pleas for Steve, his experience had clearly given him some head trauma, and when Barnes arrived, he was passed out in a bed, having finally been wrestled into a hospital gown by Rhodey, complaining the whole time about doctors. His heart monitor chirped steadily; there was a oxygen pulse reader on one finger.

"Okay. You stay here," said Sam. "...here's a tablet. This button turns it on, remember? You push buttons with your finger. This one opens the internet, and you type in anything you want here, and Google will help you find it. Got it?"

"Yes," said Bucky firmly, settling down into the bed. The doctors had looked him over already and determined that Bucky was fine... at least physically. But SHIELD had swooped in and gotten him into the system, and he was currently on a psychiatric hold until further notice. There was an armed guard outside the room, who had been told, in no uncertain terms, that he was to shoot to kill if Barnes tried anything.

Although there had been plenty of talk of cryo, every single Avenger protested so vehemently against it that SHIELD gave up, at least temporarily. They had more important matters to deal with. Like the aftermath of the battle.
Bucky typed "KARPOV" onto the screen and got dozens of articles about grand chess master Anatoly Karpov. He typed "STEVE" and got articles about Steve Jobs, Steve Madden, Steve Kerr, and-- ah-ha! Steve Rogers! He touched Steve's name and the face of the tablet changed to a newspaper-like article with a picture of Steve.

The newspaper was called Wikipedia and it a wealth of information on Steve.

*Steven Grant Rogers is a World War II veteran and civil right activist also known as "Captain America," who is notable for having received the only successful dose of super-soldier serum in 1941, giving him super-human, non-mutant abilities.*

Bucky beamed at the picture on the screen; it was so clear it was like a window that looked onto Steve, and it was in color, too. Below the picture was some information like a dossier.

*Born: July 4th, 1918, Brooklyn, New York*

*Status: Omega*

*Mate: Anthony "Tony" Stark*

Bucky frowned and poked at Tony's name. Another article!

*Anthony "Tony" Edward Stark is a business magnate, engineer, and inventor whose discoveries include the heavy metal edwinium and the portable RT node, an alternative, clean energy source.*

*Born: May 29th, 1970, Long Island, New York*

*Net worth: 12.4 billion (USD) (Forbes, 2011)*

*Mate: Steven Grant Rogers*

What the heck? Bucky gave the tablet a little shake. None of what he was reading made sense to him. Steve was his mate, and no one could be worth twelve billion dollars. Even Howard Stark probably wasn't worth twelve million. That was just... an insane amount of money.

Perhaps the newspaper "Wikipedia" couldn't be trusted.

Bucky typed in "newspaper" and got... oh, damn it, Wikipedia again. He let out a small grunt of frustration.

"Havin' trouble with tech?"

Bucky looked over. Tony was staring over at him, eyes glazed. He looked drugged.

"Is Wikipedia a good newspaper?" asked Bucky.

Tony let out a shrill laugh. "...boy oh boy. If this is what Coulson had to deal with when Steve woke up then-- then--" His face twisted. The heart monitor beeped a little faster, and he turned away.

Bucky turned back to the tablet. He was having trouble concentrating. He could feel the tug of Steve's arousal in his gut and he desperately wanted to... what? He wasn't sure. He just knew he was uncomfortably erect and needy and Steve was out there somewhere, alone, and it made him feel helpless.

"You can watch movies," said Tony after a moment.
"Movies?"

"Yeah. Name a movie."

"Lady in the Dark."

"Okay, lemme see."

Bucky passed the tablet between their beds; Tony clumsily typed away on it. "Oo. Ginger Rogers. Good choice."

Bucky grinned. "She's a looker, isn't she? Makes me wish I was Fred Astaire."

"Me too," agreed Tony. "Okay... here. See? Now we're streaming it." He passed the tablet back to Bucky; on the screen, a Paramount logo was coming on screen.

"Oooo!" said Bucky, fascinated. It was a movie! A real, big-screen movie... except on a little pane of glass on his lap!

"Yeah... after this, I'll show you Fast Times at Ridgemont High. That movie was totally my sexual awakening. Phoebe Cates is like, my generation's Ginger Rogers. ...g'night." Tony's head lolled to the side and he passed out again.

Bucky turned his attention to the tablet, grateful for the distraction.

Steve groaned loudly and fist his hand in the bed sheets. Fuck. He'd forgotten how much heats alone goddamn sucked. His preheat only lasted about ten hours and then the full blown heat had hit and it was not holding back at all. There was lube in the bedside table and a few toys (clearly, he was not the first omega who had had to spend a heat in hiding) but it was inadequate. Nothing was enough. Nothing was good enough. Steve had to put his phone on the top of his wardrobe to stop himself from calling Tony and/or Bucky and doing something he might regret.

His mind raced through various fantasies. Too many of them included one or both of his mates and he felt guilty for it every time. Steve didn't know what was right anymore. But he sure as hell knew what he wanted.

Fury called him that night and tried to have a conversation with him. It took Steve three attempts to get his phone down from the wardrobe; his heat keeping making him double over.

"Steve? I wanted to talk to you--"

"S'not a good time Nickie."

Fury sighed, loudly, at the nickname. "I know. But I think you made the right call." He cleared his throat. "Going it alone."

"I'm dying," Steve said, perhaps a little over dramatically.

"For now I can keep Barnes out of cryo. You might have to argue about it more in the future, but I thought I would just reassure you."

"Right. Sweet. Thanks."

"And Phil left you stuff in his will. So you'll want to pick that up after your heat." His voice was mellow. Steve felt a tug in his gut.
"I wish he was here," he said quietly.

Nick sounded tired when he agreed: "So do I. Power on through, Rogers. I'll see you soon enough. Oh. And good job." Then he hung up.

Steve smiled, rolling over in the sheets. *Good job.*

Steve passed out around three in the morning. He woke up in the morning, masturbated and then spent the day drawing pictures of Phil and crying. It wasn't very productive. But his heats made him overly emotional. He just kept thinking about Phil being there for his and Tony's first heat. When he made that nest in the living room, how cute it was...

He decided to make a nest. Steve didn't get much out of it himself but it felt like a sort of homage to him. He used cushions from the sofas, blankets and even legs he took off of pieces of furniture. And when he was done Steve sat in it for hours, sniffing to himself. God, heats were depressing.

The second night Aria appeared with pizza. Steve devoured two whole boxes.

"I saw the news. Are you gonna be okay, Steve? I mean... were those real-life aliens?"

"I don't know what to do about Bucky and Tony."

Aria sighed. She was clearly more interested in the big alien reveal, but Steve wasn't. Steve just kept going on about Bucky and Tony, and how he wished they were here. He didn't look his best. Steve's skin was clammy, pale, and had an unhealthy sheen to it.

"What do you want?" asked Aria with forced patience.

"I love them both."

"Well, there you go then."

"But I can't ask that of them. They don't want that."

"Well, how do you know if you don't ask?"

"Because they might say yes anyway, because they don't wanna lose me."

Aria sighed, chewing on a piece of pizza crust thoughtfully. "They're big boys. You should trust them to make their own decisions."

"...yeah. Right now I should focus on their health anyway. Bucky needs help getting his memories back and this is only gonna turn Tony into even more of an alcoholic--" Aria frowned. "--so better be on the look out for that."

Then Steve stood up suddenly. "You know what? I should call them."

"No! Steve, no--"

Aria practically climbed on top of him to wrestle him down to the ground and sat on his chest, arms crossed over her own.

Steve did not look impressed. "You're mean." The only reason he didn't shove her away was that he was so much stronger, he was scared of hurting her.

"And you're in heat! You can't think straight. Trust me Steve. Don't call them."
Steve actually fell asleep on the floor after about ten minutes. Aria grabbed cushions and blankets. She tucked them under his head and around him before leaving for the night. She didn't want to be there when the next wave hit and things got awkward.

The next morning was hell. Steve managed to break several pieces of furniture, the shower head, and a dildo. He tried watching internet porn but it just kept making him laugh. One video even gave him tears in his eyes. He didn't know how to do this. He was so goddamn frustrated and horny and he had no one to help him out with it. And he couldn't ask... no. He couldn't.

Steve sighed and stared longingly at the top of the wardrobe. He was doing the right thing, he reminded himself. And then he pulled the bed sheet over his head and curled up under it as if, somehow, that would make the whole problem go away.

When the heat hit, both of them could tell, instantly, that it was a real, proper heat. Stress be damned; Steve's body had already partially skipped one heat and it didn't seem to want to skip another.

"This sucks," said Tony. "I'm concussed, I'm erect, and I'm stuck in here with you."

Bucky had spent all day crying, if you could call it crying. He didn't even seem aware of it, but tears rolled down his cheeks while he watched movies on his tablet. He was so perfectly attuned to Steve that Tony felt like he might as well be watched the blond; he could tell when Steve was jerking off, when he was sleeping, when he was crying, everything, just by watching Bucky.

"Was it this bad for you guys back in the day?" asked Tony.

"Before the war? Steve never had heats like this," said Bucky, swiping at his eyes.

SHIELD agents came in and out, trying to interrogate them, but Tony's trauma had made him cranky and confused, and Bucky was even less helpful. Someone took away their phones because they couldn't stop calling Steve. The only thing they talked about was Steve; both were fixated. Without Steve around, there wasn't much posturing, just a frustrated sense of missing out.

On the second day they ordered a pizza because, according to Bucky, that's what Steve was eating. Tony insisted on getting pineapple.

By the third day Tony was trying to negotiate his way out of the hospital, sick of sharing a room with Bucky, whose memory was so badly fractured he had a tendency to ask the same things over and over and over ("What happened to my arm?" and "Where's Steve?" and "Why can't I leave?" were the top three... in English, anyway. Tony's Russian wasn't good enough to figure out what Bucky was talking about when he spoke in Russian.) Also, neither of them had any real privacy aside from a curtain between them, and both needed to jack off every hour, and it was weird. (At a glance, Tony noted that Bucky was bigger. Fuck him, of course he was, damn it. Did Steve know? Tony hoped not. He'd never been self-conscious, he was over six inches, but... damn it. First dominance, now this. Bucky was also, like Steve, not circumcised.)

Not only that, but they had to have an armed guard. They'd gotten to see Clint and Rumlow, who they'd played some cards with. But most of the agents were strangers and Tony had never craved the privacy of his shop more than he had then.

"You can't leave yet," said Pepper. She had arrived after what felt like an eternity, eyes red, and hugged Tony a little too hard. She'd been in and out of the room ever since, torn between keeping an eye on him and giving him privacy. Whenever Tony needed to take care of himself, she excused herself to go pick him up food; Tony refused to eat anything in the hospital and had bizarre order
preferences, like miso soup and Boo Berry cereal.

"But I'm bored."

"Tony, the city is a mess, organizing a ride home would be difficult, and you haven't given a statement yet, and--"

"Not true! I've given like a dozen statements! I just want my mate." He slumped back in the bed miserably. "Can I call Steve?"

Pepper frowned. "You and Bucky couldn't leave him alone, that's why I took your phones away. It was every five minutes--"

"And now he's had forty-eight hours of peace! Please? We'll keep it short, you can put it on speakerphone."

Tony and Bucky had learned the best way to get what they wanted was feigning cooperation.

Tony was jealous of the history and past that Steve and Bucky shared; Bucky was jealous of Tony and Steve being scent-mates. But they grudgingly liked each other. Both were cocky and stubborn. And when they agreed and compromised, people usually gave in.

"Fine. Ten minutes, and you have to share."

Pepper fished a phone out of her purse and dialed, then set it on the table between them. Tony and Bucky both leaned in eagerly.

It was Pepper calling him. Steve knew it could just be Tony but he did want to know how he was doing and presumably Pepper would be there to keep things under control.

The heat had not let up. And it had been a weird one. At one point Steve had torn down an entire door in the house with his bare hands, just because it made him feel better. He drew pictures on the walls. He drew Dum Dum with his shotgun and Phil smiling, in his best suit. Steve drew Bucky and Tony on the same wall, their images blurring together, as if to express his own confusion and frustration. They were, honestly, some of the best pictures he'd ever drawn. Steve's heat really did spark his creativity and it helped him draw without inhibition.

But the sexual frustration side of it still sucked. And it sucked a lot. Steve hated being alone. And his solitude felt all the more ridiculous when there were two Alphas out there who literally wanted to be with him...

Steve was actually in the middle of, ahem, something when Pepper called. So he called back five minutes later, his voice a little breathless and a touch soft. What he'd just been doing would have been obvious to Tony and Bucky, and they would have felt it anyway.

"Hello? Pepper?"

"The boys want to speak to you."

"Wait? Plural?"

"Bucky and Tony and are here."

"...both of them?"
"Yes."

Steve couldn't hide the surprise in his voice. They were... what, hanging out? He would have thought they'd be tearing each other apart by this point. But apparently they were together. How long had they been together for? Steve certainly didn't mind it. In fact, it made him feel less guilty about this phone call altogether. If he was talking to both of them then he was hardly being unfair now.

"So..." This was weird. ":...how are you guys doing?"

The moment they heard Steve's voice, both of them melted a little.

They looked up and caught each other's eyes; Tony's hackles spiked. Bucky held his gaze, and Tony looked down.

The hierarchy was established.

Tony had tried to explain to Pepper the not-quite-smell, not-quite-feeling of another Alpha's aggression, but given it up. As a beta, she simply couldn't understand. Bucky had long hair and so it was impossible to see his hackles but Tony knew they were up without seeing them. If Bucky had been closer to Tony's levels, perhaps they might have fought at that moment. But Bucky was so much more dominant that Tony's body reacted naturally. Without Steve's smell in the room to give him the reckless, stupid sort of confidence he needed, he submitted, and that was that.

"Steve, I miss you like crazy," said Bucky.

"Are you doing okay over there?" asked Tony.

"I talked to Sam Wilson and I've learned to use a tablet."

"I miss you, Steve."

"Do you need anything?"

"The hospital food is terrible."

"Tony taught me to use the tablet."

"Well, I taught him to stream movies illegally, which is almost the same thing."

The two of them talked back and forth, excited, desperate for news, and both fell silence in unison, practically holding their breaths waiting for Steve's response. Under the sheets, Bucky was idly, perhaps subconsciously, touching himself, but Tony was too focused on the phone to notice or care.

Pepper watched the two of them with slightly fascination. They were like puppy dogs begging for their master's attention. Without Steve's smell in the room, they were doing something close to getting along.

"They'd tear each other apart if he were here," murmured the armed guard next to Pepper.

She frowned a little. "I don't know..." Maybe she was being foolish but she felt like the two of them had made the most of their hospital stay and found some common ground. At the very least, Tony was fascinated by Bucky's arm. He had spent half a day prodding it and asking questions. ("Do you know the upper tension limit? How's the feeling? Can you perform fine motions with it? How does it integrate with the muscle tissue?") (Bucky's answers: "I don't know. ...okay. ....I guess. I don't know.")
"As soon as you want we can come pick you up," said Bucky, very purposely using the word "we." He caught Tony's eye. Tony got it, immediately. He gave Bucky a small nod.

"Yeah, or we could visit you if you wanted, we're both getting cabin fever in this hospital--"  

"And someone else could use these beds more than us."

"Yeah, honestly, we were going to check out probably tonight anyway." (Neither Pepper nor the guards had heard of these "plans.")

"You're okay, right?"

"Yeah, are you okay, Steve?"

"I'm fine. I'm really fine. I mean, you know, it sucks. But that's life." Steve hesitated. Did it sound like they.... were they getting along? Steve knew he had a type. He was attracted to Alpha brunettes (Bucky, Peggy and Tony). He liked people with confidence. But he never really imagined Tony and Bucky being able to have a conversation together, let alone hear that Tony had helped Bucky stream movies. Maybe they were only making an effort for his sake. But, regardless, Steve still appreciated it. If they got along it would make whatever came next easier, right?

"Are you guys like... hanging out now? Or something?" It was hard to hide the smile in his voice.  
Steve struggled to keep his emotions in check during a heat and the thought of Tony and Bucky sticking together and doing stuff together willing killing each other was exciting.

He wanted to say yes. He wanted to invite them both over. But he also didn't want anyone to get hurt.

"We've been hanging out for three days now, Steve," said Tony patronizingly.

"You told me you cared about Tony so I asked them to put us together and I'm taking good care of him for you," said Bucky.

"Well, I mean... *I'm* taking care of him, actually."

"You taught me to stream movies, ate half my lunch, and made me crush an apple with my hand!" (Tony had spent several hours asking Bucky to crush various things with his left hand.)

"And it was awesome!"

Steve's heart warmed in his chest. Bucky and Tony were... together, had been together for days and were making an effort. Bucky even said he'd been looking after him. It was almost sweet. And being on his heat, Steve was goddamn delighted by it. He couldn't stop smiling.

"I don't want you to visit me separately. It's together or not at all. I mean not at all! Shit." Steve hugged out a breath. "You don't get to visit me. Bad idea guys. Bad idea."

Their attention refocused on Steve the moment he began talking. "We can visit? We can come pick you up?" pressed Bucky excitedly.

"You can come pick me up," Steve said, "after my heat. Not during. You know it's a bad idea."

"I agree with Steve. You guys should wait," Pepper said, the voice of reason in the room. "Where exactly are you planning on going after you check out?"

"Please don't let SHIELD near Bucky," Steve said. "Well, the Security Council." He couldn't trust
Gideon as far as he could throw him (although Steve could probably throw him very far).

He reached for a water bottle and downed the whole thing. He was currently sat up naked in bed, sheets everywhere. He was burning hot. Steve knew he probably only about another five minutes until he couldn't trust himself not to say something really stupid. His body was already taking interest in both his Alphas' voices and he was pretty sure at least one of them (most likely Bucky) was already getting a bit excited.

"Guys. I'm gonna have to go soon. I, er... need to pee." Ha. Bullshit, and Steve was sure they knew it. But he was trying to save face.

"You don't have to pee," said Bucky.

"Why would you need to hang up to pee, anyway?" asked Tony.

Pepper was turning slightly red. "I think it's time to let Steve go."

"No!" both cried.

"What if I come visit you today and Tony visits you tomorrow?" offered Bucky temptingly.

"Wait, why do you get to visit him first?"

"Because I'm more dominant, and I came first, and I'm older, and alphabetically my name is first," said Bucky.

Fuck him, the logic was air-tight.

"We could flip a coin," said Tony, who hated the idea of Bucky getting to go and not him.

"Guys, Steve said no," said Pepper firmly.

"Shut up, Pepper, the Alphas are talking."

"Don't tell me to shut up!"

"Yeah, shut up, Pepper," said Bucky.

Pepper strode over and yanked away her phone; both Tony and Bucky protested loudly. "Steve? Hi, it's me. Do you want Aria to come over and drop off food or... anything else? Don't worry, the boys aren't leaving the hospital."

"I hate hospitals," said both in unison behind her.

"Some pizza tomorrow would be great," Steve told Pepper. "But I think any visitors today would be a... bad idea." He laid back on the bed, shifting a little. "Just, let me say bye properly?"

Pepper held the phone out to them; Steve's voice filled the room. "I'll see you both soon, okay? And thank you for giving me space," Steve said, his voice a little tight. "I know this isn't easy. It's hard for me too but it's the right thing to do. I'll see you in a few days. Sit tight."

And then Steve hung up and immediately shoved a hand down between his legs.

The second Steve hung up, Bucky let out a groan and yanked the curtain next to his bed shut.

"Did you hear what he said? ...we can visit him together," said Tony.
"Yeah, I heard," said Bucky, voice tight.

"No," said Pepper firmly.

"...Pepper, can you give me some privacy, I need to rub one out." Tony's hands were already under the sheets.

Pepper hurried out without a word, ears bright red.

Tony tried to focus on himself and not listen to the rustle of Bucky's movement next to him. God, this sucked. He had saved the goddamn world, he deserved better than this.

"Barnes. We gotta go see him."

"Agreed," said Bucky breathlessly. "As soon as we're done here."

"Do you use the left hand or the right hand?"

"...are you kidding me? I use the right hand. Jesus, who would want to jerk it with a metal-- you've done it before, haven't you?"

"It's one of many very important scientific tests I conduct on the suit, yes."

Bucky let out a breathless laugh, and after a moment so did Tony. Then they lapsed into silence because it was weird to be having a conversation while both of them were furiously masturbating. Steve's frustration was palpable and Tony, who had long since determined that heats were fucking awful and nothing like how they were portrayed in porn, felt that this was far, far worse than riding it out together. Being apart meant all the same frustrations but none of the satisfaction. And even if heats were mostly an uncomfortable, sweaty, awful business, there were brief moments in between fucking where they held each other and that was nice. Gleason had told them some mates stayed away from each other during heat to avoid pregnancy, but that it was psychologically unhealthy. Tony completely understood what he meant now.

"Wanna race?"

"Goddammit Barnes, no!"

A moment later Tony sighed with relief, jerking up into his hand and ejaculating. "I win."

"--fuck you, Stark, you said we weren't--"

"I win!"

Tony waited for Bucky to finish before the two of them went back to talking about Steve. Even though they'd both just cum, both were still restlessly aroused, the result being painful half-erections.

The armed guard thumbed through a magazine mildly, unable to give them any real privacy.

"Poor 'mega," said Bucky.

"I know, he feels so--"

The door opened and Dr. Brazinski walked in.

"--oh, no. Not you," groaned Tony.
"Who's she?"

"A SHIELD doctor."

"Hello, Mr. Stark," said Dr. Brazinski pleasantly. "How are you today?"

"Well I nearly died like three days ago because I got sucked into a wormhole and--" Suddenly Tony remembered the utter isolation. The infinite blackness and the sharp cut-off from Steve.

Feeling Steve, now, Tony could hardly imagine not having his bond. Going through the wormhole had severed the bond and Tony had never in his whole life felt more alone, without the ever-present feeling of Steve, without JARVIS's voice in his ear, without anyone or anything at all... trapped in the suit, floating helplessly, lifelessly, away, the last man in the universe, utterly alone, deaf and mute and blind, locked in, without agency, a brain in a jar, screaming soundlessly into nothingness--

"...Mr. Stark? ...Mr. Stark?"

"He's having a flashback," said Bucky pleasantly. "You can't say 'wormhole' around him."

Tony's eyes were glazed and his heart monitor was going wild. He threw a hand out wordlessly, grasping for something, anything, to ground him.

Bucky shifted to his side so he could stretched out his right arm, the real one, and grab Tony's hand.

"Can you call the nurse in? He likes the Klonopin," said Bucky, still sounding utterly unphased.

With a look of alarm, Dr. Brazinski hurried out to find someone.

She must have passed Pepper in the hall, because Pepper rushed in a moment later. She came to Tony's bedside and pulled his head against her stomach, running her fingers through his hair. "Tony. Tony, it's me. Tony?"

Tony let out a small, strangled sound, still staring, still clutching Bucky's hand.

"The lady doctor went to go get his meds," said Bucky.

"Dr. Brazinski isn't that kind of doctor," said Pepper. "But she said she'll find one of the nurses. You're due for some diazepam anyway."

"Good, my arm's doing that itchy pin thing."

Miles away, Steve could feel it. Steve could feel everything. Oh God. It was so weird. One moment he was in a blissful post orgasm haze, knowing his Alphas had just done the same, and the next he could feel a panic attack. It was probably Tony's, he had just nearly died, but it could have easily belonged to either of them. Steve swallowed down a lump in his throat.

Eventually the panic began to ease away. Steve wished he could make them feel better. He really did.

He wanted to call again, but deep down Steve knew it was a bad idea.

Pepper being there probably helped. But Steve wondered if Bucky might have helped too... he knew how bad flash backs could be, no doubt.

Steve slept for the rest of the day. He had a cold shower that night, spent a few frustrating hours alone and then passed out again. He probably had one or two days left of his fully fledged heat and
that was all. Clint had been sending him Simpsons episodes to watch, claiming it helped him 'mellow out' during his heats. Steve didn't really get the sense of humor of it all but he appreciated the gesture.

He woke up around six in the morning and devoured all the bread and cheese in the house. And then Steve started drawing again. It was mostly nonsensical stuff and Steve got lost in it.

He was snapped out of his gaze at nine when the door bell went. Maybe it was Aria, with pizza. God, yes. Steve was dying for pizza. He was just dressed in a dressing gown but he didn't care. Steve went to open the door.

"I really hope you got pineapple. I'm dying for it--"

Aria shouldered in, carrying four boxes of pizza.

"I hope I actually get some this time. ...sorry, I didn't get pineapple, I just got regular pepperoni. How's the heat coming along?" It had been four days and Steve looked like... well, like a wreck, to be honest.

She had swung by the hospital to check on the Alphas since she guessed that Steve would ask about them immediately. Bucky was utterly confused, didn't remember her, and was speaking in broken Russian. Tony was in the midst of a huge argument with Pepper because he wanted to leave. She'd slipped away after a few minutes; it was clear the two of them were not well. How much of that was due to being away from Steve was unclear.

In and around both the Alphas were dozens of agents. No surprise there. They made Aria's skin prickle. She had talked briefly to Pepper about what was going on; Pepper had, with a defeated sort of tone, told her how Tony and Bucky were being interviewed practically every hour. Neither was taking it well, but Bucky was especially unhelpful.

"We're looking for two mutants. Do you remember these mutants?" asked one agent patiently, holding up a picture.

"I know them; they tried to kill me," said Tony.

Bucky's brow furrowed. The boy sort of looked familiar, maybe. "$I... don't know."?

"Okay, how about this man? Do you know this man here?"

"I don't know."

"Does this woman look familiar?"

"...I don't... I don't know," said Bucky helplessly.

Any hope SHIELD had about Bucky being useful flew out the window. His memory was too fractured; the only HYDRA picture he reacted to was Vasily Karpov.

"Yes! Yes! I know him!"

The agent looked enthusiastic. "$Yeah? Can you tell us where he is?"

"Cleveland!" The agent's shoulders had sagged. Of all the places in the world for Karpov to have slithered off to, Cleveland seemed unlikely.

"Do you think maybe he could be somewhere in South America, or...?"
"Cleveland," insisted Bucky.

The agent gave up.

There was a lot of background talk about what the hell to do with Bucky. He didn't seem dangerous and he had fought alongside the Avengers in New York, but he was also hopelessly broken and represented a massive security risk. Yet, he was also an American soldier and a decorated POW. Bucky, naturally, assumed he was going home with Steve. But he seemed confused about where "home" was. At times, he said it was Brooklyn. Others, he simply said it was with Karpov, or Steve. And perhaps most often, he simply said he didn't know.


"Right, but now that I'm back from the war, Steve'll want to come back with me," said Bucky. 

"Back to you where? You don't have an apartment in Brooklyn anymore, Buck! Me and Steve went and checked there. There's, like, an ice cream parlor and a hair salon."

Bucky frowned deeply. "...I like ice cream," he offered finally.

"PEPPER!" barked Tony, snapping his fingers at her.

She heaved a world-weary sigh, knowing that a demand was coming. "What flavor?"

"Chocolate," said Bucky, and at the same time, Tony said, "Anything but chocolate."

They frowned at each other.

"Neapolitan," said Pepper compromisingly.

"No," said both, together.

"That shit is absolutely toxic," said Tony.

"Yeah, that's just a flavor that doesn't have a backbone, doesn't know what it wants to be," said Bucky.

"Don't get Neapolitan. If you have to, get one chocolate, one vanilla, and one strawberry. Buck can have chocolate, I'll take the vanilla, and you can have the strawberry."

"I'm allergic to--"

"Hurry up, Pepper, we're not getting any younger!"

Pepper had swept out, glaring at Tony. She'd forgotten just how awful he could be when he was sick or injured.

She'd gotten all three without thinking, but offered the strawberry to Aria on the way out, since she couldn't eat it.

"I also got you ice cream. Thought it might help cool you down," said Aria when she went to visit Steve, offering him the pint of strawberry. "Only one more day left, huh?" She tried to sound encouraging, even though she knew, after Steve's proper heat, he was going to get bombarded with government agencies wanting a statement, and he was going to have to figure out what to do with Bucky.
"Oh my God. Yes! Ice cream," Steve took the tub gratefully and grabbed a spoon before sitting down at the kitchen table. He just started eating it out of the tub, humming happily at the taste. Yes. Exactly what he needed. "Yeah. Only another day, probably, I dunno..."

Aria walked into the room, fingers skimming over a sketch of Phil on the wall that was almost life-size. "This is amazing Steve. Really amazing. You're talented." She glanced over to him. "I heard about him... I'm sorry Steve. I know you cared about him."

"When my heat is done I need to swing by the base. I think he left me something. Want to pick it up."

Aria nodded. "I can come pick you up the morning you're free, if you like?"

"I'd appreciate that," Steve breathed, still wolfing down ice cream.

Aria went to sit on the table. She sighed and lit up a cigarette.

"I don't know what to do," Steve whispered, slowly putting his spoon back down. "I really don't know what to do, Aria. I love them and I don't want to hurt them. And I don't want them to agree or ask for something they don't really want just because they're afraid of losing me."

"Would that be so awful?" Aria murmured. "People are supposed to make sacrifices for people they love. Haven't you made sacrifices for Tony too? And...if it helps, in a weird way, they appear to be getting on. They're both kind of assholes."

"Yeah." Steve snorted. "You got that right."

He pulled out his phone to text Pepper.

> When my heat is over I'm going back to the SHIELD base to pick up what Phil left me. Can you arrange for Nick to meet me there? Bucky and Tony can come too if they want. - SR

"What do I do?" Steve sighed, dropping his phone onto the table. "This has been hard enough. I don't want to hurt them Aria... ah, crackers." He fistied his hands in hair. "Tell me what to do."

Aria took a drag on her cigarette. "I can't tell you what to do, Steve. But also, I already did. They're big boys. Let them make their own decisions. You know what you want... worst they can do is say no." She paused, then added, "Anyway, SHIELD might not let you go home with Bucky anyway. ...oh, gross, Steve."

Steve had gotten an erection.

Across town, Bucky was relaxing against his pillows, stroking himself contentedly.

"Steve texted... he says he's going to go to the D.C. base when his heat's over. Probably tomorrow. You're both invited," Pepper informed them. She frowned a little and texted back.

> Is it a good idea to have the two of them around you in post-heat? - VP

"I can't wait to see him... my omega..." purred Bucky behind the curtain.

"Steve," said Tony, sounding chipper, reaching under the sheet to touch himself.

Pepper got up to tug the curtain closed.

"Tony... have you... given any thought to what you're going to do once you leave here?" asked
Pepper tentatively.

"Go home."

"Yes, but after--"

"Have a drink."

"Yes, and then--"

"Fuck Steve."

Bucky growled from his bed, but it was friendly sort of noise. Tony growled back.

Pepper sighed. "SHIELD wants you to stay in D.C. for at least a little while, to give statements and-"

"Pepper, I'm sick of getting poked and prodded and interviewed. I wanna go home."

"Me too," chimed in Bucky. There was a soft gasp, and groan, and then: "...I win."

"Oh, fuck you."

"Fuck you."

They both growled again.

Across town, Steve grabbed a cushion and squished it into us crotch. He turned a little pink. "Sorry," he squeaked.

"It's fine, I know you can't help it," said Aria, waving her hand dismissively.

Steve tried to concentrate on the topic at hand. "SHIELD won't keep him if they want me to cooperate with them. We saved the world, think I've got some leeway in negotiation terms. I don't trust SHIELD. They have HYDRA and so Bucky isn't safe with him. Maybe they'll want him under house arrest, and that's fine... but they're not keeping him."

"House arrest? You gonna take him home?" Aria asked, raising a brow. "You think Tony will be down with that?"

"Jesus. I have no idea." Steve ran a hand over his face. "If they get along around me in post-heat, then... then yeah. Yeah, I want to take him home."

Aria raised an eyebrow. "Better warn 'em."

Steve nodded and reached for his phone.

> This will be a test to see if they can both behave. SR

Whilst Steve might smell good post heat, he was in charge of his own mind. He could separate Tony and Bucky if he had to.

Aria left Steve to his own devices that afternoon. The day went as usual. Steve spent many frustrated hours in bed with a few cold showers peppered in between pleasuring himself guiltily. He passed out late in the evening after finishing off his pizza, a low buzz of want tugging at his gut.
When Steve woke up, it was over. Thank fucking God. It was over.

He showered and dressed back in his only clothes, his Cap uniform. Aria picked him up with coffee and biscuits. Steve devoured an entire packet of them and downed three shots worth of expresso on their way over to the base, most just for the taste, since caffeine no longer affected him, considering his metabolism. Steve knew Fury was expecting them but he didn't know it Tony and Bucky would actually make it.

Steve stepped out of the car on slightly shaky legs, sipping at another coffee. He looked up at the base and exhaled slowly.

"I'll wait out here," Aria assured him, lighting up a cigarette and turning on a radio.

Steve nodded to her and offered her a tired smile before he stepped inside. Hill met him in a corridor, looking tired but far better than she had been.

"Good to see you Cap."

"You too."

Steve nodded. They were all business, it seemed. She waved a hand. "Fury's this way."

Steve nodded again, then, unable to wait any longer, asked, "My mate?"

"...which one?"

Steve turned red. Right. He had two. "...either."

Maria offered him a small smile. "They're on their way. ...both of them."
Checking out of the hospital took an ungodly amount of time.

The two of them were both grateful to be in real clothes, at least. Pepper had brought Tony a clean t-shirt and a pair of jeans; Bucky had a pair of jeans and long-sleeve shirt in his tattered backpack. He pulled a glove on over his left hand.

SHIELD argued about letting Bucky leave, but in the end, they agreed to let him go to the base to meet Steve. They put a tracker on his ankle and they insisted that he be accompanied by an agent. Rumlow volunteered.

It was a four-hour drive to the base in D.C.; Pepper drove. In the backseat, Tony and Bucky fell asleep leaning against each other.

"...Steve's one lucky omega, isn't he?" said Rumlow, glancing back at them.

"Being mated to those two? Hardly. They're both assholes."

"I thought you and Tony...?"

"He's my friend. Still an asshole," said Pepper.

Tony and Bucky woke when the car turned into the gravel drive up to the military base; they pressed against the glass eagerly.

"STEVE!" Bucky sensed him first; he opened the door of the moving car, rolled out, and charged.

"Shit!" exclaimed Rumlow. He knew the Winter Soldier was fast, but Jesus, no one had told him just how fast he was; he'd had the honor of seeing the Soldier in action only a handful of times and had had no idea how fast he could move when he wanted to.

Pepper slammed on the brakes; Tony and Rumlow both piled out and went charging after him.

Heads turned as Bucky sprinted across the base, followed by Rumlow holding a semi-automatic and Tony behind.

Bucky was going based solely on instinct, but it worked like a charm, just as it always had. He wrenched open a door, nearly tearing it off its hinges, and went into the hall. He selected a door, and in two punches from his left arm, destroyed it.

And there he was.

Bucky ran up to him, grabbed him, picked him up, and swung him around, laughing.

Fury and Hill both pulled their guns automatically.

A moment later Rumlow and Tony entered, breathing heavily. Tony lunged at Bucky; he set Steve down to snap at Tony.

The two crashed to the floor in a scuffle, snapping and snarling; it didn't take long for Bucky to pin Tony.

"Okay, okay!" he yelled.
Bucky eased off him; Tony rose, dusting himself off, irritated at how much more strong and assertive Bucky was.

Alpha hierarchy: solidified.

Everyone was staring at them.

Tony was fidgeting, clearly desperate to make contact with Steve.

Bucky eased over, a silent permission for Tony to approach Steve; Tony scurried forward gratefully to hug him. "I missed you like crazy."

"Missed you so much," agreed Bucky, reaching for Steve's hand.

"...Rogers...?" asked Hill warily. Everyone still had their weapons drawn, but Bucky and Tony were too busy eyeing Steve to notice.

Steve hadn't gotten a good look at Bucky since he'd been out of cryo. His hair was still long, to his shoulders, and his face was scruffy, an almost-beard. He had deep purple circles under his eyes. But despite all that, his natural handsomeness still shone through. Tony had the same dark circles under his eyes and without his usual sunglasses they were noticeable.

Bucky held Steve's left hand, and Tony his right, both of them grinning stupidly.

"You two need to calm down," Steve said, gently prying Bucky's hands away from them so he could lean over the table to sign all the statements he'd made. He was glad to see them though, a small smile tugging at his lips. Even if they were fighting a little, least neither of them was trying to kill the another... that had to count for something.

"Is this how it is now? You three... together?" Maria asked.

Steve didn't answer. He just finished signing his papers, straightening back up.

"We can't just let the Winter Soldier go free without any supervision," Maria said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm sure you understand that Steve."

"But he's not safe in SHIELD," Steve said, voice quiet. Neither of them argued. They both knew it was true.

Steve let them both take his hands again. This was so... strange. But the contact was comforting, nice. Steve couldn't deny that.

"You're officially back in the field Cap, if you want to be." Hill pointed out. "They're suggesting you lead a STRIKE team."

Brock, who was in the door way, raised an eyebrow. "Huh. That would be cool." Steve couldn't tell if he was being genuine or not. He wasn't sure if a group of unmated Alphas would be enthused at the idea of following him. He'd selected his own team, back in the forties. Good guys that he knew he could trust.

"But right now we need to focus on how this is working out," Fury said, finally speaking up. He glanced between Bucky and Tony. "What's the plan, Cap?"

Steve exhaled softly. "That's... kind of up to them."

"I'm going home," announced Tony, trying to save face as the least dominant Alpha in the room.
"Yeah, that's the plan. We're going home," agreed Bucky. "...where's the barracks?"

"Buck. Buck, you're not in the army anymore. War's over."

Bucky's brow furrowed in confusion; his grip on Steve's hand got a little tighter.

"It is not up to them at all," said Fury, crossing his arms. "Barnes barely remembers his own name, and Stark hasn't gone twelve hours without a melt-down. This is your call, Steve. If you want Barnes, we can release him to you with the understanding that he gets daily, in-person SHIELD check-ins, and he has to wear a tracker. Frankly we'd prefer it to putting him back in cryo, since it means we can study that arm, but--"

"Please don't put me back in there," said Bucky, clinging to Steve even harder.

"Oh, and Phil left you this." Fury held out a box to Steve, but with both of his hands occupied, he couldn't take it. Fury offered it to Bucky; who flexed his left hand self-consciously with a clicking of gears; he tried to give it to Tony, who just stared blankly.

Finally Rumlow stepped forward and took the box for Steve.

"Whatever you decide, there's going to be a hell of a lot of investigations in the future. We're still trying to figure out what to do with Loki... the UN is pushing to have him executed, but Thor wants to take him back to Asgard, along with the Tesseract. It's a real cluster-fuck out there."

"Which is exactly why I wanna go home and have a drink," said Tony, giving Steve's hand a tug.

"A cold beer sounds nice," agreed Bucky.

"You know you almost killed me?" asked Fury to Bucky, raising an eyebrow.

"...I did?"

"He gets that a lot," said Tony. "Steve, c'mon, let's go. Pepper's waiting outside and we got the jet and everything. We could be home by dinner..."

"He's not going back in cryo," Steve snapped. "I made that very clear. It's torture for him."

"Well then, are you taking him home?" Hill asked with a sigh.

Steve paused. Asking Tony felt stupid. Could he really say no? But he also had to ask. And Aria was right. They were grown men. They were perfectly capable of saying what they did and didn't want. "I do think Thor should take the Tesseract back, for the record. If it's a door it can be opened again."

Fury nodded, not surprised.

Steve turned to face Tony and Bucky moved with him, refusing to let go his other hand. Oh dear.

He took a deep, steadying breath.

"...can I bring him home?"

It was Tony's home, ultimately. It was his house. Not Steve's. But he didn't want to leave Tony, or the Stark mansion that had in a way become his home, too... but he couldn't leave Bucky, either.

Steve knew he was in postheat, that he smelt good. But he still had no intention to sleep with either
of them (no matter how much he might want to). Steve had been serious about them both getting better.

Tony stared at Steve, aghast. Was he fucking serious?

Tony could still remember, with clarity, their first, disastrous date, how Steve had stormed off at the mere mention of a trio.

He could still remember when the news had broken about Steve being double-bonded, how deeply it had wounded him, right to his core.

But...

Basic logic told him that Steve wasn't going to leave Bucky. And that, the last time he'd distanced himself from Steve, Steve had ended up in Yemen. And that Steve had nowhere else to go; his old apartment had long since been given up and Steve had no money, having dumped all of his own meager resources into Project 84.

Tony twisted the band on his left hand uncomfortably. "...it's... it's your home, too. I've always said that," he said weakly. Oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Tony was proving everyone right. He could practically feel his father's ghost frowned, Obie's ghost shaking his head... Tony was being cuckolded... but he couldn't lose Steve, he couldn't, not again, not after Yemen and the... the wormhole...

"Mr. Stark? You okay?" asked Hill.

Tony had gotten a glazed look. "Dandy," he wheezed. "I... I wanna go home now..."

"Let me escort you," offered Rumlow.

Tony reached for Steve's hand.

Outside, Pepper and Aria had regrouped and were leaning against the cars together. Both examined Steve as he came with with Tony on one side and Bucky on the other.

"Listen. The jet can take you all back to Los Angeles. I've got to stay here... there's a lot of press, what with the Tower and--"

"Okay," said Tony, too quickly.

Pepper frowned and reached up to touch his cheek. "Tony? ...you okay?"

Tony nodded.

"...just so we're clear, Captain, Mr. Stark... absolutely not a word to the press until this is all sorted out," said Hill, who had followed Rumlow out to the cars.

"Crystal," croaked Tony.

There was a brief scuffle for the back seat. Aria instructed Steve to sit in front, with her. There was a second brief scuffle for the seat behind Steve's because it was slightly closer to him; Bucky won.

The drive to the airport was uncomfortable. Tony had lapsed into silence, and Bucky stared moodily out the window, brow furrowed, seeming slightly disoriented and confused about where the hell they were.
When the got to the airport, Bucky's eyes widened at the sight of the plane. Tony had never been subtle; the white jet had STARK printed on it in huge letters.

Bucky's eyes got even bigger when they boarded.

"...gee whiz," he said, looking around at the interior, with its plush carpet and dim mood lighting and white leather seats.

"I designed it," said Tony, who had made a beeline for the bar and was opening a bottle of scotch.

"What?"

"The plane."

"I thought this was a Stark plane."

"It is. I'm Tony Stark."

Buffy's brow furrowed.

"We've been over this. I'm Howard Stark's son."

"But you're--"

"The year is 2012 and Howard Stark's been dead thirty years, Buck," said Tony, sounded exhausted. He was tired of having this conversation over and over.

He dropped into one of the chairs with his bottle; he wasn't bothering with glasses.

Steve fell asleep on the plane ride, his head on Aria's shoulder. There was no spare seat next to him so neither Tony nor Bucky could try and squish on. The heat had left him drained, exhausted.

Tony attacked the bar with gusto and Bucky sat quietly in a corner, watching Steve with snake-like intensity. It was relatively calm, all things considered.

Until they landed.

The moment the plane touched ground, Tony was aware of the absolute media frenzy outside.

Damn his jet. Tony, for once, was not pleased with having his name in big, bold letters on the side. It was like a beacon to the reporters; SHIELD agents and security be damned, they were doing their hardest get to the plane. Tony was at least glad it only said STARK. Over the years he had also consider "stARC" and "★K" and "Tony" but with the O as an arc reactor. All of those seemed to brash now, too gaudy. Tony was hopelessly aware of his own mortality.

"Charlie?" he yelled to the front of the plane.

"Sorry, champ. I can't taxi the plane all the way to your house... you're gonna have to deal with the 'razzi."

Tony, already inebriated, panicked. "You mean I have to fucking walk in front of a million cameras with Steve and... and him?"

"No," said Aria firmly. "I'm sorry, but Steve, you were very clear that you only had Tony and that you weren't in a trio. Until things have settled down, we can't let them on to this. It's too much of a juicy story, especially in light of everything else that you two did in New York." With a surprising
amount of calm, she tied up Bucky's hair, stuffed it under a baseball cap, and popped on a pair of Tony's sunglasses. She looked him over critically. "If you have a nice shirt, we could put a tie on you. You could pass as a body guard."

Charlie had walked back from the cockpit. She was in shorts and a Captain America t-shirt. "...not with that scruff," she opined. "Have him carry some bags. No one ever notices the guy carrying the bags, and Tony and Steve both look dead on their feet anyone."

"Oh, that's perfect," said Aria.

They fact that there were no bags was unimportant. There was luggage on board and Aria shoved multiple bags into Bucky's arms.

"What's in these?"

"Nothing. Just carry them to the car and don't talk to anyone."

Tony's full detail was there; Happy and Beth, Daston and Ido and Marco and Tom. Tony ducked his head, trying to avoid the flashing cameras and yelling crowd and phones being shoved at him for a statement. Happy and Beth both practically dragged him into the car; the moment they were inside, Beth rounded on him.

"You're drunk, aren't you? You can barely walk."

"I nearly died, Bethany. I am allowed to get drunk right now," slurred Tony. "...g'night." He promptly passed out. Bucky followed suit.

Happy said something about aliens and "God, you really don't know anything for sure these days." Steve just grunted in response; he ended up falling asleep soon, too.

"So who's he?" asked Daston.

Happy frowned a little. Pepper had clued him in. "That's... Bucky."

"Bucky?"

"Steve's... friend."

He hadn't said it, but he hadn't needed to. Everyone's eyes widened and they got quiet.

Outside of the gates to Tony's mansion, it was a whole new crowd. Reporters and well-wishers, people holding signs and cameras and all sorts of things. They cheered in a roar as the car approached and swarmed it. It took nearly forty minutes just to get to the gate.

Fortunately, the windows were tinted, the house was a half-mile from the road, and neither Tony nor Steve even woke up, though Bucky did.

When they got to the house, Beth instructed Ido to take Tony. He picked him up and carried him in, upstairs, to put him to bed.

Steve was too large to be carried but he'd woken on his own when the car's engine cut. He staggered after everyone into the main room. It was good to be home.

He turned to find Bucky staring at him. It made him feel awkward. Aria had stuck by him, which Steve was grateful for. "Bucky," he put a hand on his shoulder. "You're going to stay in a guest room, alright?"
Bucky made to take his hand. "You are sick Buck. You need to get better, get your head screwed on right. I told you, I love Tony."

Bucky watched Steve silently, expression set. It crumpled a little when Steve said he loved Tony.

Steve could tell Bucky wanted to argue. Protest.

"I wanted you for years. I begged for you touch me, make me feel loved. And you didn't. You can't just walk back into my life and start demanding things. I will give you a home. I will look after you. But you will stay in the guest room. You got to say no for years and years. Now it's my turn. Okay? Do I make myself clear?"

"Steve, I-- I only didn't touch you 'cause I didn't want to hurt you. I'm not demanding anything at all, except for things to be the way they were, except better. And... and I'm not sick. I'm just a little confused sometimes 'cause of the war, but that happens to lots of guys. Now that I'm back home, I..." He trailed off and looked around the room, suddenly confused again. "...jeeper," he whispered, wandering around, delicately touching the furniture and the art with a look of awe. "What is this place, a museum?"

"This is Tony's house," said Beth, crossing her arms.

"Who's Tony?"

"...how about we show you to your room," said Aria firmly, because Steve was starting to look like he might cry.

"I'm bunking with you, right Steve?"

"No. Tonight, everyone gets their own bed," said Aria, steering him toward the stairs. Over the last year she had gotten a fair bit of familiarity with Tony's house. "You stay in your room and in the morning we can sort this all out, okay? Come on."

"But--"

"No, you heard Steve. He's going to take care of you."

"But he's my omega, I oughta be taking care of him!"

"Welcome to the future," said Beth dryly. "Marco, Tom... you two wanna take tonight?"

The two nodded.

"Okay. Me and Daston can take tomorrow... Happy, you and Ido get third shift."

"Sounds good to me."

Everyone broke away; Aria took the initiative to get Bucky away from Steve, up the stairs and toward a spare room. (Tony had plenty.) She was hoping that once he was away from Steve, he would be somewhat less argumentative. Whether Steve was going to go to sleep in the master bedroom, where Tony had been tucked away, or one of the other rooms, was Steve's business, as far as she was concerned.

Steve stood there in the middle of the kitchen in his Cap uniform and had a little silent cry. The tears were hot and angry as they rolled down his face and Steve just... stood there, willing it to go away. He remembered the feeling of Tony sinking into the wormhole, him being gone and it kept
overplaying in his head again and again. It was like when he'd distanced the bond but worse. So much worse. And then Bucky didn't even understand... anything. Steve couldn't even try and explain the situation to him without him thinking that he was outright rejecting him and didn't love him. He could see the sag in Bucky's shoulders as Aria lead him upstairs and he felt awful for it. He felt awful for everything. Steve had just helped save the world, but now his own world was in jeopardy.

Sniffing a little, Steve grabbed Phil's box and headed upstairs. Tony looked to be passed out on the bed when he stepped inside their room. It felt so weird to be back. He spotted a packet of Oreos he'd started before he'd been called out to the SHIELD base about the Tesseract and was reminded of how little time had actually passed. Gently, he set the box down and they peeled off his uniform. He hung it up at the back of the wardrobe, and no longer felt a need to shut all the doors and hide the stars and stripes. Steve felt like he'd earned them, for once. And they wanted to give him STRIKE. It was everything Steve had ever wanted really, except...

Except he didn't want to break Tony's heart. Not in a million years. He had to help Bucky. Hell, he would give him everything he needed. But right now he was staying in his room, with Tony. Their room.

They were kind of in a trio now if they liked it or not. Steve was slowly beginning to accept that... but he could still choose which bed he slept in.

Sam was coming around as soon as he could to organize therapy and counseling for Bucky, outside of SHIELD. Steve considered trying to get him back into a training routine but he didn't want to do anything that HYDRA might have done.

Steve changed into loose clothes, sweats and a tee, and instantly felt more domestic. No longer Cap. Then he sorted Tony out in bed. He undressed him properly and tucked him in, folding his sunglasses up on the side table and grabbing a tall glass of water to put it by his bedside table.

This felt good. It felt familiar. Steve needed familiar right now.

He wasn't ready to open Phil's box just yet.

Steve got into bed, carefully, as to not wake Tony up. He doubted much would, though. Tony was sleeping like the dead and had probably consumed an entire fifth of bourbon at least.

Steve curled up near him, his forehead almost touching Tony's arm but not quite. Without permission, Steve didn't want to just yet.

His heat had been confusing. His mind had wanted a lot of things, a lot of them wrong. But as the panic of battle and the need of his heat ebbed away Steve had come to his senses.

He knew one thing for sure. In the morning, he wanted to wake up next to Tony, and maybe then Steve would make him the waffles he really liked.

Bucky sat on the end of the bed, staring, one hand gripping his backpack tightly. This was the fanciest room he'd ever seen. The bed was huge, big enough for probably four people, and there were too many blankets on it, all in whites and browns with fancy designs. There was a desk and its own bathroom and the bathroom had a fancy mirror and counter with a huge white sink and a frosted pane of glass in front of the shower, which was separate from the bath, which was set right into the floor.

He couldn't remember why he was here or where "here" was. Some chateau in France, maybe? But where were the rest of the soldiers? Had they been separated? Perhaps he'd been hit and that's why
Bucky did what he always did when he couldn't remember: he sat and stared and waited on the edge of a bed that was too big and too soft, unsure of this place, unsure of how he had come here or where he was going.

In a cell in the middle of the Atlantic ocean, Loki sat in a cell. Thor approached warily. He'd brought food. Loki had not eaten much, nor spoke much. Truthfully, it frightened him.

"Loki?" he called. The guards moved aside to let him in. Thor eased in and sat on the floor beside his brother. "...I've spoken with the United Nations. Midgard is fractured. They have hundreds of leaders... however, they've elected a few to represent the rest. Alexander Pierce seems to be a reasonable man. They will let you come home, soon. I only need to negotiate our taking the Tesseract. It is an Asgardian relic and they have no right to it, but they are understandably concerned with their safety... of course, an alliance with Asgard is far more of a deterrent than the Tesseract for..." He trailed off. He was rambling.

Loki was still sitting there, not touching the food, his hair hanging limp around his gaunt face.

"Loki?" Thor reached out to touch his face.

Loki, surprisingly, did not flinch away from Thor's touch. But he did not lean into it either. Slowly, green eyes moved up to Thor's face. Then he reached out with lightning quick reflexes, the same spritely creature Thor had once known. Loki grasped his wrist tightly. "Do you ever wonder why I was so foul to you above everyone else?" he whispered, voice fervent.

Loki's grip was shockingly strong. How Thor imagined a creature from Hel might grab an unsuspecting passerby and drag them down. Loki's hand was soft, with slender, skeletal fingers.

"Everyone else already hated me, Thor." Loki's eyes were wide and open, his bottom lip trembled. "But you didn't. You were... almost sweet sometimes. Maybe you did love me, or something like it. So why do I hate you more than anyone else, when you were the only one who, who..." Loki shoved Thor's hand away, pushing it against his chest.

Thor watched him sadly, hand against his own heart, waiting for Loki to finish.

"You stopped." Loki curled in on himself, hands in his hair. "It's because you stopped."

Miserable and defeated, Loki turned away from Thor. "Why are you even here? Why won't you just leave me alone? I spent years trying to get your attention. It is too late now."

"I didn't stop loving you. I stopped showing it," he said softly. "It was a grave mistake. But... but I had the throne to think of. Asgard. Our father. Loki, I could not have you. I could not bond my own brother. Even if we don't share blood, it would still be dishonorable for you. What god-king mates members of his own family? People would think poorly of us. It would undermine my rule and your skills in wordsmithing and negotiation. I had to distance the bond. I never meant to bond you at all, I just-- I reacted without thinking. I should never have bit you. I'm sorry."

Loki only showed him his back.

"Loki. I'm here because I do still care for you. I can't leave you here to the Midgardiens. They would have you killed. And... and perhaps I am weak for being unable to let you go, but I cannot. I cannot let you go."
He made no move to touch his brother but also made none to leave. He did not expect Loki to forgive him abruptly but he would not stop trying. He was, if nothing else, tenacious.

"That is the problem. You never did let me go. You might have not felt anything any more," Loki murmured, voice thick. "But I did. I felt everything. I felt the entire life you lived without me. Every day, I--" He choked, showing more emotion than he had in years. Loki fisted his hands in his hair even tighter. It had once looked nice and sleek but now his hair was over grown and matted.

"I have nothing to offer you. I bring you no pleasure. Only pain," he muttered. "Why won't you just leave me alone?!" Loki demanded, voice quiet but tense with anger. He was shaking a little, the narrow stretch of his shoulders making his armor tremble.

Thor knew well that it was only an illusion, designed to make him look intimidating and perhaps to make him feel safe. In reality he was wearing a cotton jumpsuit. But Loki had always chosen to alter reality as he saw fit; he was an illusionist and had been for as long as Thor had ever known him.

It was nice to know some things hadn't changed.

"...because you were my mate," said Thor in a low voice, as if he didn't want to be overheard. "...even if you... shouldn't have been, you were. And you are still my brother. ...that. That is why I cannot leave you alone."

He rose, leaving the food for Loki. "I'm sorry. I know these words are unable to heal your wounds, but they are all I have to offer you. ...don't despair. Soon we can return home. I will ensure you have a better place there than this."

He turned, and stepped out, the door echoing closed as it shut behind him.
Readjusting to Civilian Life

Chapter Notes

Plenty of you saw my author's note. It was an attempt to sympathetically understand the frustrations many of you have expressed, an acknowledgement that sometimes we don't get the story we want and that sucks. I also announced that I just found out I'm about to be a dad and I'm really excited. Baby's due in December.

That note was deleted because the comments were overwhelmingly nasty.

I'm disappointed. That's all I'll say. Real, real fucking disappointed.

Also mild CW for Bucky's outdated and unintentional racism.

- Tony

Tony woke three times. The first two were just to crawl to the bathroom and vomit. He was wrecked. He had an awful dream that he'd fought aliens and nearly died in space.

He curled up around Steve when he returned, his front to Steve's back, spooning him, enjoying the warmth he gave off.

The third time he woke it was mid-morning and Steve was gone.

Tony crawled to the bathroom, literally, and into the shower. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a hangover this bad. Holy shit. He lay on the floor of the shower for a solid thirty minutes, and when he got out, he chewed a handful of aspirin.

He tossed a pair of MIT sweatpants and one of Steve's shirts, grabbing his sunglasses. He needed to put something in his stomach, even if he couldn't keep it down. He would probably have to spend the whole day recovering. He walked downstairs, feeling dizzy and sore. He could hear people talking in the kitchen; the sound of some babbling from Granite meant Donner was here. Hopefully so was Steve. Tony felt unusually clingy. Maybe it was all the awful dreams he'd had. They were so vivid.

He padded in wearily. "Good morning, guys," he said, flopping at the breakfast bar and burying his face into his arms. One of the only things Tony didn't like about his house was that it was too bright. Too many white surfaces, too many windows... it was hell if you were hungover.

Steve appeared, walking in from the front door with Sam at his tail. He moved to Tony's side in an instant; his Alpha felt too calm. He'd expected a full weeks' worth of a freak out. Tony nearly died. Aliens were real. And Steve's old Alpha with severe amnesia was staying in the house. He wasn't expecting Tony to be calm. Maybe it was the hangover; maybe it had mellowed him.

Steve had woken up at one point in the night to Tony curling around him and a sense of reassurance had washed over him.

"You guys look rough," Sam said. He didn't look great himself. He had a healing gash on his forehead and a brace on his left wrist. "Hey Donner. Granite's looking great."
"Isn't she just?" Donner said, holding her in his arms and glowing. He literally never stopped smiling around her. "Are you okay Sam? I imagine you must be pretty shaken up too."

"We all are," Sam agreed quietly. He glanced over at Steve briefly. "So... I won't mess around. I'm gonna go upstairs and talk to him."

"Sam, please--"

"Yeah. Don't worry. I'll make the situation clear." Sam raised a hand to Steve in a friendly manner. "I know it's hard to reassure and reject people at the same time." Steve looked awful. "But you don't him to think you're offering something you're not. It'll be better in the long term to be meaner now. Just let me talk to him... explain that you're not his property."

"He doesn't--"

"He's from the forties, Steve." And with that, Sam headed upstairs.

Donner frowned. "What's he talking about?"

Sam knocked once before peeking his head inside. "Hi, James? Though they said you preferred Bucky, right? That's right, isn't it?" Suddenly Sam was no longer in 'soldier' mode but 'counselor' made. His tone was softer. He wasn't exactly being submissive but he wasn't being confrontational either. He met Bucky's gaze but never held it for too long. He moved to sit down, making sure he kept on the same level as Bucky. He didn't seem like he'd had a shower, despite having an en suite.

"Right. Let's keep things simple." Sam said, clasping his hands in his lap. "I'm here to help with your recovery, Bucky. Do you know how you ended up here? Do you know where you are?"

Bucky stared at Sam blankly. He felt like this person was familiar and he felt like he ought to know the answers to his questions, and his stomach turned with unease. If he got the answer wrong, would he have a retraining session in the chair?

"I... know you. We've talked before," he said, cautiously. "We're... in France." The luxurious surroundings certainly looked like some sort of chateau, perhaps abandoned during the war. 
"...recovery? Did I get hit? Is that it?" he asked, meeting the man's deep, brown eyes.

The man looked sympathetic but Bucky couldn't shake off the idea that he was also being patronized, treated like he was stupid. He was not stupid.

"I can still follow orders. I don't need any special treatment," he said, firmly. He doubted this man was a doctor because he was Negro but then again, the army had surprised him before. Gabe was a Negro, too, and Bucky never even noticed it anymore. The Howling Commandos were based on merit and so they didn't care about status or race or anything like that. Hell, their captain was an omega. They all had two things in common. First, they were all enhanced. Aside from Steve, they'd all been part of POW camp after Azzano and they had been experimented on by Zemo, leaving them with above-average reflexes, strength, dexterity, healing, and pain tolerance. They were lesser versions of Steve, prototypes for the serum HYDRA was trying to reverse-engineer. The second thing they had in common was their desire to win the war. That desire transcended race and status. Every single last one of them wanted to kill some Krauts and burn HYDRA to the fucking ground.

Bucky wasn't going to let a little whack to the head prevent him from doing that.

"Juice?" Donner slid a glass over the counter toward Tony.
Tony groaned softly and curled a hand around it without lifting his head from the cool surface. "I feel like a truck hit me. The last time I was this hungover was... shit. I don't even know."

"Poor Tony," said Donner, patting his hand briefly. "Something light? Toast?"

"Waffles."

"Coming right up. And Steve?" Donner offered him Granite so he could make them breakfast. He had already had a good cry and hugged Steve with shocking strength, saying over and over how glad he was that Steve was safe. He'd mellowed out a bit and was now looking at Steve curiously. He wasn't good at being assertive but was clearly desperate to have Steve explain what was going on with Sam.

"Hey, Donnie, can I get a warm-up?" asked Tom, who was sitting at the counter reading the paper. Two of Tony's bodyguards were sitting around idly, sipping coffee.

"Uh-huh, sure, sure. ...should I make extra waffles... for...?" pried Donner, eyes flicking over in the direction Sam had gone. It was clear his curiosity was killing him. The mysterious "him" that Sam was talking to... but he didn't have the confidence to ask directly.

"Maybe," Steve said, clearing his throat. He looked down at Granite in his arms and smiled when she reached up to grab his thumb with both hands. She tried to bite at it even though she had no proper teeth yet.

He sat down next to Tony as Donner busied himself with waffles. Tony still seemed far too relaxed and Steve was... nervous. He was worried his Alpha was keeping something suppressed, or was secretly on the verge of snapping.

Donner presented them waffles and took Granite back so they could eat. Steve didn't have his usual appetite.

"Oopsie!" Granite vomited on Donner's shoulder. Donner didn't seemed bothered by it, still smiling. "I'm just gonna take her to the toilet!"

Steve nodded and watched Donner go.

He reached over and put a hand on Tony's arm. "Hey," Steve said softly. "I appreciate this is all super weird. Are you really holding up okay?"

"You're not a doctor, are you...?" asked Bucky cautiously. He didn't like doctors.

"Well, not a medical doctor, no. I'm a licensed counselor, though. Sort of like a doctor for your head," said Sam.

"I'm not getting discharged, am I? Just 'cause I got hit? Did I get hit? I can still keep fighting, you know."

"No. You didn't get hit." Sam raised a hand to placate him. "Barnes- Bucky." He kept his voice low. "Your memories aren't quite in the right order. You were captured by HYDRA for a while, they messed with your brain a little."

"Right. Azzano," said Bucky. "But I can still follow orders just fine. Ask the Cap."

"We don't want you to follow orders. That's not what this is about. The war is over, Bucky. The year
is 2012. This is about readjusting you to civilian life." Sam leaned forward. "And Steve and Tony have kindly let you stay here to do that. They've given you a home here, a safe space. I'd say you stand a really good chance of regaining all your memories Bucky."

Bucky's eyes widened.

Tony looked up blearily when Steve asked how he was doing. "...yeah. Thanks, Steve. I'm holding up okay. I mean, it's not like it's *my* kid. And she'll grow out of the vomiting phase eventually, right? Actually I probably threw up more than she did this morning..."

He trailed off. Steve was staring at him with a look of concern.

"...we're talking about the baby, right?" asked Tony. He felt a weird coil of unease in his gut.

...shit. They were *not* talking about the baby. Tony wracked his brain but honestly everything was fuzzy. Also his memories were still mixed up in the vivid, hallucination-like dreams he had had. Dreams of battle and of a nuclear blast in space and of spending days in a hospital bed with Steve's old Alpha.

Tony wondered if he'd taken some salvia or something. His hangover was hell but the dreams had been too vivid, too *real*, for regular dreams.

Maybe that's what Steve was talking about. He'd obviously had a bad trip. Oh, fuck, had he said or done something awful? Was that what was going on?

"...we're okay, right?" ventured Tony. "I'm sorry... I mean, about the drinking and... other stuff... you know I like to party." He offered Steve a weak grin, then added, "I'm totally swearing off the drugs for a while though. I mean, I learned my lesson. Did I scare you?" Steve definitely felt freaked out. "...Steve. I'm fine. Just hungover. It'll pass."

The war had passed? It was over?

Hot damn.

Bucky stared at Sam expressionlessly. Civilian life... oh, God, he was ready. More than ready. He was tired of nights spent sleeping on the ground, waking up to shells exploding, watching men die, eating poorly and walking until the blisters on his feet popped and then reformed, tired of jumping at every cracking branch and getting rained on and clutching to his gun like it was a teddy bear, knowing it may very well be the only thing standing between him and a shallow grave in a foreign land.

But after that he had no clue what Sam was talking about. "Who's Tony?" he asked. As soon as he'd asked it, he realized who Tony must be. Steve had gone and taken a war Alpha. Fuck.

"Tony is Steve's mate," Sam explained tentatively. "They live here, together."

Well, he'd knew that might happen. It happened plenty and Steve was an omega who needed taken care of. But he could still feel the bond (Steve felt uneasy; sure, of course he did, with Bucky being back and all) and so he wasn't too worried.

He also wasn't entirely clear about what Sam meant by "the year is 2012." Was that slang for something or had he misheard him?
"...I actually feel just fine, to be honest," Bucky said. "I mean, I know my memory's real bad, but I've been keeping journals." He had spent part of the night writing in his notebook. "In a week or two I'll be okay and I can go back to the docks, no problem. Heck, I could go back now, actually, you don't need a brain to lift stuff."

Sam frowned a little at Bucky. "The docks? Where you used to work, right? Look. You won't be going back to the docks soon Bucky. You have to focus on getting better. It's important that we get your memories in order." He tried for a smile. "You keep journals? Well that's a great start. What kind of stuff do you write in them? Do you draw at all?"

Bucky shook his head. "Naw. Steve's always been the artistic one. You know how horseshoes are."

Sam winced. "Okay, about Steve. Well, first, about the term 'horseshoe.' Nowadays we call them 'omegas,' okay?"

"Okay."

"Now about Steve... listen, Bucky, this is going to be hard to hear, but..."

"Yeah. You scared me. But not with..." Steve trailed off, frowning. Did Tony not think it was real? Steve had never experienced this with his soldiers out in the field before but they'd also never faced aliens.

"Tony--" Steve moved to take his hand properly and squeezed. "What do you remember about yesterday?"

"Uhh..." Tony hesitated. He sat up a little, just enough to look at Steve. He gave him a weak smile and sipped the orange juice. "I remember... y'know... the yooj."

Donner breezed back in with Granite. "Sorry, guys, I'm back... Marco, can you hold Granite?"

"Is Granite, like, a nickname, or...?"

"No, no, that's her regular name."

"...huh," said Marco, accepting the baby, who was gurgling cheerfully.

Tom took a sip of his coffee. "Y'know, boss, you're about the only guy I know who thinks an alien invasion is the yooj. But I knew they were real."

Tony froze, mid-way through another sip of orange juice. "Alien... invasion...?"

"Yeah." Tom looked up, brow furrowing. "You okay, boss?"

Tony let out a weak little noise and dropped the juice, slithering off of the barstool and onto the floor. Tom got up but was too late to catch him.

"Hey, Mr. Stark!"

"It was real... it was real... I nearly died... it was real..." Tony curled into Tom, retching weakly.

Granite began crying.
"Oh, geez," said Marco.

Donner whisked over to take her. "She's fine, she's just cranky sometimes." He looked down at Tony with sympathy. "Oh my God, I can't even imagine. Poor Tony." He bounced the fussing baby, going back to the kitchen to cook, balancing Granite expertly on his hip while Tony shivered on the floor.

Bucky began shaking uncontrollably and wasn't sure why.

"I'm his mate," said Bucky, teeth chattering. "I know I'm-- I'm a little confused, but I'm not sick. I wanna go back to work. I have to, I gotta support me n' Steve." He wasn't sure how you could just spend all your time "getting better." Going back to work seemed like a much better idea to him.

He looked over at his backpack warily. He did not want to show Sam his notebooks. "...I just write 'bout whatever I remember, is all. I don't draw. I was never as good as Steve, he's the artistic one." He sometimes leafed through the contents of his notebooks but they made him uneasy and often more confused than ever. His handwriting was unfamiliar to him, large and blocky and awkward, like a child's.

"I wanna go-- go see Steve now," he said, rising. He also needed to eat something. Hopefully Steve was feeling well and could make him breakfast.

"Tony is Steve's mate too now! And they both live here, together," Sam was trying to say, keeping his tone as low and calm as he could muster. "Steve doesn't need support right now. He just wants you to focus on yourself, Bucky--"

Bucky was already making for the door.

Sam sighed as Bucky stood. He wouldn't try to stop him. "I guess." He stayed close on his heels. "I'm coming with you though..."

"Hey. Hey, Tony. It's okay." Steve knelt down in front of him and took his mate's hand in his own. Tony was trembling. Tom seemed to get the hint and backed away, giving them space as Steve pulled Tony against his chest. He reached up and ran his fingers through his Alpha's hair. "I love you. You didn't die. You're not going anywhere and neither am I. I'm here with you Tony. Just focus on my voice."

And then Bucky walked in, trailed by Sam. Steve instantly began shaking his head at him.

"Hey, Bucky, why don't I show you outside?" Sam tried to tug on his flesh arm. Bucky did not budge.

Steve curled an arm around Tony as if he could somehow protect him from the panic.

"Bucky." Steve struggled to keep his own voice calm. "Now is not a great time."

Bucky walked into the kitchen but he wasn't looking at Steve. He was staring past him.

Donner was trying to make breakfast one-handed, his other arm holding the baby; he had pulled down his shirt to give her a nipple. He looked up, caught Bucky's eye, and ducked his head.

"...Steve?" said Bucky in confusion.
"Er-- no. No, I'm Donner." His voice was all wrong, much higher than it should have been and without any Brooklyn accent.

A moment later Steve was speaking, and Bucky looked down, and there he was, the real Steve. The one that smelled and sounded right. Bucky felt a storm of confusion. Yes, that was right, Steve had somehow gotten bigger and taller and wasn't sick anymore. And... and hadn't he somehow fought in the war? But omegas weren't allowed in the army and also why would Steve have a war Alpha if he was deployed?

Bucky stared; Steve was rocking another man, who was shaking and staring off, blinking, gripping his shirt. Yes, Bucky had seen this before. Shell-shock.

He squinted a little. "...Howard?" he said, with even more confusion.

Sam put a firm hand on his shoulder, the right one. "Hey. Bucky. Come on. That's Tony and I think he needs some space right now. Let's go outside. You want to smoke?"

Bucky did, actually.

But he was still confused. Why was Tony experiencing shell-shock if he hadn't fought in the war? And what was up with the luxurious mansion? And how had they gotten here, anyway? Who the hell was Donner and why was he here and where was his Alpha and why did he look like Steve and why did Tony look like Howard? Everyone looked like somebody.

Maybe Sam was right and he was more mixed up than he realized. Everything just seemed off. The kitchen looked like a spaceship.

Bucky decided he liked Sam. Sam was the only one in the house who didn't look like someone else and wasn't confusing the hell out of him.

"Okay," said Bucky uneasily. The panic was pouring off of the man in Steve's arms-- Howard?-- in waves and Bucky could literally feel it in his own gut. He was shaking, too, and he hadn't had a smoke in ages.

"Okay, come on... come on, let's go out onto the pool deck, it's nice... you ever seen the Pacific Ocean?" Sam gently led him toward the back door. They passed through a room with a grand piano and a wall that was a bar.

"There's a bar!" he exclaimed. This place was so ritzy; he would have felt out of place in his clothes but everyone else was wearing regular clothes, except for the two beta men in suits. Bucky didn't understand.

"Yeah. Hey, come on, we can look at that later," said Sam. "Come on... right through here..."

They walked through a glass door out onto a pool deck. There were palm trees and fancy plants and statues and a huge pool and a spectacular view and the ocean stretched out forever. Bucky was speechless.

"Is this a country club?"

"No, it's a house."

"How many people live here?"

"Just Tony and Steve. And you, now."
Bucky turned back to stare at the rear exterior. Like the kitchen, it resembled to him a spaceship, something you might see in a Buck Rogers comic. It was white, made of cement and practically carved into the cliffside; the levels all overlapped and there were lots of glittering windows overlooking the ocean. It was both elegant and alien in its modernism. It was incomprehensibly huge. Bucky was rendered speechless.

Sam gently nudged him. "Hey."

Right.

Bucky pulled a slightly crushed pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He needed to get more. He was down to his last two.

"...Prilucky Osoblyvi?" said Sam, squinting at the label.

"Pietro gave them to me," said Bucky, lighting one up. "I like Lucky Strikes best."

"Do they even make those anymore?"

"Well, that's what we get in our rations."

"Bucky. It's 2012."

Bucky took a drag.

"...that's the year. 1944 was like seventy years ago."

Bucky took another drag. He didn't react. In fact, he made very few facial expressions at all.

Clearly, Sam had his work cut out for him.

---

"I'm taking him upstairs," Steve breathed, standing with Tony in his arms. Donner was frowning.

"Who was that?"

"That's Bucky. He has amnesia. Sorry he...."

"It's fine. Will Tony be okay?"

Steve didn't really know the answer to that. "I hope so."

He carried Tony upstairs to their bedroom. Steve could just hear Sam and Bucky talking outside as he went but struggled to make out the words. His grip tightened a little on Tony.

Steve carefully laid him down in bed, sitting him up against the cushions to help with his breathing. And Steve clambered onto the bed next to him, holding Tony's hand and staying in his line of vision.

"Hey, Tony. You with me?" Steve murmured, brushing the pad of his thumb over the bumps of Tony's knuckles. "Hey there. It's okay. I promise it's okay. I know it was crazy. Terrifying. But it'll be okay. I promise. I'm here and I'm yours. It'll be okay."

It was nothing unusual. Steve would say the same kind of mantra over and over again whenever Tony had a panic attack. But now, for some reason, it felt like some of the words held more... meaning.
Steve reached up with his other hand to gently run his fingers through Tony's hair, in what he hoped was a soothing manner. He smiled a little sadly.

"Just breathe Tony. Do you think there's anything that'll make you feel better? You want some water?"

"JARVIS," croaked Tony, drawing the comforter around him. "Check-- check my heart. Is it my heart? Is my heart...?"

"Your heart rate is elevated but regular, sir," said JARVIS.

"My-- brain-- my heart--"

"Sir, you are experience an anxiety attack."

"But my heart...?"

"My analysis shows no signs of abnormal activity in your RT node, sir."

Tony gripped Steve's shirt like a vice. "Okay... I'm okay..."

"Might I recommend a sedative, sir?" suggested JARVIS.

"Yes... yes, I want that... xylazine... clonazepam... something..." Tony's gaze shifted over to Steve. "My omega..." He leaned in to rest his head on Steve's chest, his breathing shallow and rapid.

A moment later Marco walked in, shaking a bottle of pills. "JARVIS said you wanted--"

Tony flung out a hand. "--I'm not giving you the whole bottle, Mr. Stark."

Tony let out a thin whine. Marco pressed two pills into his hand. He shot Steve a look of sympathy before edging back out of the bedroom.

Tony's breathing remained elevated, but slowly, the tension ebbed away. Within twenty minutes he was still, his grip limp on Steve's shirt, his face buried in Steve's skin. The familiar warmth and smell of his mate had done as much for him as the drugs had. He looked worse for the wear; he was pale and his face lined, dark circles under his eyes, hair messy. But in sleep, at least, he was calm.

Downstairs, in the kitchen, Bucky and Sam both settled down at the counter. Bucky was staring quite obviously at Donner.

Donner misinterpreted this. "Do you want to hold her?"

Bucky looked surprised. "The baby?"

"Yeah. She's five months old. Here."

Bucky tensed; he took the baby in his right arm, looking slightly alarmed. Granite almost immediately grabbed a fistful of his shirt and stuffed it into her mouth, staring up at him with huge, bulbous eyes.

"How did you have a baby?"
"Easy. I just pushed her out. It took almost twenty-four hours," said Donner, proudly. "Isn't she perfect? Her name is Granite Elphaba Malick. Granite, you know, like, Steve's middle name is grant and... I thought Granite sounded really strong... I just sort of made that up. Well, I thought she was going to be a boy, so I had to come up with something. I was going to name her Grant Boswell Malick but I didn't think Boswell really suited a girl, to be honest."

Bucky stared down, clearly confused by this wealth of information about the baby. Granite was flailing her limbs cheerily, still gnawing on his shirt, getting copious amount of drool on it.

"Careful. She just ate and lately she's been puking a lot."

"You look like Steve."

Donner flashed a smile over his shoulder. "I get that all the time. Everyone always says I'm like Steve before the serum. You know, skinny. But it's not like I don't eat. I just have good metabolism, I guess. Waffles?"

He deposited a plate of waffles in front of Bucky.

Bucky studied it, then took one and offered it to Granite curiously.

She bit it and chewed without actually eating it.

"Does she eat yet?"

"Well, I tried to give her some baby food last week but she just spit it out," said Donner breezily. "She definitely likes trying things but she hasn't figured out swallowing yet. I don't plan to wean her until she's at least a year old. I read that it's important. They get everything they need from--"

Granite pulled away and, without warning, vomited on Bucky's hand and the waffle.

"...yep, see, she keeps doing that," said Donner cheerfully. "Come on, pumpkin, let's get you cleaned up!" He scooped up the baby and whisked her away. Bucky stared at the ruined waffle in his hand.

Tom began laughing. "See, this is why I keep telling my girlfriend I don't want kids!"

Bucky got up to throw away the waffle and wash his hands. It was easier said than done; she'd gotten half-digested milk all over his shirt, too. He gave up and pulled his shirt off, dumping it on the floor.

Tom's laughter ceased. He and Marco stared at Bucky's torso. It wasn't just that he was laughably muscular; there was also the metal prosthetic. Bucky looked like he could easily flip a car. (He could.)

He sat back down at the counter, putting up his elbows (the left one clanked loudly, indicating just how heavy the prosthetic was) and began eating the rest of the waffles, which were thankfully untouched by Granite.

Sam watched him eating; he thought he heard Steve coming down and glanced behind him. He wasn't sure Bucky entirely understood what was happening, and even if he was, he didn't know how well Bucky would remember.

Steve curled around Tony was he drifted off to sleep, not wanting to let him go. Tony's hands
remained bunched up in his shirt, the grip tight as his head ended up tucked under Steve's chin. Steve closed his eyes, wrapping an arm around Tony and running his hand soothingly up and down his back as he drifted off. The tension slowly ebbed out of the tight line of Tony's shoulders but Steve knew things wouldn't get any easier when he woke up.

He closed his eyes. Steve didn't think he'd be able to sleep like this but he felt like he should be here when Tony woke up in case he became disorientated again. He realized, belatedly, that Tony had never really experienced war before. That might have well been the closest he'd come to experiencing it. Steve didn't know if he would describe the Chitauri invasion as a 'war' but it was certainly one hell of a battle.

It soon became clear Tony wasn't waking up any time soon. Steve gently sat up and tucked Tony into the sheets. "JARVIS? Let me know if Tony shows signs of waking up, please."

"Of course Captain."

Yes, that's right. Steve was a captain again now.

Steve appeared to find a wary-looking Sam and a half-naked Bucky. He walked up to Sam. "Why isn't he wearing a shirt?"

"Baby puked on him."

"Oh. Figures." It was hard not to stare at the scars like this. Steve didn't scar easily, but then Bucky's serum wasn't his own; it wasn't 'perfect'. Even though, Steve could scar. He had a few faint white lines from various serious injuries he'd obtained during the war. But they were hard to spot if you weren't looking for them. Bucky's scars were just there, unapologetic and angry, streaking out over his left shoulder and down the left side of his torso. Steve swallowed.

He thought about what HYDRA must have done to him, to twist Bucky's body up so bad. It was enough to make Steve's blood boil.

"Is Tony okay?" Sam asked.

"Not really," Steve said. "But that's to be expected. He's not a soldier." He reached for an apple from the fruit bowl, wanting something to do with his hands. Bucky appeared to be focusing on the task at hand; eating. Steve didn't want to distract him. Natasha had told him when she'd been readjusting to the world outside of brainwashing and 'handlers' that even simple tasks like eating and showering could be a challenge. Self-care had to become a learned, not automatic, behaviour.

"Do you think he's okay with Bucky in the house?"

"I think having another Alpha in the house is actually kind of put in perspective by the whole nearly dying thing," Steve said. "He hasn't mentioned it." Bucky had finished his waffles. Steve tried to engage him in conversation. "How'd you like your room Buck? Want me to grab you another shirt?"

"Какие?" said Bucky, looking up. He stared at Steve, expressionless for a moment, then smiled. His smile was wrong, tight, artificial, and didn't quite meet his eyes. Like he knew what a smile was and was trying to do one, but hadn't quite perfected it. It was utterly different than the cocky little smirk he had given Steve back in New York. "My room?" he repeated. He had no clue what Steve was talking about. "...do you want me to wear a shirt?"

Back in the thirties, Bucky often lounged around in an undershirt, clearly enjoying his physique and the way people looked at him. He was boxer and had the muscles to prove it. He was just as fit as Steve remembered, except now, his left shoulder, left side, and the entire upper left quadrant of his
torso were scarred. The skin looked like it had been either flayed or melted, and it had healed in magnificently, raised, pale pink ropes of scars that was impossible not to notice. The prosthetic arm seemed flawlessly integrated into the flesh.

The smile sent a shiver down Steve's spine that he didn't like it. It wasn't right. It wasn't Bucky

"Yes," Steve said flatly, not smiling. "I want you to be fully dressed in the kitchen." Sure, he and Tony walked around half naked all the time. But Bucky wasn't...it wasn't the same. Besides, Tom looked at least a little bit uncomfortable. And Steve didn't really like the thought of Bucky walking around half naked and Tony comparing himself to him. After all, Bucky was goddamn broader than Steve was (overall, he didn't quite have the Cap shoulder span).

Bucky seemed completely unaware of the scars, the arm, or of anything else, really. Having finished his waffles, he just... sat.

After a few moments, he seemed to remember something. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up. "I need to get more. Stevie, you think you could run down to the store and grab me another pack?" asked Bucky.

Tom and Marco watched him with unabashed fascinated. Sam watched him with a look of sympathy.

"Bucky. We're in Tony's house, remember?"

"This is a house?"

"You gotta smoke outside of the house," Steve told him, walking around to throw his apple core in the bin. "And if you want something Buck, you can order it. I don't run down shops anymore."

Sam sent a look that said something along the lines of I told you so.


"Who's Tony?" asked Bucky, making no move to get up.

He had a vague recollection that Pietro had told him that he didn't have to follow anyone's orders anymore. Besides, he sure as hell wasn't going to follow orders from a horseshoe. Maybe if Steve was in a uniform and if they were on the battlefield, but not in the kitchen.

Steve wasn't smiling and Bucky didn't like it. He felt... uneasy. Like he was doing something wrong, even though he was just sitting there smoking. And hadn't Steve been cured of his asthma, anyway?

"Tony's my mate." Steve said, voice as patient as he could muster. He would have told JARVIS to order cigarettes but he didn't want to freak Bucky out with a voice from the ceiling. It had taken Steve goddamn weeks to become accustomed to it.

Bucky looked another drag.

"Bucky," said Sam, firmly. "Come on. Let's get you a shirt."

Bucky got up obediently, cigarette still dangling from his mouth.

"And you smoke outside from now on," Steve added as Bucky stood, following Sam.
"You have more clothes in your bag?"

Bucky looked confused.

"...the backpack...? In your room? ...where your notebooks are?"

"Oh. Yeah, I think I have one or two," said Bucky. "Steve, can you take care of that?" He gestured toward the discarded shirt on the floor and made to follow Sam.

"...it's like Tony Two," said Marco, propping his head up with his fist.

"Ugh. Like we needed another diva in here," said Tom, checking his watch.

"They're not that similar, are they?" Steve asked as he watched the two Alphas trail upstairs.


Steve sighed and moved to clean up the shirt. Tom held up a hand. "Dude. No. I'll get it. You just saved the world."

"...thanks." Steve smiled a little and then headed upstairs, but headed to his and Tony's room. He found his Alpha still asleep and crawled back into bed next to him.

In Bucky's room, Sam crossed his arms over his chest as he watched Bucky rummage through his rucksack.

"You know you gotta do what Steve says right? It's his house, his rules. And Tony doesn't like people smoking near him."

Sam exhaled slowly. "You remember who Tony is?"

"Tony owns the house," said Bucky in exasperation, still smoking. "But come on, if the war's over, why do I have to listen to Steve? ...he knows his place. He's just upset because... well... we had a rough couple of years, that's all. He'll come around. He always does. We're mates; he's my best friend."

Bucky pulled on a tank top. The result was that, while no longer bare-chested, he looked even bulkier than ever, his shoulders broad and his chest solid.

"Anyways, we're not going to stay here. I'll get us our own place and the we can go back to how things were. Now that Steve's not sick anymore, it'll be perfect."

He smiled. This time, the smile was a natural one. "That's all I ever wanted, was for Stevie to get better. Now he's fit as a fiddle and he can keep house, have whelps... and without me needing to take care of him all the time I can put in more hours and we'll have money... heck, maybe we can even buy a house in the 'burbs. You know, maybe in Pelham or something. Or even Jersey. Not anywhere too far, though. I mean, I gotta be able to take a train and see my sister and stuff."

Bucky padded back out of the room; Sam followed, frowning. "No, man, you're not listening to me. Steve is pair-bonded to Tony. He doesn't want to move to Pelham with you."

Bucky stopped so suddenly that Sam collided into his back. He turned, his brow furrowed. "...no. No, me and Steve are bonded. I can feel him."
"Right. You're both bonded to him. He's double-bonded and he's not going to let go of Tony."

Bucky felt his dander prickle on his neck. "Who the hell is Tony?"

"...Tony is his mate. He owns this house. He and Steve have been bonded almost two years, and living together, and they're very happy. Steve still cares about you, but he also cares about Tony, and he doesn't want to lose either of you. You know what Steve wants? For you to get better."

Bucky stared at him for several long moments, expressionless, then swept down the hall.

Sam ran after him, trying to grab his good arm, but Bucky was like a rhino. He never broke stride. Without needing direction, he located Steve in an instant.

Steve was in a bedroom even bigger than his. The floor was white stone, absolutely seamless, and in the middle was a huge bed with white sheets. It sat in the middle of a fancy white rug. One wall was floor-to-ceiling windows, overlooking a balcony and, beyond that, the sea. The room was surprisingly minimalist, although to his right, Bucky spotted a bar and a walk-in closet that was bigger than his and Steve's old living room. Across from the bed was a fireplace and, above it, a black rectangle of glass. Some sort of mirror? In the corner there was a nook with a bookshelf and a couple of chairs and a telescope; there were a few weird-looking gadgets on the table over there, wires and metal, who knew what. The bedhead was up against a low partition, and on the other side of that was another little sitting nook with a thoroughly strange lamp that looked like a bunch of stacked cubes, and there was a six-panel art piece that was just a bunch of random shapes and colors.

Steve was curled in the bed, holding...

"Steve!" cried Bucky, striding over. Not only was Steve in a bed with another man but it wasn't even some random guy; it was Howard fuckin' Stark.

He scruffed Steve and yanked; the two of them crashed to the floor.

"Five more minutes, Pepper," mumbled Tony without waking up, rolling over.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" demanded Bucky, teeth bared.

"Bucky, get off him!" said Sam, yanking him, but Bucky didn't budge.

"Howard Stark? Really? You're cozying up to Howard Stark? What am I, huh, chopped liver? How come you're treating me like some kinda chump and then going for some hotsy-totsy, decked out creep? I'm not your patsy, Steve, I'm your mate! How could you?"

One moment, Steve had been half asleep and peacefully dozing away. The next Bucky was lifting him up, slamming him into the floor and yelling at him. He let out a ragged breath. Bucky might have been strong but Steve was just as strong (minus the vibranium arm, which was sort of cheating). Steve pushed a hand against Bucky's chest to get him off of him. Sam walked over tentatively to offer Steve a hand to stand up. The sedatives appeared to be doing their job with Tony at least, who was still out cold.

"Howard Stark is dead Buck! Haven't you been listening? It's 2012. And you might be my mate but so is Tony. And you-- you don't get to speak to me like that anymore." Bucky might have been the Alpha in the situation but Steve was goddamn ready to fight him to prove his point, to put Bucky in his place.

"He wants you to move to Pelham," Sam said and Steve's expression broke a little.
"Bucky. I live here. This is my home. It has been for years now. And I know we're still bonded, but you don't get to make those kinds of demands off of me. You don't get to tell me where to go or what to do. And you don't get to rip me out of bed when I'm with Tony. He's going through a tough time right now. He needs me. And you-- you need to get better."

Bucky growled.

"Don't argue. You do." Steve tried to keep his voice calm and clear, 'captain' like. "And if you really wanna start with 'how could yous'..."

"Steve," protested Sam, but it was too late.

"You gave me a miscarriage. You bit the back of my neck and I don't even remember it happening. You tried to rape me in a cell because a man told you to and you only stopped because I started screaming." Steve was shaking visibly, his voice soft yet vehement. "You don't get to make demands here Buck. I'm in charge and if you don't like it then tough. Because it's either here or SHIELD. I'm giving you a home, I'm giving you a chance 'cause of the history we share--" He let out a ragged breath. "--but if you threaten my home. If you threaten my happiness. If you hurt Tony, I will never forgive you, and your chance will end, and that will be your final how could you. Because you do not get to walk in here and act like you're some hot shot in charge. I'm not your housewife. I will not clean up after you. I will not do your shopping. I am goddamn Steve Rogers and it is time for you to get used to what that means. I'm not just an omega. I'm a person, God damn it."

Steve took one step closer. "Do I make myself clear?"

Bucky stared at Steve, not moving an inch.

"Are you fucking nuts?" he said finally. "None of that ever happened! I never gave you a miscarriage and I never tried to rape you... hell, if anything, you were the one always buggin' me for it, even though we both knew a pregnancy would kill you! Every fuckin' preheat you tried to jump my bones and every single time I had to say no, and then I was the bad guy and then you'd cry and throw shit at me and make me feel like the worst Alpha in the world, for what, huh? For trying to protect you? Your ma made me promise, Steve! All I ever did was look after you, and I never asked a thing for it. I never asked you to lift a finger 'cause you were too sick, and I'm the one who busted my ass paying all the bills and getting you medicine and scraping together food to eat, and I never complained, I did it all 'cause I loved you... and now that you're a big guy, you act like you're fuckin' entitled to even more! Like all those years of me caring for you and defending you and protecting you meant nothing! The only time I ever bit your neck was 'cause we both wanted it, but I guess you'd rather be with some cock-of-the-walk rich guy instead of your best friend who's only ever done right by you!"

Bucky turned and made to storm out, but stopped by the door and whipped around. "Maybe the serum made you big, but it made your head fat, too. You always took me for granted. I just never knew it was this bad. I fucking love you, Steve."

With that, he left. Sam bolted after him.

"Bucky... wait, Bucky..."

"No, leave me alone. I don't even know you. I'm going to get some smokes."

"Bucky, please calm down, there's a lot you don't remem--"

"I would never hurt him!" snarled Bucky, wheeling around. "I would rather fucking die than hurt
him! He's been brainwashed or something. Sayin' I would any of that stuff to him... fucking idiot spade."

Sam looked horrified at the casual use of the omega slur, but Bucky was too upset to notice his expression.

"I spent my whole life trying to earn enough money to support both of us, I gave him a home, I gave him everything I could, I went to war for him, and now I come back and he's banging Howard Stark and acting like I oughta be grateful to him for... for what, letting me stay in some big-ass house? I'd rather live on the street than here, if that's how it's gonna be! Everything I ever did was for him. And you wanna talk about how could yous, huh? He dropped me. He dropped me and I lost my damn arm! But you don't see me holding a grudge about that, do you?! Because unlike Steve, I actually fucking care about hurting his feelings! I guess I'm a chump and that's why he thinks he can get away with running around with others Alphas! Well, fuck him! I'm going to get a drink!"

"Bucky, please--"

Bucky jogged down the stairs and toward the front door. Was he planning on walking? The nearest bar was miles away, and besides, there was a massive crowd beyond the gates of the mansion.

"Bucky, stop, you can't go out, you'll never make it through that crowd! ...come on, let's go outside, let's sit out on the deck, there's beer here--"

Bucky pulled out his pack of cigarettes, but it was empty. He tossed it onto the ground in frustration and kicked it.

"--listen, Steve's upset, too, you both are, I get that, it's really rough... a lot of things have happened while you've been asleep..."

"Like Steve fucking replacing me?" said Bucky, and behind the anger, there was hurt. Real hurt. Like he might cry if he didn't remain angry.

"He didn't replace you, man, he's just-- he's worried about Tony, he's sick too. Come on. Let's go outside. We can share a beer out there. The sun'll do you good."

Bucky still looked incensed and was clearly struggling to control himself. "Who the hell're you, anyway?"

"I'm Sam Wilson. Steve's best-- Steve's friend."

"Are you sleeping with him, too?" demanded Bucky, tensing.

"Nope. Definitely not," said Sam. "...hey, come on, let's go. I bet Aria can share some of her cigarettes when she gets here... she's Steve's friend, too, and she's a beta, she's very cool, you'll like her..."

He managed to coax Bucky outside, grabbing a couple of bottles of beer from the downstairs bar. The two of them ended up sitting by the poolside, dipping their feet into the water.

"...you know what it's like to lose your mate?" asked Bucky, staring at the surface of the water.

"...what am I s'posed to do now? Should I distance the bond so he can be with...?"

"I think you should just take some time to relax and when everyone's calmed down, you can talk," said Sam gently.
"You think it's 'cause of my arm?"

Sam blinked in surprise. "Your-- your arm?"

"Yeah. 'Cause my left arm's gone. It's gone, right? This is just a replacement."

"...I don't think he cares at all about your arm, Bucky."

Bucky took a swig from his bottle, but his expression remained unconvinced.

"It's not that he doesn't care about you. Dude. He loves you. Everyone can see it. You think he would bring you home if he didn't? You think Tony is gonna be happy you're here? Cus he ain't. Steve is putting him out over this. Because he doesn't want to lose you again," Sam said, trying to explain. He let out a frustrated breath. "You don't remember some stuff. But when you were with HYDRA... bad things happened. And whilst it's not necessarily your fault, Steve is gonna have a hard time moving past everything. He loves you and he doesn't want you to lose you. He wants to help you work out your memories."

Sam leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "Because, frankly, they're scrambled. That's not Howard Stark. That's his son, who is over forty years old now Bucky. And he didn't replace you. He thought you were dead. Seventy years dead. And him Tony are scent mates. It just happened. But your bond with him..."

Sam looked off into the pool's surface. "You can't just write it off. You know you're like...next level right? You knowing where Steve is. You waking up during his heats. That's not normal for any bonded couple, ever. You have a connection unlike nothing else. But you gotta understand that you're not just entitled to... well, everything. Not anymore."

Sam was keeping his voice calm in the hope of Bucky calming down too.

"Steve loves both you and Tony. He's gotta work out what he's gonna do about that. And in the meantime, you gotta get better. Focus on yourself. We all just saved the world. You need to take a step back and breathe. I know-- you just got Steve back and now it feels like you're losing him. But if you don't wanna lose him then you gotta start listening to him. You used to know what Steve wanted. I'm not sure you do anymore."

Bucky sighed and nodded, his expression quite a lot calmer.

"...not sure he does, either," Sam muttered, an after thought, mostly to himself. "Anyway, you should calm down. Take a minute. An hour. And then maybe try and talk to Steve again. Maybe do it without Tony in the room, and don't start with shouting next time either."

"He's upset," reported Bucky dully, staring at the pool. "I can feel him. I upset him."

"Yeah, well, you said some pretty shitty stuff back there. It's normal to be angry after everything that's happened to you, but maybe when you're calmer, an apology might be in order," said Sam evenly.

Bucky nodded again, then said, softly, "Yeah. You're right, Sam. ...you're right."

For... for granted? What?

Steve slid down to the floor and could feel hot, fat tears streaming down his face. Fuck. Fucking hell. Before he knew what he was doing he was curling up on the floor, in on himself. The forties had
made a mess of them. Steve's sickness and Bucky's duty. They loved each other, so fiercely that Steve stormed into enemy territory and liberated a whole goddamn camp. But were they happy, really?

Sometimes Steve wasn't so sure. Right now was one of those times. He fisted his hands in his hair and tried to focus on breathing.

Why did loving Bucky always have to hurt so much?

It always had. Suddenly Steve felt like he was twenty again, curled up in the bathroom and sobbing against the door. He could feel Bucky's own upset and confusion twisting in his gut, hot and unrelenting. Steve thought he might be sick. It was like when Tony was upset but ten times worse. Goddamn. He'd forgotten how strong this bond was, how it amplified shared feelings, made them vulnerable to each other whether they liked it or not.

Slowly, Steve managed to sit up. He saw Tony, still asleep, and blinked slowly, forcing out the last of his tears.

Steve rubbed at his eyes and grabbed a hoodie (one Aria had bought him; it had a pretend pocket with a cat in it she thought was cute.) And then he headed downstairs, avoiding Marco and Tom because he knew they'd see he'd been crying.

"Oh, Stevie."

Steve turned to see Aria. He sniffed and wordlessly she pulled him into a hug.

"I hurt him," he whispered. "I never meant to--"

"I know sweetie. I know." Aria squeezed him and ran a hand down his back. She didn't know if he was talking about Tony or Bucky, but it didn't matter. It was what Steve needed to hear in that moment. He let out a choked sob. "I know."

Bucky worked his way through three beers, sitting with Sam out on the pool deck. He didn't want to go inside because he didn't feel welcome. It wasn't his house. It was frankly the most un-house-like house he'd ever seen. Everything was too white and too sterile and the thought of anyone liking it there was beyond him. But apparently Steve and his new mate liked it just fine. Well, they could have it. Screw them.

Bucky felt a little better but not much. He could feel Steve in his gut and knew he was crying somewhere, which only made him angrier. Steve always cried and Bucky never did and it always made Bucky feel like the bad guy. Every fight they had, Bucky was always the bad guy, even though he tried so damned hard. Steve was too brave for the world, too spirited, and every fight they had boiled down to a simple argument: Steve wanted something and Bucky had to say no. For his own good.

Now that Steve wasn't little anymore, or sick, Bucky could hardly say no. But it was like Steve didn't remember how it had been. Like he'd gotten so used to getting his own way that he no longer remembered all the nights Bucky had stayed up with his while he coughed, all the times he'd worked doubt shifts to afford medicine, all the times he'd had to deny Steve when, hell, it wasn't like he didn't want to make love to his mate. He wanted nothing more in the world. But he would've never been able to live with the guilt. Bucky could remember after he'd bonded Steve, how Steve had gotten sick right afterwards. They'd spent their whole "honeymoon" phase with Steve in bed, running a fever and pleading for sex, while Bucky pressed a cold washcloth to his forehead and kept saying
Sometimes around noon, a lady in a uniform walked out.

"Hello, Sergeant Barnes. Do you remember me?" she asked.

"No," said Bucky. He didn't move from where he was sitting on the edge of the pool, hunched, pants rolled up and feet in the cool, clear water. His hair did a good job of blocking most of his face.

"I'm Agent May. I'm here to check in with you. SHIELD is going to check in even twelve to twenty-four hours to make sure you're okay. ...how's it going?"

"Well, my left arm is gone, my omega is fucking some rich jerk, and everyone I know is either dead or missing. But I can't remember any of the other horrible stuff that's happened to me, so I'd say I'm swell," said Bucky bitterly.

She let out a light laugh. "At least you're keeping a sense of humor, huh?"

Bucky shrugged his right shoulder. "I guess."

"Any problems?"

Bucky shrugged again.

"I think he's okay," answered Sam for him. "He's adjusting. But nothing SHIELD needs to worry about."

She nodded. "Okay. Good. ...he's not getting drunk, is he?"

"Three beers over two hours... gimme a break," said Bucky grudgingly.

"Fair enough. See you later, Wilson."

"See you, May."

She walked off; Bucky gave Sam a sideways glance through a curtain of hair. His deep brown eyes were curious. "...who, or what, is Shield?"

"Oh. Them. The Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division. They're sort of like the FBI on steroids. They're monitoring your case since you... you were a POW. They want to make sure you're okay."

Bucky sulked. "Well, my arm is gone, so I'm obviously not."

Sam reached over to put a hand on Bucky's good shoulder. "Hey. ...hey. I know you lost a lot in the war. We all have. It's hard as hell, but you know what? You're through it, now, and you're gonna start to heal. Focus on that."

Bucky threw back the beer, not responding.

"How is Tony holding up?" Both Steve and Aria looked up to see Maria in the doorway. Her concern sounded genuine, which in turn made Steve suspicious.

"Not great. But you know, he nearly died in space."
She nodded. "The... the funeral is next week. They want you to speak at it. Something short, sweet. You know?" Her expression looked strange and her voice caught a little as she spoke.

Steve nodded. "Of course. I'll be there. I'd be honored to."

Aria reached out and grasped his hand as Maria nodded and backed away.

"You opened the box yet?"

Steve shook his head. "It's like admitting it, you know? I have so many drawings of him. I don't know what to do with them now." Steve ran his other hand over his face. And then he paused. "Huh."

"Uh-oh. I know that expression," said Aria, as Steve ran up the stairs two at a time.

Steve came outside onto the pool area and dropped four entirely full sketches right by Bucky. They were his private sketchbooks (the black binding meant no one else was supposed to look). No one else had ever looked in them before. Then Steve sat down cross-legged between Sam and Bucky.

"They're all of you," Steve said quietly. "I drew them all in the last two years. All you Buck. So don't ever think I don't care... because you've been on my mind a lot. You just gotta understand that two years ago I thought you were dead. Things are messy, complicated. I don't wanna hurt you. That's the last thing I wanna do."

Bucky turned and stared at Steve for a long few minutes. Then his gaze shifted down to the sketchbooks. He reached out and touched one without opening it.

"...I didn't want to hurt you, either. But no matter what I did, it still hurt. I just could never do right by you. Hell, the world didn't do right by you, making you like that. An omega and a sick one, to boot..." He stared at the sketchbooks with an intensity not typically seen in the general population.

Then he looked up at Steve again.

"I'm not dead. I'm alive. And I love you."

He flipped open one of the books.

From the page, a picture of a grinning man. Was it him? Bucky could barely picture himself, and this man in the drawing... he was tall, his posture straight, smiling, perhaps mid-laugh. He was clean-shaven and had short hair. He was a stranger to Bucky.

Bucky closed the book and went back to staring at the surface of the pool.

"Steve, can I see you for a quick sec?" asked Sam, rising. He took Steve's arm and practically dragged him across the deck. "...Steve. Bucky's... really not okay. His memories are shot, his brain's scrambled like an egg. I'm gonna be real with you, man, he needs like 24/7 care. Like a legit caretaker. He barely knows who he is or what year it is. ...he's really messed up, Steve. Really, really messed up."

Across the deck, Bucky sat placidly by the pool, staring at nothing in particular. His hair was a tangled mess. It had not been brushed since he left the hospital.

Sam gave Steve a look of sympathy and gave his shoulder a pat.

Steve felt a little sick. He watched the line of Bucky's shoulders as he sat by the poolside and there
was a tugging sensation in Steve's gut. It was uncomfortable and grim. He was failing him. He was trying, but he wasn't enough for Bucky.

"I can't give him that," Steve said quietly, his gaze drifting away to the floor. "I can't him 24/7." His voice broke a little, like he felt guilty.

And Steve did. He felt terrible.

"Hey man. It's not your job to give up your life for him."

Steve reached out and clasped Sam's arm tightly. "He would have done the same for me."

"But you have Tony to think about now."

"I have Tony... yeah." Steve let out a ragged breath. "So what do I do Sam? He's not safe with SHIELD. I already let him fall once," he murmured, ducking his head down. "I can't let him down again."

"Steve. You got a hero complex," said Sam firmly. He grasped Steve's shoulders and looked into his eyes. "I wasn't telling you that you had to be with him 24/7. Look, you and Tony have money. Hire a couple of nurses. Hire him a caretaker. He needs someone to explain stuff to him and to ground him in reality. When you came out of the ice, you had a whole team of people helping you out. Right now, Bucky's got no one. And don't forget, Steve, Bucky and Tony weren't the only ones at New York."

He gave Steve a pointed look before letting go of his shoulders.

Across the deck, Bucky looked up at some gulls that were wheeling above them, squawking loudly. He turned and looked over at Steve.

"He doesn't need a savior or a hero or a miracle right now, Steve. He just needs a friend," said Sam softly.

Inside, Donner was watching Bucky out the window, along with Tom and Marco.

"He doesn't seem very friendly, does he?"

"...probably with the right people. He was bein' pretty friendly toward you," said Tom with a grin.

"Oh, please. Only because he thought I was Steve."

"How 'bout that arm, huh? Looks like they fucking melted the original one off."

"Don't mention the arm," said Donner sharply. "He can't help it and he's probably self-conscious about it."

"...didn't you used to be quiet?"

"I got better," said Donner with a small smirk.

Outside, Steve worried at his lip for a moment, then said, finally, "I'll ask my therapist. Doctor Jones."

His voice soft. "She'll know some good people. Hell, maybe she'll offer to help out. She was a soldier herself; she specialises in us." He tried to a smile and clasped Sam's arm, squeezing gently.

"Thank you, for coming so quickly. You've been a great help Sam."

"You would do the same for me," Sam said, smiling back. They both looked tired, weary, but the
sentiment was genuine. That was what mattered.

"...I shouldn't have said that stuff, about the things he did under HYDRA's control. It wasn't fair," Steve added in a murmur. "He didn't do 'em. HYDRA did 'em. He wasn't in control of himself."

"Dude. You were upset. People say dumb shit when they're upset. And well... it is true. He did do them, even if he wasn't entirely in control of himself at the time."

"But--"

"I've seen the tape, remember? I know you love him Steve. Clear as day. Doesn't make it right."

Steve pulled him into a hug. Sam patted his back.

"I'll be around in a few days, alright? Call if you need anything. But I gotta go report in to SHIELD."

Steve nodded and glanced back to Bucky on the desk, meeting his gaze. "Alright."

"You gonna be okay, man?" asked Sam, placing a hand on Steve's upper arm.

"Yeah. I'm gonna go talk to him."

"Don't overdo it, okay, pal?"

"No, of course not," said Steve, turning toward the pool deck. "I feel a lot better. Really. I'm fine. ...I could do this all day."
Readjusting to Civilian Life, part II

After Sam left, Steve quietly slipped back out onto the pool side. He sat down beside Bucky, gaze fixed on the water.

"I drew all the pictures from memory, you know," he murmured. Steve tried to smile, it didn't meet his eyes. "Couldn't remember my ma's face... but I could remember yours."

Bucky stared at the water, not moving.

After a moment, he said quietly, "I don't remember anyone's face anymore. Not my mom's, or my sister's... no one's. Sometimes, I think I do. But then I realize I'm just remembering someone I killed. I killed people. I killed a lot of people, Steve. I know that. That's about all I know. That, and I'm never gonna be good enough for you."

Bucky's voice was devoid of any emotion. Somehow, that made the words worse.

"I have photos of your ma and sister. They should be yours really. You should take 'em," Steve murmured, studying Bucky's face.

Bucky put out a hand, offering it to Steve, but he didn't look at him.

"Your new Alpha's rich, huh? ...how come he hasn't bought you a nice collar yet?" Bucky looked up at the rear exterior of the house, clearly fascinated by it. And why not? Tony's mansion was possibly larger than their whole tenement building had been back in the thirties, square footage-wise. It had cost hundreds of millions of dollars and it was, like Tony, unapologetically larger than life.

Seeing it through Bucky's eyes, it was frankly a bit much. Certainly considering only two people lived there.

Steve stared at the offered hand, flesh and naked. He didn't hesitate. He took it, tangling their fingers together like it was the most natural feeling in the world. He and Bucky didn't do a lot physically, but they held hands whenever they could. Bucky's hand was rough and warm, the serum making him hot like it did Steve. The touch was still familiar and it made Steve's heart ache.

It felt comforting, grounding. Like Steve wasn't about to lose him.

"I didn't mate Tony because of his money. You know I'm better than that." If there was one thing Steve had never been, it was materialistic. He was a practical person. Even now, with all the money Tony and him had at hand. Steve never bought anything he didn't need or really want. He was never frivolous. He appreciated every penny. "Don't really do collars anymore. Turns out they're kind of oppressive. Heh." Steve didn't mention he sometimes wore one during sex. Now didn't feel like a good time for that. "Actually kind of got into a lot of omega civil rights stuff. Caused up quite a stir. Figure you would have liked to watch."

Bucky's brow furrowed a little, then he broke into a smile. A real one. "Omega civil rights? ...you mean like trying to get horseshoes into the army? ...only you, Stevie." He laughed a little. "Glad you're still gettin' into trouble." He lapsed into silence, a smile still ghosting his face, still holding Steve's hand, his thumb idly rubbing over the back of it.

"Something like that." Steve murmured. He figured explaining the concept of omega civil rights might be a bit much for one day. And whilst Steve was pained to admit to himself, it wasn't a priority in that moment. Right now the priority was Bucky. And Bucky's thumb on his hand felt nice. It kind
of made Steve never want to let go.

It was a few moments before Bucky spoke again. "...Steve? ...we're still bonded, aren't we? ...I feel like I've spent a whole lifetime trying to remember you, trying to find you, and now I have but... but you seem to be doing well for yourself and... well... I can distance it. If you want." Bucky wasn't actually sure he could. But he was willing to try. "I want you to be happy. I don't wanna be here if I'm not wanted."

Bucky's tone was oddly flat, like a drunk man trying to keep control of himself, and atonal, like English was no longer his first language. But Bucky's words were picked out carefully. There was no bitterness in them. And his facial expression never wavered.

Steve had accused him of horrible things. Bucky knew he'd never do any of those. But Steve had seemed so convinced. If that was the kind of person Steve thought Bucky was, then Bucky didn't see any point in hanging around.

But he wasn't sure what he'd do or where he'd go. Did he have any family left out there? Could he just go back to work on the docks, come home to an empty house? Maybe he could get married to a nice beta girl and try to put all this behind. He wasn't sure. His heart ached at the mere thought of their bond being distanced or severed. For his whole life, he and Steve had been inseparable, and when they had bonded, they'd taken it to a new level. Getting rid of Steve would be like cutting out part of his soul. But Bucky couldn't stand the idea of ruining what seemed like a good gig for Steve. Though he also couldn't really imagine why Steve liked his new Alpha more... he was less dominant and, although he was rich, Steve was right; he'd never cared about money, so that couldn't be it.

"Yeah. We're still bonded. I figure if I know you're in a car across the street without even seeing you, we're still bonded. Hell Buck, it's like a homing beacon on you. I think I could find you in a snow storm." He paused. "I don't want you to distance it. I really don't," Steve whispered. "I guess that's... part of the problem. I want you. But I want Tony too, and I don't wanna hurt him. I don't wanna hurt you either. It's... complicated."

Steve sighed and ducked his head down.

"The problem is...Tony isn't very dominant." Stupid thing to point out; Bucky had already noticed it. "And you are very dominant. So it's not exactly great for his self-esteem if, you know..." Steve sighed again. "Like I said. It's complicated. Which is why I had to spend my heat away from both of you. I didn't want to make things messier."

"I don't see the problem," said Bucky bluntly. "It would be messy if we were on the same level. But I'm so much more dominant than him... it's kind of obvious, right? I'm your primary Alpha. It sucks to be him but you don't get to choose your dominance. You're just born with it like that. And him being a war Alpha, he shoulda known I might come back."

He brought Steve's hand up to his face like he was going to kiss it, but instead, he simply placed the back of Steve's hand onto his cheek.

His eyes were unfocused, fixed on some point beyond the pool.

"Find me in a snowstorm," he repeated distantly. He scoffed suddenly, a mirthless little laugh. "You didn't though, did you? Ever since Azzano there was something wrong with me. That stuff they put into my veins. And when I fell... when I fell, it wasn't you that found me. It was them. They told me..." His brow furrowed. "They told me I'd be the new fist of HYDRA. I don't... remember..." He trailed off. His hand had dropped back down, bringing Steve's with it. "...there were others. But none like me. I passed every test. Vasily was so proud. He could order me to walk into water and inhale.
And I did it. I drowned myself, just to show how obedient I was... and they all clapped. I woke up, coughing it out. It burned, like fire. I couldn't get it all out. Like fire. And they were all clapping."

His voice was distant.

"Bucky..." Steve's eyes had teared up a little. The story was abhorrent. And yes. Steve should have kept looking for him. But he hadn't. They told him Bucky would have been dead after two days and he had believed them. And when Steve had plummeted that plane into the ocean, into oblivion, it had felt like he was joining him. It had made it easier.

The back door opened suddenly and it was like they were waking from a dream. Bucky blinked at the sound of Granite crying, of the homely smell of food wafting from the house.

"Steve, JARVIS is calling for you! Tony's up!" hollered Donner. "Also, Ty just called, he wants to come over! Is that okay? I told him if he's willing to brave the crowd but he just laughed and said he'd part them like Moses with the red sea what with his smell and all... hey, are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Ty's always welcome. Just warn him that Bucky might be weird about...you know." Steve wiped a hand over his face, wiping away tears too. "And yes. I'm fine."

Donner didn't look convinced but he didn't press.

Bucky got up suddenly, letting go of Steve's hand. "I need cigarettes," he declared firmly.

"What? Oh, gosh... I don't think any of us smokes... oh, wait... ARIA! ARIA, BUCKY NEEDS A CIGARETTE! ...do it outside, though, I don't want Granite inhaling it. Steve, should I tell Ty to come or...?"

Bucky stalked toward the house, whatever memories he had having vanished with the interruption.

He nearly collided with Tony on his way toward the living room to seek out Aria (who looked like, he had no idea, but that wasn't going to stop him). Tony was stumbling a little, groggy from sedatives, in a silk robe. His dander rose at Bucky, but Bucky barely acknowledged him, which only made Tony's dander rise more. The nerve. Dominant asshole.

"Donnie. Gin," commanded Tony, snapping his fingers.

Donner grabbed a glass. "How 'bout some tomato juice?"

"What, like a Bloody Mary?"

"No, like juice."

Tony pinched the brow of his nose, pushing his glasses up. "So help me Turing, Donner, I am not in the mood for some twelve steps bullshit. Give me my fix or get out of my house."

Donner looked like he wanted to talk back, but instead, he shot Tony a withering glare before putting a bottle of gin out of the freezer.

Steve had taken a moment to collect himself by the poolside before he walked back into the house; there, he found Tony with his robe half-open and Aria handing Bucky a few cigarettes. "Jesus," she muttered. "Your shoulder span is almost as ridiculous as Steve's." If she was phased by the metal arm she didn't show it. Aria was never phased by much at all.

"I spent like an entire year trying to make all his doubles into singles," Steve told Donner
sympathetically as he walked over; Donner was frowning as he poured Tony his gin. "He notices."

Donner sighed as he added the juice.

Bucky tried to light up inside and Aria swatted his arm. "You smoke outside." She turned to the kitchen. "Steve, we need to talk about interviews."

Steve blinked. "What?"

"People wanna know what's going on, you know. They were aliens in the sky. Aliens! Who better to reassure them?"

"Can't it wait a few days?" Just as Steve said that he received a text on his phone from Nick.

> STRIKE meeting in two days. Be there. NF

Oh boy.

"Don't worry. I can play babysitter if you're worried, Steve," Donner said, smiling.

Aria snorted and leaned against the countertop. "Yeah. For who?"

"Both of them," Steve mumbled and Donner sniggered. But really, he wasn't joking.

Tony stared out of the French windows at Bucky as he smoked on the pool deck. Bucky was more dominant, sure, but this was his house, godammit.

"I think we should start crafting statements ASAP. And not just about the aliens... the thing is... it's better to, you know... to divulge and control stories instead of just letting the press find out," said Aria. She looked like she was uncertain how, exactly, to explain. But the matter she was referring to was obvious.

Tony tensed a little. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"Well, Bucky can't just be a secret forever," said Aria. "Sooner or later, people will find out about him. And it'll look worse if they think Steve was trying to hide it."

"They're gonna go crazy no matter what," butted in Tom. "I mean, America's sweetheart, reunited with his long-lost love in battle? Come on, they'll eat it up. Plus all the drama with Tony to the side... yeah, I think it's gonna be huge no matter what. Sorry, boss," he added, because Tony had taken the bottle of gin and was topping off his drink.

"I doubt Steve's love life is as big a deal to the American public than aliens," said Aria.

Tom shrugged a little. "You'd be pretty shocked at what people like. Besides, it's kind of a heartwarming story. The press has been 24/7 coverage of the attack, just death and destruction and shit... Steve and Bucky are gonna be a breath of fresh air."

Tony groaned helplessly, grabbing a fistful of his hair. "I... I can't, I can't do this. You know what they'll say about me?"

"It's not always about you, Tony," said Aria. Tony looked shocked that she would say such a thing.

Bucky walked back in, smelling like cigarette smoke. A familiar smell to Steve. He walked over and ran a hand down Steve's back affectionately. Tony's dander spiked; Bucky shot him a withering glare and Tony dropped his eyes, his hackles flattening.
"What day is it?" he asked.

"May 12th," said Aria.

"No, what day?"

"Oh. Saturday."

"Great," said Bucky. "What church do you go to, Steve?"

Tony laughed, then realized he was serious. "We don't go to church."

Bucky looked puzzled. "How come?"

"Because if there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-seeing entity out there, I doubt he would want me to waste an hour of my time every week singing songs that are butchered translations from a book written two thousand years ago," said Tony.

Bucky looked surprised by his candidness. "Don't you ever pray?"

"Nope," said Tony. "Again, if there's some sort of godlike being out there, I doubt he cares about my petty human complaints. My very limited time on earth is better spent doing shit, not praying for it to just happen."

Bucky shot Steve a concerned look. He could not, for the life of him, understand why Steve liked this Alpha. He was a drunken, submissive atheist... what the hell had Steve been thinking? At least Howard had been charming.

The thought of Howard only reminded Bucky of just how complicated everything was. "You're Howard's son?"

"Yes, unfortunately," said Tony. "And in case you're going to tell me that my father was a god-fearing man, I'm afraid you're mistaken. Dad didn't give two shits about God and any time he talked about him, it was only for the press. He went to church once, at most twice a year, and when he did, he was usually drunk off his ass."

Bucky had certainly seen Howard tipsy, but Howard had never struck him as a lush.

How much had he missed?

His memory was a delicate thing. Before 1944, his memories were solid, but inaccessible to him except in disjointed flashes. And after 1944, he had no sense of narrative memory whatsoever. It felt like his time with Karpov had lasted both a single week, and an eternity. He couldn't stitch together anything that had happened after 1944; he had only fractured pieces, nothing that gave him any sense of time or self. As if all the memories he'd formed after 1944 were simply snippets of a movie, one that had been described to him enough times that he could picture it, but not one he really understood or could explain to another.

He tried to scratch his left arm but only touched metal. He looked down at it in surprise. Right.

"I need some diazepam. My arm's itching again."

"I'll get it." Donner passed Granite to Aria and whisked out of the room. Bucky watched him go.

"Who's he?"
"Steve's cousin," said Aria.

"...Steve's got a cousin?"

"A cousin four times removed," corrected Tony. "...apparently familial relations get weird when you've been asleep seventy years."

"I'm not sure I actually believe in God anymore Buck," Steve murmured, gaze fixed on the floor. And for the first time since waking up, he felt guilty for it. God had just disappeared. He was a constant gap in Steve's life, a tug in his chest. But he couldn't make himself believe. He just couldn't. "Sorry. But if you do want to go to church, I'm sure there is one nearby."

Aria went quiet, pressing her lips together. "So... how do you feel about making a statement Steve?"

"I...I don't know. I don't want to attract even more public attention. The last thing Bucky wants is scrutiny right now. And..." Steve shrugged. "I don't even honestly know what we would even say right now. How can you explain Bucky coming back after so many years?"

"You did," Donner pointed out, overly cheery as he handed Bucky the medication for his arm.

Bucky popped a couple of pills, looking bothered by the whole conversation. The Steve he had known had been an altar boy. The future had changed everything, even his best friend and his omega.

He got up wordlessly and stalked off to the living room. He had no purpose. Without orders, he wasn't sure what to do with himself; he sat on one of the low, fancy couches to stare and wait.

In the kitchen, Tony polished off his juice.

"Welp. I'm gonna go down to the shop, work on my suit," he announced, getting up. "If you're gonna make any statements about the enormous pile of shit we've found ourselves in, run it by Pepper, would you?"

He swept out before Aria could answer, walking unsteadily out, toward the stairs down to the garage.

Passing through the living room, he noted Bucky sitting there. Not fidgeting, not listening to music, just... sitting.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Nothing."

"...what do you mean, nothing? You can't just do nothing."

"Waiting."

"For what?"

Bucky blinked a few times. "I don't know."

"Jesus, at least put some music on, you're creeping me out. JARVIS!"

A moment later, Carry on my Wayward Son was playing. Bucky's brow furrowed. "What's this?"
"Kansas," said Tony. "...listen, you can't live in my house without at least a passing knowledge of good music. Hold on, lemme get my guitar. JARVIS, mute. Pay attention, Manchurian candidate, this is important."

He walked over to the corner where he kept a few of his Stratocasters and pulled one off of its stand, plugging it into the amp. He played a couple of chords to make sure it was in tune, then began playing. Bucky stared at him, baffled.

"I'm a cowboy; on a steel horse I ride; I'm wanted... dead or alive!" wailed Tony.

"What's that?"

"Bon Jovi."

"Is that a musical?"

"Jesus Christ! No! That's a band from the eighties!" He switched keys. "Cut my life into pieces; I've reached my last resort. Suffocation; no breathing; don't give a fuck if I cut my arm bleed--"

Bucky got up, crossed the room, and pulled the plug to the amp. "This music is terrible."

Tony looked thoroughly affronted. "No, this music is raw and real and way better than all the romantic tinkly crap from the forties."

"How're you suppose to dance to it?"

"You don't dance to alt rock or punk."

"Yeah, that's the problem. Can't even take a cute gal for a spin to that."

"Might I suggest--" began JARVIS.

"No, shut up, Jarv."

Bucky looked around, confused. "Who was that?"

"JARVIS. He's-- well, he's, uh, an AI system... I mean... he's like a ghost, never mind." Bucky stared at Tony. Had he gone mad? "JARVIS is a program... he's... I built him, he's like... well... he's like a mechanical... guy," finished Tony. He was not used to speaking to someone without at least a basic technical knowledge.

"...and he... recommends music?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

"Perhaps Sergeant Barnes would prefer something more contemporary. Music from the fifties or sixties is more likely to appeal to him," said JARVIS. A moment later, he was playing The Temptations.

Bucky nodded his head. "Yeah. This is music." Tony wrinkled his nose. "...what?" asked Bucky. "Ain't you never took a girl dancing before? ...boy, are you missing out." He walked over to Tony; Tony's hackles flattened in submission.

Bucky took his hand. "Follow my lead."

"What? " 
"Follow my lead," repeated Bucky. "...I taught Steve to dance, too, I'll show you." It had been a long time since Bucky was in a position to teach anyone anything; he took Tony's hand (Tony squawked indignantly) and pulled him over. Tony just barely managed to shove the guitar back onto its stand before Bucky dragged him away. "Right foot... left foot... right, over, back, now step away-..." He stepped back, twirled Tony, then dipped him. "--and that's when you'd go in for a kiss."

"Stop trying to woo me, Barnes. I've gotten way more tail than you."

"Doing what, playing that awful music? Do they sleep with you to get you to stop?" asked Bucky, grinning.

Tony matched his steps easily. "Uh, no, by being brilliant and charming. You should try it sometime." Bucky laughed. Tony snorted a little. "You know, they say when the student is ready, the master appears."

"You, the master of charm? You're yankin' my leg," replied Bucky.

"I ooze charisma, Barnes. Everyone knows it."

"And yet you can't dance worth a damn."

"I'm keeping up!"

"Only because I'm going slow."

Off to the side, Steve and Aria had silently appeared from the kitchen and were standing against the far wall. Steve watched Tony and Bucky dancing with wide eyes, not quite believing it. Aria stood next to him, arms crossed over her chest as she chewed on a piece of watermelon gum.

"Huh," she said. Steve was inclined to agree with her.

He was so confused...were Tony and Bucky getting on or weren't they? Where had the lines been drawn? Who was allowed to hold hands with who? Who was allowed to kiss who? What was actually going on here?

The front door opened and Ty walked in; he paused, confused. Bucky and Tony were stepping around the living room to The Temptations. "Am I interrupting?"

Tony looked over. "Hey, Ty."

Bucky jerked away from Tony; his hackles spiked. Tony took a vicious pleasure in Bucky's abrupt state of discomfort. Bucky stared at Ty, horrified, muscles tense.

Ty held up his hands. "My apologies. I know, my smell is disconcerting. I'm Tiberius... a friend of Steve and Tony's. You must be Bucky."

Bucky didn't budge, appraising Ty warily. He didn't acknowledge that he'd been spoken to.

"Bucky's kind of anti-social," said Tony.

"A moment ago you two were waltzing around the room together," pointed out Ty.

"Yeah, 'cause Barnes mistakenly thinks he has more game than me. ...he doesn't," added Tony breezily. "JARVIS, put on some real music... I'm going down to the shop."

He swept out as JARVIS changed the music from The Temptations to Drowning Pool. Ty watched
him go, then looked back to Bucky. Bucky was staring; his upper lip twitched in a snarl when Tiberius made eye contact with him.

Ty was used to that response. He smoothed down his tie and walked past Bucky toward the kitchen to find Steve.

Steve was already striding out into the living room to greet him.

"Hey Ty," Steve breathed as the man walked over. He allowed himself to be pulled into a light, one-armed hug.

"It's good to see you. The news looked rather, well..." Tiberius smiled a little tightly. "It looked rather extreme."

"That's one word for it. Can I get you a drink?"

"Yes, tea would be lovely."

They moved back into the kitchen. Steve put on the kettle.

"Who was that man? Is that...?" asked Tiberius, clearly curious about Bucky.

"Yes. That's--" Steve tapped the back of his neck. "--number one. Or two. Whatever order."

"And Tony is okay with him here?"

"I don't know. I really don't," Steve breathed, pouring steaming water out into cups. "But he has no where else to go. And well..." he shrugged. "There's no where else I'd rather him be," he admitted in a murmur.

In the living room, Aria had walked over to Bucky and shoved a tablet into his hands. It was full of articles about Steve.

"This is how awesome he is. This is what he's been up to. If you really wanna get involved in that, then here it is," Aria told him, stepping back to spit her gum into a bin with impressive aim. "Things were different in the forties, I get that. But you gotta see Steve for his 21st century self now. Maybe he doesn't believe in a god, but he believes in people."

She pulled out a cigarette, heading out onto the porch. "And he believes in you." Then Aria stepped outside and lit up before taking a long drag.

Bucky looked down at the tablet, then over to the kitchen, where Tiberius and Steve were socializing, his brow furrowed in thought.

He looked down at the tablet one more time, clutching it to his chest, then went after Aria to beg for a cigarette.

Ty smiled wryly at Steve. "Seems like they're working on it. ...I suppose since they're both bonded to you, they have some sort of connection to each other, right? ...to be entirely honest I've never understood... I mean... well. I can't, you know." Ty accepted a cup of tea from Steve. "But enough about me. I wanted to come over, see if there was anything I could do for you. ...you know all of us at Status Alliance are here for you. If there's anything at all we can do..." He trailed off.

Ty, like every other person in the world, had been saturated in media over the last week. He'd watched shaky cellphone footage of aliens pouring from the wormhole, seen the iconic photo of one
of the leviathans crashing to the ground, heard the breathless eyewitness reports of the destruction, and watched the vigils for the dead on television. The news was nothing but the battle. Nothing but the invasion. Nothing but the Avengers.

It had eclipsed everything else. Project 84, once a massive news story, was dwarfed by what some called "The Incident" and others called "The Battle of New York" or "The Battle for New York." And there had been no mention at all of Bucky; Ty's first glimpse of him had been in the living room. (In real life, anyway. Ty, like most people, had seen pictures of the Howling Commandos in his history books, and had seen Bucky Barnes-- supposedly the only one who died in combat-- in plenty of black-and-white photos.) He was undeniably handsome, though there was something... off.

Ty waited until Bucky had gone outside with Aria before adding, "Is he holding up well? Was he frozen? ...did you two both get the serum?"

"Yeah. He got a version of my serum, an 'imperfect' one," Steve said, marking quote marks in the air. He grabbed his own cup. It was green tea. Steve had found he'd grown fond of it. He took a sip and then made to sit down at the bar.

"I think he's gonna be okay. I don't know. He doesn't remember stuff right and he thinks we can just easily be a trio because Tony is way less... you know." Steve shrugged. "Back in my day, once your Alpha came back, you kicked your war Alpha to the curb and the war Alpha distanced the bond. Or, you know, fought the other Alpha for the right to have you." Steve winced. "Simpler times, huh?"

Ty tilted his head at him.

"But it's not that simple now," Steve murmured. "I love both of them. Tony's insecure and when... when we first got together he wanted a trio. A normal one, with a woman." Ty didn't look surprised. "And I was, well, very upset about it. I guess I'm... bad at sharing. Now I feel like a hypocrite."

"So you don't feel like you can ask for this," Ty hummed.

"I have no right to. The problem is--" Steve sighed. "If I had to chose... I don't know, it's hard. Tony's just been through so much. But Bucky needs me more, doesn't he? He's so..." Steve stared out the window at Bucky's figure, standing beside Aria. "Lost."

"Are either of them asking you to choose?" asked Ty curiously.

There was something oddly refreshing about having somewhere who was asking him these sorts of domestic questions instead of questions about aliens.

"Not yet. Not exactly," Steve murmured. "But Bucky expects to be top dog..." He trailed off, pressing his lips together.

Thankfully, Steve didn't have to elaborate; Bucky walked back in, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He froze, dander spiking. "What's wrong with you?" he demanded, staring in horror at Tiberius.

Aria appeared behind him. "Bucky. No smoking in the--"

"Botched arvicolectomy," said Ty without a hint of unease.

"A what?"
"They cut out my bonding gland, trying to turn me into an Alpha."

Bucky pulled the cigarette from his mouth and barked out a laugh. "You can't turn a horseshoe into an Ace!"

Ty gave him a tense smile. "Yes, obviously. But in the eighties they thought they could."

"Well, that's stupid."

"Congratulations, Buck. You're already more progressive than a ton of modern-day Americans," said Marco.

"--yes! Aria gave me her tablet and I understand now what you want," said Bucky. Considering he'd only been gone ninety seconds, that seemed unlikely. Aria was trying to drag him back outside but he was ignoring her and she didn't have the strength to move him. "You want to be treated like an Alpha, right? Omegas get to go to college and join the army and vote, right? ...right?"

"That's... more or less correct," conceded Tiberius.

Bucky beamed. "Okay, great. Now can we go home?"

Steve raised a brow at Bucky. "No, I don't want to be treated like an Alpha. Just like a person. With the same rights as you do."

"Steve is home," added Aria sternly.

"But me and him--"

"--aren't going anywhere," finished Aria, snatching the cigarette from Bucky's mouth and crushing it on the tabletop. "Steve lives here, with Tony, and that's not changing unless Steve decides it. Besides, this is the safest place for him right now. The crowd outside is bigger than ever. Pepper rerouted all your fan mail to Stark Industries and it's literally filling up a warehouse."

Bucky put his elbows on the countertop and stretched out toward Steve, clearly wanting to hold hands. "I just want you to be happy, Stevie. That's all. Tell me what you want and I'll make sure you get it. ...he's no good for you, Steve, you guys've been bonded two years and don't even have whelps yet."

Tiberius snorted and Aria pinched the bridge of her nose. "Omegas don't have to have babies anymore, Buck. Steve and Tony chose not to have babies because they were busy with work."

Bucky ignored her. "I talked to Sam Wilson, I procured a tablet, and I caught up on everything I missed. I did exactly what you said," he said. "I know about Bon Jovi and omega rights and Fast Times at Ridgemont High. I'm ready for us to start over now."

Both Tom and Marco guffawed, but Bucky was looking at Steve completely sincerity.

"Buck," said Tiberius. "...I don't think Steve is leaving."

Bucky ignored him.

"Are you ignoring me because I'm an omega? You'd better get used to omegas being lippy. We have the same rights as you do, now," said Tiberius. "And right now, Steve is in charge. You can't tell him where to go or what to do."

"And you can't buy us anymore, either," added Donner from the kitchen, bouncing Granite on his
Bucky's brow furrowed. "Do all these people live here?"

"No, we're just Steve's friends," said Donner.

"I'd like to spend some time with you alone. Maybe we could catch a movie show or something?" offered Bucky hopefully. He felt like Steve would come to his senses and realize how ridiculous he was being sooner rather than later. Bucky was obviously a superior Alpha to Tony. But Steve had always been stubborn. Bucky really did want to try harder for him, to be better for him. Now that Steve wasn't sick anymore, they could be happy. Bucky didn't have to say no, didn't have to be the bad guy anymore.

"You two could go over Bucky's personal effects," suggested Aria. "...might help him with his memory. Pepper put everything in a box in your studio, Steve. His dogtags and all those old pictures--"

"My tags!" repeated Bucky, immediately excited to have his dogtags back. "I thought I lost those! ...wait, what studio? You have a studio?"

Steve stared at the offered hand and finally took it with a sigh. "Alright. I'll show him. Just--"

"Stop worrying about Tony. If he wants something, he should goddamn ask for it," Aria said, swatting at his arm.

Steve nodded and led Bucky upstairs.

The tension ebbed out of Bucky's body and he let Steve lead him by the hand upstairs.

The studio had drawings over inch of the wall now. Pepper sometimes joked that they should open it up as an exhibition. There were a few stray canvases in the centre and sketchbooks too, along with the picture of Phil he'd drawn during his heat, which he had peeled off of the wall. (There was now a large hole in the wallpaper back in SHIELD's New York safehouse.)

Steve hadn't drawn Bucky much on the walls, and the sketches of him were smaller. Peggy was probably featured the most.

Bucky whistled appreciatively at Steve's studio. "...you got better. Wow. Steve, this looks just like Peg!" said Bucky, staring at the wall.

"Sorry... there wasn't a lot of you. Drawing you made Tony feel more self-conscious," Steve murmured. "But there are those sketchbooks of you."

By the canvases sat a box full of Bucky's things. Steve walked over, tugging the other down to sit down on the floor with him. Bucky sat with his legs crossed, watching Steve attentively.

"This is all yours Buck."

Steve glanced over at him. "You remember any of it?"

Bucky pulled out the dog tags and held them up, examining them. He traced his name, mouthing it silently: **James Buchanan Barnes.** After a moment, he slipped the tags around his neck, and went to rummaging through the box.

"...no," he said quietly, sounding disappointed. "He doesn't even look like me." He pulled out a
faded, sepia-toned photograph. It was taken on a dock and it showed a short, skinny Steve, Bucky in his uniform, arm around him. Bucky stared at it for a little bit, touching his face in the picture. But he didn't know himself. He knew Steve. But he found the soldier with his arm around Steve to be unfamiliar.

He pulled out another photo and got a tiny, nostalgic smile. "I know these people. There's you, Dum Dum, Falsworth, Jimmy, Jacques, and Gabe... so this one must be me." He pointed to himself. He didn't remember this photo being taken. "...we all look like Alphas, huh? You wouldn't know," he said. "...I remember the dominance hierarchy. Me, then Jimmy, then Gabe, then Jacques, then Dum Dum and Falsworth. But Falsworth was a cocky little SOB, wasn't he? He didn't even care one bit. He strutted around like he owned the place." Bucky's smile broadened a little and he pulled out another old photo, examining it. He brushed a stray lock of hair from his face. "...I don't miss the war," he said suddenly. It was a strange thing to say. Strange, but true. Sometimes Steve might have said, too. It was just to reminisce, to become nostalgic, looking at these pictures, remembering their friends. But they weren't just a group of friends. They were soldiers. They fought and bled and cried beside each other. None of the photos showed that.

"They think I have PTSD," Steve said. "Because I need to oppose stuff, won't let go of the war. All that crap." He shrugged. "But I don't think it is that. I think I was always obsessed with opposing something, you know? I always needed a fight. I had to have some opposing force against me else it was like... like I couldn't function. And I figure I've kind of always been like that. Don't think therapy is gonna fix shit really." Steve sighed. "They're gonna make you go into therapy too. For sure. Maybe they'll give you my doctor. She's not with SHIELD and she's good."

Bucky hummed noncommittally as he pawed through the old photographs.

"Maybe...maybe I could draw you again sometime," Steve suggested tentatively. "Get some sketches that look just like you Buck. Would you like that?"

Bucky smiled at Steve; this time it was neither a stiff, artificial wince nor a coy smirk. It was Bucky's real smile, the rarest of them all. "I would like that a lot," he said. He let out a breathy laugh. "You always were a fighter. You were such a dumb punk, Steve... you never knew when to run away or cut your losses... you got creamed in so many back alleys. If there was an award for getting your ass kicked, boy, you'd have it."

He lapsed into a nostalgic silence, still smiling; he reached over and gently took Steve's chin in his hand, leaning forward to kiss his bottom lip softly.

He didn't know what PTSD was, but to him, Steve hadn't changed a bit. Not on the inside, anyway. He was still that dumb punk kid from Brooklyn who was always picking fights on the street, not knowing when to stay down, never able to keep his mouth shut.

He pulled away gently, still smiling, and ran his thumb over Steve's jaw and cheek. Everything felt right again. He knew his memory was bad, his mind slightly askew, but being with Steve felt... right. It felt like home. It felt perfectly natural and even if nothing else made sense to him, this sure did.
Bucky's smile made Steve's heart skip a beat despite himself. Steve's chest felt tight and it was like he couldn't breathe. And then Bucky was touching his face and he was kissing him, and he could have never have leaned away from him. It was the most natural feeling in the world, like emerging from water and taking his first breath.

Steve was knocked speechless, overwhelmed by a confusing sense of both guilt and giddiness.

Steve and Bucky sat on the floor of Steve's studio, alone, gazing into each other's eyes, when JARVIS interrupted them. "Sirs."

Bucky jumped, looking around wildly. The voice was coming from nowhere and everywhere.

"Drs. Brennan, Brazinski, and Gleason are downstairs for you."

"Who's that?" said Bucky in alarm, trying to ascertain where the voice was coming from, who was talking to them. It sounded like a posh British gentleman. For some reason it was passingly familiar but Bucky couldn't quite ID it.

"Dr. Brennan and Dr. Brazinski are psychologists from SHIELD. Dr. Gleason is an omegecologist," replied JARVIS, misunderstanding.

"Who are you?"

"JARVIS," said JARVIS.

Bucky blinked. That name... "Edwin? ...Howard's boy?" He had a sudden memory of an omega, a tall, slender man with a British accent, one who shadowed Howard with the sort of loyalty that made other Alphas jealous. Was Edwin still alive?

"No, sir. I'm just a rather very intelligent system that emulates Edwin Jarvis's voice. The human Edwin Jarvis passed away in 1986."

Bucky looked at Steve in alarm, not understanding. How could Edwin be speaking to them if--

He remembered Tony explaining that JARVIS was like a ghost. He got goosebumps.

"Don't be freaked out by him Buck. He's sort of a computer. It's... hard to explain." Steve breathed, taking Bucky's hand before he led him downstairs.

The three doctors were sitting in the main room of Tony's home on white leather couches; they looked up as Steve and Bucky descended from the staircase, and Gleason rose to greet them.

Gleason pulled Steve into a hug when he saw him. "It's good to see you in one piece, Captain," he said, clearing his throat as he backed away and straightened out his shirt. He glanced over at Bucky, noticing the arm instantly. "And, erm, this is...?"

"Yes."

Steve looked at Brazinski. He had nothing against her, just who she worked for. "Bucky won't be
having a SHIELD therapist. I made that pretty clear already."

"You're more than welcome to seek out additional help for Sergeant Barnes," said Dr. Brazinski, "but SHIELD does require us to perform periodic evaluations on him to ensure he doesn't pose a risk to national security. I'm sorry, Captain, but you don't have any say in this."

"I'm here on behalf of the United Nations. I work for NIH, not SHIELD," piped up Dr. Brennan.

Bucky looked over the two of them warily. Both were women. Dr. Brennan was an Alpha, but she wasn't very dominant and he didn't find her threatening. She had long dark hair and freckles; Dr. Brazinski had brown hair and was wearing glasses. He didn't dislike either, but he didn't trust them, either.

And then there was Dr. Gleason. He was, shockingly, an omega. JARVIS had said he was an omegaeconomist, which Bucky supposed was a special word for omega doctors. The idea of an omega being a doctor was wild. Did they have special medical schools for omegas in the future? Were they allowed to practice on Alphas or only other omegas? He was curious but it wasn't his place to ask. He hung back by Steve, examining the three doctors warily.

They examined him back. He didn't look like he had brushed his hair since the hospital, nor slept at all. The circles under his eyes were dark and heavy.

"Hello, James," said Dr. Brazinski. "Do you remember me? We met in the hospital."

Bucky shook his head.

"Well, that's okay. Is there somewhere the two of us can talk?"

Bucky looked at Steve.

"The second floor lounge is unoccupied," chimed JARVIS. Both doctors looked around for where JARVIS's voice was coming from.

"Unfortunately, we do have to complete our evaluations separately, so we're going to need him for about three hours every day," said Dr. Brennan. "My assessment will only take a week, however. ...I don't know how long SHIELD will need him for."

"Indefinitely," said Dr. Brazinski.

"I don't have that much to say," said Bucky.

The doctors smiled at him; Dr. Brazinski gently coaxed him toward the stairs, leaving Dr. Brennan, Steve, and Gleason alone.

David smiled at Steve. "...politics, huh? I'm here partially as a doctor but mostly as a friend," he said. "Don't worry, I won't ask you any questions." He chuckled a little at Steve's look of relief. "I also thought, if you needed, I could provide you with some... er... guidance. Being double-bonded is not especially common for us omegas... jealousy problems, you know."

Upstairs, Bucky and Dr. Brazinski settled into the lounge. Bucky eyed the door cautiously. The lounge was nice and there were at least two escape routes, the door (closed, but unlocked) and the glass door that led out onto a balcony (closed, unknown if locked, but the glass could probably be broken). Bucky sat on the edge of the couch stiffly while Dr. Brazinski pulled a notebook out of her bag.
"So... you understand I'm from SHIELD and I'm here to make sure you're safe, right, Mr. Barnes?"

Bucky nodded because he felt like she wanted him to agree.

"How are you doing?"

Bucky looked hopelessly lost at the question. How was he doing? ...thinking about it, he wasn't sure. He shrugged a little.

"...can you tell me your name, Mr. Barnes?"


"Very good. May I call you James? ...do you know how you got here?"

"I came with Steve on a plane from New York," said Bucky.

"And do you know what year it is?"

"Nineteen--" He hesitated because he thought he saw a flicker of emotion on her face. "--I don't know."

"That's okay. It's 2012."

Bucky nodded his agreement.

"... you don't seem very phased by that."

Bucky didn't respond.

"How do you like California?"

Bucky shrugged. He wasn't sure why she was asking about California at all. Who cared about California, anyway? Bucky hadn't ever even been to California.

"...do you remember HYDRA at all, James?"

Bucky considered this question carefully. "Yes. They told me I would be the new fist of HYDRA. They said we could fix the world. Free people from the oppressive liberty of democracy and make the world a more productive place where everyone is equal and working toward a single noble goal. It's a righteous cause."

"Do you believe that?"

Bucky shrugged.

"Who told you that?"

"Colonel Karpov."

"Who's he?"

"My handler." The words felt wrong in Bucky's mouth for some reason. He tried to think of another word, but he couldn't. Colonel Karpov was not his Alpha (he was an Alpha himself) and not his friend. Mentor, maybe? "Mentor," amended Bucky.

"So Colonel Karpov is the one who told you what to do, and why?"
"Yes," said Bucky, who felt much better now that they were talking about something he understood. "Did you do everything he told you?"

"Yes."

"Did he ever tell you to do something you didn't like?"

Bucky stared at her blankly. He'd never considered whether or not he was supposed to like things. He just did as he was told. And sometimes afterwards Vasily would praise him, or brag about him, or give him a cigarette. Which he liked. And if he did well then he didn't need retraining sessions, in the chair. He didn't like those.

"I like following orders," said Bucky neutrally.

"What if he told you to do something you didn't want to do? What would you do then?"

Bucky stared.

"...James? If Colonel Karpov told you to do something you didn't like, would you do it?"

"He-- but he wouldn't. I mean, yes," said Bucky. "Yes, of course. But he only tells me to do things that are for the greater good. For the cause."

"The cause?"

"Yes, for the good of humanity. People just don't understand."

"Don't understand what?"

"I... don't know."

"Did Colonel Karpov tell you that you were doing good? That HYDRA was helping humanity?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that?"

"Yes," said Bucky without hesitation.

"Where is Colonel Karpov now?"

"Probably Cleveland."

"...Ohio? Why would he be in Ohio?"

"Because no one appreciated his genius. Project Guiding Star was ahead of its time," parroted Bucky. "Someday they'll see."

Dr. Brazinski paused, frowning at her notebook. "Project Guiding Star," she repeated, making a note. "Can you tell me about that?"

Bucky couldn't because he actually had no idea what it was. He shrugged.

"Do you know what the Winter Soldier program is?"

It sounded familiar. Bucky nodded.
"Can you tell me about that?"

"Colonel Karpov called me that. The Winter Soldier."

"Is that your name?"

"No. Just a nickname. Like Актив один or солдат or Bucky."

"He called you Bucky?"

"No, he called me солдат."

Dr. Brazinski made another note. She already knew Director Fury was not going to be happy. Not one bit.

"How are you holding up Steve?" David asked, more serious now Bucky had gone upstairs. Steve looked a little forlorn at the question. "You know, it must be strange, having him around... after what he did."

"He doesn't remember it." Steve shrugged.

"So it's like he didn't do those things?" Brennan said. "You can't be angry at him for something he doesn't remember doing."

Steve really didn't want her to start analysing him. But he supposed it couldn't be helped. He moved to take his tea again, Ty watching him warily.

"You really shouldn't feel guilty about this Steve," he said and then before Steve could protest he added. "I know you do. I can see it in your face."

"You saved the world," Gleason pointed out. "You should be celebrating."

"How can I celebrate when I don't even know what the hell those two are playing at?" Steve sighed, ignoring Brennan's gaze.

"Well, why don't you ask them?"

Steve snorted. "Asking them what they want? That's a dangerous idea."

Ty looked down, adjusting his cufflinks. "I think it's fairly obvious what they want. You."

"What's dangerous about asking them?" asked Dr. Brennan.

"Oh, please," said Gleason. "Don't be coy, we're all Alphas and omegas here. You know the two of them probably want to tear each other to shreds. ...nonetheless, Tony's a logical man. I think if you approached this the right way... well. I've seen a successful trio before with two Alphas."

"Just one?" asked Ty.

Gleason winced a little. "Just one. But one is proof that it's possible. And Tony's low dominance--"

"But Barnes isn't," said Brennan.

"If you don't want him, I'd gladly take him," said Ty suddenly, with a small ghost of a smile. He
hadn't expect Barnes to be as handsome as he was. Even with the tangle of long hair. "I'm kidding," he added unnecessarily, sobering quickly. "...where's Tony, anyway?"

"Mr. Stark is downstairs working on his suits and listening to Trapt. He requests not to be disturbed," said JARVIS.

"Whether you like it or not, a bond's a bond. We can't distance or sever them. Only Alphas can," said Gleason somberly. "So it's in your best interest to make this trio work out. ...since their dominances are vastly different they'll probably form a hierarchy quickly and then there won't be any fighting."

"Is that what happened with the trio you saw?" asked Ty.

"Ah, no. Actually the two Alphas in question were very low dominance and pansexual. They, er, also liked each other."

"...have either of them shown any aggression toward each other?" asked Dr. Brennan. "They seemed to be getting along well enough in the hospital."

"No aggression," Steve murmured, shaking his head. "But... sometimes Bucky has sort of made Tony... stand down, you know? It could have been messy."

"But their difference in dominance means it won't be," Gleason pointed out.

"You guys are making it sound so simple," Steve sighed.

Tiberius shrugged. "Maybe it is."

Steve shook his head. "Maybe for Bucky. But Tony couldn't deal with it."

"You should ask him," Ty pointed out.

"He would just say yes anyway."

"What if you gave him certain... benefits?" Gleason asked and Steve frowned, tilting his head.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for example... if you're allowed to sleep with Bucky then he could sleep with whom he wanted to. Have you discussed having an open bond?"

Steve blinked and gave nothing away. "Huh."

"It's only a suggestion," said David quickly. "Lots of trios have to come to compromises... alternatively, you could just--"

The door slammed open and Banksy jogged in, wearing a dark, burgundy suit; his jacket was open to a dark grey shirt and tie. His blond shoulder-length hair was tied back in its usual small ponytail.

"Okay, I'm here! Whew, that crowd! ...Steve!" Banksy threw his arms around Steve.

Dr. Brennan perked up a little. "Thomas Banksy?"

"The one and only!"

"...big fan of the show."
Banksy beamed. "Thank you! Oh my God, Steve, I watched the whole thing, I'm so glad you and Tony are okay, I was scared to death for both of you." He squeezed Steve tightly. "You were so brave, I can't even imagine, if there's anything I can do--"

Bucky walked in with Dr. Brazinski, who did not look thrilled.

Banksy's eyes widened. "Hubba hubba. Who is this?"

"This is James Barnes. Steve's other Alpha," said David.

"...you have excellent taste, Steve. So here's Brawn... but where's Brains?"

"Downstairs," said David.

"He's all yours," said Dr. Brazinski to Dr. Brennan; Dr. Brennan climbed to her feet and gestured for Bucky to follow her. Bucky smiled at Steve before letting Brennan lead him out of the room.

Ty and David waited for Dr. Brazinski to leave before they filled Banksy in.

"We were just discussing how Steve should deal with... er... Brawn and Brains," said David. "Trios can be difficul--"

"Flattery," said Banksy immediately. "That's all. Alphas have fragile egos. You can twist them around your little finger if you flatter them. The only thing they care about more than dominance is omega attention. Give it to them and you'll be blissfully bonded with zero problems."

David frowned. "I don't think it's fair to say that all Alphas--"

"Oh, psh, come on, don't act like it's not true! Steve, ask any omega out there. Ask George, ask Donner, even. Alphas are like putty in our hands; you just need to use your omega wiles. And don't even consider celibacy, it would be a crime not to indulge in Brawn, he's a tall glass of water if ever I saw one." He let out an appreciative whistle.

Steve was turning pink; Ty and David both looked a little uncomfortable.

"You just turn their attention from each other to yourself. Flatter the hell out of them. Laugh at their jokes, flirt... you have to let them think they're in control. But it's you, Steve. You're in control when you get an Alpha's attention. They're not as smart as us, you know. They do too much thinking with their knots. They're very easy to manipulate."

Ty was nodding, but David was frowning.

"I don't think manipulation is the healthiest way for a relationship to--" began David.

"Don't listen to him. He's an omegecologist, he doesn't do Alphas. I'm the Alpha expert here. Steve, you have everything going for you; you are a gorgeous specimen of a human being. If anyone deserves a trio with two of the most to-die-for Alphas in southern California, it's you. Stop worrying about them and start worrying about you. Have fun. Go crazy. Flirt like there's no tomorrow. The more you give them, the more they'll want, and they'll be too interested in you to even notice each other."

David shook his head. "No, I think compromise--"

"Shush, you."

David glared at him. "Have you ever used your little technique to separate a pair of ferals? Or is this
an untested hypothesis?"

"I have, actually. And not just any two ferals. Obadiah Stane and Howard Stark, who, you might recall, has a certain relation to one Tony Stark." He turned to Steve. "They got into a brawl backstage on the show back in the seventies. Didn't you ever wonder why Bozzy let me on the show in the first place? I'm an adorable omega and what do I do? I flatter the hell out of all of the puffed-up, self-important Alphas who come on the show. And we never have fights. Because everyone's too busy trying to impress me to even notice each other. Everything thinks I'm cute, and they have no idea that I'm stringing them along. Ever notice how aggressive Boz would get in interviews, even though he wasn't all that dominant? That's because the guests were always distracted by yours truly."

This speech was ended abruptly with a squeal of delight from Banksy. "Granite, baby! Hello! Oh my goodness, you're so big now!"

Donner had appeared behind Steve without anyone noticing; he passed the baby to Banksy, smiling. Granite stared up at Banksy with stark curiosity while he cooed over her; after a moment she gave him a gummy smile, infected by his excited mood.

"Wook at her wittle itty bitty toesies! Isn't she just a soft wittle pear? Yes she is, she's a little pear and I wuv her and I'm gonna gobble her up," babbled Banksy, cuddling Granite.

Granite squealed in gleeful delight at the attention.

David looked like he'd had enough. "Well, I'd better go. Steve, call me if you'd like to talk sometime," he said, rising. Steve probably could have guessed David and Banksy would have radically different ideas; David was a member of the Horseshoe Society and far more conservative in his ideas than Banksy, who, Steve had come to appreciate, was something of a radical.

"How the hell do you make both of them feel like they're in control?" Steve asked, terribly confused by Banksy's whole hypothesis. "Also, I'm terrible at flirting."

Banksy scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous Steve. Just look at you."

Steve blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"You don't gotta flirt, per se. I think walking around with no clothes on would do the job!"

Steve really did turn bright red then. "David! I'll show you out," he said in a high-pitched tone, rising.

The doctor offered him a small smile as Steve caught up to him.

"Aren't you staying?" asked Steve hopefully.

"I have a lot of calls today. It really was just a drop in... but call me if you need anything Steve." He put a hand on his arm. "I mean it."

Steve nodded. "Thank you David. Thank you so much."

"You've got this Steve. Just remember, your Alphas can't be happy if you're not."

And then Gleason left. Steve couldn't help thinking... surely it went both ways? Didn't his happiness also depend partly on Bucky and Tony's?
Steve walked back in to find Ty admiring Granite, a strange sort of smile on his features. Banksy still looked rather hyper.

"Of course, not all trios have to lead to threesomes Steve," Banksy continued sagely the moment Steve re-entered the room.

And the blush was back. Steve cleared his throat. "I hadn't even thought about--"

Banksy swatted his arm. "Of course you have."

Yeah. Okay. He had.

Steve swallowed.

"I just... don't want to be a hypocrite."

Banksy scoffed. "Please! How's it hypocritical? It's not like Tony didn't know you weren't previously bonded." Steve didn't have a chance to correct him, because Banksy was still rambling. "Get Tony up here, I'll show you, it's easy, Steve. Take off your shirt and they'll lose it. JARVIS! Tell Tony to get his butt up here! I need to teach Steve how to flirt! Show him that us omegas can get anything we want if we play to an Alpha's ego correctly! But don't tell Tony that last part."

"Of course, Mr. Banksy," said JARVIS.

"Are you in preheat or something?" asked Steve in alarm. He was used to Banksy being hyper, but not this hyper.

Banksy ignored him. "He's fun, isn't he? I wish I had a robot friend," he hummed. "...stop blushing, Steve, you should be proud! This is the future! An omega with two Alphas? It's like totally subverting the traditional notion of a trio! I'm proud of you! ...now shaddup, watch and learn"

He turned expectantly toward the steps to the basement. Summoned by JARVIS, Tony staggered up, looking tired and defeated. He'd at least thrown on a pair of pajama pants under his open robe. "What?" he demanded crankily.

"Hi, Tony!" said Banksy. He gestured Tony over. "I just wanted to say hi. And, you know, thank you. For saving the world."

"Yeah, well," grumbled Tony.

"...Steve told me about Bucky."

Tony's hackles pricked. "Yeah, his other Alpha?"

"Mm-hm," said Banksy, crossing his legs, unfazed. "I think it's so incredibly... compassionate. Letting him into your home, taking him in... it's so selfless and kind. I'm honestly really impressed."

Tony cocked his head. "...it wasn't really my idea. Steve--" he began.

"Oh, no, no, don't be humble! It's your house and you're Steve's Alpha... I mean, you could have said no, but you didn't. That's just the most noble thing I've ever heard. ...not that you're probably threatened or anything. I mean, you're like, the world's richest, smartest--"

"Third smartest," amended Tony humbly.

Banksy laughed lightly. "Oh my God, when did you get so humble? ...Steve, this guy's the whole...
package! I swear, if only you were unbonded when we met, I would've snatched you up in a heartbeat. C'mere, you."

Tony grinned and walked over to Banksy, flopping onto the couch next to him; Banksy threw his arms around Tony's neck and kissed his cheek.

"And you know what? I was thinking, you should come on the show, just you, and tell everyone about your trio!" announced Banksy.

Steve was prepared for Tony to argue that they weren't in a trio, but he didn't.

Instead, Tony's smile wavered. "What? No... no, I don't want people to think... I mean..."

"To think what, that you've actually got a soft side? What better person to announce it than you? I mean, everyone loves you and Steve, but you're the Alpha. And you're already a hero. Everyone loves Iron Man. This is a whole new perspective. Not just a hero who saves the world, not just a beloved playboy billionaire, but a guy who really, truly cares about others. Who puts his omega first. Now that's a real Alpha. Seriously, I think it's like, the noblest thing ever. I bet Steve's just creaming his pants over it right now."

Tony look of uncertainty had changed to one of smugness. "Well, I mean, I am a philanthropist. No one really gives me credit for that but you know, I don't just fly around in a suit looking badass. I'm really into charity and stuff."

Steve watched with wide eyes and was blown away by the entire scene. He wouldn't even call it flirting, no. It was more than that. Banksy was incredible. Of course, it probably helped that everyone was a little bit in love with him. Steve certainly didn't consider himself immune to his charm.

Banksy laughed again. "You have, like, everything, Tones. Steve, you are so lucky. I wish I had an Alpha--" He broke off suddenly, his gaze growing distant. The light-heartedness had evaporated.

"...Banksy?" asked Tony, looking over.

"Sorry," said Banksy, voice cracking. "Just... need a second." He got up abruptly and left the room.

Ty frowned. "Poor thing. Honestly, after Boswell died, I was worried he'd end up with Takosubo syndrome. They've been bonded for so long... he only just started actually taking care of himself again."

Tony scratched his goatee. He'd relaxed onto the couch and was sitting there, slouched, legs spread, robe open, looking like a king on his throne. The churning unease Steve had felt in his stomach had lifted.

"You know, he's kind of right, though," said Tony. "About me being, like, charitable and stuff. And me being the best person to break the news. I mean, everyone's been saying for months about Steve being triple-bonded. But he's only double-bonded, and if I just explained that... and I am his Alpha and all... maybe Pep could talk to him about that. I mean, like, it does sort of make me look awesome, right? Being cool with it?"

Ty was barely able to conceal an eye roll. "It could be like your own Project 84, Tony. Being a big civil rights leader, showing everyone an alternative trio..." said Ty. "And it would look really brave, too. Not caring what others think." His voice had a tinge of sarcasm to it, but Tony didn't seem to pick up on it.
"Yeah, it would be badass. And I don't care what others think," echoed Tony, looking thoughtful.

Ty caught Steve's eye and mouthed, *See?*

"I'll be back in a second," Steve murmured and then slipped away.

He found Banksy in one of the bathrooms looking a little teary. Wordlessly, Steve pulled him into a hug.

"You're doing so great. And I'm proud of you," Steve whispered and then kissed the top of his head. Banksy sniffed a little.

"You just saved the world. Shouldn't I be saying that to *you*?" he said, trying to lighten the mood and falling a little short.

"You just made Tony feel a hundred times better and I don't even know how. I certainly couldn't reassure him like that. I wouldn't even know how to... but you were wrong about one thing."

Banksy blinked wetly. "Hm?" he asked, patting his face with a bit of tissue.

"He didn't know I was bounded to Bucky at the start. I didn't. I thought he was dead. So Tony just has to be okay with it... he didn't really have any other choice."

"Oh." Banksy said. "...that's awkward."

"You're telling me," Steve said. He tried for a smile; Banksy smiled weakly back. "And I've never even... had sex with Bucky," he confessed. "Even though we're bonded."

Banksy swatted his arm again, suddenly bubbly again. "That's a goddamn crime! Have you seen him? Have you seen the way he looks at you?"

Steve felt a little weak at the knees.

As they walked back out Brennan was just bringing Bucky back down the stairs. He looked a little forlorn, perhaps, like she'd asked him something he hadn't managed to answer, or remember.

Tony was still sat on the couch. It looked as though Ty had been talking to him until he was distracted by Bucky re-emerging. Steve looked over at Brennan. "So? Are we done for the day?"

"Sergeant Barnes is done for today, yes. But we will have to establish a routine of sorts."

Steve nodded. "I guess so." He might not like it, but he could hardly refuse. He wanted SHIELD to think they were up for cooperating.

Then Aria marched in, tablet in hand, looking serious. She pointed at Tony. "What's this I hear about you delivering the news? Are you sure that's a good idea?"

Tony had already pulled out his phone; apparently he'd texted Aria and Pepper. "Well, it's just an idea. The thing is, I'm Steve's Alpha and, you know, it would have an impact..."

"Gotta tell your loving fanbase sooner or later," hummed Ty. "Especially if James is staying here for the foreseeable future."

"I'll be by tomorrow at two. Oh, and please help him brush his hair," said Dr. Brennan, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "...I'll see you tomorrow, James."
Bucky nodded, watching her leave.

Banksy made a beeline for Tony and flopped onto the couch beside him. "So you're really gonna do it? Oh my God. Please say you'll do it on my show. Please, Tony?" He snuggled up to Tony.

Tony's smirk was back, even though Bucky was in the room. "Well, it was your idea," he said graciously.

Aria looked confused by Banksy's behavior.

Bucky was still standing exactly where he had been left.

"James? ...you want to sit down?" asked Ty.

Bucky's hackles pricked at being addressed by Ty. Steve and Tony had gotten so used to his smell they barely reacted anymore, and had all but forgotten just how strong its effect was.

"What's wrong with you?" demanded Bucky.

"Botched arvicolectomy. They cut out my bonding gland and tried to turn me into an Alpha," said Ty, unfazed.

Bucky's brow furrowed. "Well, that's stupid. You can't turn a horseshoe into an Ace."

"Yes, we know that now. Thank you, James. Sit down," said Ty.

This time, having been commanded, Bucky sat.

...on the floor.

"Good dog," said Tony.

Banksy swatted him. "Not funny!"

"Jesus Christ," Steve muttered when Bucky made to sit on the floor. His heart lurched in his chest. What had they done to him?

Sometimes Steve idly entertained the idea of finding Karpov and killing him.

Whatever he had done, it was unforgivable.

"He meant in a chair, Buck. Sit down in a chair," said Aria gently.

Bucky got up and sat in the nearest chair, surveying the room.

Banksy caught Steve's eye and mouthed, Flirt!

Steve caught Banksy's gaze and it was hard not to turn a little pink. Steve couldn't flirt! He was useless at it. He'd made Tony laugh more than few times before when he'd been trying to lure him into bed.

"You could be on the show too Steve!" Banksy said, nudging his shoulder against Tony's.

Steve moved to sit down cross legged between Tony and Bucky. He was trying to look comfortable even though his brain was going a mile a minute.

"I dunno..."
"You'd be great!"

Bucky obviously wasn't ready for a show himself. Or anything to do with media. Steve looked almost sheepish himself. He'd never liked shows about himself; he was better at talking about causes. Not his personal life.

"People will ask questions about Bucky I can't answer."

"A lot of it is classified," Aira hummed. "But you could give people clarity. I think it's a great idea."

"But I really think Tony will be best at handling this," Steve insisted, attempting to copy Banksy's technique. "I don't want to do it... Tony's more confident in front of a camera."

Steve did find talk shows stressful. Or anything live. He didn't mind interviews so much for papers; he knew they'd always edit him more favourably.

"Oh I'm not disputing that," Banksy said, waving a hand. Steve awkwardly returned his smile, his heart hammering away in his chest. He had no idea what to say or do.

"...Buck? What do you think?" he prompted uncomfortably.

Buck's gaze turned to Steve slowly. "I don't know," he said.

"I mean, I've been giving sound bites since I was a kid. I can do it," said Tony.

"Oh, absolutely, and it would have so much more impact, you know, you being the Alpha and all," said Banksy.

"Since when were you okay with this?" asked Aria, frown deepening. "Have you been drinking?"

"Yes, obviously," said Tony.

Banksy elbowed Steve, clearly unimpressed with his flirting. "Oh, Steve, you have a stain on your shirt. Give me that, I'll throw it in the hamper for you," said Banksy, plucking at Steve's t-shirt. He gave Steve a stern look.

Both Bucky and Tony perked up a little, eyeing Steve with undisguised interest.

"What stain?" asked Aria. "I don't see a--"

Steve turned bright red then as Banksy tugged up his shirt, showing a flash of a six pack before Steve tugged it back down. He cleared his throat.

"So I'll talk to Pepper about getting you on the show, okay?" said Banksy loudly, cutting her off. "It should be scripted but, you know, you're so naturally charming and everything, it should be easy. SHIELD won't care, right? I mean, it's not about aliens, it's about your personal life. You're allowed to talk about that, right?"

"Right," agreed Tony, nodding. Bucky was nodding too.

"Well, me and Ty and Aria have to go soon. Give you three some space," said Banksy, still loudly.

"Please, don't talk about space," said Tony.

"We just can't mention the, erm, Winter Soldier stuff--" mumbled Steve, thinking about the interview. He reddened even more. "Space? We don't need space."
"Don't be silly. Your heat was just over! You must be desperate to make up some time with your Alphas..." Banksy said, giving him a pointed look.

Steve practically squeaked. Banksy had no idea. But he also had no right to ask for... any of it. Jesus.

But Steve's mind had certainly drifted once or twice, to what it would be like... especially with both of them.

Aria and Ty were backing out, being gestured at by Banksy. Steve was soon going to be left alone with the two of them.

"You guys don't have to go so soon!" Steve said, sounding a little nervous. "Stay for drinks!"

"Oh, I think we do Steve." Banksy said, squeezing his arm with a wink.

"Bye, Banksy," called Tony, who was eyeing Steve with undisguised interest. Steve was still in postheat and Tony had missed him. And Banksy was right; he was the Alpha, he was in charge, he deserved some time with his omega. He was the goddamn Iron Man and he shouldn't be sulking in the basement.

"Steve, you wanna take a nap?" he offered hopefully. "I was gonna go lie down upstairs..."

"Don't forget to brush his hair!" hollered Aria over her shoulder as Banksy herded them out. Bucky's hair was a mess. While he was in the hospital, the nurses had brushed it for him and tied it back for him. Now loose, no one had helped him with it and it was clear that Bucky was incapable of doing it himself.

"Who brushed your hair before?" asked Tony.

Bucky looked surprised at this question. He reached up to try to drag his fingers through his hair, clearly a bit surprised to discover that his hair had grown out to his shoulders. "I don't know. Karpov," he said. "...he took care of me," he added, sounding almost sad. He missed him. The world has been simpler. No one had asked him questions except for mission reports. Now people only ever asked him questions and he felt overwhelmed. Talking with the two doctors for hours had left him feeling wrung out.

He slid onto the floor and scooted over to Steve, seeking comfort; he hesitantly laid his head into Steve's lap. Tony stiffened a little, eyeing him warily.

Steve could tell that Tony was not talking about a nap. He wasn't stupid. He knew what they both wanted. He jumped a little in surprise as Bucky laid his head in his lap. Steve looked down to see that his hair really was a mess and tentatively reached down to run his fingers through it, gently easing out the knots.

It was more methodical than tender; Steve was focused on the task at hand.

"A nap? Erm, maybe in a bit," he said, trying to keep his voice steady and act nonchalance, as if Banksy hadn't gotten his Alpha all wound up with his flirting. "And no more Karpov. He was a bad man Buck," Steve breathed, voice quiet. "He wasn't really good for anyone."

He swallowed and glanced up at Tony. "We can't exactly go have a 'nap' and leave Bucky down here..."

"...Steve, I wasn't talking about a literal nap," said Tony in exasperation. His hackles were partially up; Steve was raking his fingers through Bucky's hair, trying to work out the tangles.
"I know! I know you weren't," Steve whispered, almost sighing, like it was somehow a secret. "But it's not... it's not that simple," he hissed.

Bucky had closed his eyes, enjoying the feeling. He didn't think Steve was right about Karpov. Karpov was an infallible leader, but Bucky didn't want to argue and besides, he was enjoying having his hair untangled.

"I'm sure Bucky will be okay for like, one hour by himself," reasoned Tony.

Guilt was churning in Bucky's gut for not standing up for Karpov. "Colonel Karpov is a good man," he blurted, unable to stop himself.

"I want to stay with Steve," said Bucky.

"Oh no you don't," snapped Tony. "You don't get to develop opinions if they're gonna get between me and my omega."

Bucky looked up. "He's my omega," he said, his voice soft and dangerous.

Both of their hackles had gone up and both were ignoring Steve, glaring at each other.

Tony was finding it hard to meet Bucky's gaze. Every instinct in his body was screaming at him to lower his eyes and submit to Bucky's dominance, but Bucky was still lying on the floor and Tony had the high ground and, damn it, he wanted his omega.


Bucky reached up and grabbed Steve's shirt, holding him without ever breaking eye contact with Tony.

The two looked moments away from a literal tug-of-war with Steve. Clearly neither wanted to leave him.

"Karpov is not a good person. He wanted you to hurt me. You think that makes him a good person, Buck?" Steve said and gently curled a hand over Bucky's. He tried to pry his fingers out of his shirt and he couldn't. "Guys, you can't..."

The two were glaring daggers at each other.

Steve sighed. "Tony, you seriously think we'd be able to without Bucky coming in? No. That's not gonna happen."

He awkwardly tried to stand up and failed. It was so hard to say no to Tony, especially when he directly asked.

Steve looked both confused and a little desperate. He really wished the others hadn't left him alone. "This is gonna go badly. Buck. Please let go. I'm gonna go draw something... or something. We can't have his conversation right now. I can't give you both what you want."

"But I nearly died!" protested Tony.

"I want you," said Tony, voice lowering. "I let him into our house. I feel like I'm being punished for doing the right thing here. I mean, I'm trying to support you, Steve, but if this whole trip thing means giving up sex, count me out."

"I would never hurt you," repeated Bucky, clinging to him. "I love you and I promise not to leave again." He gently took one of Steve's hand in his metal one (the other was still gripping the shirt). The metal was cool and smooth and surprisingly delicate. He brought Steve's hand to his face and kissed it.

Tony bristled; he got off the couch and edged over to Steve, reaching for his other hand. "Back off, Barnes."

Bucky didn't move.

"Buck, I know you do. I know." Steve said.

Before he could try and pry Bucky's hand off of his shirt again, Tony took his other one.

"It's not that I don't want to," Steve whispered, the guilt setting in. He swallowed thickly, not knowing what the hell to do.

He thought about what Banksy had said and didn't see how flattery would really help. But Steve thought it would be worth a try. Maybe.

He turned to face Tony. "I'm so grateful," he murmured. "You have no idea. You've been amazing. You've gone above and beyond and I would love you make it up to you but Bucky can feel everything. If he won't even let me sleep next to you unbothered do you seriously think he'll--" Steve let out a soft huff. "Bucky. Please stop pulling my shirt up. Let go of me and at least try to engage in this conversation. I know you love me. That's not what the issue is here. I think that everyone should just let go of me and then we can talk. Come on, Tony, you're real smart, can't you calm down? Be a... good role model for Bucky?"

Bucky hesitantly, slowly unfurled his fingers, letting go of Steve's shirt.

Tony looked slightly validated. "Above and beyond," he repeated. "...for you, Steve. All for you. 'cause I'm a good Alpha and want you to be happy. ...but why do we need his permission? I don't wanna have to get him to sign a permission slip. We've been pair-bonded for two years--"

"Seventy years," said Bucky smugly.

Tony's lip curled up. "...right, so me and him have sixty-eight years to catch up on," he retorted.

Bucky nuzzled Steve's leg; he was still seated on the floor in front of Steve. Tony's grip on Steve's hand tightened. "I've been really cool but--"

"I only didn't mate you 'cause I couldn't," said Bucky plaintively.

"Your heat is over now, can't we--"

"Because he can feel it! It's not like we're just having sex. We'll be having sex with him too! I can feel what car he's in across the other side of a street, you think he won't feel it when you're inside of me?!" Steve demanded, sounding exasperated now.

"I'm tired. Can I take a nap with you?" asked Bucky.
Tony rolled his eyes. "I'm not talking about a literal nap! Fuck!"

"Bucky." Steve sighed, reaching down to tug Bucky up by his hand. Having him on the floor pressed against him wasn't helping right now.

Steve threaded his fingers into Tony's and squeezed.

"I think Bucky wants that kind of 'nap' too Tony," he said awkwardly, clearing his throat. "That's the issue. Listen, I want to be good for you Tony, I really do," Steve whispered, expression sincere. "I just... a part of me wants to good for Bucky too, you know? I need his permission. You both mean so much to me. I just... I just don't wanna let you down. Either of you."

Both of them bristled at each other.

"You are good, Steve," said Bucky.

"Yeah," echoed Tony distantly. "You're good. I just-- I want-- Steve, staying away from you in your heat--"

"It was hell," said Bucky flatly.

Tony's hackles flattened a little. "Yeah. It was hell."

"It was hell for me too," Steve pointed out. "I know. It sucked. It really did. And ideally, it would be nice to not have to do that again..."

But he couldn't really see another way around it. Steve swallowed.

Bucky brought Steve's hand up again and nuzzled it.

Tony brought up his other hand and nuzzled it. "Don't push me away, Steve. I get it, you're trying to be fair, but... I don't wanna live the rest of my life without ever getting to kiss you again." He paused, then added bitterly, "It's not like I don't know when you two are kissing. You kissed earlier. I felt it. I get that you and him can feel each other and shit, but I can feel you, too."

"Are we bonded?" asked Bucky, looking confused.

"I don't fucking know, Bucky," said Tony, sounding tired. "Can I please have permission to fuck my omega now?"

Bucky stared blankly. He'd never been asked for permission for anything before and he didn't know what to say. He shrugged. "I don't know."

Tony let out a frustrated noise. "Fine. Well. I'm going upstairs to rub one out and if any omegas happen to want to join me, I'll be beating off in our bed." He rose.

Bucky looked around, as if uncertain about what omegas Tony was talking about.

Steve watched Tony march upstairs, expression set, and Steve's heart sank. "So much for my omega wiles," he whispered. He really wanted to go up after him but he also didn't want to leave Bucky alone and confused on the floor.

Steve stared at the stairs hopelessly as if they some how held an answer.

"I don't know what to do," Steve said, half to Bucky, half just to the room. Hell, the air. He would take any advice from goddamn anyone right now. "I don't know what's right and wrong anymore
and it feels like my head is gonna split in two, Buck."

Bucky sat up to stare Steve, unsure of what to say.

Shouldn't omegas be wired to obey? Steve's guilty and uncertainty was heavy in his stomach.

"You're supposed to do what your Alpha wants," he offered. A look of annoyance passed over Steve's face, but Bucky didn't know why. "...you should... do what you want," he corrected, remembering how Steve wanted to be treated like an Alpha. He moved up onto the couch and leaned in to nuzzle Steve's neck. His postheat smelled delicious. "...I know what you want," he added. "I want it, too. I don't see the problem."

He really didn't. Steve was being difficult for no discernible reason. Perhaps it was a punishment for all the times Bucky had pushed him away, slammed the bedroom door in his face, made him sleep on the couch while he was in heat.

But wasn't Steve punishing himself, too?

"I want what you both want," Steve whispered. "The problem is I'm not sure you both want... the other to have that." It felt messy and complicated to even say it. Steve screwed his eyes shut and shook his head. "And I'm afraid you'll say you're okay with it when you're not really."

"I love you," he offered. "...I never stopped. I thought-- I thought the bond was broken. When you came for me, after Azzano, it was gone, the mark. Your neck... but now it's back! We're still bonded, right? I-- I thought you didn't want me anymore. But you do, right? We want each other, right? ...please don't be mad at me, Stevie. I'm sorry I didn't treat you right, but it was hard. You were sick."

Steve shivered when Bucky nuzzled against him, his breath hot against Steve's neck.

"I want you too," Steve promised him. "I just-- like I said. It's not that simple, Buck."

Steve was still staring at the stairs. Bucky shifted his gaze over to them, not sure what Steve was looking at. "...you wanna go upstairs?" he guessed. He didn't wait for an answer. He put his arms under Steve and lifted him easily; Steve let out a noise of alarm at being picked up. Bucky kissed his temple. "I got you," he reassured him.

Steve squeaked in surprise when Bucky picked him up. And it was almost like Steve was just over five feet again and thin as nothing, not like he was tall as a tree and built like Adonis. For Bucky it seemed his size wasn't a problem.

Well, heh, good to know.

Steve raised a brow. "Bucky? What are you--"

And then they were suddenly in Tony's and his' bedroom. Steve was in Bucky's arms and Tony was in bed with his hands down his pants.

"Hey," Steve said, trying his best (and totally failing) to not sound awkward. "So... Bucky? Do you maybe wanna put me down?"

Tony let out a noise of indignation at Bucky barging in. Steve was in his arms, his arms around Bucky's neck. Tony resented Bucky for his ability to pick up Steve like he weighed nothing.

"Hey! Can't a man enjoy the comfort of his own bed and hand in peace?"
Bucky dropped Steve on the bed. "Get out," he commanded.

Tony's hackles rose. "No. This is my bed."

"He's my omega."

"He's my omega!"

"Scram!"

"No, you!"

Bucky didn't move and neither did Tony. The only thing preventing them from getting into a brawl was probably Steve being between them. Well, that, and Tony wasn't overly fond of the idea of getting into a wrestling match with a guy twice his size while sporting an erection.

"Steve needs me."

"No, he needs me."

"I'm his Alpha."

"No, I'm his Alpha."

"I was his first Alpha!"

"I'm his scent mate!"

The two bristled even harder at each other. Even though Steve was between them, physically preventing them from lunging, they weren't looking at him. He was like a glass partition between them. Present but see-through.

Both let out noises of protest when Steve stuck his hands out.

"No! No-- hey!" Steve was up on his knees on the bed, arms stretched between Bucky and Tony as if that would somehow keep them apart. "Buck. This is Tony's bed. You cannot kick him out of it. That's ridiculous. And this isn't even about me anymore! This is about you two proving something stupid to each other!" Steve said, frustrated and exasperated with the both of them. "You don't even wanna screw me. It's not about that. It's somehow owning me more than the other person, or having some goddamn monopoly. Well, neither of you have that right now. Nobody owns me, no one but myself. You're both just pissing me off. This is about your egos and some toxic Alpha bullshit. Nothing else."

Steve dropped his hands down and sighed. "How can I be good for you when you're both giving me such mixed messages?!

"I nearly died in New York and all I want is to masturbate in peace!" protested Tony. "How is that a mixed message?"

"I do wanna fuck you!" protested Bucky.

"Yeah, this isn't about my ego, it's about my dick!" said Tony.

"I don't even care about him, I'm your primary Alpha and--"

"Barnes, why are you still here?"
"--and I did everything you asked and you--"

"I'm serious. Get out!"

"--said if I did what you asked we could mate and--"

"This is my bedroom."

"--I nearly died, too."

"I am seriously losing my erection. Get the fuck out, Bucky."

"--Pietro said I don't have to listen to orders anymore!" shouted Bucky.

"Who the hell is Pietro?"

"I don't know!"

Bucky's expression went from one of frustration to confusion. He looked at Steve plaintively. "I wanna sleep with you again. Please, Stevie. Don't lock me out."

"You wanna fuckin' watch, pervert? Be my guest," snapped Tony, crossing his arms over his bare chest. (He was still wearing his robe but it was open. His arc reactor was glowing with its usual, steady persistence.)

Bucky made to climb into the bed.

"I wasn't being serious! Get out."

"I don't have to listen to you," snapped Bucky, cuddling up against Steve.

"I refuse to be a slice of bread in a Steve sandwich," growled Tony on Steve's other side.

"If you were a slice of bread you'd be the heel," snarled Bucky.

"The heel is the best part, you ass!"

"You're nuts, the heel's the worst part!"

Both were trying to shove the other one out of the bed. Unfortunately, Steve was between them, and Tony's bed was large enough to easily accommodate all three, even considering Steve and Bucky's shoulder spans. The result was mostly Steve being jostled between them while they yelled at each other about the correct way to make a sandwich.

"You guys should just--"

"Will one of you just listen--"

"For godsake--"

The two were shouting at each other and ignoring Steve entirely.

At one point Steve got off the bed and he was pretty sure neither of them even noticed. He marched over, grabbed the shield off the foot of the bed and then slammed the door shut. Steve then wedged the shield between the handle and the floor.

"You two deserve each other!" he yelled, and promptly walked away from the bedroom, trembling
with a strange kind of frustration, one that was no doubt made worse by his postheat.

They were totally incapable of being reasonable and Steve so done with this argument already. Right now he didn't want to sleep with either of them, not when they were behaving like children. Screw them. They couldn't even be reasonable.

Steve headed back downstairs to the gym. He needed to either fuck or punch something, and it was clear that the former wasn't happening at the moment.

Chapter End Notes

How many of your guys held your breath thinking there was gonna be a threesome in this chapter? Lol. Banksy ships it. - T
Truce

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony and Bucky yelled at each other on the bed with Steve between them, hackles up. Steve got up, and both relaxed a little. Clearly he was letting them take care of business. They lunged, scrabbling around on the bed; it wasn't until the door slammed and Steve yelled at them from the other side that they paused.

"...Steve?" they called in unison.

"Fuck!" said Tony. He wormed out from under Bucky and strode over to the door, trying to yank it open.

It was... locked?

Tony stared at it in bafflement. How had Steve managed to lock it from the outside?

He jiggled the handle irritably.

Bucky walked over and shouldered him aside, giving it a yank with his good arm.

"He fucking locked it!"

"I'll break it down," said Bucky, pulling back his left arm.

"Oh, no, you won't! You're not breaking down pieces of my house, Barnes!" snapped Tony, inserting himself between Bucky and the door. "JARVIS!! Unlock the bedroom door!"

"It is unlocked, sir."

Tony yanked the handle, then braced a foot against it. It didn't budge.

"....STEVEN GRANT ROGERS, YOU OPEN THIS FUCKING DOOR RIGHT NOW!" yelled Tony, banging on it in frustration. He whipped around to Bucky. "You know, I was having a perfectly good masturbatory session before you came waltzing in here and ruined it."

"Should I break the door down now?" asked Bucky, unfazed. "Steve does this kind of thing all the time. The guys at the docks say he's spoiled."

"Yeah, no, he's spoiled rotten. And no, don't break down the door," said Tony, stepping back to rub his goatee thoughtfully.

Bucky copied him, rubbing his scruff and staring at the door.

"I could call the suit up here, but it'd probably bash into a bunch of stuff on the way," said Tony.

"We can take that door," said Bucky, pointing to the balcony.

"Yeah, I think we'll have to. Come on, Terminator, I'm gonna need a leg up." Tony went into the closet and shucked off his robe and pajama pants, swapping them out for a pair of jeans and a v-neck t-shirt. Then he walked out onto the balcony. It was a bright, pleasant day; the breeze coming off the ocean was perfectly gentle.
Tony turned and pointed. "Okay. The roof here is pretty flat. Let me up and I'll go over to the next balcony over."

Bucky made a seat with his hands. Inelegantly, Tony put a hand on his head and clamored up onto the roof, using him as a step stool.

"Now help me up," said Bucky.

"Are you kidding me? You're like two hundred pounds, I can't lift you. You're huge."

Bucky frowned. He climbed onto the railing ("Don't jump, I was kidding, you're not that huge!") and, coiling his muscles, leapt onto the roof. ("Aw. I was hoping you'd do a backflip.")

"This way?" asked Bucky, pointing.

"Any way," said Tony. The bedroom stuck out to the side, overhanging the ocean. The roof was relatively flat, a vast white expanse, and they could pretty easily traverse it.

"Okay. This way," decided Bucky.

He and Tony walked across the roof toward the nearest balcony, which opened into the second-floor lounge.

"You scared of heights?" asked Tony, casting a look at the sheer, rocky cliffside below them.

"No. Are you?" said Bucky, who didn't want to mention falling off the train.

"No," said Tony, who didn't want to mention being thrown out of a window a week ago.

They made it over to the second floor lounge balcony, a small, private ledge that overlooked part of the pool deck.

Bucky hopped down.

"Catch me," commanded Tony.

Bucky obediently caught him when he jumped down.

Tony tried the door. It was locked.

"Fuck!"

"Now should I--"

"No, it's not glass, it's bullet-proof. You'd just ruin your arm. ...help me back up, we'll go the long way."

The two climbed back onto the roof and loped across it toward the front.

"Fucking brat," snarled Tony.

"Yeah," agreed Bucky.

"What's his problem, anyway?"

"Horseshoes are emotional like that."
"No kidding. ...don't say stuff like that in front of him though, he's real sensitive and all his little omega friends are fuckin' social justice warriors. Oh, and no one really says horseshoe anymore. It's sort outdated."

"You say omega?"

"Yeah, omega," said Tony. They paused at the front of the house. They were easily twelve feet up, perhaps more.

Bucky leapt down easily onto the driveway. It was circular and in the center was a new fountain, bubbling water over a large rock.

Bucky turned and held his arms out.

Tony was sitting on the edge of the roof, legs dangling. "...are you kidding me with this trust fall nonsense? Get a ladder. I'm not-- oh, fuck it." Tony jumped.

Bucky caught him and set him down.

The two walked over to the front door. Tony hit the keypad outside.

"Jarv, open up, it's me. Code foxtrot uniform Charlie Kansas London Oprah Charlie Kansas Oprah umbrella tango."

"Welcome home, sir," said JARVIS as the door clicked.

Tony stormed in, Bucky on his heels.

"He's in the gym; that's where he goes when he's upset," said Tony. He had lived with Steve long enough to know his habits.

"He's that way," said Bucky, pointing. He could tell where Steve was through the bond.

Both of them went toward the gym.

Sure enough, Steve was in an undershirt punching a bag.

Bucky walked over, scruffed him, and tossed him to the ground easily.

Steve had been very happily going through a set of punching bags (despite them being reinforced, he was still destroying them, just slower) when they interrupted him. It was actually quite a surprise. Steve hadn't even heard them coming; one moment he'd been in the 'zone' and the next Bucky was pinning him down to the ground.

"Bad omega!" barked Tony.

"No!" agreed Bucky from above him.

Tony crouched near Steve's head. "How did you even manage to lock the door from the outside?"

"We had to go on the roof," said Bucky, pinning Steve down with his left arm.

"I used my shield to stop the door. And you guys were being assholes! How did you even get out, anyway?" He knew Tony wouldn't let Bucky break down the doors or his house. "What do you mean... the roof?!!"
"Hands-down the worst end to a sexy nap I've ever had, with the exception of that one chick who accidentally called me Howard," complained Tony.

"Bad omega." Bucky felt guilty; he hated scolding Steve. "I'm not mad," he added gently, "just disappointed."

"Oh, that's way worse than being mad," said Tony. His nannies had used that line of him all the time.

"I still love you." Bucky leaned in to gently nose Steve's neck, reassuring him. Tony leaned in and gave the other side a nuzzle. He wanted to remain pissed but he felt guilty, too. Steve had only stormed out because he and Bucky were getting into a fight over bread. It wasn't even worth fighting over. Tony knew he was right; the heel was obviously the best part.

"I'm sorry," said Bucky softly, still partially pinning Steve under his left arm. He was straddling him but out of habit, he wasn't completely on top of him. Back in the thirties, he'd never dared put his full weight on Steve, who wasn't even a hundred pounds soaking well. He'd been too delicate.

Tony leaned it to put his elbow on Steve's opposite shoulder; unlike Bucky, he had no qualms about climbing all over Steve, who he'd only ever known as completely ripped with muscle.

Steve was in too much shock to respond; normally he would have been insulted with the way they were treating him, like a misbehaving child, but he was having trouble comprehending what he thought he was hearing. Did that mean they had worked together? Huh.

"I'm sorry, too," echoed Tony. Any irritation he'd felt that bled out at the taste-smell of Steve; he was still in postheat and the air was thick with pheromones and Steve's neck was screaming all sorts of signals to the more primitive part of his brain.

Bucky turned his head to kiss his bottom lip, exposing the side of his neck to Tony. Tony would have been furious about the kiss except Steve's neck was right there; he licked behind Steve's ear, seeking out the gland, wanting more of it now that he was close.

"I'm not mad," repeated Bucky, softer.

"But don't ever do that again," added Tony against Steve's skin, nosing into it.

"Er, guys, I..." They were both climbing on top of him. In fact, Steve was pretty sure with the prosthetic arm Bucky could effectively hold him down as long as he needed to. Steve wasn't stronger than that.

And then Bucky was kissing him, his tongue swiping over Steve's bottom lip, and he shivered as Tony tongue dragged against his neck. Oh fuck. That felt good. For a moment, Steve's brain went offline and he just let it happen. Then he pressed a hand against Bucky's chest.

Steve was still aching with a quiet kind of desperation, the sort that lingered after spending a heat alone. But he wasn't quite gone enough to entirely lose all inhibitions. He was scared about where this was going.

"Please stop fighting," Steve sighed. "I don't like it when you two fight. I don't know how to be good for you when you fight."

"Well, he started it," said Tony.

Bucky curled his hand around Steve's on his chest and cast an irritated look at Tony.
"You did, you came into my bedroom and-- okay, look, I won't fight if he stops posturing. I get it, you're more dominant, but Steve's my omega and this is my house," said Tony firmly.

Bucky frowned.

"Truce?"

Bucky looked wary, but he nodded.

"Okay. There. You happy, Steve?" asked Tony, sitting back on his heels.

Bucky pulled his arm from Steve's chest and sat back to let him up. Tony reached over and carded a hand through his hair longingly.

"You know, if this is anyone's fault, it's yours, for going into heat."

"Yeah," agreed Bucky.

"We're only human."

"Yeah."

"I mean, he's part cyborg and I'm powered by a battery lodged in my chest, but still. Human."

"Ye-- battery in your chest?"

Tony pointed to the arc reactor.

"Is that what that is?"

"Yeah, pretty much. What the hell did you think it was?"

"I didn't think about it," admitted Bucky.

"...huh." Tony looked thoughtful. No one had ever simply not noticed it before. It was actually sort of refreshing to not have someone ogling it. Come to think of it, Bucky had simply ignored it during their entire stay at the hospital.

Well, that was at least one good thing about him. Bucky didn't ask a lot of bothersome questions. He was remarkably passive.

Steve sat up and then cocked his head at them. "Oh, I'm so sorry my biology did the thing which I have no control over," he stated flatly, sounding more amused than anything else. He was almost smiling and there was a glint in his eyes that hadn't been there before. "Also, if you two weren't so obsessed with being top dog we could have avoided a lot of bickering by now, and you could have probably both gotten what you wanted."

Steve made to stand, reaching up to unhook the punching bag he'd been battering.

"So? Are you two done sitting on the floor talking about your metal bits or should I leave you to it?"

Bucky walked over silently and took the bag from Steve easily, automatically, not wanting his omega to carry a heavy thing. Steve raised a brow when Bucky took the bag away but let him.

"We're done," said Tony peacefully, because he hadn't missed the implied hint of sex and didn't want to screw it up. "How many bags did you go through?" he asked, trying to lighten the mood. There
was a small pile of ruined ones off to the side, leaking sand all over Tony's gym's floor.

"Three." Steve said casually, like it wasn't all that impressive. Usually, he would get through more. "You guys kind of pissed me off, you know."

"Our biology does things, too, you know," said Bucky, carrying the bag over to the pile and depositing it on the sun-lit gym mats. "...it's not very easy to control your hackles. S'not like we're posturing on purpose. Just... kinda happens."

"He's right," agreed Tony. "Dominance screws with your head. We can't help it. ...but we're done fighting for now. Right, Buck?"

"Right," said Bucky.

"Come back upstairs?" asked Tony hopefully. Make-up sex was always excellent.

"Why?" asked Bucky.

"Not you. Steve." Tony held out a hand to him.

Steve sent Tony a look. "Pretty sure that if I come 'back upstairs' you two will start fighting again."

Steve could tell Tony wanted to protest so he crossed his arms over his chest. "No? Alright. Why are you suddenly not going to fight about this when you were before?"

Tony opened his mouth, then closed it. He didn't have a good answer.

"I... okay. Okay, fine," said Tony, heaving a sigh. "I'm gonna go back down to the shop. See you for dinner, Steve." He turned and walked out; he'd given up on the idea of getting off over an hour ago.

Bucky looked around the gym with interest. "He has a gym in his house," he observed with a small smile. Bucky hadn't seen much of the house. He doubted he'd ever see all of it. It was huge. Back in the thirties he might have wanted to go exploring, but he seemed less curious now, less inclined toward showing any real interest in anything.

He waited until Tony was gone before sidling up to Steve and nuzzling into his neck, putting his arms around him. They were alone. Finally.

Steve put a hand in his arm to both steady and stop him from leaning in closer. "You both need permission; I'm not doing no funny business with you Buck." That's what Bucky always used to call it when Steve was half in heat and protesting on the sofa, sprawled over it like the drama queen he was.

"Come on." Steve tugged on Bucky's hand, leading him upstairs. "Lets sort your hair, then I can draw you."

They ended up in the studio, Steve leaned against the wall with a sketchbook propped up against his knees as he carefully worked the lines of Bucky's face into paper. The sketch was gentle, the edge of his jaw sharp and the dark waves of Bucky's face framed his portrait just right.

Bucky was pliant; he let Steve lead him upstairs and he held still while Steve pulled a comb through his hair. Steve left it loose and then grabbed a sketchbook. Bucky sat still while Steve sketched him, perfectly, abnormally still.
He gave Steve one of his rare smiles when Steve showed him the page.

"That's me," he said.

Once they were finished, Bucky let Steve lead him downstairs, taking his hand (he noticed Steve was wearing a band on his left ring finger; was he married now? That made no sense; male omegas didn’t marry...) and watched him cook, admiring his body, with the same little half-smile on his face.

Steve made dinner, Bucky watching him from the kitchen counter. He just made cheesy pasta and baked it. It was nothing fancy. Steve wanted easy right now.

He passed Bucky his bowl before taking one downstairs to Tony, assuming the other would follow (he did). Steve punched in a code to the door and walked in. This was yet another room Bucky hadn't seen yet.

Steve ducked his head into the workshop, setting the bowl down on the first empty space he found.

"Tony?" he called out. "I've got dinner!"

Tony was sitting on the worn couch in the corner lounge, a tumbler of whiskey in front of him, one arm covered in a mess of wires and locked plates. Watch maker's tools were scattered all over the table, along with pieces of tech Steve couldn't have even given a name to.

Tony looked up and his eyes widened in alarm.

"Why is Bucky in my shop? Steve, this is my man-cave, only like four or five people are allowed down here."

"But we're bonded," said Bucky.

"Please tell me you're referring to Steve and not me," said Tony.

Bucky's brow furrowed.

"Never mind. Give food." Tony took the bowl from Steve with his unencumbered arm. He gestured from his arm to Bucky's with his fork. "Look, Buck. Twinsies."

Bucky looked down at his metal arm in surprise. "What happened to my arm?"

"Wow. ...you lost it in the war. ...wow. Seriously, Steve, are you sure you shouldn't have him committed? He's like a goldfish."

Bucky bristled a little. He wasn't sure what Tony was talking about but he knew when he was being insulted.

"It's only the second day, Tony. He needs time," Steve sighed. "Please just eat your food."

He could see Bucky was still frowning. "I'm not sending you anywhere Buck, don't worry," Steve breathed and squeezed his arm. "We'll leave you to it Tony... but it would be nice to see you later."

Steve didn't want Tony to just hide away in his workshop. The problems weren't just gonna go away.

Steve sighed when Tony didn't eat. "Please just..."

Tony frowned at the bowl of food on the table and picked up a tiny screwdriver. "I'm not hungry,"
he said grouchily. "And I don't wanna talk. There's nothing to talk about. We're in a sexless trio. Hurrah. I nearly got my ass nuked and what do I get in turn? Squat. My only consolation is knowing that Barton's probably not getting any, either. ...who am I kidding, he's probably nailing Natasha as we speak."

"We'll talk tonight, okay?" Steve asked, desperate for some kind of affirmation.

He reached for the glass of whiskey with his left hand. The gauntlet crushed the glass, spilling alcohol everywhere.

"Was it supposed to do that?" asked Bucky.

"No," snarled Tony. "I'm still working out the bugs. It's kind of hard to work when my omega is bringing his other Alpha into my fuckin' shop!"

Bucky pointed to himself questioningly.

"Yes, you!"

"Tony." Steve sighed, frowning. His brow was knotting together. "You think I want this? I can't just--" He lowered a voice a touch even though Bucky could still probably hear him. "If I knew I could sleep with you without you tearing each other apart, I would. But I will not be responsible for you getting hurt. Look, I'm sorry...I'm sorry. I'll get out of your hair," Steve let out a soft huff. "Please try and eat something Tony."

He awkwardly backed away towards the entrance, knowing when he was just making things worse.

"If you two could actually have a conversation about it without thinking with your knots, that would also be great," Steve added in annoyance, without thinking.

"We can have a conversation! We spent like five days hanging out together 'cause you wanted us to!" protested Tony.

"Yes, we watched Fast Times at Ridgemont High," said Bucky. "Phoebe Cates takes off her shirt."

"Phoebe Cates takes off her shirt!" repeated Tony. "We both agree that we should be allowed to bang you but you keep acting like we're gonna go feral and kill each other when we only almost did that like two or three times. Goddamn, Steve! We'll flip a coin! Barnes! Heads or tails!"

"What's heads and what's tails?"

"Heads gets head and tails gets tail."

"Tails," said Bucky.

Both stared at each other.

"Flip a coin."

"I don't have one. You flip one."

"I'm a billionaire, I don't have coins."

".. we could draw straws."
"Why would I be more likely to have straws than coins?!"

"If you had a straw you wouldn't have spilled your drink."

Tony flexed his exo-arm and looked woefully down at the puddle of whiskey and broken glass.

"JARVIS. Flip a coin."

"Heads," said JARVIS.

"I don't wanna trust no computer!"

"Well then go get a quarter, you ass!"

"Are you seriously going to flip a coin over this?" Steve said, exasperated but not surprised. He leaned against the doorway and watched them bicker almost fondly.

He was sure they had agreed to it, but being okay with it was something else. And Steve almost felt nervous... not about Tony, but he'd never actually had sex with Bucky. It was seventy years of expectations coming to a head (pun not intended). How could Steve not be nervous? He'd thought about it for years, for decades, even. But having it so close, so almost-real, was very different than simply daydreaming about it.

He shoved a hand into his pocket and produced his wallet, chucking it at Bucky so he could find a quarter inside.

Steve stepped back into the room, a little unsteady on his feet. Was this... seriously happening? "You can hardly blame me for being cautious," Steve pointed out. He perched on the edge of a counter, watching Bucky fiddle with a coin. "You guys are kind of dicks, sometimes. All this Alpha aggression is a huge turn-off."

Bucky tossed the coin into the air.

"I'm not a dick... well, okay, sometimes I am," conceded Tony.

Bucky caught the coin and slapped it into the back of his left hand, producing a metallic click. He checked it. "Tails," he announced.

"Okay then! As usual, money has spoken!"

"I won?" asked Bucky, looking puzzled.

"You called tails earlier."

"...what did I won?"

"Jesus, dude. We were trying how to figure out how to split up my--" He hesitated and dropped his eyes. "--our omega."

"Oh! ...I get to mate Steve now?"

"No, only people without mechanical arms get to do that," said Tony.

Bucky missed the sarcasm and without hesitation, reached up, fiddled with his shoulder, and a moment later his arm fell to the ground with a clang.
Tony's eyes widened. "You can take it off?!"

"Yeah. How else would they fix it?"

"Oh my God!" Steve's eyes went wide. Left on Bucky's shoulder was a strange piece of metal, the plates from the arm seemingly separating from it. Steve swallowed. "Geez Louise. Bucky. Please put your arm back on..."

Tony was immediately interested in examining the socket. It was a surprisingly intricate system.

He slid down to the floor and started to help him. He picked the arm up and, Jesus, it was heavy. "It doesn't hurt, right?" Steve asked, watching Bucky wince a little as it slid back into place. The plates clicked together with an almost sinister level of precision. It was hard to see where the arm had even separated in the first place. "That's... slightly insane," he whispered, tracing his fingers over the supposed gap.

"It only hurts a little where the wires and nerves go in," said Bucky mildly.

"...don't tell SHIELD it comes off or they'll confiscate it," advised Tony.

Then Steve seemed to remember what they'd been talking about and straightened up. And suddenly he felt nervous all over again.

"Tony was joking Buck. We had sarcasm in the forties, remember?"

"Sorry," said Bucky. "I thought you didn't like it." He was used to taking orders literally and immediately. Tony still had a look of gooey-eyes interest in the arm. Somehow Bucky had never mentioned he could remove it and everyone had just assumed it was a permanent part of him.

"I like the arm. I mean-- I like that you have an arm where you didn't. And it's nice, that it's, er, strong," Steve said, clearing his throat. "Please don't feel you have to randomly start taking it off, though."

"I want you to be happy, Stevie," said Bucky.

"I, too, would give my left arm for Steve," said Tony, the corner of his mouth quirking up in a smile. He reached up, pulled off the Iron Man sleeve in progress, and set it into the table in front of him before reaching for Steve's hand. "...that's at least one thing we have in common. That, and magnificent hair."

"I am happy Buck. How could I not be?" said Steve.

Steve smiled faintly and reached for Tony's hand when it was offered, linking their fingers together. He felt a gentle shiver run down his spine. He brushed his thumb over Tony's knuckles.

"Are you, Steve? ...really?" asked Tony. His tone was suddenly serious.

Steve looked up and his eyes met Tony's. He glanced over and met Bucky's gaze, then looked back to Tony's. He considered the question, but there was only one truthful answer. "Yeah. ...I really am," he said, softly. "I love you. I love you both. And... I really am happy."
Alright readers, here's the deal.

This week you get two chapters. THE NEXT CHAPTER CONTAINS A GRAPHIC THREEWAY SEX SCENE. If you don't like it, feel free to skip it. It's not especially important to the plot. Sometimes, the authors just like to write smut.

#WeWroteThisForUsButY'allCanReadItIfYouLike

Enjoy. - T
Cooperation

Chapter Notes

Briefly considering titling this chapter "Two Alphas, One Steve" but I think we already have enough ire from our fans.

In case you missed the note in the previous chapter, yes, this is the threesome chapter. Don't read it if you don't like it; it's not plot-essential. It is literally just pure, sleazy smut, written for the sake of writing it. Enjoy (or don't). - T

Steve's gaze moved between Tony's and Bucky's, his fingers still entwined with Tony's, feeling a sense of peace he hadn't for a long time. Being in the same space with his Alphas when they weren't fighting was a cozy, safe feeling, one he'd equate with sleeping in on a rainy morning or cuddling with his mother on the couch to listen to the radio on a day when there was no school.

"So. Ah--" Steve cleared his throat. His gaze darted between Tony and Bucky.

Peacefulness aside, he was still in post-heat.

"What happens now?"

"Well, Steve," said Tony, giving his hand a tug. "I won heads and I'm planning on claiming my prize now, unless you have another excuse. But your smell has been basically screaming at me for the last week and I would love to get off without a cyborg bursting into my bedroom and trying to tell me the heel isn't the best part of the bread when it clearly is."

Bucky's mouth turned down a little but he didn't argue. Steve felt nervous but not angry and he wanted to keep it that way. Steve wanted them not to fight.

"You said I could mate you. If there were no cameras and I talked to Sam Wilson and procured a tablet and got caught up on all the things I missed. I fulfilled all my objectives," argued Bucky stiffly.

"Plus you won a coin toss. ...Steve I'm really fucking trying here but you know I'm not an acer."

"I'm not a fairy, either," said Bucky quickly.

"But I wanna be able to-- you know."

"Yeah," agreed Bucky. He threaded his fingers through Steve's free hand. Tony was already pulling Steve toward the stairs.

"I am all out of excuses," Steve assured them, voice a tad quieter than normal. Bucky's hand was warmer than Tony's as it threaded into his other and they both began to tug him up the stairs, Tony kind of leading the way. Bucky's fingers were shorter and thicker, a soldier's hand instead of an engineer's. Despite the callouses on Tony's hands, they were slender, hands that could play a piano as well as they could turn a wrench.

"But at the... same time?" Steve asked as they ascended the second set of stairs. He wasn't really sure
what the technicalities of their intentions were. Honestly, Steve would definitely be down for the simultaneous thing but he could understand if that was a deal breaker. They weren't attracted to each other (right?) just to him. Although, he honestly thought it would still be weird to be in separate rooms and have the other person just... waiting, and feeling it too. Urgh. This was complicated. Or maybe Steve was just overthinking it.

Mostly, he just didn't want another fight to erupt. He was more than willing to keep barricading them up if he needed to, but the idea of getting teased like this and then having it end with a stupid Alpha posturing fight was a bit dull.

Tony pulled them into the bedroom and Steve's heart was in his throat.

"No, not at the same t--"

Tony turned and frowned. Bucky was standing in his bedroom holding Steve's hand.

"Buck. Leave."

"But I won the coin toss. I thought I get to go first."

"Fine. You know what, fine, just don't look at me or talk to me."

"I wouldn't want to," snipped Bucky.

Tony was already pulling his shirt over his head. He hesitated only briefly. But Bucky only glanced at the arc reactor, barely more than a flicker. Maybe his time with HYDRA had gotten him accustomed to freakish body mods.

Tony flopped onto the bed in his boxers, settling himself against the pillows and watching Steve. Bucky had not budged; he was still holding Steve's hand. Steve had not budged, either.

"Is this relationship a democracy now? Oh my God. Everyone in favor of Steve getting undressed..." Tony raised his hand, giving the other two a pointed look.

Bucky raised his unoccupied left hand, shooting Steve his cocky little smirk. At that moment, he and Tony's similarity was undeniable. They had identical, wolfishly smug expressions. The biggest difference, body modifications aside, was their ages. Unlike Tony, Bucky's face was youthful and without lines, even though it was clear he wasn't sleeping; he and Ton had matching bags under their eyes.

Steve half smiled and resisted the urge to roll his eyes. A strange fondness tugged at his chest. "Alright. Alright. Jeez. You guys don't have any class, do you?"

Truth was, Steve wasn't really nervous because of Tony. He was familiar with him. He knew what he liked, how he felt. But Bucky was unknown territory. Would Steve still be how he liked? Was Bucky bigger, so would it hurt? Although Bucky had never appeared confused about who Steve was, or what his relationship was with Steve, was there something wrong about sleeping with him, considering how confused he was? Or was it patronizing to deny his adult sexual desires just because he didn't remember what year he was in?

"Buck.. you... know who I am, right?"

"Better'n I know who I am," said Bucky immediately. His voice sounded like his own. The old snarky Bucky Barnes Steve had known since childhood, his first love, his first mate.
Steve's mind was racing at a mile a minute. And he knew they could both feel it. Goddammit. He was Captain America. He had fought *aliens*. He shouldn't be indecisive, or nervous!

Bucky let Steve shake off his hand and pull off his shirt. He appraised Steve's body thoughtfully. He looked more like an Alpha than an omega: all muscles, strong jaw, broad shoulders. But there were still plenty of signs though. Nice hips. Not a lot of body hair. And like anyone who was statused, Steve's smell meant more than his looks ever could.

Steve pulled his shirt over his head and then climbed onto the bed, settling between Tony's legs. Now this he knew how to do. He nuzzled against Tony's thigh, breath hot against tender skin and his expression full of affection.

"Will you touch behind my ear?" Steve asked softly. If one thing was going to stop him feeling nervous, that was certainly it.

Tony leaned over to kiss Steve's neck, reaching up to stroke behind his ear on the opposite side. He knew the moment he hit the gland; Steve went limp into Bucky's arms with a moan.

Bucky tensed and his hackles rose watching his omega pay attention to another Alpha. He strode over, reaching down to undo his belt; he dropped his pants and climbed over, pulling Steve toward him to kiss his neck and the lines of his shoulders.

Bucky gently took one of Steve's hands and brought it down onto his thigh. Back when they were fooling around, Steve would always put a hand into his thigh, eyes pleading, and that was always when Bucky would pull away and say no. When the tone of the night would shift and they'd end up in a big fight over it. Now it was an invitation for Steve to continue.

Steve was practically melting like warm butter and Bucky wasn't sure why. The smell of Steve's postheat was strong and he was tilting his head into Tony's touch, practically whimpering with delight. Bucky ignored him; he angled Steve's head to the side to kiss him softly, relearning his mouth and his taste and the curvature of his lips.

Steve's brain had gone offline and his nerves had evaporated in an instant. He moaned into Bucky's mouth, lips parting as the other's tongue nudged against his own. Bucky was warm and firm on top of him. Steve could feel Tony's own growing erection against his thigh and he could feel... everything. Steve slid his hand down lower, to the front of Bucky's underwear. "Jesus," he whispered. Steve had waited so long for this, for so many years back, then he'd *wanted* this and now he was... he was finally getting it. All he could think about was pleasing his Alphas; everything else was secondary.

Tony's fingers felt just *right* against his neck and Steve whimpered, low in his throat. And then he slipped his fingers under Bucky's waistband and-- and goddammit he was *finally* touching him like this. They finally parted for air and Steve's head tilted to nose along Tony's jawline and the graze of stubble there.

With his other hand Steve reached down, palming Tony's erection. He was already trembling, growing wet between his thighs. Steve leaned his neck into Tony's fingers and let out a quiet, high-pitched. His eyes were glazed over and eyelids half shut. "P-Please. I wanna--" It was hard for him to speak like this. "I want to be good."

The slogan of every omega born into The Greatest Generation. A dated, archaic notion. One Steve had never quite been able to let go of, even though he usually took pride in the fact that he wasn't a "good omega."
Bucky groaned appreciatively and gave a breathy little laugh as Steve reached down to touch him. It felt incredible, Steve's slender artist's hand, warm and smooth. Steve knew exactly how to grip it, stroking it, tracing the veins, working the foreskin back and forth over the head; he gave Bucky's knot a squeeze and Bucky gasped and arched into it. The angle was a little awkward but neither Steve nor Bucky cared in the moment.

Bucky felt like he was really awake, his good hand trailing up and down Steve's back, his lips moving against Steve's... all of the sensations were grounding. Were real in a way that nothing else had been in a long time.

"So good," whispered Tony into Steve's ear, licking behind it. Steve was awkwardly palming his crotch, still craned half-ground to face Bucky, but it still felt incredible. There was a deep sense of relief that came with being finally touched by his omega and fulfilling the carnal need that Steve's smell has been taunting him with for days.

Tony gently turned Steve's head away from Bucky; when they broke apart Steve whimpered and Bucky gave a soft growl. Tony leaned in to kiss him; Bucky reached down, between his legs, and a moment later he was tentatively running a pair of fingers over Steve's wet, puckered entrance. He knew male omegas got wet like women but holy shit, he had not expected anything like this. Steve felt so slick and also so tight, virginal, almost. Bucky trembled, leaning on to rest his chin on Steve's shoulder and huffed his neck, the two of them finally touching each other after years and years of denial.

Tony was content to make out with his omega, pushing himself in to Steve's hand, taking it slow, enjoying the closeness after days of being refused. "Good... so good... just what I wanted..."

"Good boy," echoed Bucky softly, eyes closed contentedly on Steve's shoulder while Steve stroked him. "My sweet little Stevie. Good Stevie."

Neither seemed to even notice each other; they were both too involved with Steve. His smell was overwhelming, a result of Tony playing with the glands behind his ears and of Bucky's hand working between his legs. Unlike Tony, Bucky ignored Steve's cock completely, remaining intently interested in his hole. Steve was so tight and Bucky, who had been conditioned for his whole life to treat Steve gently, found himself worried that it might hurt him. How much knot could you stuff into one omega? Bucky had never been with a male omega. It seemed like an impossibility.

Steve gasped into Tony's mouth as Bucky's fingers pressed inside him. He clench around him, wet and slippery with need. Tony kissed him so well it made him whimper, Steve practically purring in delight as the other licked into his mouth. When the second finger pressed inside Steve huffed softly. He pulled Tony's erection out of the confines of his boxers and stroked him with careful, long fingers. Steve ducked his head down and kissed the sharp edge of Tony's jaw. "I wanna, please," Steve's voice sounded desperate, needy. Tony pressing on his gland had left him eager and squirming for more.

Steve pushed up onto his knees and tilted his head to steal a kiss from Bucky. The angle was, again, awkward, but they managed it. He tugged on Bucky's bottom lip with his teeth, a move that had sent Bucky desperate in the forties. He sensed some kind of hesitation and squeezed Bucky's thigh. "I can take it, don't worry," he whispered.

And then Steve sunk back down, turning his attention to Tony as he wiggled between his legs. He let his breath ghost over Tony's shaft teasingly for a moment, a mischievous kind of glint in his eyes before he leaned forward to flick his tongue over the slit. Then, slowly, Steve closed his mouth over the head and sucked gently before beginning to sink down.
Tony let out a grunt of enjoyment and settled back, placing his hands on Steve's head and closing his eyes, letting Steve bob on it eagerly.

Bucky felt dizzy when Steve nipped at his lower lip. God, the little minx hadn't forgotten a thing.

He put his hands on Steve's hips to pull him over and lined himself up. Steve's head was between Tony's legs and Bucky was surprised to find it very erotic to see him so desperately sucking dick. He leaned down and sunk his teeth into Steve's neck, finding his mark, the scar where his mouth fit into.

Steve arched into him with a thin whine and Bucky rolled his hips, prodding Steve's entrance and then sighing with satisfaction as he felt the head push in. He sank the shaft deep into the warm, tight, sinfully slick hole; he stopped at the base of his knot, shuddering with enjoyment. Steve felt too tight to take the knot. He tasted a metallic tang; his teeth were cutting into Steve's skin but Steve was arcing lovingly against him, making little noises onto Tony, who was rocking into his mouth, eyes closed, a half-smile on his face.

Steve wasn't sure if he'd ever been more turned on in his life. In fact, he was pretty sure he hadn't. Steve swirled his tongue just how he knew Tony liked, taking him up down to the base gradually as he bobbed back and forth.

Steve whimpered around Tony as Bucky's teeth sunk into his neck and then moaned loudly, the noise vibrating low in his throat, as he felt his Alpha sink into him. Steve trembled at the stretch, his toes curling and eyes fluttering shut.

He pulled off of Tony, not wanting him to finish too soon, and began to tease him with his tongue. He explored his balls and then sucked at the side of his shaft, blue eyes dark as he trailed back up to circle the head with his tongue.

Feeling needy and demanding, Steve curled a leg around Bucky's hip and tugged him closer, squeezing around him. His Alpha didn't need to hesitate. He could take it.

"...yes..." murmured Tony breathlessly, both fists full of Steve's hair. His head was weeping precum and Steve kept swiping his tongue over it, not quite willing to completely pull his length back in, not yet. Tony fucking loved it when Steve drew it out like this.

Bucky's body tensed a little. "Don't wan' hurt you," he mumbled, unwilling to let go of the skin on Steve's neck. Steve was trying to tug him in but the idea of hurting Steve-- he was already so tight and Bucky's knot was swollen-- Steve wasn't letting up. He was made greedy little noises of want, ones that had been burned into the back of his mind because he'd had to listen to them every lousy little half-heat Steve had had in the thirties.

He wanted so badly to do it but it felt like a violation of the most sacred rule: Don't Hurt Steve. He was more certain of that rule than he was his own name. Of anything, really. He was supposed to protect his omega, even from himself, and Steve couldn't possibly--

Tony laughed a little, reaching down to grab his shaft and tugging Steve's head over, pushing it back into his mouth. "Stop teasing me; suck," he commanded. Bucky had a good view of Tony's stomach from his position. Tony's skin was quivering and twitching with suppressed pleasure, flexing, contracting.

Tony had such an easy way of pushing him around. Like they were well-practiced.

Bucky's stomach turned slightly. Was this submissive little Alpha more experienced than him?
Impossible. He'd had lots of flings with girls down at the docks, not to mention his exploits in Europe. Bucky had had no less than 30 partners in his life, something he was equal parts ashamed and proud of.

The thing was, he'd never knotted a male omega. They were supposed to be a lot tighter than women and Bucky--

Steve let out a thin whine that was partially garbled by Tony's presence in his mouth. He trembled in delight as Tony pulled him back down onto his cock. He sucked at him eagerly, hollowing his cheeks and making a real show of it. Just how he knew Tony wanted it. Each bob of his head was guided naturally by Bucky's thrusts. Steve's hands had fisted in the bed sheets by the point, his knuckles almost white.

Bucky hesitated. Steve wasn't small anymore. He was a captain. He could make his own choices, right?

He pushed against him; Steve let out a noise that could only be described as a squeal. Bucky bit down harder on his neck, getting purchase, his fingers digging into Steve's hips, wiggling, pushing. Yes. There was the give--

Tony let out a gasp. "Fuck! Teeth! Watch the teeth!"

Bucky grunted; his whole knot had suddenly squeezed into Steve and Steve's whole body clenched around it. He rolled his hips easily; Steve's body milked it, massaging it without letting go, gripping and pulling him in every time he pulled out.

Bucky pushed inside of Steve, totally and fully and-- fuck. Steve's fingers tore into the sheets a little. He slipped up a tad as he sank back down onto Tony's dick and sent him an apologetic look at the just too strong graze of teeth.

Tony looked up; Steve had made a noise that had sounded like pain and he felt a natural surge of protectiveness.

But Bucky had already mated him and knotted him. His lovemaking was slow and long and sensuous; he fucked like he was in a porno. Tony wondered whether Steve preferred Tony's hard, sharp, fast thrusts or Bucky's long, deep strokes.

He shoved the thought out of his mind and reached down to stroke Steve's cheek with his thumb, reassuring him. There was no goddamn way that hadn't hurt. Tony had glimpsed Bucky's knot. ...fuck.

"Good boy. Good Steve," he murmured, rubbing his fingers gently behind Steve's ear. "You're okay... you're going so good... good boy... yes..."

Bucky was big. Bigger than Steve had anticipated and the knot hurt. He felt so goddamn full. His thighs quivered a little with the stretch and he made a mental note to take a lot more time preparing in the future. Steve whimpered as Bucky drew out and pushed back inside. Yes. Fuck. That felt good. It hurt, but it was worth it.

Steve's eyes rolled back as Bucky thrust inside and he squirmed in a strange kind of delight.

When Tony reached behind his ear again all the pain and discomfort disappeared altogether and Steve moaned. He rocked his hips back wantonly, squirming on Bucky's knot and sucking at Tony's dick like his life depended on it. Steve hummed around Tony, letting out sweet sounds and soft
murmurs as arced up into Bucky, encouraging him to get the angle just right.

And when he did, Steve saw goddamn stars. His own dick was hard and leaking at this point, curved up against his stomach and trapped between himself and the sheets. But in that moment, Steve didn't care. He was concerned with one thing only and that was pleasing his Alphas.

Steve kept back up his hips and Bucky bit him harder, fighting him for control. Steve was clearly after something. Bucky finally felt Steve shudder and relax a little, and he pushed him into the mattress, holding his head down and moving his hips rhythmically.

Tony threw his head back, gasping; every one of Bucky's thrust was shoving Steve's face straight into his cock and Steve was swallowing it with unconcealed enjoyment.

"J-jerk him off."

"Whu?" Bucky's eyes darted up at Tony, who was panting and thrusting into Steve's mouth.

"Reach around and grab his cock. Jerk him off. Gonna cum soon," said Tony breathlessly.

The hell?

(In the forties, a male Alpha touching a male omega's penis was unheard of.)

Bucky reached around without thinking (it had been a direct command) and wrapped his hand around Steve's dick, immediately experiencing an uncanny familiarity that was tainted by the distinctive lack of a knot.

"C-cum with me... swallow it..." gasped Tony, arching.

Steve let out a muffled cry. Bucky gave him a few quick, sharp thrusts, burying himself, letting himself let go.

Steve practically cried out in relief when Bucky began to stroke him. He squirmed, his hips jerking up at the touch and he instantly knew he was close. And then they were coming, both of them, and Steve followed soon after.

It was easily, above and beyond, the best sex Bucky had ever experienced. Steve's body practically drank from his cock; no woman was comparable to this.

He'd denied himself for years and thank God he had. He never would have been able to resist if he knew how eager and willing and tight and warm and desperate his omega truly was.

He whimpered into Steve's neck, twitching into him, riding out his orgasm in long, slow strides while Steve bucked back into him, letting himself dump his seed into Steve and tasting the delicious metallic taste of broken skin, his right hand gripping Steve's erection without a care in the world, their bodies pressed together so hard it was hard to tell where one stopped and the other began.

Steve whimpered as he was filled with Bucky's warm spent, his own dick twitching as Tony came down his throat. He swallowed him, practically licking his Alpha clean as he pulled off. Steve's cheeks were rosy and his lips wet. At the corner of his eyes it seemed there was a threat of tears too. He had come over Bucky's hand and the bed sheets below him. The other was still warm and thick inside Steve. And it was suddenly like all his bitterness from the forties had dissipated but this-- this was worth the wait.

Steve nuzzled against Tony's thigh, his expression glazed over and blissed out. After spending a heat
without anyone, they had certainly all needed this.

He soon realised he was falling asleep. A familiar post coital tiredness tugged at his bones. Steve let out a soft huff and dropped his head down on the bed, apparently happy to fall asleep with Bucky still inside of him. "Was... was that okay?" He asked, voice thick with a content kind of tiredness. "Was I good?"

"Yes," said Tony and Bucky in unison.

Bucky tried to tug out; Steve cried out in pain.

"Stop. Stop, you can't do that. It takes like thirty minutes," said Tony quickly.

"Did I hurt you? Are you okay?" asked Bucky. He wanted to see Steve's face.

"He's fine," said Tony. A definite partial lie, because he could smell blood, though he wasn't sure if it was coming from Steve's neck or elsewhere.

He wriggled down to put his arms around Steve. Steve was flushed, hair plastered to his forehead with sweat, expression one of dopey contentedness. A tear ran down his cheek; Tony brushed it away with his thumb. Steve didn't feel sad. Steve felt completely fucking high on a rush of hormones and adrenaline.

Bucky nuzzled his neck, hugging him from the other side.

"It was better than I ever imagined, Steve. I love you."

"Love you," echoed Tony distantly, kissing Steve's lips gently.

The two of them snuggled up into their omega, Tony to Steve's chest and Bucky to Steve's back, relaxing on the bed, ignoring the sweat and semen and each other.

Bucky shifted a little awkwardly, not sure how to get entirely comfortable with his dick trapped inside of Steve. It was a strange feeling. Not unpleasant, but impossible to ignore the throb of Steve's pulse, every tiny quiver of movement. He glanced down; there was a smear of pink on his hip. He felt his stomach catch in his throat.

He nuzzled Steve's neck apologetically, licking his bonding mark, but Steve and Tony had already passed out in each other's arms, breathing soft and steady. Bucky relaxed, clinging to Steve, and within a few minutes, comforted by the smell of his omega, he fell asleep, too.
Steve woke up at seven the next morning. Upon remembering he had to be at HQ at 0800 for a STRIKE meeting, he distantly thought about killing someone; there was probably at least one punching bag in the house he hadn't yet destroyed.

He sat up, slipping off of Bucky was a groan. Both of his Alphas were dead asleep, although he had to tread extra carefully around Bucky. Steve was sure his soldier senses made him easier to wake.

After managing to slip off the mattress Steve glanced back at them and then caught sight of himself in the mirror. His hair was a mess; he had bruises on his right hip and a few hickies on his neck. And, goddamn, Steve couldn't stop smiling.

That was, until he sat down. Steve had showered, washing away the blood on his neck and cleaning himself best he could. He'd been tender around his entrance but he couldn't feel any serious damage down there.

Steve had just sat down with breakfast, a piece of toast in his mouth and coffee in hand and- fuck. That really goddamn hurt. It had never been like this with Tony. (Okay, maybe after they'd gone a few rounds, but never after just once!) "Jesus Christ," Steve muttered to himself as he stood back up.

He wasn't used to his body being sore but, clearly, he'd worked it harder than he had realized the night before.

He left both Bucky and Tony a plate of toast by the bedside along with a note reminding them where he has off to. Steve grabbed his jacket, deciding to take his bike to HQ.

Now that had been a mistake. There were a lot of wonderful things about his Triumph but it had clearly not been designed to be ridden by an already-sore body. Once he stepped through the doors Steve began to wonder if he could avoid sitting down on a chair for the next few hours or so. Just as he began to ponder this Natasha appeared beside him, hands clasped in front of her. "Morning," she hummed. Her hair was tied back. She didn't do it often but Steve thought it suited her. It was nice to see her face.

"Morning," Steve replied, trying to play it cool.

"So... how's it going?"


Natasha smirked at him. "Good, huh?"

Steve was suddenly aware of the bruises all over his neck. "Yep."

She turned around to face him before they stepped through the doors of the conference room.
"Good," Natasha simply said back, eyes glinting. Steve raised a brow at her, feigning being unimpressed, and then they stepped through the doors.

Steve recognized Brock and Jack. He didn't know any of the others' names. Maria Hill was stood at the front of the room, hands clasped behind her back and looking serious. "Morning Captain, Agent. Director Fury will be joining us in just a moment."

"Cap," Brock gave a little mock salute. Steve took it good-naturedly and offered a small nod back.

"It's good to meet you all," he said.

Natasha took a seat so Steve felt he had to. Oh God. That did not feel good.

"You alright?" Natasha asked, studying his face. Steve couldn't tell if it was genuine concern or amusement.

"Yep," Steve said, voice a little higher pitched than he would have liked. "I'm swell."

A couple of the unbonded Alphas at the table eyeballed Steve's neck with undisguised interest. Natasha bristled at them and they looked away.

The door slammed open and Clint skidded in with a raw Pop-Tart, practically throwing himself into a chair beside Jack.

A second later Fury walked in. He was wearing a floor-length black duster and under one arm was carrying a mess of plain manila folders with the words "CLASSIFIED" stamped across them.

"Agent Barton. Nice to see you aren't late," he said, raising an eyebrow.

Clint was practically panting. "No, of course not, Director Fury," he managed.

"Captain Rogers, glad to-- are you okay?" Nick was staring at his neck.

Brock cleared his throat, loudly. "Those aren't from New York, sir," he said gently.

"Oh. Sorry, Rogers." Fury, a beta, clearly hadn't realized. But Jack and another one of the Alphas were smirking. Brock flashed his teeth at them, and they turned away.

Brock nodded at Steve. A friendly gesture.

Fury tossed the folders on the table.

"Everyone grab one. Lately SHIELD has been up to our eyeballs--"

Clint raised a hand. "Eyeball, sir?"

Fury pointed at him. "Watch yourself, Barton. --up to our eyeballs in the New York invasion along with figuring out what to do with Loki."

The atmosphere sobered immediately at the mention of that name.

"However, we still have a number of domestic terror cells we need to keep our eyes on. We've had three Mandarin attacks since the start of the year, and we're expecting HYDRA to use this opportunity to do what they do best. It would be pretty damn easy for a person to go missing under these circumstances; there are a lot of people in New York whose bodies were never found. Not to mention a few of our leads and moles have evaporated into thin air as well. The reason I'm briefing
you here today is to discuss which targets we can safely return to and which we can't. We need a fast, small, subtle, expertly trained group of individuals to-- Barton!"

Clint was trying to catch Steve's attention and was gesturing to his throat.

"Huh? Yes, sir. Fast, small, subtle, and expertly trained."

"Like Barton in bed," muttered Jack. Half the room broke out in titters; Fury slammed a hand on the table and they all went quiet.

"--to begin gathering intel and we've IDed a couple of bases that we think might have some information on locating aforementioned persons of interest."

Brock had already flipped open his file. "New Jersey, sir? This location was considered inactive years ago," he said, closing the file and tossing it onto the table.

"At this time, we're re-assessing the activity of all bases. Now is the perfect time for re-expansion because they know we're busy. All the more reason to crack down, hard. Hopefully they'll lower their guard. With that in mind, we're deploying six STRIKE teams. Look around the room; you are STRIKE Team Delta and these are your new best friends."

Everyone cast a look around.

"You want us to go around saying something about ourselves?" asked Natasha, leaning back in her chair, arms crossed.

"No. You oughta already know each other. Captain Rogers, if you accept command of this team, it's yours. I believe all of you have worked with each other in one or another capacity. For those who haven't: Captain Steve Rogers, tactician and spec ops. Brock Rumlow, tactician and spec ops. Natasha Romanov, spec ops and infiltration. Jack Rollins, spec ops. Ben Clark, spec ops. Clint Barton, sniper. Wesley Obu, sniper. Alec Slick, communications and technology."

Fury was right. Steve did know Brock, Jack, and Ben, because they had helped kidnap him and deliver him to Gideon.

Aside from Alec, everyone was wearing a dark tactical clothes with lots of pockets and more than a few weapons.

"Is Alec Slick his real name?" asked Ben, raising a hand. Alec looked like he was about nineteen years old; he had long hair, acne, and was wearing a t-shirt with a phrase that was making Steve blush. He was an unbonded omega.

"No. His real name is Brayden Oscar Fennenbaum," said Director Fury.

Alec glared daggers at Fury.

"Who's overseeing Delta?" asked Brock.

"Myself, Agent Hill, and Alexander Pierce of the WSC," said Fury.

Brock gave a small nod of approval.

Natasha flipped through the folder with a frown. "So the Mandarin... domestic terrorist?"

"Yes."
"Without known affiliations?"

"Without known. Doesn't mean he's alone," said Fury. "I'd be surprised if he was. Three killings so far, zero evidence. With most of our resources being dumped into the New York clean up, we can't afford to just let him go. He'll strike again and so far we don't know a damn thing about him. Then you lump HYDRA into it and you're up shit creek without a paddle. Right now, we're at our weakest, and our enemies know it. That's where you come in."

"So basically, we're doing basic intel and tracking?" asked Jack, sounding unimpressed.

"Don't knock it. Intel is the best weapon we have right now," said Fury. "You all got your files. In forty-eight hours, I expect a report with a plan of action. Our top eight targets are contained in your debriefing folders which, needless to say, are top secret. If approved, Maria and I will present it to Pierce, and we'd like to begin tracking by the end of the month. ...you're all dismissed. Rogers. Stay for a second."

Everyone rose, folders in their hands, flipping through the information.

Clint hovered back, waiting for Steve, scarfing down the rest of his Pop-Tart.

"Barton. Get."

Clint walked out the door, leaving Steve and Fury alone.

"...everything okay with the Winter Soldier?" he asked, point-blank.

There was no doubt in Steve's mind that Clint and Natasha were waiting for him outside to go over the folders and then start gossiping. Clint had had a huge grin on his face the whole meeting.

Steve stood and walked up to Fury's edge of the table. He clasped his hands behind his back loosely and tried his best not to look awkward. "Yes," he said. He could see Fury was looking at his neck again. "It was all... consensual." His ears were burning.

"Just be careful Rogers. A man like that can flip out without meaning to."

Steve nodded, trying to read Nick's expression and failing to. He couldn't tell if the director disapproved, and if he did how badly.

"Coulson's funeral is in a week," Nick added. "It goes without saying you are invited and we expect you to make a speech of some kind."

Steve glanced away and thought about the box in the corner of his room. "I would be honoured to," he said softly.

Fury's warning about Bucky was short and sweet, as was his request (order?) for Steve to speak at Coulson's funeral.

The next part was unexpected.

"I'm gonna be honest with you now, Rogers. Something you probably SHIELD did more often. There's two ulterior motives to having you lead STRIKE Team Delta. First of all, you're a well-known omega rights activist, and a lot of mutants, of all statuses, look up to you. A lot of those mutants came out at the Battle of New York and then went right back into hiding. But they'd been exposed and HYDRA is going to start recruiting. I don't just want you folks tracking HYDRA... I want you to head off any of their attempts to use this invasion to their advantage. Ideally, I'd like you
to recruit mutants to SHIELD. As an... enhanced individual, a metahuman yourself, and a person who people respect as a champion of the second-class citizens of America, mutants are going to respond better to you than to anyone. Having you lead the team looks good. Our second ulterior motive you can probably guess. You have Barnes at your disposal. Any intel you can collect from him is fair game to use against HYDRA. We don't know if this Mandarin guy is some lone nut, a mutant, or one of HYDRA's side operatives, but we'd like to find out. Part of the reason I was able to convince the WSC to let Barnes stay out of cryo was because of his unique insight into HYDRA operations. As far as the WSC is concerned, the Avengers Initiative was a huge success; they're claiming credit for it and I already told them you'd agreed to head Delta and that you were working closely with Barnes to gather intel. So there you go. Those are my cards out on the table." He rose. "I know you don't like playing politics, Rogers, but let it never be said I'm not an honest man."

He left the room and Steve without another word.

Of course there were ulterior motives that weren't on paper. Weren't there always?

He stepped back outside to find Natasha and Clint waiting for him. So was Alec, standing a ways off against the wall, next to a drinking fountain. Clint looked like he was poorly suppressing a laugh. "What?" Steve asked. He crossed his arms over his chest and tried to look serious. "I don't know what you're laughing at."

Slowly, Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. Steve sighed.

"Fine. Look. It's all good, okay? I mean... he and Tony aren't killing each other, or trying to. We're getting along. That's the best we can hope for, isn't it?"

"So they're getting along? Sharing nicely?" asked Clint, vibrating with suppressed laughter.

"You know everyone's going to lose it, you being in a trio with two Alphas," said Natasha. She held up a hand. "I know, I know, it's not fair. An Alpha has two omegas, or an omega and a beta, and no one blinks an eye. But a relationship with two Alphas is going to get everyone worked up. It's controversial. You just can't stay out of trouble, can you?"

"S-so who's better?" asked Clint, giggling his head off.


Steve didn't miss her glance over toward Alec.

"Can we help you?" she demanded, voice like acid.

"Yeah. I wanted an autograph," said Alec.

Natasha uncoiled a little. "Oh."

Alex pulled out his backpack and held out a shirt to Steve. "Can you have Mr. Stark sign this?" The shirt was for something called the Future Foundation.

Steve stared down at the shirt. He had no idea what it was about but took it anyway. "Sure thing kid. I'll bring it back next time." Alec didn't look all that thrilled at Steve calling him kid but seemed to polite to say anything.

"Did you say you were in trio?" he asked, sounding genuinely curious above all else.

"Not officially," Natasha breathed, eyes narrowing at him.
Alec swallowed but didn't back down. Clearly, his curiosity outweighed his fear of Natasha.

"Seriously though," Clint put a hand on his arm. "Who's better?" He was still clearly suppressing the urge to laugh, the edge of his lips twitching up.

Steve shook his head slowly. "We are not playing that game."

"But I think it's a fun game."

"Well..." Steve didn't smirk but there was a glint in his eyes. "I have a more fun game waiting for me back home, so if you don't mind..."

"We're going for drinks after Phil's funeral," Natasha said. "Just so you know."

Steve did smile then, properly. "Thanks. I'll be there. And you, shush." Clint was still grinning at him, looking rather proud of himself just behind Natasha.

"Nice to meet you." Steve nodded at Alec who'd been pretending to be fascinated with something on his phone. And then he pulled away; he wanted to get back home already, where his two Alphas were waiting.

Tony had put on headphones. It was the only thing keeping him from going insane, because Bucky was discovering music. Unfortunately he wasn't interested in anything Tony had to offer. His tastes were old-fashioned; even though he had asked JARVIS for "new" music, he was clearly interested in stuff that was similar to his own generation. He hadn't liked anything later than the 1970s and was mostly interested in stuff from the '50s and '60s. Tony had suffered through "Build Me Up Buttercup" and "Be My Baby" and "You Really Got Me" and had finally given up trying to convince Bucky to listen to Nirvana instead.

They were in the living room and Tony was keeping an eye on Bucky only out of a sense of loyalty to Steve. Bucky was clearly not well. He was almost child-like, really. He got easily confused and asked a lot of questions over and over. But that was at least preferable to the moments when he got stiff, his gaze distant, and stop speaking, responding to all orders immediately and literally. Tony didn't know how to deal with him like that; he had had two "episodes," if you could call them that, and Tony had simply waited for Bucky to snap back.

He'd sent Daston out to get cigarettes for Bucky and had to remind him no less than four times that he had to smoke outside. Bucky had confused him for his father three times. Tony had literally had to hover over him to get him to brush his teeth and wash his hair. Bucky had had a cup of coffee unprompted.

Now he was sitting in the living room, relaxing on the couch, listening to JARVIS play Simon and Garfunkel. Tony was on one of his laptops on the opposite couch, talking with Pepper, who was in New York and was threatening to jump into the East River in response to Tony's idea of going on Banksy's show to announce his trio with Steve.

Bucky's head turned suddenly, like a deer responding to the cracking of a branch.

Tony pulled his headphones off. "What?"

"Bike," said Bucky.

Tony relaxed. "It's probably just Steve coming home."
Bucky perked up. "I like Steve."

"Yeah, I know, buddy." Tony put his headphones back on. "Come on, Pepper, Banksy's show is really progressive, it's the perfect platform. We gotta say it sooner than later. We won't mention his name or anything. We'll just confirm, yeah, there's another Alpha and that's Steve's choice--"

"You're playing Russian roulette with your image. That's what you're doing," said Pepper on his screen.

"Pepper, I just saved New York, no one'll care right now. I'm as loved as Steve is and that's saying something. The longer we wait, the worse it'll be. It's like pulling off a Band-Aid."

"You make me pull off your Band-Aids for you," she pointed out grumpily.

"Well, yeah, because you do it better than me..."

Downstairs, in the garage, Steve dismounted his bike with a wince, leaving it in the garage and dropping his helmet onto one of the handles. He was hungry and kind of tired (and honestly, still sore). He just wanted to curl back into bed and maybe binge on pizza. Then perhaps he'd start on his speech for Phil's funeral. Fuck. He still hadn't opened the box he'd left him but--

But opening it meant accepting that Phil wasn't coming back. Every time Steve thought about just walking over and ripping the lid off, his bottom lip trembled. He wasn't ready to face that particular reality yet.

Steve was about two steps into the living room when Bucky was on him, pulling him into a hug. He was warm and he smelt like home. Steve closed his eyes for a brief moment, just savouring it. "Hey. Hey. I wasn't gone long." Steve pressed a kiss to the top of his head and smiled a little as he pulled back. The smile was almost shy, like Steve was sixteen again and just letting Bucky in for lunch. He almost expected to see Sarah, his mother, grinning in the background as she finished the dumplings for her signature stew.

"Where's Tony? On the phone?" Steve could hear him bickering the distance with, who he guessed was, Pepper. "Cool. Okay."

He went to the fridge, raiding it for food. He produced a box of eclairs and began to sit down-- oh, nope, still a mistake. Could the serum not kick in with its magical healing powers already?

Bucky followed Steve to the kitchen and watched him pull a box of fancy pastries out of the fridge. He'd already come to appreciate that the fridge was like magic. It always seemed full and Tony could turn to any of the beta men that haunted him like ghosts and demand something, and it would appear a short time later.

He looked concern when Steve flinched as he sat down.

"I was thinking Buck," Steve said. "To get you used to asking for stuff, you should ask for something every day. Even if it's just small. It'll be like baby steps, you know?" He leaned his elbows on the counter, standing up to eat.

Bucky's expression, which had been a smile since Steve had walked in, faltered even more at Steve's suggestion.

"Ask for what?" he said. "I don't need anything. You worry too much, Stevie, I'm dandy. Just getting my head on right after everything, but I'm not helpless or nothing."
"False," said Tony, striding in barefoot. His headphones were around his neck, the cord trailing after him. "You're one of the most helpless human beings I know."

He ran a hand through Steve's hair in greeting and took an eclair, plopping into a barstool beside him.

Bucky watched them eat, frowning, hands clasped on the counter.

"So far the only thing you've been able to form an opinion about is that you want a cigarette and don't like good music. But I literally dressed you this morning."

Bucky stared blankly. That didn't sound right. He could dress himself. He didn't remember getting dressed but for crying out loud, he was a grown man.

"It doesn't have to big stuff," Steve reiterated. "But just asking for small things. Like orange juice, or a new jumper, would be good. It's not about 'needing' anything. It's about wanting stuff. You're allowed to want things. HYDRA took that away from you. We want to give that back." He inhaled a second eclair.

"Oh." Steve produced the t-shirt Alec had given him and dropped it onto the counter in front of Tony. "A kid on the team, named Alec, wanted you to sign it." He pressed a kiss to Tony's forehead before pulling away to grab the milk out of the fridge. Travelling anywhere always made Steve hungry and after returning from HQ it was normally habit for him to empty half the fridge.

"You don't gotta push yourself Buck, okay?" Steve could see he looked worried. "This is gonna take time. I just want you to be happy."

"I don't want anything," insisted Bucky. "I'm content. Thank you." His tone was on edge.

Tony unfolded the shirt. "Ahh, Future Foundation! Yeah, okay, sure. Lemme see if I can get Reed to autograph it, too," said Tony. "I talked to Pepper. ...she, uh, mentioned Phil's funeral next week. She'll be there. STRIKE isn't going to be dragging you off to Korea or something, is it? I don't wanna have to be responsible for Super Sleeper Agent over here."

Bucky watched Tony catch a bit of eclair cream on his chin, licking it off his fingers.

"Also, are we taking him with us? A ton of people will be there but we can't leave him alone. The thing is, the 'razzi will probably be out for blood, once news breaks about..." He gestured to the back of his neck, and added, "Don't think they won't crash a funeral. They're fucking ruthless."

"Who's the 'razzi?" asked Bucky.

"Human vultures. ...photographers," said Tony. Bucky was still eyeing the eclairs longingly. "...Buck. If you want an eclair, take one. We've got twelve."

Bucky hesitated and looked at Steve for clarification.

"Take one," commanded Tony. Bucky took one.

Tony looked at Steve. "This is what I've been dealing with, all morning. Usually he gets worse right before he just sort of shuts off. Speaks Russian and acts like a robot. I'm not going to lie, I love robots, but it's damn freaky, Steve. Oh shit. Also I forgot to give him his diazepam. My bad."

"Thank you Tony. For looking after him," Steve murmured, brushing his hand against the other's. "I guess he can come to the funeral," Steve breathed, chewing on his bottom lip. "SHEILD might not
like it but they won't want us to leave Bucky unattended either."

He went to go get Bucky's medication and then pressed it into his hand. Steve went to sit down again, pulling a face.

He placed his elbows on the table and threaded his fingers into his hair.

"Have the therapists been yet? I kind of wanna crawl back into bed."

Tony checked his watch. "Not yet. They probably won't be until after noon. We can go take a nap though, if you want. A real nap," he added hastily, because Steve had given him a look.

Bucky's brow was furrowed with sympathy; he reached for Steve's hand. "Did I hurt you? Does it hurt?" he asked, looking like he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"I told you, he's fine, Buck," said Tony. He had already dealt with one melt-down in the morning that had ended with forty minutes of stony silence and staring off into the distance; there had been blood on the sheets and Bucky had lost it. Tony didn't know how bad it was, but he figured Steve must be okay, if he was walking and talking and eating eclairs. He had already planned to ask Steve in private, but the idea of Steve being injured clearly set Bucky off, and Tony found the whole Winter Soldier thing creepy as hell. It was like he was a shell of a person, like his very soul had been extracted.

"Bucky. I'm fine. I've been shot before, you know--" Okay that line of reasoning wasn't helping Bucky. He clearly wouldn't drop it, his brow knotted together. Steve sighed. "I really am fine."

"Are you bleeding? Did I hurt you? Is it bad?"

"Hey, Buck. Buck. He's fine," repeated Tony. "...let's all go take a nap together, okay? Go grab a cigarette, and then we'll lay down, okay? You'll be able to see for yourself that Steve's fine." Tony put a hand on Bucky's shoulder. "Buck. Go outside and smoke a cigarette now."

Bucky obediently got off his stool and walked outdoors to smoke.

Tony waited to hear the door slam before he looked at Steve. "Okay, for real, though, how bad?"

He reached for Tony's hand as they watched Bucky head outside, fiddling with a packet of cigarettes in his hands. Steve turned to face Tony as he turned to him.

"I don't know," Steve admitted. "It just hurts. But I wasn't bleeding in the shower this morning."

He reluctantly guessed Bucky was right. Back in the forties, Steve really couldn't have handled him. He let Tony tug them upstairs, eager to be back in bed already. Steve flopped back on the mattress and let Tony wiggle his jeans off, leaving him in a tee and boxers. He reached for Tony's hand the moment his jeans were on the floor. "Are you doing okay?" He asked quietly, admittedly a little nervous about the answer.

Tony looked thoughtful; he let Steve take his hand, kicking off his jeans while he thought. "I, uh... I'm okay, I think."

He had called Rhodey. It was hard to have a conversation with Bucky being ever-present, but Tony had given him the Cliff's Notes: Bucky was staying with them, they were definitely in a trio, and it was weird.
Rhodey had said, "Shit, man," which made him feel better.

Rhodey had suggested he talk to Sam ("He's into Alphas, I dunno, maybe he's got some good advice") but Tony hadn't. Sam was too close to Steve and he'd probably tell him everything.

"It's weird. I don't know. It's weird, but it's... just is what it is. I... I could've died back there. I feel like... like who am I to complain, you know? I didn't think I'd come back. I'm just lucky to be alive." Tony's eyes were unfocusing. "I'm just lucky I didn't die up there."

The bedroom door slammed over and Bucky stormed him, flinging himself at Steve.

"Damn it, Buck!" yelled Tony. Bucky was, in a word, clingy. Very much so.

He smelled like cigarette smoke.

Tony suddenly felt completely suffocated. He jumped out of bed and strode over to the balcony door to rip it open, let in a breeze. It was another fucking perfect day: a cloudless blue sky over the ocean, the ever-present white noise of the ocean waves and the cries of gulls wheeling above.

"Take that shirt off. You reek like tobacco," demanded Tony.

Bucky pulled it off without protest. His dog tags glinted on his chest.

Steve rolled over on his side, it hurt least like this. He tucked his arms against his chest and watched the flex of Bucky's shoulder blades against his back as he pulled off his shirt. Steve swallowed.

Both Tony and Bucky were in his line of sight. Steve let a strange sense of ease wash over him. Maybe his post-heat was making him clingy too.

Bucky walked over and it seemed he was set on inspecting Steve. He lifted up his shirt to spot bruises on his hip. Steve huffed softly. "I'm okay Buck. Promise. Maybe just...we can't do that everyday," he tried to joke but Bucky was still frowning. "I'm a big boy, okay? I wanted it. Don't feel bad."

Bucky's face crumpled. "I feel bad," he said. Steve had told him not to, but he couldn't help it. His eyes welled up. "All I ever did, I did it to try to keep you safe. I'm sorry." He wrapped his arms around Steve. "прости... прости... прости..."

Tony wandered over, looking slightly repulsed. "Great. Now he's gonna be a zombie for the next hour." He clambered into bed on Steve's over side and wrapped his arms around him. Steve was trying, unsuccessfully, to comfort Bucky. But Bucky seemed lost in a loop of regret and wasn't responding to any external stimuli.

"...if the therapists see him having one of these melt-downs, Steve, it's gonna be bad," said Tony unnecessarily. "Last one, he kept asking for you-know-who." He didn't say the name. The name set Bucky off like nobody's business. Bucky had already spent a solid twenty minutes asking for him that morning, over and over.

On the bright side, Tony was feeling a lot less intimidated. As dominant as he was, Bucky was clearly not in his right mind. Tony felt relatively in control for this reason: he was smarter, richer, and saner than Bucky.

"I know," Steve said quietly. He turned his head and nuzzled against Tony's shoulder. He kept one hand around Bucky's, brushing his thumb over the back of his hand comfortably. "It's gonna be a mess, no matter what," Steve sighed, closing his eyes. "The important thing is keeping him separate
from SHIELD. We can't trust them, even if we want to."

He traced his other hand over the rise and fall of Tony's bicep.

"I love you," Steve whispered. It felt right to say it in the moment. "...last night was kind of intense, huh?"

Tony smiled faintly. "Yeah. Intense is one word for it. ...you seemed to enjoy yourself," he said. He kissed Steve's shoulder. "Happy first threesome. ...next time I'm gonna take tails, though. Seems only fair. ...I mean, you seemed pretty into it. No regrets, right?"

"Right," Steve breathed. He nodded against Tony's jaw and squeezed his arm gently. It was a little strange having Bucky next to them but so absent from the conversation.

Bucky was still murmuring Russian against Steve, pressed up against him. Tony ignored him. At least, consciously, he did. Subconsciously, he could feel a slight twinge of panic in his gut, and the smell of another, more dominant Alpha in distress was bothering him. A lot.

He could feel a twinge of something unpleasant in his chest that wasn't his own. Steve frowned a little. "If something is bother you I do want you tell me," he pointed out gently.

"Nothing's bothering me... actually... I mean... I think I'm just feeling him," said Tony. It was strange to admit that he could feel another Alpha. That they were, indirectly, bonded to each other. Eurgh.

He shifted the conversation to SHIELD.

"So what's going on with SHIELD, anyway? Why did they call you in? ...is it about New York, or...?"

Steve exhaled slowly. "It's about a maybe terrorist group hiding out in an old HYDRA base. Unconfirmed kills. That sort of stuff. The whole situation is kind of unknown at the moment. We have to have a plan in 48 hours."

"So they're sending you back into the field? ...I thought Fury's Avengers thing was ruined and the whole Yemen thing kind of... uh... threw a wrench into your reliability? I guess saving the world gave us a Mulligan, huh? ...about what me? No one's asked me to help. Do they want me on the STRIKE team? I'm putting together some new suits. I mean, the old Mark VII got banged up but that's okay, it was only the first... I'm gonna make a bunch."

"They want me to lead the team because of all the mutant shit that's being dredged up," Steve murmured. "I mean I'm not one, but Nick did point out I'm not entirely human either. They want to put out a good impression and they're basically doing that through me. That, and they want the HYDRA intel from Bucky." Bucky didn't react much when Steve said his name. His heart strings tugged at his gut. "Nick didn't mention you. I think the problem will be if we're trying to be stealthy," he half smiled. "The suit is awesome, but not very subtle. I'm sure I could call you in when we need the big guns though."

Tony hummed appreciatively, watching Steve, in his underclothes, tenderly stroking Bucky's hair. The room was light and airy and despite the modernness of their clothes, Bucky and Steve looked like a Renaissance painting, draped with the sheets of Tony's bed, the ocean behind them, sunlight streaming in and casting their muscles in stark relief.

"Steve?" Tony's voice was carefully controlled. "...you're not replacing me, right? I'm still your Alpha, forever, right? That's how bonds work, right?"
The question threw Steve off guard. But then he rolled Tony over and he kissed him, kissed him like he goddamn meant it. "Don't ever say that. I would never replace you," he whispered. "For a second in new York I felt what the world would be like without you and I never want to feel that again."

Steve remembered tearing through Chitauri with his bare hands. He remembered Bucky holding him as he cried, hands fisting in his clothes. He'd not felt such rage and anguish in a very long time.

Tony kissed Steve back passionately; Steve broke apart and met his eyes.

Tony's lips quirked up a little. "Thanks. I just... needed to check. S'all." He gave Steve's cheek a patronizing little pat.

On Steve's other side, Bucky was still lost in his own little world.

Tony knew Steve wouldn't leave Bucky, and he didn't feel like leaving Steve, so he stuck around. Besides, his sleep patterns were all screwed up anyway. He didn't sleep well and found himself waking up frequently to half-dreams, half-memories, soaked in sweat, panting with fear. He wasn't sure how long that was supposed to last but didn't want to talk about it with anyone. It was a weakness. Tony did not like feeling weak. Besides, who could relate, anyway? Not a lot of people nearly died from space-nuke-wormholes. He was going to have to soldier forward alone.

He found it easy to redirect his mind, though, into a restless, numbing energy that could be put into suit construction. Clearly, having one or even two Mark VIs was not enough. Seven suits? That was good for, what, a week? What if there was another attack? He had to be able to protect Steve and it was clear that he was terribly inferior to some of the things out there. How easily he could have died. He needed to make more, and they needed to be bigger, faster, and stronger.
Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Man, this part is getting LONG. I'm thinking of splitting Loki's trial and Phil's funeral and Bucky's adaption to modern life into a new one, Part 6. Thoughts?

Tony must have fallen asleep thinking about the suits because a moment later he was woken by JARVIS beeping at him.

"Sir. Sir, the doctors are here for Sergeant Barnes."

"Oh." Tony sat up dizzily in his bed, taking a moment to take stock of his bedroom, with Steve and Bucky tangled together next to him at the bed. "Buck. ...Buck. Hey, Buck." Tony gave Steve a shove, pushing him into Bucky.

Bucky was already awake. He stared at Tony silently.

"Please tell me you're speaking English right now. You have to act not crazy for a couple of hours."

"How do I act not crazy?"

"I'm the wrong person to ask, Bucko."

Steve stirred, sitting up between them, his blond hair a tousled mess.

Steve reached out to take Bucky's hand, leading him off the bed and towards the door. Steve squeezed his hand gently as they descended the stairs and saw the doctors down there waiting for him. Brennan's smile was too tight and Steve didn't like it.

"Your hair looks nice, James."

"Bucky." Steve corrected. He glanced over to see Gleason at the kitchen counter.

"Hi David," Steve turned to Bucky. "I'll see you in an hour, yeah?"

"We might not even be that long," Brennan assured him, tapping Bucky's arm lightly to encourage him back upstairs.

As Steve was lead away Steve turned to David.

"SHIELD recommended I come again. I wasn't sure why," David said. "But I think I know now."

Steve frowned a little. "What?"

"We need to put you on contraceptives, Steve. Super solider serum makes your... little soldiers more super, you know?" Gleason grimaced. "Okay that analogy was terrible. Point is we need to do..." He waved a hand. "...something."

Steve went quiet. He realised Gleason could tell they'd had sex from the bite mark. After all, he had treated his neck before and gotten up close and personal with it. He'd recognise it: the familiar, old
bond mark and the new, fresh one. David's facial expression looked a little strange. Maybe he disapproved, or something?

"For now just use condoms, but I'll try and work something out."

"Right," Steve said, trying not to turn a shade of pink. "I'm gonna..." He realised he was still in boxers and a tee. "Go get dressed."

He disappeared back upstairs and found Tony still in bed. Steve flopped down next to and sighed. "They have to work out some kind of contraceptive for me. Because of, you know..."

Tony stretched languidly when Steve threw himself down on the bed.

He hummed, looking at Steve through heavy-lidded eyes. "Yeah... yeah, it's probably for the best, to be honest." Steve and Tony's contraceptive method had been about two-thirds condoms and one-third assuming they'd get lucky. Tony was pretty sure his sperm count, thanks to years in labs and playing around with electromagnets, was low, but still, they'd been playing with fire. And during heats, all bets were off.

Steve was obviously not thrilled at the thought of them both getting done. He sat up a little in bed, leaning into Tony's touch on instinct.

Tony propped himself up on an elbow. "I want to point out, again, that I could just get snipped. Super-easy procedure. Takes like a couple of minutes, puts me down for a day. That's it. Buck could do it too. No more problems. I mean, you can't be expected to take a pill every hour like you do in heat."

"Maybe I'll go for an evening run and think about it," Steve mused, half to himself. Steve pulled out his phone. He should invite Sam over.

Tony got up and stretched with a groan. His right shoulder made its usual pop-crack. "Well, I'm gonna go grab a sandwich. ...you're not gonna stay in bed all day, are you? I mean, I know you were up early, but you're Captain America. Usually you've run a couple of marathons by now."

He walked over to the closet and threw on some shorts and one of Steve's t-shirts, which hung loosely on him, and walked over to run a hand over Steve's head before leaving.

Dr. Gleason was sitting at his kitchen counter, chatting with Dr. Brazinski. Both looked up at Tony. "Good morning," said Tony.

"Afternoon," corrected Dr. Brazinski.

"Whatever."

"How are you sleeping?"

"Don't shrink me, doc. It's too early for that nonsense," said Tony, pulling open the fridge.

Dr. Gleason watched him. "...so... how are you and Steve?"

"Fine." Tony straightened, looking at the two of them over the refrigerator door. "...you guys saw the mark, huh? ...yeah, we're in a trio, okay? It's here, it's queer, get over it. I'm not exactly thrilled but a bond's a bond and right now I'm mostly just happy to be alive." He pulled out a carton of orange juice and began drinking from it.
David frowned at Tony, hands clasped in front of himself on the counter like he meant business. "And what about when the novelty of breathing wears off?" He asked.

Brazinski was poised, ready to take note of anything of interest.

But before Tony could respond Aria and Pepper walked in. Aria was already on the phone to someone, her tone rather snippy. "I told you already! No! Steve Rogers is not available for your stupid talk show--"

"It's show doing a debate about Omega Rights 'controversy'," Pepper explained calmly. "They want to have Steve on and this other guy, right wing and very pro-Alpha. They want to make it all a source of conflict and entertainment, you know the drill. The Alpha they want on has a terrible record and Aria is upset that they would suggest Steve even sit at the same table as him."

"--I can't believe you even think Steve would sit at the *same table* as him!" Aria finished loudly in the background. Pepper raised a brow, concealing a small smile.

Steve appeared moments later, dressed in jeans a t-shirt. Both Natasha and Clint had been sending him thoughts about the whole 'Mandarin' problem and he should probably get to it. His forty-eight hours were very quickly going to get eaten up.

Aria hung up with a frustrated groan and went to hug Steve, her hands fisting in his shirt briefly. "I hate people," she said. Steve patted her shoulder, having no real idea what she was talking about.

"We've got to get you an interview in the next week or so Steve," Aria sighed, straightening up. She glanced over at Tony. "So if you wanna go first, you better get on it. Has Banksy said when he'll have you?"

Brazinski was rather unashamedly peering at Steve's neck. When she caught his gaze she smiled. Steve didn't like it.

Pepper sighed, crossed the expansive kitchen, opened a cupboard, and pulled out a glass. She pushed it into Tony's hand.

He held it, still drinking from the carton. In part because he was avoiding both David's and Aria's question.

He wasn't sure how to respond to either. ...David had a point. What happened when the novelty of being alive got old? Was he just supposed to be okay with being in a trio he'd never asked for? One with another Alpha, a taller, more muscular, more dominant Alpha who had a fuckton more in common with Steve than he did? He and Steve's real connection was a chemical one, based solely on pheromones, not personality or shared experiences. Would they be okay? Doubt curdled in Tony's gut.

And then Aria's question... shit. Going on Banksy's show and boldly announcing he was in a trio and supported Steve and didn't care what anyone thought had seemed like such a good idea when Banksy was giggling on his lap, but now, all he could think of is what a loser he would look like. Every other Alpha in the world would no doubt be embarrassed for him, unable to keep his omega, having to share him with another Alpha. And the rumors of him being gay would probably explode. He'd have to hide the back of his neck. Maybe grow out his hair to prevent anyone from seeing the old scar there and getting the wrong idea.

Shit.

"Uh... I haven't really talked specifics with Banksy yet," said Tony. "I mean, no rush, though, right?"
Buck's basically under house arrest, he's not going anywhere, we don't have to tell anyone yet... you know I'm not an acer, though, right?"

"I know, Tony," said Pepper gently.

"It just sorta happened. None of us expected this. But, y'know, there's nothing between me and Buck. It's Steve who's double-bonded. Just saying."

"Yes, Tony, I understand," said Pepper patiently.

"I just want Steve to be happy, that's all."

"Are you happy?" asked Dr. Brazinski.

Tony exploded.

"WHAT THE FUCK KIND OF QUESTION IS THAT? I'M TONY GODDAMN STARK! OF COURSE I'M HAPPY!"

He shoved the orange juice into Pepper's hands and stormed out of the kitchen toward his shop; they heard the door slam all the way from their seats. Only Pepper looked unfazed; she put the unused glass and the carton of juice away, like this was perfectly normal behavior.

Aria gripped Steve's hand tightly as they watched the scene unfold. Steve swallowed thickly, pushing down a lump he felt threatening to rise in his throat.

Brazinski was scribbling something down and Steve had to fight the urge to smack her notepad from her hands. He felt doubt sitting low in his gut, twisting there. This was why he knew he shouldn't have had sex with them. It was too soon.

But they had been down for it... right? Tony suggested flipping the goddamn coin himself. He wouldn't have said that, if he didn't want to... would he?

Now Steve was just playing mind games with himself. He let out a withered breath.

"Give him a minute," Aria said quietly when Steve began gazing at the workshop stairs longingly.

Moments later Brennan appeared followed by Bucky. The situation was awkward and Steve felt some desperate, strange sense of uselessness, that he couldn't fix it.

"We have a week until Phil's funeral. Then it'll be harder to keep things hidden," Steve said quietly and Aria nodded.

"Don't worry about it, Steve."

Well, he was worried but there was nothing he could do about that.

"I have SHIELD work to do," he said simply and then disappeared back upstairs, putting distance between himself and everyone else.

Bucky cast Steve a look of worry as Steve excused himself. Concern was etched onto his face.

"Hello, James," said Dr. Brazinski, rising. "...do you remember me?"

"Dr. Brennan," said Bucky.
She smiled patiently. "No, but close. I'm Dr. Brazinski. That's Dr. Brennan. It's rather confusing to have our names be so similar, isn't it?"

Bucky didn't respond or move.

"Would you like to come upstairs with me and chat?"

Bucky didn't move. He wasn't sure what he liked. He knew he liked Steve but Steve had left and Bucky felt like he had done something wrong.

"Yes, he does," supplied Pepper for him. "Go talk to Dr. Brazinski, James."

He obediently went after her.

Pepper waited until they were well out of earshot before turning to Aria. "Okay, what did I miss?" she asked wearily, rubbing her temples. A migraine was threatening to erupt, and no wonder. She had barely slept at all. Stark Tower, only a week away from its opening, had been Ground Zero for The Incident, and it was currently swarming with SHIELD agents, not to mention the FBI, CIA, CDC, NSA, and probably a dozen other agencies. The company had been slammed, its stock dropping dramatically (along with nearly every other industry's; The Incident had caused a minor economic crash). She had been fighting with the board and the press and the government non-stop and had been jetting between Washington and New York and Los Angeles, throwing her sleep schedule into total disarray.

But she was as observant as ever. Steve's neck told her plenty; Tony's reaction told her the rest.

"What's the game plan? We can't let this story break on its own. We need to be running damage control on this. Their images are pretty strong right now... people are more likely to be okay with a non-traditional trio considering they saved the world a week ago. And we've got to do it before they start making regular public appearances, or else they'll get accused to hiding it later. ...people are going to want to know all about James. I talked to SHIELD... they're willing to let us reveal his identity as James Barnes but not as anything else and expect us to deny his involvement with any government agency whatsoever. The story they want to weave is that he, like Steve, was frozen this whole time and has amnesia. They want to leave out anything involving the Soviets or Yemen."

"A lot of people still think that it was a third Alpha who bit Steve in Yemen. So that works," Aria hummed. She moved around on automatic, making them coffee. "Banksy suggested Tony coming out on his show with it. But I'm not sure if Tony actually thinks that will put him in the best light." She sighed, pushing Pepper her coffee across the table before sitting down with her own. "They're all idiots. Which doesn't help."

Pepper laughed lightly. "Tony is the dumbest genius I know," she agreed fondly.

Aria took a sip of her drink. "Pretty sure they had a threesome. I mean, I dunno. But Steve refused to sleep with either of them separately. I just can't really see it, you know? They're both very insistent they aren't gay at all." She almost smiled. "Makes me think of that Lonely Island song, you know it?"

Pepper almost definitely didn't. Aria carried on talking. "I think it might be better if Tony and Steve go onto something together. I don't see why Tony should have to do this all by himself."

"...Tony is fairly open-minded when it comes to sex," said Pepper. "It's not the sex that he's got a problem with. It's the whole relationship. Being in a normal one is hard enough for him, but having James around is triggering all sorts of hang-ups." She didn't elaborate on his hang-ups. Both she and
Aria were betas but it was obvious enough to them who was more dominant, and both already knew how low Tony's dominance was, anyway. Pepper had never mentioned the scar on Tony's neck but she assumed Aria had picked up on it at some point.

She frowned at her coffee. She was usually a tea-drinker but she needed the caffeine. She sipped it delicately.

"In theory, I agree it would be better for them to announce it together, show a united front. But I imagine Tony wants to feel in control right now and wants to be seen as stronger than he is. You know how... unstable his self-esteem is. I don't know, maybe we could have two segments... one with just him, and one with Steve. The other thing is that, frankly, people are going to prefer to hear it from the Alpha. Right now the media's assumption is that Steve wears the pants in the relationship and I think it puts a lot of more traditional Alphas off. ...we need to appeal to the greatest number of people we can."

She let out a sigh, and added, "He won't go to therapy. Let alone trio counseling. He's too proud. And he doesn't want to dredge up old memories..." She lowered her voice out of habit. "...about Afghanistan."

"Right," Aria said softly. "Afghanistan." Of course, no one had told her outright but it wasn't hard to work out that something had happened there. Steve didn't mention it and Aria didn't ask. But she wasn't blind. She saw the mark on Tony's neck and she had noted his insecurities once or twice.

"If it'll help them all it work then I'm all for Tony doing it by himself," Aria said. Usually, she wouldn't pander to Tony's needs and would always insist Steve came first. But she understood that Tony being happy was key to Steve being happy and that a lot of work would have to go into making this trio functional.

"We just have to make sure Steve doesn't seem... you know. People freak out enough that he has sex with Tony, the thought of Steve having sex with two Alphas on a regular basis? Unthinkable." Aria sighed and gulped down like half her coffee. "Basically what I'm saying is we don't want people to start thinking or calling Steve a whore, whatever. He already had people saying that after Yemen and he didn't even remember that happening. People have this Puritanical view of Captain America. They don't like to imagine the sex."

Pepper scoffed. "Good luck with that. No one's dim enough to think that they're somehow bonded but celibate. Steve's got two Alphas, like it or not. There's always going to be people upset by that. ...I definitely think you should play up Steve's prior relationship with Barnes, though. Maybe people will go easy on him, them being childhood friends, and--"

The windows and saucers rattled; a streak of bright red flashed past the window.

Pepper frowned. She had very specifically asked Tony not to break the sound barrier too close to the house.

"Why don't you talk to Steve about how he wants to announce it? We'll work something out with Banksy. Alternatively, we can just release a statement to the Associated Press, something canned. Maybe request people respect their privacy right now... not that that ever works..."

When Pepper had been informed that Tony had been found, alive, back in 2008, after three months of being presumed dead, one of the first things she'd done was to release a statement. It had been short and sweet, informing shareholders that their CEO was alive, was in stable condition, and was returning home, and that he requested privacy. Tony had immediately ruined that by grandly announcing (from the floor) (while eating fast food) that he was dumping their weapons program,
prompting a frenzy from within the industry's news outlets. The New York Times Business section had called him "Stark Raving Mad" so many times that there were actually letters to the editor requesting that they stop. (One was from Tony himself. It stated, simply, "While I am well-aware of the ample puns provided by my last name with regards to my mental health, I request that you at least acknowledge, just once, that the phrase 'Stark Naked' is undoubtedly a more accurate reflection of my neuroses, most of which are sexual in nature, as can be confirmed by 4/5ths of last year's Playboy Bunny cover models. - T. Stark" They had published it, prompting Obadiah to come over with a pizza to yell at Tony, who took a bite out of every slice with a broad smirk on his face.)

In any case, the two things Pepper learned from the incident is that the media never, ever respected requests for privacy, and that even if they did, Tony himself couldn't be trusted to keep his mouth shut.

"I'm sorry, Aria," she said suddenly. "...I've been doing this for so long and I'm so used to Tony being... well, Tony... it must be difficult for you. Steve may not be a sarcastic, egotistical cad, but I imagine working for him is still a pain in the ass." She didn't need to say that it was probably harder to manage to public image of an omega as opposed to an Alpha.

"It's okay. I mean, he's worth it." Aria half-smiled. "Steve is great, and I know that he's always sorry when problems do come up. But trouble kind of revolves around him, you know? It's a lot of work. Everyone wants to ruin his image. Steve deserves to be seen how he really is, and I'm worried people will use this whole thing to just...discredit him. A lot of people never forgave him just for being an omega. As if he has control over that. ...they all want their precious captain to be a big, tough Alpha. Urgh. Sorry." Aria downed the rest of her coffee. "Right. Tony is doing it. We decided. I'll talk to Banksy about potential questions and stuff, just to make sure everything Steve needs covering is covered."

Upstairs Steve had been drawing up plans whilst he was on the phone to Clint. The conversation had mainly stayed professional as Natasha kept butting in with extra advice. All they needed right now was a plan of action, with a plan B and C in the wings. The Delta STRIKE task force wasn't expected to take concrete action in two days, just to start preparing for it. Although Steve didn't want to waste anytime.

Still, Steve was nervous. He wanted to prove he was capable of leading, that SHIELD was right in bringing him back.

He emerged downstairs an hour or so later; he nodded to Aria and Pepper and then walked down to the workshop.

Steve paused in the doorway, hearing the clang of metal as Tony worked on sometimes. "Tony?" he called out tentatively, "you got a minute?"

Tony was in the middle of sautering a tiny crack in one of the Mark IV’s ailerons; he pulled up his safety goggles, wiping his hands on his pants.

"Yeah, what's up? ...I didn't bug Pepper when I flew past the window, did I? Check it out, the Four's nearly back to ship-shape!" He beamed, standing over a pile of non-distinct red, grey, and gold metal pieces that were scattered all over the poured floor. It didn't look like a neat little suitcase anymore. It looked more like a robot had died and its "bones" had been scattered all over the place, perhaps by an earthquake. How Tony determined when something was close to being "finished" was a mystery to all but Tony.

His smile wavered a little. "...why do you look so serious? You okay? Did Buck have another wack attack?"
Tony was covered in grease and engine oil. He was an engineer in his element. Steve kind of loved him like this. Well, he loved him all the time. But especially like this. When the polished appearance was gone and Tony was just...Tony. Steve stepped into the room and felt almost nervous, chewing on his bottom lip briefly as he tried to figure out how best to approach this.

"You're not okay with everything," Steve said quietly. "And that's okay Tony. You don't have to be. Hell, I'm not. None of us are. Please just... don't pretend to be happy for my sake. Or because you're afraid of losing me. Because I'm not going anywhere."

"Seriously, did Bucky do something?"

"This isn't about Bucky. This is about you." Steve walked over and took of Tony's hands in both of his own, kissing the back of it. "What can I do to make this easier for you?"

The creases on Tony's forehead deepened when Steve took his hands. Steve's skin immediately darkened with oil from Tony's.

Tony reached around, pulled a rag hanging from his back pocket, and took a moment to try to wipe Steve's hands off, fussing over them like a mother. It was a pointless attempt; the rag itself was dirty from the shop. But Tony needed to stay busy to gather his thoughts. He found himself turned the ring on Steve's left hand.

"Steve... I'm not unhappy. I'm just... it's an Alpha thing. I told you that. Buck's way more dominant than me. You guys shared a generation, a culture, a childhood. Me and you had only known each other one or two months when we bonded. Thing is, I know you're loyal to me. I can feel it, us, our bond." He'd given up trying to clean Steve's hands and was just holding them in his, still holding the rag. "I just... have irrational fears. I have a super bad track record with relationships and... and we had the whole Yemen thing happen when I let my... my issues get between us. I don't want that to happen again. But, yeah, I'm intimidated by Barnes, okay? Hell, he's more messed up than you or me, but... but still. He's really, really fucking dominant. And his knot's, like, fucking huge. He has, like, a Sasquatch dick. I mean, I know you don't get it, you're a 'mega, but... it's just tough, when your instincts are telling you to be threatened and your rational brain is telling you it's gonna be okay."

Tony's shrugged his shoulders. "I'll get used to it. Gimme time, okay? I'm not pretending to be happy though. I really am happy... mostly... I just don't want people saying I'm an acer or a homsexual. I'm not. ...heh. Knot. It's a pun."

He let go of Steve's hands and pulled his goggles down over his eyes. "Now. Excuse me, but I need to finish building myself up again, pun intended that time. ...can you just promise me you won't... won't have any, like... private stuff with Barnes for now? I don't wanna feel left out. I don't wanna come upstairs and find you two went on a romantic date or... or feel you two boning. I mean, I get that he's your primary Alpha from a... from like an instinct point of a view, but from the rational side, you know, this is my house and Buck is sort of... well... let's be real, he's not all there, y'know?"

"Okay...okay. You take all the time you need," Steve told him softly, reaching up to run a hand through Tony's hair as he pulled the goggles down. "No private stuff. Got it." And Tony was right. Bucky wasn't all there. That was what scared Steve...what if Bucky never fully recovered? What if this was all that was left of him? All his complexity was gone. He was a shell of the old Bucky Steve had used to know and his heart ached at the thought of this being all that there was of him. Bucky couldn't live a full life like this, not when he needed someone's permission to goddamn eat.

Steve kissed Tony's brow before he let him pull away. "I'll come back down for dinner," he told him and then headed back upstairs.
Just as he did he found Brennan and Brazinski fussing over Bucky, who was apparently done for the day.

"Hey Buck," Steve walked over to them. "How's it going?"

"Good," Brennan said, smiling too much for Steve's liking. "Mr. Barnes has a good attitude."

"Good," he said, turning to Bucky. "Sam is coming over soon. Would you like to go out for a run with us Buck?"

Bucky stared blankly at Steve.

...did he want to?

"Sam... Wilson?" he asked, buying time. He'd just gone through nearly three hours of questions and he felt completely wrung out. The last thing he wanted to do was answer more questions like what he wanted.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Bucky," said one of the doctors. Bucky had already forgotten which was which. He had specifically corrected their use of "James," because no one called him that. He'd always been either Jimmy or Bucky. In the army, he'd been exclusively Bucky, as there were already too many Jimmies all over the place. Hell, there was even one in the Commandos, He remembered this detail and had told Brennan but then been unable to recall Jim's last name. ("Monroe? No... no, that's not is... Mort... Morgan? ...started with an M, maybe.")

"Okay," said Bucky, watching them go. He turned back to Steve and stared, waiting for Steve to tell him whether or not he was going for a run. If not he'd probably just wait in the living room until someone else gave him orders. He had never been awake this long with so little to do and he was re-discovering boredom, which he was almost positive he did not like. But he didn't want to complain.

In fact it was little wonder that the doctor said he had a good attitude. Bucky had no strong negative opinions whatsoever, and most of what he had to say was utterly neutral. The two things that never failed to elicit a strong response were discussions about Steve and Karpov, both of whom Bucky had a clear over-the-top loyalty and only spoke positively about, to the point that it bordered on neurological praise or worship.

"Yeah. Sam. He was over a few days ago, you remember him?" Steve said, almost nervous of the answer. "It's up to you Buck. I just kind of lost my exercise routine after my heat and all the alien crap. So if you wanna join us for a run, you can. But it's up to you."

Bucky didn't answer.

"You wanna help me make dinner? Come on. Sam doesn't get here for a while." Maybe if Steve gave him more time to think on his answer, then he'd be more willing to give one.

Bucky stared blankly at Steve, but came to the kitchen when Steve told him to follow.

Steve started getting food out for dinner, making a something along the lines of a Thai Green curry. But he held back on the spice, unsure as to whether Buck was used to chili. He imagined the food HYDRA had given him wouldn't have been very creative.

He gave Bucky peppers and onions to chop up. They fell into a quiet and easy routine.

Bucky let Steve take the reins. Bucky didn't mind helping out in the kitchen; in fact, he'd done plenty of it back when it was the two of them in the late thirties and early forties. If Steve had been a
normal omega, Bucky would have expected to come home to dinner, but with Steve sick all the time, Bucky often came home from the docks to find Steve in bed, drawing and listening to the radio. On those days, he cooked with Steve's instruction.

Bucky took the knife and began dicing peppers with ease. His familiarity with a knife was slightly worrisome.

The two of them worked easily in the kitchen together, always aware of the others' movements; occasionally one would hold out a hand only for the other to put something into it, without a word being passed between them. This is how it had been on good days, when they weren't fighting. Easy, domestic, the two of them perfectly synced to each other.

Steve had just put the rice on to boil when Sam appeared in his running gear.

"Congratulations on the STRIKE man!" Sam said, walking over and clapping a hand on Steve's shoulder.

Bucky had frozen when an unfamiliar Alpha entered. He was unbonded. He slapped Steve on the back and then started staring at his neck; Bucky bristled slightly. Who the hell did this punk think he was, anyway? His grip on the knife tightened.

Without meaning to, Sam's gaze zoned in on Steve's neck and it didn't take him long to realise that the fresher mark wasn't Tony's. "Hey," he said softly, gaze darting over to Bucky. "Everything okay?"

Steve realised what he meant and straightened up. "What? Yeah. I mean-- it was consensual."

"Oh." Sam blinked. "Well, good for you dude. And Tony?"

"Was present," Steve said, voice getting a little higher pitched. "I'm gonna go change into running stuff. Do you mind watching the food?"

Steve disappeared upstairs, cheeks a little pink, leaving the two of them alone. Sam cleared his throat as he walked over to Bucky's side of the table.

"Long day, huh? Steve said those two doctors are coming regularly. Must be exhausting." Sam tried for a smile. "Fed up of answering questions, right?"

The man started asking him questions. Bucky stared at him. When the man had the audacity to ask whether or not he'd had enough questions, though, he snapped; he was clearly being mocked and he wasn't going to take it.

Bucky flung himself at him and slammed his back against the nearest wall, holding the knife. "What do you want? Who are you? Answer me!"

he barked.

The Alpha's eyes were huge. "I don't speak Russian!" he protested.

"Don't play dumb! Tell me who you are!" he yelled.

"Bucky! It's me! Sam! You know me! Speak English, man!"

"я говорю по анг--" he began, then realized, startled, that he wasn't speaking English at all. What the...?

The knife lowered just a fraction; Sam moved, grabbing his wrist out of nowhere, hitting a pressure
point. He dropped the knife, disarmed, but immediately came back to his senses, and used his left arm to pin the other man by the throat. His hands came up and he scrabbled weakly at the metal arm, searching for something to grab; there was nothing; it was all smooth. He let out a choking noise, eyes bulging, but the soldier didn't move, staring darkly at him through a curtain of hair, keeping the pressure steady.

There was a loud metal clang and Bucky stumbled back, looking dazed for a moment before he dropped to the floor, revealing Steve behind him holding his shield and looking terrified. "Oh my God," he whispered, voice trembling. "Sam? Sam, are you okay?" He started checking his friend over, the shield dropping to the floor noisily. Sam pushed Steve back, hands on his arms.

"Steve I'm fine. Believe it or not, this isn't abnormal--"

"He could have killed you!"

"But he didn't." Sam sounded a little hoarse and was rubbing at his throat. "I shouldn't have walked in like that. I should have known better." He coughed. "I forget that in the forties, we couldn't be friends."

Steve frowned and knelt down by Bucky. He wasn't knocked out, not properly, just stunned. Steve rolled him over, keeping Bucky's head in his lap. Steve peered down at him.

"I shouldn't have given him a knife," Steve murmured, half to himself. Sam didn't disagree with him.

"Aw shit!" Sam rushed over to the oven where the rice was boiling under the pan, the water bubbling out and onto the hob. Sam coughed again and Steve felt awful.

"Have you dealt with this kind of thing a lot?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, eh, they just don't usually have a metal arm. But it's fine, Steve, he's a vet, I get it. He's adjusting. These things happen."

Steve waved a hand in front of Bucky's face. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Bucky blinked rapidly. His eyes were watering but he didn't think his retina was detached this time. "...I don't need to go to Liebmann," he slurred. He had a memory of too-bright light and whirring drills and his teeth itched as if in protest. There was some dark memory there he didn't quite understand, but he knew that whoever Liebmann was, he was probably worse than the chair, and that was pretty bad. "...I'm fine..."

There was a slam from the basement and Tony ran in, skidding to a halt. "I heard a crash," he said uncertainly. Sam was coughing and pulling a boiled-over pot from the stove, while Steve was crouched on the floor, cradling Bucky's head, the shield beside him. Bucky was staring vacantly toward the ceiling.

"What the hell happened? ...Buck?" Tony walked over and nudged him with his foot.

Bucky turned and gazed up at him, blinking wetly. "Я закончил переподготовку?" he asked weakly. His head was ringing and he felt horrible.

"Uh-oh. He had a meltdown, didn't he? What happened? Did he try to call the Kremlin or something?" asked Tony.

Sam started to say something, but it broke off in a wheezy cough, and Tony realized he was holding his throat. He looked down in alarm. "...did he fucking attack Sam?"
"You're not going anywhere Buck. I promise," Steve shushed, pushing his hair back from his face. Concern was etched onto his features and he had a lump in his throat that wouldn't go down. He had so many questions but he didn't dare press for answers right now.

He looked up as Tony walked in and nodded when he asked. Steve swallowed. What if this happened again? What if Bucky attacked Tony next, or him? He wasn't safe. Especially not with--

"We're going to have to remove the arm, aren't?" Steve asked, his voice breaking a little.

"He can do that?" Sam asked, wheezing.

"Yeah. It's made to."

"Did he say something about training?"

Steve stared back down at Bucky, running the pad of his thumb over the bump of a cheekbone. "Buck?" He said softly, voice catching. "You attacked Sam. You hurt him. You could have killed him. Sam is our friend. Why did you do that? There's no training here. I promise."

Bucky smiled softly and turned his head slightly, enjoying the feeling of Steve stroking his cheek. It took him a few moments to process Steve's words.

"...who's Sam?" he asked. "I... I thought..."

Why had he attacked Sam? He wasn't sure. Surely he'd had a good reason.

His face crumpled into a look of utter confusion. "...I... thought I had to?"

Tony watched him warily. "I'm all for taking his murder-arm, but we can't give it to SHIELD. They'll reverse-engineer it. I vote we keep it down in the lab."

Bucky tried to sit up. The world swam a little. "No. No, please don't take my arm. It works fine."

"That's sort of the issue, man; you just used it to try to kill me," said Sam.

Bucky looked up a him. "Who are you?"

"That's Sam. Sam Wilson," said Tony.

Bucky's eyebrows shot up. He struggled to get to his feet, bracing himself against the wall. "I need to procure a tablet--"

"Right, you already did that," said Sam, whose patience was clearly being tried to the limit. Tony stepped in.

"Hey, big guy, let's get you to lie down for a bit, okay? The adults need to talk," said Tony. "Don't worry, we're not getting a divorce. We'll explain when you're older."

Bucky stared blankly.

"...Buck. Come."

Bucky went.

Tony took his right arm, led him into the living room, and pointed to the couch. "Lay down there until we call for you."
Bucky obeyed.

Tony went back to the kitchen. Sam had moved the pot to another burner and was wiping off the stove.

"So. Do we report that or no?" asked Tony bluntly. Steve was still kneeling on the floor with his shield, looking thoroughly distressed, perhaps even more than Sam, who had gotten himself a glass of water and wrapped some ice in a towel for his neck.

"We can't report that," Steve whispered, gaze still fixed on the floor. "I bet the World Security Council is already edgy about the whole thing. Gideon Malick once threatened to fuck with me through Bucky before. I'm not giving them any ammunition."

"But he needs help. Like real help," Sam said.

Steve sighed and ran a hand over his face, slowly standing up. "I know. Shit. This sucks. Sam, I'm so, so sorry."

Sam patted his shoulder awkwardly as he held the towel up with his other hand. "S'not your fault."

"But it is. I brought Bucky here; I wouldn't let SHIELD take him. I'm responsible for everything he does. I took that responsibility Sam."

He didn't argue with Steve on that point, which felt like both a defeat and a victory.

"He said he thought he had to. Which meant that he didn't want to be violent, it just seems like it's a learnt behaviour," Sam said. "Which means it can be unlearnt. You need someone who understands what it's like to have that kind of programming crap in your head."

"Maybe...maybe Natasha could help?"

"I don't know dude, but it's worth asking."

Steve stood up with a bit of a wobble. "You think anything triggered it in particular?"

"The unbonded alpha thing?" Sam asked with a shrug. Steve frowned.

"He's fine with Tony."

"But he can feel Tony's bond," Sam pointed out. "That is different."

Steve pressed his lips together in a thin line, still unsatisfied with the answer. He pulled out his phone to text Natasha:

> Bucky just attacked Sam. We don't know what to do. You got any ideas? SR

Tony was walking back into the kitchen when Natasha called. Specifically, she called through the house, which was unusual. Tony didn't think she'd ever called him before. JARVIS informed him of the incoming call.

"Put her on," he said to JARVIS. "...Dark Angel, is that you?"

"Yes. It's me. Is Sam okay? Where's Barnes now? Who else is there?" she demanded.

"Whoa. Whoa, whoa, slow down. I'm fine," said Sam hoarsely. "Barnes is laying down, everyone's okay."
"It's just me, Sam, Steve, and Buck," said Tony. "Oh! And I think two of my guards are on patrol outside. But I mean, in the house, just us."

"What happened?" asked Natasha, still sounding on edge.

"Actually, I wanna know, too. No way he just attacked you for no reason," said Tony. "The guy's like a puppy."

Sam glared at Tony. "I didn't do anything! I just walked in, said hi to Steve, then Steve left, then I asked if he'd had a long day and was sick of doctors yet, and he just... snapped."

"Did you say it in Russian?" asked Tony.

"No!"

"And then what?"

"Then he attacked me! He was yelling in Russian, but I'm not sure what he was saying. I'm telling you, that's it! Steve came in and cracked him over the head with his shield."

Natasha was quiet for a moment. "...you need to get his side of the story," she said finally. "He wouldn't act without motivation. Everything he does is dictated by what he thinks are orders. Get the story from him. Don't ask. Demand. Asking implies consent. You have to ask for a report. At this point, he'll probably be most likely to respond to direct orders than questions. ...are you going to tell SHIELD? What if he attacks Tony or something?"

"He wouldn't attack me, we're Eskimo brothers," said Tony.

"The fuck is an Eskimo--" began Sam.

"Shared an igloo. Y'know. Fucked the same omega," said Tony.

"Tony!" snapped Natasha.

Steve fisted a hand in his hair, too upset to even be embarrassed about the mention of a threesome. "Okay," he said with a swallow. "I'll go in and I'll ask for a report. We'll see what Bucky has to say."

"It doesn't have to be you," Sam pointed out. Steve glanced over to him. He shook his head. "I brought him into this house. I'll deal with it."

"I wasn't thinking of telling SHeILD. At least not unless it happens again," Steve added.

"Seems wise for now," Natasha said. "But sometimes you've got to admit you need help Steve. They have resources."

"Yeah. Yeah. I know," Steve ran a hand down his face. "I'll go talk to him."

Tentatively, he walked into the living room. Steve walked right up to Bucky and tried his best to look serious. His hands flexed by his sides, fingers in and out. He exhaled.

"James," he said. Steve always called him James when he was annoyed in the past. "I want you to tell me why you attacked Sam. Now."

Bucky looked up. "I had to. He hurt you," said Bucky. His eyes narrowed. "He slapped your back and he was looking at your neck. I was protecting you. I promised your ma. She said, make sure
"you take care of Steve. And I said I would. He was asking me too many questions. Trying to confuse me so he could take you."

Tony peeked into the living room, eavesdropping. "...wow, HYDRA must have scrambled your gaydar. Sam's as queer as a three-dollar bill. He only likes other Alphas."

"Thanks, Tony," said Sam grudgingly, walking up behind Tony. He didn't feel right about leaving Steve to deal with Bucky all by himself. From what he'd seen of Bucky before, in the hospital, Bucky was generally a completely tolerable guy. A bit literal, black-and-white in his thinking, but friendly enough. Sam had never expected him to attack... but then, Sam had seen plenty of guys at VA with milder issues than Bucky lose it now and then.

Bucky bristled at the sound of Sam's voice. "He was flirting with you. You blushed. I protect you. You're my omega."

"I was congratulating him, man! Not flirting! We're friends!"

"Oh, I get it. Sam's dominant enough to get attacked, but not me, right?" asked Tony bitterly.

"Can it, Stark, this isn't about you," snapped Sam. Softening a little, he added, "I think it had more to do with me being black and unbonded, not more dominant. Besides, like you said. Eskimo brothers."

"They prefer to be called Inuit, actually," said Tony.

"But earlier you were the one who-- oh, forget it."

"He didn't hurt me!" Steve let out a soft exasperated huff. "And it doesn't matter that Sam is gay. I can look after myself now Buck. I can fight my own battles. I don't need no one looking out for me. If I want help, I'll call for it. Otherwise, you gotta trust me."

Briefly, Steve's mind flashed back to a small room in a SHIELD building, Gideon's fat hand squeezing around his neck, the air in the room was stuffy and hot, he couldn't move--

Steve blinked, coming back as Tony and Sam were bickering about Inuits.

"Also. I blush all the time," Steve pointed out wearily. "And even if someone was flirting with me, which Sam was not, you don't get to attack them! Bucky..." his tone was becoming increasingly imploring. "If you hurt someone, hurt someone real bad, SHIELD might try and take you away from me. Please. You gotta think before you do stuff. You can't just strangle people."

Steve gave him a serious look again. "Tell me what you've learned from this. That you won't do it again."

"I gotta think before I do stuff. I can't just strangle people. I promise I won't do it again," recited Bucky.

"Yeah, that didn't sound convincing at all," said Tony.

"I think it's gonna take him some time to really understand, Steve," said Sam quietly. "It's okay, though. He didn't hurt me bad. I'll just wear a scarf for a while."

"And no doubt look fabulous," said Tony.

"...I would sic Barnes on you if I didn't think he'd actually do it," said Sam, casting an annoyed yet
fond glance at Tony. "...anyways, it's fine, Steve. You stopped him before he did anything serious. Maybe just... be careful when he's around other Alphas. Except Tony, who he's bonded to."

Tony and Bucky both made loud voices of protest. "I'm bonded to Steve," they corrected in unison, clearly disgusted at the idea of being bonded directly.

"Right, right, sorry, whatever," said Sam. "...hope you don't mind if I skip the run, Steve. I'm not feeling it right now."

"Have a glass of whiskey," offered Tony.

"No thanks, I don't--"

"This one's twelve grand a bottle!"

"--yeah, I'll try some."

Tony jogged over to the bar to fix drinks. "Is Sam staying for dinner? Follow-up question, is Bucky going to be okay with that?" He walked back in carrying four tumblers.

Sam frowned. "You're giving him alcohol?"

"...why not? Buck, you like whiskey, right?" said Tony.

"I like whiskey," repeated Bucky, accepting the glass.

"I think he's like me. Can't get drunk easy," Steve murmured. He knew he probably shouldn't approve but he was all for Bucky indulging himself. Bucky just saying he liked something was progress in itself.

The situation calmed considerably after that. Steve brought out dinner in bowls which they ate whilst watching the first Indiana Jones movie, something Sam insisted was a classic. Steve didn't think Bucky really paid all that much attention to the actual film but he sat through it politely all the same.

Tony and Bucky sat on either side of Steve, sipping liquor and providing commentary on the movie. Tony had seen it before but it held up well. Bucky sat with polite non-interest, spending more time watching Steve than the movie itself, although he clapped when the Nazis died at the end.

Sam left after the film, obviously still feeling a little weary.

Steve surprised him by hugging him as he paused in the doorway. "I'm really sorry."

"Okay. Dude. You can stop apologising. Just... keep an eye on him, yeah?"

Steve nodded. He sure as hell would now.

He walked back into the living room to find the credits still rolling and both Bucky and Tony drinking whisky. There was empty bowls on the floor and a considerable amount of the whiskey itself was gone from the bottle.

"I think I'm gonna go to bed," Steve announced.

"Seventy years later, and Nazis are still the bad guys. Pretty good, huh, Steve?" said Tony, smiling.

"...yeah, let's go to bed. Don't worry 'bout the dishes, a maid'll get 'em." He threw back the last of his drink and got up to stretch. Steve was no doubt still beating himself up about Sam getting attacked, but Tony was sure it'll all blow over. Sam seemed okay and he worked with vets; he know
how screwed up their brains could get.

Tony took Steve's hand and walked with him up the stairs. Bucky trailed them silently.

Tony realized, halfway down the second-floor hallway to the bedroom, that Bucky was still there.

"Buck. What are you doing?" demanded Tony.

"Going to bed."

"Your bedroom is that one," said Tony, pointing back down the hall. "Remember? Come on." He let go of Steve's hand and gave Bucky a push toward the guest room. He opened the door. The bed was made; Bucky's backpack was on the floor. "You sleep here," said Tony.

"...I sleep with Steve," said Bucky.

"No. No, Steve sleeps in our bedroom. Which is my bedroom. This here is your-- did you sleep in here at all the first night? Why's it so clean?"

"I waited," said Bucky.

"...for what?"

"For Steve."

"...Jesus. Well, you've got to sleep tonight, not wait. And tonight, you sleep here."

Bucky hesitated, trying to peek past Tony toward Steve to confirm his orders. "I sleep with Steve. What if he needs me?"

"Why would he need you? He has me. He's fine. Shoo."

"...can I ask for a thing now, Steve?" asked Bucky hopefully. "...I want to sleep with you."

"Ohhh no! No, no, no! You can't pull the *I'm finally expressing unprompted opinions* card! That's not fair! ...goddammit it, he's going to get what he wants, isn't he?" Tony had not expected Bucky to be let in the bed every night. But Bucky was not budging. And he was casting a sad little puppy-dog look in Steve's direction. Tony was pretty sure it was a lost cause to get Bucky to sleep in his own bedroom. It didn't look like Bucky valued privacy at all, and alone, had spent the first night not doing a damn thing other than just... sitting there.

Steve stared at the empty guest room that looked so naked and unlived in and felt sick to his stomach. Tony and Bucky were arguing but he had stopped listening. How could he send Bucky back to a room like that? One he wouldn't even sleep in?

After everything with Sam, Steve was already feeling a little emotional. Now he was teetering over the edge. "Dammit," he muttered, his voice a little damp. He rubbed a hand over his face, getting rid of any tears that had been threatening to show.

"Okay. I said you got one thing. I'm a man of my word. You can get it. But tomorrow you gotta think of something different to ask for, alright Buck? And you gotta actually try and sleep," Steve added. "No funny business."

Bucky grabbed his backpack from the floor of the guest room and obediently followed Steve, Tony scoffing his displeasure loudly.
Steve padded into his and Tony's bedroom, the discussion seemingly over, and began to strip out of his running gear in turn for something to sleep in. Steve moved on automatic but it was strange to have two Alphas in the room instead of one.

Steve looked up to find them both pottering around awkwardly. "Are we going to bed, or what?"

Tony watched with his arms crossed as Bucky hovered annoyingly in the room, watching Steve.

"Okay, let's get things straight," said Tony. He pointed to the bed. "There's an imaginary line here. You don't cross it. This is your side, and this is my side. Capiche?" He indicated Steve's "side," but the truth was, Steve had gotten used to the way Tony slept, which was selfishly. He had a tendency to spread out and end up with more than half the bed almost every night.

"Okay," said Bucky. He pulled his shirt over his head; it was hard not to look at the abs, the arm, the scars. He folded his shirt and pants with military efficiency and put them away into his backpack, then made to climb into bed.

"Ah-ah! No! You brush your teeth first. And tie your hair up, it's gonna get tangled like that," demanded Tony.

Bucky obediently went to the bathroom. "Gee whiz, it's like a French palace! ...how many people fit into that bath tub?"

"Less talky. More brushy," said Tony, crossing his arms. A moment later he was protesting loudly. "Oh, no! No, no, no, that's my toothbrush!" He turned and looked at Steve accusingly. Babysitting Bucky's every action was a total pain in the ass. How long would he be like this, anyway? Surely not forever?

Just to be safe, when Bucky emerged from the bathroom, hair tied back in a ponytail not unlike Banksy's, Tony once again pointed to Steve's half of the bed and told Bucky he had to stay on that side.

Bucky climbed in, wearing boxers and his dog tags. He slid an arm around Steve's shoulders and pulled him over to him, just like they'd used to sleep back before the war, with Steve curled into Bucky's chest. With his left hand, Bucky picked up the dog tags and examined them closely, lips moving as he silently read the information on them.

Tony, who normally slept naked, had throw on a pair of MIT sweatpants and one of Steve's shirts to sleep in. He flopped onto his side and immediately spread out expansively with a sigh.

"...can you dim it?" asked Bucky

"What?"

"The light on your chest. Can you turn it down?"

"No. No, I cannot," snapped Tony grumpily. "You're gonna have to learn to deal with it. I did."

"Good night."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever."

Bucky leaned in to nuzzle Steve's neck. Steve had gotten used to Tony doing it, too, huffing the side of his neck with affection. It was sometimes sexual but other times simply comforting; Tony often did it before bed or when he was feeling tired. Apparently it was a universal Alpha thing.
Steve held one of Tony's hands in his own loosely, his back pressed up against Bucky's firm chest. Maintaining contact with both of them felt important somehow, like it stressed how fair he was trying to be. And Steve really was trying, to be fair that is. He felt bad that Tony was having to deal with all this. Maybe Steve could hire some kind of carer, or something? He knew, from Sam, that that kind of service did exist. And it was clear that Bucky needed it.

Bucky nuzzling against his neck felt nice and drew out an involuntary shiver. Steve was just in a tee and boxers, but he normally wouldn't bother to sleep with so much. It was just he didn't want to encourage anything aside from sleeping. He was tired; the day had taken an emotional toll.

Steve eventually drifted off to sleep, Bucky's hand hot against his hip, one of Tony's hands tangled in his.
Memories of the Colonel

Chapter Notes

Sorry for a one-day-late update. This weekend was LA Pride so you know where your boy was at. :-) - T

Steve woke around 6 am, as usual, and quietly slipped out of bed. He changed into running gear, eager to get at least an hour of exercise in. He managed to avoid waking either of the two sleeping Alphas as he headed out, grabbing his phone for music on the way. Steve's run was more like a sprint; he was determined to work up a sweat.

He got home a little past seven and inhaled two bananas and half a pint of milk before heading upstairs for a shower.

When Steve stepped back out, a towel around his waist, both Tony and Bucky still appeared to be asleep. But then, oh— he felt it. He felt Bucky waking up. Steve walked around to the wardrobe to grab some clothes, keeping his voice soft when he spoke as to not wake Tony.

"Did you manage to sleep okay?"

Bucky woke to find Steve just disappearing into the closet. He sat up, smiling faintly.

"I slept okay," he said.

He didn't remember getting up, but he had.

_He woke in the middle of the night. It was quiet and the room was bathed in a soft blue glow. Steve was curled into him._

_Gently, he untangled his omega, laying him down gently, and slipped out of bed, holding his dog tags so they wouldn't click on each other. The rubber edges used to silence them in the field had disappeared. He'd have to ask General Philips for new ones._

_He ventured out of the room and into the house. It was all silent, too large, and he went exploring, feeling paranoid. Sweeping made him feel better. The house was seemingly endless; he could have spent hours or even days trying to clear it._

_But he stopped in the living room, staring at a picture in a frame. Two men and two women were standing there. The men were in suits and the women were in short white skirts and hats with brims and holding tennis rackets. One of the men had dark hair and a smiling, ruddy face; the other had white hair and a white moustache. One of the women had short blonde hair and the other had longer, darker hair pulled back into a neat little bun._

_"Buck? What are you doing?"

Tony's voice was drowsy. _His arc reactor glinted off the glass pane of the picture._

_Bucky placed a finger on the picture. "Who's that?"_
“That’s Nancy Reagan. She played tennis doubles with my mom.”

Bucky’s finger moved over the picture. He stared at it, intently. The couple looked so familiar.

“Buck?”

“He called me Sergeant Barnes,” he recalled suddenly. He put a finger on the face of the man with the white hair. “…and she called him Howard.”

Tony was silent for a moment. “…Buck. Go back to bed,” he said.

Bucky obediently set the picture down and went off to bed.

Tony stood for a few moments longer, and after a moment, turned the picture face-down before going back upstairs.

Bucky kicked off the covers and rose, stretching his arms over his head, showing off his muscles a little.

In bed, Tony didn't move, splayed out like a dead man.

"How come you didn't wake me up?” he asked. He and Steve had always gotten up together in the army to work out and eat. Wash, if they could. Shave, if they could.

Bucky reached up with his left hand and rubbed his face; it was scruffy. He needed to shave. The metal was cold on his jaw and he got goosebumps from it.

"Good," Steve murmured, turning around just as he pulled on a shirt made of soft cotton. He tried not to stare at Bucky but it was hard not to, not when the goddamn muscles of his arm popped as he stretched it overhead. Steve swallowed and busied himself with finding a pair of trousers.

Bucky couldn't help but smirk a little when he noticed Steve's hesitation at dropping the towel. Deep down, he was still an omega of his time.

His smirk vanished, though, when he saw the bruises his left hand had left on Steve's hip. They were dark and ugly.

"I didn't know if you'd wanna be up at six. Also, I know you're not sleeping so well, so I figured I should let you get all the rest you can,” Steve explained. He hesitated before dropping his towel and then felt ridiculous because they'd had sex now. Nudity wasn't a big deal. Steve was struggling to get his head around that. He'd had sex with Bucky. "But if you want me to start waking you up for runs, I will. Although tomorrow I'll probably be getting up closer to five. I have to go into SHIELD again.”

Steve pulled on a pair of trousers and walked back over the bed, noticing how Bucky grimaced and rubbed at his jaw. "Want me to help you shave, Buck?” Steve also used to back in the forties. He'd enjoyed it. Besides, Bucky missed patches if he did it himself.

"…yeah,” mumbled Bucky unhappily in response to Steve's offer. What, he wondered, had he done to deserve this omega, who offered to shave him after he'd hurt him?

Bucky had always been surprisingly lousy at shaving. Especially during the war, when they were trying to do so in tiny little mirrors in the middle of forests while perched on the edge of munitions crates. He had let Steve take over; this was one of the few special benefits he got that the other Commandos didn't, and there was plenty of light, good-natured teasing about it. Falsworth never
failed to elbow Steve and ask what other "services" he provided, and all of them at one time or another joked about growing a beard just to get a shave from Steve.

Bucky could appreciate why Steve liked the army, even the war. On an all-Alpha team, he was not looked down on for being an omega. He was treated with respect, listened to, his orders followed. Even with the gentle teasing, there was never any doubt that every Commando would have followed him to the end of the earth and back.

Bucky walked over to Steve and put his arms around his neck, nuzzling his neck. "I'm so sorry, Steve. I'm so sorry I hurt you. I swear I tried to be gentle..."

"Hey, hey. It's okay," Steve assured him softly, running a hand down his metal arm. "I promise. A couple of bruises won't kill me. And maybe...maybe I kind of liked you being a little rough," he admitted in a whisper, blue eyes glinting as he pulled back a fraction. He grabbed Bucky's hand. "Come on. Let's get you shaved."

He had Bucky sit down on the toilet whilst he did it. It was a lot easier than doing Tony's. Bucky just wanted it gone rather than in a specific shape. Steve's brow was furrowed lightly in concentration as he took the razor up and over the sharp edge of Bucky's jawline. It couldn't have taken him more than ten minutes. The whole thing was oddly familiar, comforting. "Done," Steve announced with a smile, going to wash the razor and his hands in the sink.

Bucky sat stock-still while Steve lathered him up. Steve still knew his way around a straight razor; he moved Bucky's head with his fingers, cleaning him up, and when he was finished, he ran the towel over Bucky's face gently.

Steve gently wiped away any shaving cream from Bucky's face. He smiled again, the look in his eyes a tender one. "There you go," he murmured, voice a touch softer than before, patting Bucky's cheek. "Handsome as ever."

Bucky looked up with a smile when Steve called him handsome. He reached out to catch Steve's wrist.

"Thanks, Stevie." He let go and felt his jaw his his right hand. "I feel like a new man." He rose, watching Steve, who was putting things away with a little half-smile. Bucky couldn't believe how utterly... right everything felt. "It's all sort of perfect, isn't it?" he said. "Everything is turning out just right, just like Karpov said it would."

He saw Steve's shoulders stiffen a little, felt a tug of annoyance from Steve. He shut up, not sure what was wrong but not wanting the gentle moment to end yet.

"Bucky--" Steve started to speak and then stopped himself. He looked torn, his jaw stiff. "You do trust me, don't you?"

He went to stand in front of Bucky, their knees knocking together. Steve's lip was twisted up awkwardly and his expression was serious, like he was thinking hard to find the right words. "You do know that...that if Karpov had gotten what he wanted..." Steve paused, like it was hard for him to say it. "I would still be in a cage. You would still be working for HYDRA. He would have had you assault me, made me pregnant, just so HYDRA could raise their own super soldier from scratch. Karpov might have cared about you, or thought he did. But he never put you first. He lied to you. He made you hurt me. He did hurt me." Steve bent down in front of Bucky, his expression imploring. "You have to understand Buck. He's not who you think he is. I know everything is confusing for you right now, and overwhelming...but you gotta get this. Because it's important."
Steve took Bucky’s hands in his and then moved to sit in his lap, legs swung over one side. He moved one hand to brace it against Bucky’s chest comfortably. "Karpov is a bad man," Steve said softly. "Do you understand?"

Bucky had nodded immediately when Steve asked if Bucky trusted him.

But then Steve continued. Bucky stared at him, jaw set. He began to nod when Steve said Karpov might have cared about him, but then he stopped when Steve said he’d been hurt.

Steve sat in his lap and Bucky’s breath hitched. He clenched his jaw tighter. Steve’s blue eyes were boring into him; he looked down.

Saying that Karpov was bad, was anything other than infallible, went against every ounce of belief in Bucky’s body. He wanted to give Steve what he wanted, to say it, but the words didn’t compute. He didn’t understand. He couldn’t. Steve was wrong.

He stared silently at the floor, unable to agree, but unable to disagree because Steve seemed so sincere, so desperate for him to repeat those blasphemous words.

He wanted to make Steve happy, yes. But he also wanted to make Karpov happy. He was a good soldier; he did as he was told; he followed his orders; he was the new fist of HYDRA and he and Karpov were a shining beacon of what would someday be the norm, people knowing their place in the world, being directed by their betters, creating a perfect utopia of production and pure blood, free from crime or decision or conflict, where everyone was unified in their service to the great cause.

Steve waited, and Bucky could feel misery twisting in his stomach. The longer he waited, the more upset Steve became.

Bucky was trapped in a paradox. He could not deny Karpov, but could not deny Steve... there was no right answer... he didn't know what to do because his orders were conflicting, but he couldn't simply do nothing, and if he didn't answer soon he'd have to undergo retraining...

He took a deep, shaking breath, his whole body beginning to tremble. *Fuck.*

The door to the bathroom opened and Tony walked in. He frowned at the two of them sitting on the toilet. "Okay. Weird. No judgement," he said, blowing past them, pulling out his penis, and beginning to urinate in the shower.

Bucky blinked in surprise at this bizarre intrusion. He was still quivering.

Steve was beginning to shake a little himself, looking both upset and angry. His brow furrowed together. "You don't believe me! Christopher Columbus," he said, slipping off of Bucky’s lap. "You trust him more than me. *Fuck.*"

"Bucky trusts Christopher Columbus?" asked Tony in confusion, who still sometimes didn't understand Steve’s weird 1940s slang.

"He’s a man who literally screwed with your head for years and you trust him more than you trust me!" exclaimed Steve furiously, storming out of the bedroom.

"We’re not talking about Christopher Columbus, are we?" called Tony after him.

Steve hadn't realised just how much work there was left to do. Jesus Christ. He shouldn't have been
so naive. Steve walked out of the bathroom, his shoulders in a tense line. He needed to work through some punching bags, or something. Maybe he'd get some SHIELD work done. Or maybe he could track down Karpov and finish the asshole off for good.

Steve took a moment and counted to ten in his head.

He let out a ragged breath and just ended up sitting down on the edge of the mattress, hands fistin in his hair.

Tony finished peeing, shook off, and walked out to find Steve sitting on the end of the bed with his head in his hands.

"...'sup?" he asked

Steve heard his mate approach before he spoke; he looked up at him, steepling his fingers under his chin. Steve's eyes were watering a little.

He just reached out for Tony's hand, pulling him close, and then leaned his forehead against his chest.

Steve reached out wordlessly; Tony let Steve draw in and put an arm around him and a hand on his head, offering him comfort.

"...okay... what did he do now?" asked Tony wearily, stroking Steve's hair as Steve leaned into his chest.

Bucky appeared silently in the doorway to the bathroom. He could feel Steve trying not to cry and he felt awful.

Tony turned to look at him. "What'd you do?" he asked.

"I failed to obey orders," admitted Bucky. He walked over and Tony realized he'd never seen Bucky act submissive before. But his head was down, his shoulders lowered, and his hackles were completely flat on his neck... not just loose, but flat, pressed against the skin. "...I understand I need retraining," he added in a low voice.

"What orders? What are you talking about?" asked Tony, still holding Steve's head to his chest. "...Steve? The hell happened? ...Buck, sit your ass down, we're gonna figure this out."

Bucky sat on the floor where he was standing immediately and without protest.

"We're not training you! This isn't training!" Steve suddenly snapped, his head shooting up. "We're not HYDRA! We're not trying to make you into anything. We're just trying to let you be yourself." He sounded more upset than angry but his voice was still loud, taut with emotion. Steve slowly stood up, his hands flexing by his sides. "I didn't give you orders! I was just trying to get you to understand! I was just--"

Steve stopped himself, pressing his lips together into a thin line. He let out an angry huff.

"You need proof? You need proof that he's a bad person? Fine. I'll get it for you," Steve snapped and then he walked out.

Tony watched Steve storm out, and looked back at Bucky. "...dude. What the hell happened?"

Bucky shrugged his good shoulder, still sitting on the floor.
Tony was at a complete and total loss.

He left Bucky sitting on the floor and went to the closet to get dressed.

Seconds after exiting the bedroom, Steve had phoned Sam; he paced the hallway furiously as it rang.

"Hey man, what's up? Is this--"

"Do you have the tape?"

Sam was quiet for a moment. And then he realised what Steve was talking about. "You asked me to destroy it."

"We both know you didn't."

Sam sighed.

"I hope you know what you're doing Steve."

"I don't, but I appreciate the sentiment."

A minute later Steve received a video file without a name. He walked back into the bedroom and shoved a tablet into Bucky's hands.

"This is your Karpov. Alright? This is what he makes you do."

Steve stormed back into the bedroom and shoved a tablet at Bucky.

Bucky stared at it uncertainly. It was playing a video and in the video there were two men, one behind a glass wall. Bucky blinked when he recognized Steve and then, with a shock, himself. He didn't remember this.

"Colonel Karpov says we all have a role to play in making a better world, and that most are supposed to serve and to follow. This is especially difficult for Americans because their minds have been poisoned with capitalist lies about individuality. But he says once you'd had a few pups you will naturally fall into your role and be content."

Bucky nodded agreeably with the words he was saying on the video. "You see?" he said.

Steve reached over and moved his finger across the video and suddenly it jumped to a new part.

"He and Bucky were inside the cell, together, and several people were outside of it."

"Asset?" said a man.

Bucky grabbed Steve and slammed him into a wall; a moment later he was sticking a syringe into his arm.

Bucky's face went pale, but his expression was unchanged.

Tony poked his head out of the closet at the sound of the video; he walked over and looked down, then up at Steve. "...you didn't tell me there was video footage," he said in a low voice.

Steve reached over and jumped ahead again on the tape.

There was Karpov. Bucky touched his face on the screen longingly. "сэр," he said.
"Colonel," said the man on the tape, nodding to Karpov.

"солдат. взять его," said Karpov.

Bucky lunged for Steve immediately.

"...enjoy, Captain," called the director.

The two scientists and Karpov, on the other side of the glass, watched as Bucky grabbed Steve and threw Steve to the ground. Steve was yelling: "No!" Bucky grabbed his hair, yanking him into place roughly, climbing on top of him--

Bucky threw the tablet, hard; it smashed against the wall.

Bucky jumped up; he was crying angrily. "Lies! ...lies! I would never-- I didn't-- he wouldn't--" He rounded on Tony suddenly, who was standing there with wide eyes. "You! You-- you made that somehow! It's a trick!" He lunged at Tony.

Tony let out a shriek as Bucky smashed into him and the two fell to the floor. But Bucky wasn't feral; he was simply reacting. Tony kicked him in the crotch, hard, and then grabbed his ponytail to yank him off, managing to scramble out from under him.

Bucky was weeping too hard to go after him. "No. No. It's not true! I didn't do that! I would never hurt you! I only killed bad people-- he told me-- I only eliminated targets that needed to be eliminated, I did it because he told me, I'm a good soldier, I would never hurt you, Steve! Never!"

Steve watched the whole scene unfold with a strange expression on his face. It wasn't quite remorse, but it was something akin to it. He was ready to lunge in when Bucky attacked Tony, however, but even their brief conflict soon dissolved and Tony was backing away whilst Bucky wept on the floor. It was a heartbreaking sight. But it was reality.

Steve calmly knelt down in front of him. He took Bucky's forearms in his own hands to make Bucky look at him. "You never attack Tony again. Or I will fight you," he explained, voice still calm. "He had nothing to do with this. This was Karpov. This was HYDRA. It was real. And I lived through it. They didn't feed me, they barely gave me water and they kept me in that box for days with just a hole in the floor to piss in. You hurt me, but you stopped. You stopped. Because you realised what you were doing was wrong. But the reason you did that, the reason you tried to, was because Karpov told you to. You were a good soldier but he gave you bad orders Bucky. Now I'm trying to go easy on you. I understand this is hard. But I will not sit there and have you tell me that a man who told you to rape me is a good man. You would never hurt me. But Karpov would. He made you try and hurt me. He did that. Everything Karpov told you was a lie and that's not your fault. But you need to understand that."

When Steve grabbed his wrists, Bucky didn't fight him. He was too completely wrapped up in his own misery; he was still weeping while Steve spoke to him, and by the time Steve got to the end--about Karpov being a liar-- he was hysterical.

And then Steve pulled him against his chest and let Bucky cry into his shirt. Soon enough he felt his chest getting wet. And, belatedly, Steve realised he was nearly crying too.

Bucky let Steve pull him over and hug him and Bucky buried his face into Steve's shirt to sob. It wasn't right. Karpov was his handler, his righteous master, and Karpov took good care of him. Bucky had only had Karpov for years and years and he had been happy when he followed orders and was praised, happy to obey. He couldn't stand idea that Karpov could be wrong, could be
anything other than perfect. It broke him.

Tony watched warily a couple of meters away, not quite willing to get attacked again. But Bucky was a puddle of human misery and he was too completely absorbed in sobbing into Steve's shirt to do anything else.

Steve was holding him, eyes watering as well.

Tony edged over slowly after a few long, unbroken moments where the only sound was Bucky's crying. He reached out tentatively and put a hand on Bucky's left shoulder; Bucky didn't respond. "...Buck? ...hey, Buck? It's okay, buddy. You don't need him. You got Steve. And me, I guess... c'mon."

Bucky kept crying, face hidden.

Tony looked up at Steve with concern. He literally couldn't remember the last time he saw someone this miserable.

Bucky was acting like Banksy had the night Boswell had died.

"...Jesus, Steve, why did you show him that?" demanded Tony. There was an unspoken question in his words: Why didn't you show me, either?

"I don't know. I was angry. You should hear the way he talks about him--" Steve whispered and then stopped himself again. His jaw trembled. "I couldn't stand it. He's brought Bucky so much pain. I couldn't...

Steve fell silent for a brief moment.

"And you were already blaming yourself enough Tony," Steve added quietly. "Seeing it with your own eyes would have just made it worse." The scene was rather striking, with Bucky's dark form standing over him and the bloody writing of I DO NOT CONSENT smeared across the glass.

"Would you have really wanted to see him bite me? Come on."

They both knew the answer to that.

Steve rubbed a hand up and down Bucky's back, rocking him gently, his other hand gently running through his hair. Yes, Bucky was miserable and wailing. But at least he was expressing emotion. This was the most human Steve had seen him in this century. He was emotional and raw and real. It was awful. Steve could feel his anguish burning hot in his own chest... but this was worth it. Maybe that was screwed up. But Steve didn't regret showing him the truth.

Steve pressed a shaky kiss to the top of Bucky's head. "I'm so sorry that I couldn't protect you from this," he whispered.

"Василий," wept Bucky weakly against Steve. "Василий... пожалуйста, сэр... Василий..."

Tony patted Bucky's back while Steve rocked him. Steve was like a lightning rod of guilt; Tony felt he was in the worst position because he could feel both Steve's misery and Bucky's anguish. Hell, a beta could've felt it; it radiated from Bucky and blanketeted the air. Bucky clung to Steve sobbing and saying "Vasily" over and over, which Tony finally remembered was Karpov's first name.

The three sat there for nearly an hour before Bucky had cried himself out. His ragged sobs gave way to shaking and periodic little cries and whimpers, and finally he quieted. He remained in Steve's arms limply; after a while it was obviously he'd cried himself to sleep.
"...that was... an extreme reaction," observed Tony unnecessarily. He looked up to Steve; Steve looked shaken to the core. "...don't beat yourself up over it. He needed to know. Part of the healing process and all that. ...why don't you put him back in bed. Maybe he'll feel better when he wakes up." Tony laughed mirthlessly. "Or, you know, not remember it at all." It was hard for Tony not to feel sympathetic. He didn't know if he'd ever witnessed anything like that, except maybe Jarvis when his dad had died, although that was more of a slow burn-out.

His hand was still on Bucky's shoulder. He drew it back and rose to his feet slowly, looking down at Steve clutching him like Michelangelo's Pietà.

"...I'm... uh... gonna go get some breakfast," he said meekly. "...come on, Steve. Let him process it for a while. ...we can talk it over later when he's less... you know... emotional." He realized, belatedly, that he had said "we" instead of "you." Maybe it was because he'd just sat with them for an hour. Why had he done that? It was past nine and he was hungry. He didn't owe Barnes anything. ...it had just felt natural to stick with him and Steve.

Steve nodded. Slowly, he stood and lead Bucky over to bed. He tucked him in, kissed his forehead and then followed Tony downstairs. His movements were stiff and wooden. Steve's face was all twisted up with different emotions. He sat down on one of the chairs in the kitchen heavily.

"What if I can't fix him?" Steve whispered, voice too quiet. "What if he's just... empty for the rest of his life?"

"He won't be," Tony reassured him as he pulled a carton of eggs out of the fridge.

"Then HYDRA have won, haven't they? In a way. They've taken Bucky's life away from him."

Tony regarded the eggs in the carton for a moment, then put them back in the fridge. "Steve, they haven't won. Bucky'll get better."

He looked at Tony, eyes a little teary. Steve swallowed. "And I'm so sorry you have to deal with this. This isn't what you signed up for."

Tony rooted around for some cereal, listening to Steve.

He settled down across from him and reached over to take his hand.

"Hey, Steve, look. I didn't sign up for any of this, okay? I didn't sign up to bond to a ninety-year-old man but here we are. And I didn't sign up to fight aliens or Nazi cults, but here we are. And I'm okay with it, Steve. Between Iron Man and you and all the saving-the-world shit, my life's had more meaning now then it's probably ever had, minus my '96 sex tape coke binge year and my '08 Maxim covergirl tour." He paused to eat a handful of dry cereal. "As for Barnes... eh, give him time. He's been through seventy years of electroshock. He's not gonna get fixed right away. But look, Natasha's normal and she was brainwashed, right? And how 'bout all those kids from the camps? They seem to be doing well. People can relearn, they can get better... Buck's only been here a few days. Give it like a couple of months. The dude's still figuring out microwaves and smart phones."

He lapsed into silence, busying himself with eating cereal and reading the back of the box, patting Steve's hand absent-mindedly.

He only looked up when Pepper stormed in, a bag over one shoulder. She looked exhausted; her hair was slightly frizzy. "Tony. I need for you about twenty minutes."

"You look terrible," said Tony.
"Yes, I know. Listen, I've got to catch a plane back to Washington in two hours, so please pay attention. I talked to Banksy and I can get you onto the show and into a time slot Friday. SHIELD's approving a scripted interview with you and Steve but there's about a thousand things you can't say. Basically they're letting you talk about your trio but not New York. I drew up a rough draft." She began pulling papers out of her bag. "I need you to go over this and send it back to me with any corrections for approval; it has to be run by SHIELD 48 hours before taping, obviously they won't let you do it live, your mouth's way too big. But I think this is a good start, and if you can get it back to me in twelve then they can air it before Phil's funeral, which is really in our best interest, since I assume James will be attending along with you and Steve."


"No time," she said, checking her watch. "I'll be at a Senate hearing all afternoon so if you have questions please talk to Aria. Oh! And Steve, she scheduled a home visit with Gleason this afternoon. Okay, I've got to run. Tony, can you please tell Happy to charge his phone, when you see him?"

Tony frowned. "You two still seeing each other?"

"None of your business. Just tell him to charge his phone. Okay, bye, guys... please review that script!"

She blew out. Tony looked down at the stack of papers in front of him. "...you think she's tweaking?" he asked, only half-kidding.

"Thanks Pepper!" was all Steve really managed to get in before she disappeared again. He heard the door swing shut. "We need to buy them another holiday," he murmured, half to himself.

Whilst Steve made himself a proper breakfast, something that wasn't just cereal, they went through the script SHIELD had sent. It was goddamn air tight. There was nothing about aliens, or HYDRA. WWII itself was barely mentioned. They obviously did not want people to work out Bucky was the fabled Winter Soldier, or that he'd ever been in Yemen. And honestly, Steve didn't either. He was terrified of it. If people found out what Bucky had done whilst he was under HYDRA's control...the world would never let him forget it. It was better people thinking he was frozen.

Steve tore through a lot of toast with cream cheese and raspberries on it, then made another suitably enormous pile to take upstairs for Bucky.

"I'm gonna try and get him to eat something," Steve murmured, standing up. He pressed a kiss to Tony's forehead, the other still flicking through the script. He hesitated, not sure if it was okay in Tony's view. Steve knew it was important they portray this in the right way.

"Is it okay for you?" he asked in a murmur, staying close.

Tony squinted at the page, then held it out. He hadn't put in his contacts and his glasses were upstairs.

"...looks pretty good, I guess. ...it's kind of funny that we're announcing a trio but did you notice the words trio and triad are never actually said at any point?" He set the pages down delicately.

It was better, he knew, to get it over with, and to be the one to announce it himself. But he knew no matter how carefully they revealed it, it was a can of worms, Pandora's Box, and inevitably, people would end up calling him weak and submissive and probably an acer.

Tony reached up to scratch his hackles. The scar beneath them was obvious under his fingertips. He
huffed a sigh.

"Are you going to be okay?" asked Steve.

Tony looked up, met his eyes, and smiled. "There's no time like the present, right?"

"You sure you're okay?"

"Steve." Tony reached out to pat Steve's arm and steal a raspberry off of Bucky's toast. "Don't worry about me. I'm always okay. Seriously."
Tony and Steve had lapsed into silence over their breakfast and were scanning the Banksy script in the kitchen for probably the third or fourth time when the door slammed again.

"Pep, the script is fine, you don't need to--" began Tony, but stopped. It wasn't Pepper, but Brazinski.

"Hi. Sorry I'm early... my schedule's pretty busy today," she said breathlessly. "...where's James?"

Tony's eyes darted over to Steve. "...uh... sleeping."

She checked her watch. "Sleeping? At this hour?"

"Well, uh... actually he was up early and went back to bed..."

"I woke him up without meaning to after my jog," Steve said trying to sound as casual as possible. He stood up with his ridiculous plate of toast and cream cheese.

"Right. Of course." Brazinski was smiling again and Steve didn't like it. It was as if she knew a joke that he didn't quite get. "It's no problem. I can wait."

"Right," Steve replied, failing to hide his awkwardness before he slipped away upstairs.

He found Bucky in bed, his head even tucked under the covers. Steve felt his chest go tight. He walked over, setting the food down on the bedside before he moved to sit on the edge of the mattress. "Hey Buck," he murmured and gently curled a hand onto his shoulder. "I brought you food," he whispered.

Bucky didn't respond. Steve worried on his lower lip.

"Can... can I come under the covers too?" He asked carefully.

For several long moments Bucky didn't move or speak.

Then, stiffly, he pulled up the covers to invite Steve under them.

He looked terrible; his eyes were puffy from crying and his hair had come loose; it was once again tangled all to hell.

He didn't react when Steve climbed into the bed, only moving to pull the covers back up over his head. He closed his eyes wearily, his face empty of emotion, like he'd managed to cry every last bit of it out, which was more or less exactly what had happened.

Steve crawled under the covers and took Bucky's flesh hand in his own. He barely reacted. It felt like they'd taken one step forward and then three steps back. Bucky looked terrible. And it didn't help that Steve knew he was the one who made it feel that way.

"I love you," Steve murmured, the air hot under the covers. It was all he could think to say in the moment.

Bucky didn't say anything, just lay there blankly.

After a long time there was a knock on the door.
"...the thing is, he's actually not feeling so hot today," said Tony as she let herself in. He'd tried every excuse in the book but the problem was, at the end of the day, Brazinski worked for SHIELD and had every authority to tromp all over Tony's house poking into things, and they both knew it.

"Oh? Why's that?" she asked.

"Uhh... allergies," said Tony, trying to come up with something to explain how Bucky looked. "Ah-choo," he added. "Yeah, we've all got 'em."

"You have allergies?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yup. Tell her, JARVIS," said Tony. "...about my allergies!"

He had hoped JARVIS would pick up that he wanted a lie, but JARVIS wasn't perfect and instead took the command literally. "You are allergic to opioids, sir," he said.

"...opioids," repeated Brazinski, frowning.

"Er, yeah. There's a lot of... um... morphine in the air today. Ah-choo," said Tony.

Brazinski walked over to the bed. "James?" she called gently. "...James? Are you awake?"

Bucky was, but he made no move whatsoever to come out from under the covers, nor any sign that he'd even heard her. He remained curled up, staring ahead blearily, unmoving.

Steve cursed under his breath when he heard Brazinski let herself in and hoped she couldn't hear through the covers. Lightly, he squeezed Bucky's hand and then sat up, letting the covers fall off of him.

"Oh." Brazinski blinked. "Hello Captain."

"Hi, look, so the thing is--"

"I really do insist I conduct a--"

"Bucky just found out an old... friend of his is dead. Someone he was very close to. And he really needs a day to grieve, you know? So now is not the best time for this."

"Captain Rogers, I do insist..."

"He's grieving," Steve implored her, giving her a serious look. Brazinski sighed.

"...Fine. We will give James a day to grieve. I suppose."

It was a half-lie. Karpov wasn't dead, but the man Bucky thought he had been was. Steve wasn't quite sure if she believed him, but so long as she gave in, then he didn't really care. He met Tony's gaze briefly.

"So... yeah. Bye doctor," Steve said, flashing her a fake smile of his own.

"I'll be by tomorrow. You understand how important--"
"Yep. Bye," said Tony, giving her a none-too-gentle shove out of the door.

He closed it behind her, not bothering to escort her out, then turned. Steve was sitting up in the bed; Bucky was curled next to him, staring off into nowhere.

"Hey, Buck. You awake? ...you get to skip therapy today. That's good, right?" said Tony.

Bucky didn't move.

"...Buck?" Tony walked over and prodded him in the chest. Bucky didn't react. Tony looked at Steve worriedly. "If either of the docs see him like this tomorrow we're in for a world of trouble." He didn't add that Bucky being completely comatose was probably better than Bucky being violent. But neither was exactly normal. ":...hey, Buck, wanna go outside and smoke a cigarette?" asked Tony, hoping it would stir him.

Bucky's eyes flicked over briefly.

"Me n' Steve will go with you. ...come on, you haven't smoked in what, sixteen hours? ...can't lay in bed all day, man." He gestured for Steve to pull Bucky up. He felt like Bucky was only going to make himself feel worse if he kept wallowing, and that they had to get him acting normal as soon as possible. Or at least, normal for him.

Steve grabbed Bucky by the arm and half-dragged him downstairs. Tony followed after, grabbing Bucky's packet of cigarettes and lighter on the way. Steve set Bucky down in one of the deckchairs and as Tony pushed the cigarettes and lighter into his hands. They watched him with baited breath. It took Bucky a moment, but he eventually moved to light up.

Steve let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

"We should order pizza for dinner. Have a treat," Steve murmured.

Tony helped himself to one of Bucky's cigarettes, lighting his off of Bucky's. For a brief moment, it looked like he was leaning in to kiss Bucky, but then he drew back, taking a drag on the cigarette, the end glowing red.

Steve hauled him away from Bucky, who was smoking with that same vacant stare.

He turned to face Tony, away from Bucky.

"I made him so... sad," Steve whispered. It was stupid he didn't see this coming. He'd been living with the reality of Yemen for so long now, he hadn't realised what having it thrust upon Bucky would do to him. Steve thought Bucky might remember, they'd talk about it and eventually get over it... he knew he'd be upset but he never expected him to just switch off.

"I don't know what to do to make things better. How can I prove to him I've already forgiven him for it?"

"I dunno, Steve," said Tony, cigarette bobbing between his lips. "It's hard for us Alphas. We're hard-wired to protect you and you basically just told Bucky he nearly raped you. Plus, you knocked Karpov down a few pegs, and Karpov's like god to that guy. Frankly, aside from you and Karpov, I don't think there's anyone else Buck really gives a shit about. Not even himself, really."

"But he stopped. He didn't actually hurt me. Him caring about me was enough to break through like 70 years of programming. Surely that counts for something?" Steve said, sounding a little exasperated.
Tony glanced behind him at the miserable figure sitting there smoking, then turned back to Steve. His face was etched with sympathy, a rare thing for Tony. "I know how he feels. Yemen was my as much my fault as his. I pushed you away, I kicked you out, I distanced our bond... you know, I gotta live with that, every day, knowing how fucking stupid and selfish that was. You have no idea how much me and him love you, or how... how important it is for us to feel like you're safe." He gave a tiny chuckle. "Congrats, you have the world's lousiest two Alphas... we're both more likely to put you in danger than to keep your safe."

"Will everyone stop saying Yemen is their fault? I literally called HYDRA. But none of you ever even think about that." Steve pointed out. "I asked for it. I wanted a fight. I wanted to get hurt. And I did. Sure, your actions lead me down that path but I still chose that fork in the road. I could have stayed with Peggy, she begged me not to go. But I went anyway. I lied to her when I promised I wouldn't do anything stupid. I was manipulative and I knew exactly what was I doing."

It was a strange admission. It was nothing new but it still left Steve shaking a little. He let out a ragged breath and turned to see Bucky's face twisted in an expression of hurt.

Tony took another drag on his cigarette, taped the ash, and then looked down at it with a sigh. "You know I quit like four years ago? ...he's got some of the same scars as me. These ones." Tony pulled down his shirt a little and indicated a small, white pock mark on his collarbone. "Hard to believe how loyal he is to that Karpov guy. ...maybe we should get Natasha over here to talk him through... you know. Being his own guy again. Plus she speaks Russian, which is probably a big plus. I know like, three phrases, and I only learned them to annoy Nat."

He turned toward Bucky and yelled, "Эй, сексуальная леди!"

Bucky didn't react. The ash on the end of his cigarette had gotten long but he made no move to tap it off. Tony shook his head at him; what the hell was going on in that guy's head, anyway?

"Colonel Karpov! So good to see you, finally..."

"Hello, hello, comrade, please sit... no, the pleasure is all mine..."

The Asset watched the men shake hands and greet each other. It stood against the wall, back straight, awaiting instructions.

"So, then, Project Guiding Star is doing well, I understand?"

"Better than you know. I've brought The Asset so you can see for yourself, along with its last five mission reports."

"Very good, very good. Is this it here?"

A man was peering at it.

"Yes, that's it. Handsome thing, isn't it? You can thank Zola for that. It was one of the original subjects in the Winter Soldier program. The one back in the forties, actually. I daresay that's why it survived the fall in the first place. Tore the arm clean off, but of course we were able to fix that. I only inherited it, but I would say I perfected the programming. Its last handler told me that it occasionally acted up, needed punishing... no more of that, I'm happy to say. Only regular retrainings required. But no unnecessary tantrums or disobedience under my care." Karpov patted its shoulder proudly.

"Oh, excellent. Any enhancements beside this one?" The man was picking him its arm.
"No, not yet. Perhaps someday. Dr. Liebmann had some ideas but the last one we handed over to him came back without eyes, and I'd rather keep this one in good shape. The Asset is my greatest achievement so far... it is nearly perfect. Watch."

Karpov took its right hand and turned it over, putting out his cigarette.

The Asset felt the burn and clenched its jaw against it, fingers twitching with effort not to make a fist; it didn't want to spill any of the cigarette's ashes on the floor. Its eyes pricked slightly with tears, a reflex; it blinked rapidly, forcing them away, not moving.

"...you see? Barely even a pain response anymore."

"...that really is fascinating. And all this using only electroshock?"

"Yes, yes. It's a golden age of technology, my friend. Would you like to sit in on one of our sessions? I'm sure you'd find it very informative."

"I would be honored to do so. When could we arrange that?"

"Oh, perhaps this evening, if you're free." Karpov reached up and brushed some of its hair to the side, smiling.

And later that evening, after retraining, he sat on the end of the Asset's cot, putting a cool, wet washcloth over its eyes, which were searing with a terrible headache, and took its right hand, with the large, angry blister on the palm, and wrapped it in cool, clean white cloth, all while murmuring how proud he was, and how lucky The Asset was, to play such a big important role in the history of the world, and how Karpov would always care for it and direct it wisely and that together, they were a team, a perfect team creating a perfect world.

A tear rolled down Bucky's cheek.

Tony blew a smoke ring and looked over. "Oh, geez, he's going off again. ...do you think he heard me mention you-know-who's name?"

"Maybe...maybe it's a flashback? Clint has mentioned once or twice that Natasha can sit in the same place for hours," Steve whispered, relaying rather sensitive information. But it felt relevant.

He squeezed Tony's hand before letting go and walking over to Bucky. He knelt down in front of him. Not in a necessarily submissive way, more just to put himself in Bucky's eyeline. Tentatively, he put a hand on his knee. "Hey Buck," he whispered. "Can you tell me why you're crying?"

Bucky's eyes flicked over to Steve, but he said nothing.

Tony walked over, took the cigarette from Bucky's mouth, tapped the ash off, and then put it back between his lips. Bucky didn't even react.

"Buck. Steve asked you a question. You heard him?" asked Tony.

Bucky still didn't say anything.

Tony paused, then remembered what Natasha had said.

"...Buck. Tell us why you're crying," demanded Tony.

Bucky looked up, eyes watery. "...I miss Karpov," he said hoarsely, his voice barely audible above the white noise of the ocean below them. "He took good care of me. Now he left me. And he tried
to make me hurt my omega. Now whose orders do I take?"

"...no one's," said Tony bluntly.

"I don't understand."

"Look, Buck." Tony braced a leg onto Bucky's chair. "When I was the CEO of Stark Industries, I had a business partner who was like a dad to me, okay? He was like one of my most trusted friends in the world. And he tried to have me killed. And when it didn't work, he tried to do me in himself. And guess what? Turns out he wasn't really a good friend after all. But I still miss him sometimes. ...it sucks. But just because you miss someone doesn't mean they were a good person. The person you lost was the person you thought he was. Not the real him. Without him, you're better off. You got Steve, you got me... and you can't be told to do bad things anymore."

"But how do I know what to do? If it's even good or not, if no one tells me?"

"Well... you either get a talking cricket to be your conscience, or you ask me or Steve or JARVIS," said Tony. "Don't worry, I programmed JARVIS with a pretty good sense of judgement. His altruism parameters are pretty high."

Bucky was crying again. "Why would Karpov do that? I am his most treasured asset. We're a team. Why would he order me to hurt Steve? He can't be wrong."

"Yeah? Wasn't this wrong?" asked Tony, pressing a scar on Bucky's right inner arm.

Bucky looked down at it, as if surprised, then looked at Steve imploringly, like he didn't know the answer to the question.

"The two things aren't mutually exclusive Buck," Steve murmured, reaching for one of his hands. "Someone can hurt you one day but treat you well the next. He was wrong to hurt you and to ask you to hurt me. But he was right when he did look after you. You're allowed to be confused Buck; his behaviour was confusing."

Steve rubbed the pad of his thumb over the palm of his hand slowly.

"I don't expect you to just find your way instantly. It will take time." Steve tried to smile but it came out a little sad. "One day, you'll be able to think on your own two feet. Until then, we can be here to offer you direction when you need it. But hopefully, one day, you won't miss taking anyone's orders at all, Buck."

Bucky managed a tiny nod, though he didn't look convinced.

"You have to give yourself time to grieve; you just lost someone important to you," Steve pointed out. He squeezed Bucky's hand gently and gave him a hopeful look. "You know when we spoke about you asking for one thing a day Buck? Do you think you maybe wanna try and ask for something right now? Only if you want to, of course," he added hastily.

"I want..." began Bucky. He trailed off, and his brow knitted in confusion. He even stopped crying.

What did he want? He could think of nothing to ask for. Everything was provided to him and always had been. He had his omega in arm's reach and a cigarette in his mouth.

"I want... want..."

Tony watched him, arms crossed. After a few long moments, he looked at Steve. "Congrats. You
broke him. ...maybe asking him to make a request is too big of a first step." Tony tried, and failed, not to sound sarcastic. He could easily think of a hundred things he'd ask for. But Bucky seemed paralyzed when he was put on the spot. "Maybe a multiple-choice question would be better," said Tony.

Bucky teared up and looked at Steve. "...there's something wrong with my brain, isn't there, Steve? I can't remember nothing at all. When I try to think about stuff, it's all just... not there."

Steve smiled sadly and cupped his cheek. "You're not wrong Buck. Just a little sick. But we're going to get you better again. Promise."

Bucky rubbed Steve's hand in his, then blurted, "I... I wanna see my sister. That's what I want."

This was met with a long, awkward pause.

"I...I have photos of her Buck," Steve said softly. "I can show you those. But I can't..." He pressed his lips together in a thin line. He wanted to say 'we could go visit her gave' but that could be enough to break Bucky in itself. His voice was thick with emotion and he was worried he might actually cry for a moment.

"Steve, can I see you over there real quick?" asked Tony, pointing across the pool.

Steve pulled himself together.

"Yeah. Yeah." He swallowed down the lump in his throat and straightened up. Steve walked over to the other side of the pool, hands shoved into his hoodie pockets despite the pleasant weather. Bucky's confusion and misery were palpable. "I know, I know..." Steve sighed and ducked his head down. "We need to get some kind of professional help in."

"That wasn't what I was gonna say," said Tony, mumbling. "I... I did some Googling, back when... when we didn't realize that Bucky was the Winter Soldier. Remember how you smelled him in that simulation like two years ago? And we all thought he was dead... well... so I thought the Winter Soldier must be related to him, maybe. So I Googled him. His sister's ancient but... she's alive. He had family. A nephew and a niece, plus a grand-nephew and a grand-niece. They're all omegas. Not the same thing, I know. Just saying, he's got family, technically. Although all his siblings are dead, 'cept the old crone."

Steve's eyes widened. "Becky's alive? But she must be in her eighties!"

"Yeah, late seventies, early eighties, something like that," said Tony with a shrug. He turned and looked back over. Bucky was staring at the sky, looking lost. "...I think we oughta wait before dropping that on him, though," added Tony unnecessarily. He took a final drag from his cigarette and then flicked it into the pool.

"Family, huh?" Steve murmured, glancing back over to him. He almost envied Bucky. The closest thing he had was Donner, and now he honestly was like family. But Steve hadn't had siblings. His mother had died decades ago and he didn't even remember his father. Having left no children of his own too meant Steve hadn't really had anyone to wake up to.

The back door opened and Dr. Brennan walked out. "Hello there, James. JARVIS told me you were out here."

Bucky stared at her.

Steve quickly walked over to Tony's side, eyes fixed on Brennan. Out of the two, Steve did like her more. But then Brazinski was hardly tough competition.

"According to whom?" she asked sternly.

"According to meem," said Tony. "We already explained to his other doctor, he's in mourning, he found out about-- uh-- someone's death today and he's taking it really hard."

"Sounds to me like he needs therapy more than ever to cope with the loss," shot back Brennan, not moving.

"Why didn't Brazinski tell you?" asked Tony.

"Because we don't actually work together. Once again, she works for SHIELD, whereas I work for the NIH and as a consultant for the UN."

Bucky watched them arguing, silent. His eyes were still red and puffy, his hair a mess. While Tony blocked Dr. Brennan, he reached for his pack of cigarettes and lit one with a shaky hand. For some reason, Bucky's smoking habit seemed like one of the few things that remained natural and unautomated. Bucky barely remembered to eat or take care of himself but clearly hadn't lost his love of nicotine.

"It's been a rough day," Steve said quietly.

"Everyone has rough days. I understand that. Just because today is worse does not mean I'm going to recommended James gets taken away or sectioned," Brennan explained patiently. "He's human and humans are inconsistent. If he really is upset, let me talk to him, maybe I can help. Or maybe I can find someone else who can."

The implication being that Tony and Steve hadn't really helped at all. Which, honestly, was a fair analysis.

"How about I make it shorter today? Just half an hour?" Brennan offered, searching for a middle ground.

Steve sighed but let her find it. "Okay," he breathed. "Alright. Just..."

"I'll be gentle. Trust me, I know how. This is my job."

Steve reluctantly stepped side. Brennan moved to take a seat across from Bucky. He didn't want to leave him but let Tony lead them back into the house as he took his hand. On automatic, Steve threaded their fingers together.

"Do you think they keep the recordings of our simulations?" Steve asked abruptly.

Tony gave Steve a sideways look. "...duh. It's the government. Steve, I bet every time you pee into a toilet, they have some dude tap the pipes and take a sample."

"I think I know a video that might cheer him up," Steve murmured. "Or at least, a little."

He glanced outside. Brennan was talking; Bucky was just staring.

Tony tugged Steve over to the bar. It was in the living room, far enough that they could pretend they were just hanging out but close enough to the glass wall that they could spy out onto the deck and watch Bucky.
He let Tony guide him over and sat down when he was told to. It was hard not to just stare at Bucky and not be paranoid about what Brennan was saying. From this distance Steve only managed to catch a few words. It was nothing ground breaking, just stuff like 'coping', 'Steve, 'feel' and 'process.'

Bucky didn't look very cooperative.

Brennan pulled some papers out of her bag and offered them to Bucky; Bucky reluctantly took them and a writing utensil. Tony felt a stab of envy. How come he didn't get to draw?

"Sit," he ordered Steve. He went behind the bar and tossed a towel over his shoulder, then put his elbows up. "Well? What'll it be, Cap? A Shirley Temple or something?" He pulled out a tumbler and began fixing himself a margarita, just to have something to do.

"Just give me some whiskey," Steve sighed. He would have to drink a whole bottle to feel something but he wasn't totally against doing that right now.

Tony winced sympathetically. "...why don't we go over the script together, call Banksy... confirm the show... and we can talk to Gleason or Natasha or someone we actually trust about getting Bucky some real help."

Outside, Bucky was doodling while Brennan talked to him, his brow furrowed in concentration. Tony was deeply curious about what he was so involved in. He doubted Bucky had Steve's talents, but Bucky looked like, whatever he was drawing, he was putting a lot of effort into it. Tony wondered, idly, if they were going to have to put it up on the fridge when he was done.

"David is coming around later anyway," Steve pointed out. "...to talk about contraception. Jesus Christ."

Tony set a bottle of whiskey in front of Steve, delicately putting the rim of his own glass into a little tray of salt before pouring the margarita into it.

Steve took the whiskey when it was slid over and downed it before leaning his forehead against the bar. Steve snorted weakly. "Like we'll be having sex again anytime soon."

Slowly, he straightened up and temporarily got up to go fetch the script. Then Steve returned to the bar. He blinked down at the script, running it over in his head again. "It's so inoffensive it almost hurts. Gee. Could we sound more boring? We all know what this is really about."

"Cheers," said Tony. "...just to be clear, you mean you and Bucky, right? I can still have sex with you, right?" He sipped his drink thoughtfully, eyeing Bucky and Brennan outside. Bucky still didn't appear to have said a single word. "...I'm sure we can tweak the script a little bit. I mean, we don't have to explain specifics, but we can totally..." He picked out a page and his eyes scanned it. He frowned. "This doesn't sound like us at all. ...let me see the banned words list."

The list of words and phrases they weren't allowed to say was longer than the script itself, and included "aliens," "extraterrestrials," which made perfect sense, as well as "trio," "triad," "threesome," "ménage à trois," "polygamy," "polyamory," and "double-bonded."

Tony sipped his drink, incredulous. "But double-bonded is what you are! ...this is so stupid. You know what I say, call a spade a-- er, sorry. Never mind."

That actually made Steve smile. A real, proper smile. "Well Captain America isn't allowed to have sex, ever, you see," Steve said in a pretend hushed voice. "So... no threesomes and absolutely no fun."
Steve poured himself another glass of whiskey but didn't just straight up down it this time.

"We're not the kind of people who pussyfoot around," Steve said. "I get not talking about New York, but this is ridiculous. It makes it seem like we're shy about it, or ashamed. We don't have anything to hide... aside from the whole Winter Soldier thing, but, you know."

He took a generous sip of his whiskey.

"And not saying the word trio is a joke. It would be like us announcing a pregnancy but refusing to say the words child, or baby." Steve sighed and ran a hand over his face thoughtfully. "SHIELD's a bunch of idiots."

"So.... fuck SHIELD," said Tony, dropping his voice conspiratorially. "It's Banksy's show; he's the producer. Let's call it what it is: a trio. We can probably bypass SHIELD, if we really want to." He examined his drink thoughtfully, then downed it. "I'm so sick of caring about... people. Let's just... it is what it is, it's a trio, okay?" He threaded his fingers together. "I mean, we won't talk about New York, but it's our personal life. We should be able to call it a trio. And if we act like we're ashamed, people will notice. People will pick up on us not calling it what it is, and criticize us for that. So I say we just ignore this script and call it a trio."

Tony threaded his fingers together thoughtfully. Saying it over and over was helping him come to terms with it, get used to the idea.

He watched Steve. The two of them were still together. The world hadn't ended. Their bond felt normal, unchanged.

He offered Steve a tiny smile. "Best defense is a good offense, right?" said Tony. He'd rather announce it himself, their... situation.

The back door opened and Brennan walked in, frowning, Bucky trailing her.

"Has he spoken all day?" she demanded.

"Yeah. Why? He not talking?" asked Tony. Behind her, Bucky was silent, his face expressionless. "...what'd he draw?"

She set down a sheet of paper.

It was completely covered in red.

Tony stared at it for a moment, then said, "Y'know, Mondrian drew nothing but colored rectangles and he's one of my favorite artists."

"I'm extremely concerned by his behavior," said Brennan bluntly.

"He's having an off day... what, he's not allowed to have a bad day? ...lay off," said Tony, looking surprised at himself for standing up for Bucky.

Behind Brennan, Bucky flexed his metal arm, the plates making some, mechanical clicks with his movements.

Steve stared at the red mass of colour swamping the A4 sheet and swallowed. He felt a strange chill run down his spine. He thought back to Schmidt and the hideousness of his mutated face. Before the Yemen incident Steve had began drawing him obsessively. It was... not good.
To Steve, art was a form of expression, and he could not ignore it.

Steve swallowed. As Brennan and Tony bickered he pulled out his phone and sent off a quick text to Maria.

"Like I said," Steve insisted, standing up. "He received some bad news. You gotta cut him some slack."

Brennan hummed noncommittally. "It is vital James receives the help he needs."

"His name is Bucky," Steve said, moving over to his side. "And he just needs time. It's like... the third day since he's come here. Come on! It took me two weeks to become coherent after I woke up and I'd only been frozen. No one had messed with my head."

Steve murmured and gently tugged the other upstairs. He felt a strange need to get him away from Brennan, whose penetrating gaze wouldn't stop boring into Bucky.

Brennan, whose penetrating gaze wouldn't stop boring into Bucky.

Tony shooed Brennan out and then took Bucky's "drawing," if you could call it that, and went to put it on the fridge with a Stark Industries magnet.

Bucky let Steve lead him upstairs and set him on the bed. He sat there blankly, waiting.

Steve was worried. He wasn't feeling much from Bucky right now, which was never a good sign. Their bond was so sensitive that an absence of emotion was achingly transparent.

"I want to show you another video," Steve said softly as he settled gently onto the bed beside Bucky. "If you'll let me. But you gotta promise not to smash my phone against the wall too."

Bucky's eyes met Steve's when Steve said he was going to show him another video, and his eyes welled with tears. Was he going to show him another video of him being awful? Or was he going to slander Karpov some more?

"I will not smash your phone against the wall, too," said Bucky, voice cracking as he repeated Steve's instructions.

"The reason I knew you were alive is because they put me in a simulation. And our bond was so strong I started seeing you in it," Steve explained softly. "I couldn't see your face but... a part of me knew it was you from the start. The first few times I saw you it was confusing and it didn't make much sense, but then..."

His phone buzzed and Steve grabbed it, opening the video file Hill had forwarded to him. "The image is a little funny, because it isn't actually real," Steve warned him. But after fighting aliens, this sort of technology really felt quite mundane.

He skipped forward to a point in the video. "It's from my perspective," Steve explained. He put his phone in Bucky's hand pressed play.

Steve appeared to be tied up, dangling from the ceiling of a red brick room. And then Schmidt walked in, holding his shield. Steve felt Bucky tense beside him. "It's okay. I promise."

In the video Johann hit Steve overhead with the shield a few times whilst he tried to kick out at him. Things seemed to be going badly for Steve as Schmidt dropped the shield and stepped in closer, but then--

The wall smashed in and Bucky appeared, punching Schmidt down before moving to untie Steve and carry him in his arms. Bricks were scattered everywhere and dust was rising from the floor. He
had the goggles on but it was unmistakably him.

Bucky tensed at the horrible man who mocked Steve, who was clearly going to take advantage of him, and Bucky began compulsively flexing his left arm.

But then he appeared.

Steve, in the video, was safe.

Steve tried for a smile. He stopped the video and put a hand on Bucky's arm to try and get him to look at him. "As far as I knew, you were dead. Seventy years gone. But you still traveled all that goddamn way, through cryo and all that hell... to save me. Maybe you didn't know it, but subconsciously, we were always still bonded. And when I was in trouble, subconsciously, you showed up to save me. In our minds."

Bucky eased a little; Steve touched his arm and he looked up, studying Steve's face. Steve looked a bit sad.

He touched Steve's cheek with his metal hand, trying to comfort him. Bucky's overwhelming emotion was one of simple confusion. Karpov always made everything clear to him, reduced everything in the world to simple and easy-to-understand boxes. No more Karpov meant he was alone in a world he didn't understand and he felt utterly suffocated by choices.

His hand dropped and he looked down, hiding his face with a curtain of hair. "It's not enough. I shoulda been there for you, these last seventy years."

Steve smiled again, wistfully. "I could say the same. ...agree to call it even?"

At that, Bucky looked up, and after a moment of consideration, he nodded, sticking out a hand to shake. "Yeah," he agreed. "...even."
Downstairs, Tony had taken the initiative to call Banksy.

"Hey, Banksy. I checked out the script for Friday's show. Listen... I'm just gonna call the damn thing a trio, okay? That's what it is."

"Sure," said Banksy enthusiastically. "I think that's super brave of you. How's he holding up?"

"Who, Buck? He's okay. He's got good taste in art," said Tony, squinting at the red square on the fridge.

Upstairs, Steve was still trying to lure Bucky out from the bed. Bucky's touch was cold against his cheek. Steve blinked slowly. "Bucky," he whispered. Carefully, Steve pushed back some of his hair so he could see his face. He looked so torn. "Maybe a distraction would help... something to focus on. We could try running, or maybe sparring. But just in the gym; we don't have to go outside."

Steve tucked his hair back behind his ear. "I know it's scary and overwhelming. I know it's hard. But I'm here with you, okay? And I'm not going anywhere."

Bucky liked when Steve brushed his hair behind his ear but didn't emote. He liked it because that was one of the few intimate gestures Karpov regularly did, especially when he was feeling proud or bragging about his soldier to others.

His sense of enjoyment was immediately overcast by misery, knowing he'd never feel that again from Karpov and feeling terribly confused about who Karpov even really was.

Steve leaned forward, resting his forehead against Bucky's. The gesture was oddly intimate. "You're never alone. I'm here for you."

Steve put their foreheads together and they stared into each other's eyes for a while. Steve's were lovely. Deep blue but with little specks of greenish gold near the pupil.

Steve broke them apart, offering to spar; he grabbed Bucky's right hand. "Come on, let's change into some gear. Exercise releases endorphins, they say; it'll make us both feel better. And maybe a routine will help, you know?"

Bucky had been a boxer as a kid, had put a lot of his frustrations toward his father into punching bags down at the Y. When they'd been Commandos together, Bucky had always felt conflicted about sparring with Steve. He had been raised never to hit a girl or an omega. He pulled his punches, remembering all too well how small and weak Steve used to be. The other guys had teased him for going soft on Steve and Bucky always had the impression that Steve resented him for not fighting back harder. But Bucky just couldn't bring himself to do it. He remembered all too well how Steve had been, how soft his hits were, and how many times Bucky had found him getting the snot kicked out of him in back alleys. Poor guy.

Bucky got to his feet and obediently let Steve drag him over to the closet. The closet was big enough to be a bedroom. He ogled at all the suits that were hung up. Steve's things took up less than a quarter of the space; clearly, Tony was far more materialistic than Steve.

Bucky stripped off his clothes so Steve could give him something else to wear. They were comparable in size, more or less. Same height, through Steve's waist was smaller. Anyway, Bucky should be able to fit into Steve's clothes. He stood silently and without any apparent embarrassment.
whatsoever, waiting for Steve to give him whatever he'd be wearing.

Steve turned around and was suddenly faced with a very naked Bucky. Trying not to turn pink, or anything else so childish, Steve thrust out the gym clothes he'd picked up for him. "There you go," he said, trying to sound casual about it. Bucky had just had a breakdown this morning (because of Steve) so he certainly didn't not need Steve ogling him.

Steve quickly changed into his own gear before taking Bucky's hand and leading him down to the gym. One corner of the gym had soft mats in it. He and Natasha had sparred more than once before but Steve had usually saved it for SHIELD headquarters in the past. Steve barely did anything except press ups and running in here anymore. But now he and Bucky were gonna spar... right? Now he finally had a work-out partner who might be able to keep up with him.

"You better not go easy on me," Steve said. "I know you used to pull punches back in the day. But come on Buck, you've seen me fight aliens now." He felt like it was a good point. He imagined Bucky was nervous about the metal component but he'd always been right handed. Either way, Steve would not accept him holding back.

"C'mon. It'll be a good distraction," Steve insisted, leading Bucky onto the mats and then going to stand opposite him. They were both bare foot. Steve raised his hands in a defensive pose. "No biting, yeah?" he half-joked. It was the one rule they'd always had in the Commandos.

Bucky hesitated, then put his left arm behind him and put his right fist up. "No biting," he repeated, remembering with sudden clarity a fight that had gotten out of hand, Gabe pinning Dum Dum and snapping at him. War turned a lot of good men feral; they had all, at one time or another, snapped a little. Dum Dum had taken it well; Gabe was naturally more dominant than him and they'd agreed no hard feelings.

There were a few taps; Bucky turned. Outside, peeking through the glass, were two men in suits. They waved; one of them waved a keycard at the glass window and then opened it like a door. "Hey, Steve! You and Buck duking it out? Y'know I used to be a boxer?" (Of course Steve knew; Happy was clearly saying it more for Bucky's benefit than his.)


"Yeah? You box? I'm not very good anymore, but I'd be happy to go a few rounds."

Bucky actually looked interested. This beta man did look like a boxer, with the stout frame of a man with functional muscles, who was concerned more with core strength and a solid stance than merely looking good.

"Well? You guys gonna go at it?" asked the other man. Also a beta. "...sorry but we gotta see him in action! ...where's the boss?"

"Probably downstairs," said Happy.

"With the robots or--" He made a jerking off motion.
"Knowing him, both," said Happy. He pulling over a little stool to sit on and watch.

Bucky went back to his defensive stance, right hand up, left arm behind him. Everyone had always said Bucky's right hook and uppercuts were phenomenal. But Bucky had never used any of them on Steve before and honestly didn't know if he could.

It was kind of ironic. Under HYDRA's control Bucky hadn't hesitated. Steve remembered him bursting into his crowded apartment and slamming Steve up against the wall like nothing else. And now here they were and Steve was actually asking to be hit and Bucky was hesitating. He couldn't argue about the metal arm thing but he would try his best to hold back with his left too. Steve had always been a stickler for a fair fight.

"He's not, for the record, doing the latter," Steve said to Happy, the edge of his lips twitching up in amusement.

Happy blinked, looking a little confused. Steve mimed jerking off.

"I would, you know, feel it."

"Oh. Huh. Must be weird, right?"

"It's not too bad," Steve said and met Bucky's gaze with a half smile. And then he made his first swing, but really, it was sucker punch. He didn't actually hit him and then he hooked his foot around Bucky's ankle and knocked him down to the floor on his back. Steve let out a noise of disappointment.

"You didn't even try! Come on."

Steve offered him a hand and pulled him back to his feet. "This doesn't work if you treat me like I'm 5'2" again," he sighed. "I can take it. Come on. Hit me!"

Steve had knocked him to the floor.

He appeared above Bucky and stuck out a hand.

Bucky let Steve pull him to his feet and got back into a fighting stance.

Steve gave him a couple of sharp jabs. Bucky took them easily.

"...you... uh... you gonna hit him back or just let him keep knocking you down?" asked one of the betas.

Bucky felt conflicted. "...Karpov told me to... to knock you down. And I did. I don't wanna hit you, Steve," he said, shoulders sagging. "...do I have to? Can I ask not to...? I'm sorry." A moment later, lightning-fast and without warning, Bucky's right hand lashed out and smashed into Steve's jaw. Clearly, he wasn't able to resist defying a direct order.

Everyone was right, it turned out, about Bucky's right hook. Steve actually hit the wall behind him and nearly fell over.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" cried Bucky, wide-eyed, wringing his hand out.

Happy whistled. "God damn! That was something, Jimmy! ...you might gotta go easy on me."

"Don't say sorry!" Steve actually let out a laugh, rubbing at his jaw with a grin. "That was awesome Buck! Yes! More of that!"
It was easy to forget that Steve didn't quite experience pain like normal people did. Bucky might have cracked someone else's jaw, but Steve was smiling and if anything looked hyped up by it. He was grateful to finally get a proper response. He didn't look to be in pain at all.

Bucky's eyes were watering. "...did I give you a miscarriage? Was that real?" he asked suddenly, shoulders sagging.

And then the question looked like it hit Steve like a ton of bricks. It hurt more than the punch. Steve slumped.

Daston looked at his watch and elbowed Happy. "Uhh... we should go back to patrolling now," he said, looking deeply uncomfortable.

"Did I?" pressed Bucky, voice going higher as he got himself more and more worked up.

"Yeah," Steve said, threat going dry. "But I didn't know. I didn't know until..." Steve stepped forward. "Bucky." He sighed and shook his head. "It was HYDRA that did that. Not you. They had complete control over you. You weren't there... mentally, you know? ...I want to tell you it's not your fault," Steve murmured. "But I know you won't believe me. But this..." He gestured between them. "...is a chance to work out some of your frustrations, yeah? I can take it. Don't worry. Punch it out. Trust me, it helps."

Bucky's eyes watered. "No. I don't want to. Please--"

A second later his hand whipped out and he punched Steve, hard, in the stomach, knocking the air of him.

His foot came around a hooked Steve's ankle, unbalancing him, and then he threw him to the ground and pinned him with his left arm. Steve squirmed but Bucky didn't move. He was crying again.

"Нет. Скажи мне остановиться," he begged.

"Bucky. Bucky, no, sweetheart. You don't have to fight me. Not if you don't want to. It's okay. I promise. It's okay," Steve tugged Bucky against his chest and let him cry there. He ran a hand up and down his back.

JARVIS beeped suddenly. "Sirs. Dr. David Gleason is here for Captain Steve Rogers, at his convenience."

Bucky was still sobbing. "I wanted a baby. But you couldn't; you were too sick. It was his, wasn't it? Wasn't it? I killed your baby." He rolled off Steve and curled up on the mat, weeping again. Steve could hear him saying Karpov's name again, Vasily. The word was a surprisingly intimate one. Karpov was hard and stern... but the long "ee" sound in Vasily made it almost gentle, and the way Bucky said it, it was like he was pining for a dead lover.

"I wanted a baby too," Steve whispered. "I always felt like I'd failed you, because I wasn't well enough. That I wasn't what you deserved. But then there was a war on and no one was thinking about babies no more." He kissed the top of Bucky's head. "Tony didn't want it, not really. In a screwed up way it was for the best. I want to keep my job but I don't think I could live with having a termination either. It's okay. It was over a year ago, Bucky. It's okay," Steve kept saying, voice soft. Slowly and carefully he moved to pick Bucky up. He was heavy but Steve managed it, one arm under Bucky's back and the other under his legs. Steve grunted and then began to walk them out of the gym, with Bucky's head tucked against his shoulder.

He sort of felt like crying. Steve could feel a lump in his throat. But he didn't want to cry in front of
Bucky and have him feel guilty for something else.

Steve walked out into the living area to find Gleason sat at a kitchen counter, sipping tea.

"Could you give me five minutes, David? I think Bucky is just gonna grab a nap," Steve said, already heading upstairs. Gleason watched him go with a furrow in his brow.

Bucky curled into Steve, whimpering, barely even noticing that he was being carried.

He was used to being manipulated physically, moved like a mannequin.

He'd often been called "it," spoken about like a thing. He was used to it. He let Steve carry him, wrapping his arms around his neck and sniffing into his neck for comfort. Steve's smell was familiar, intoxicating. As good as the soft, tiny little gestures Karpov used to praise him. Lighting his cigarettes for him, brushing hair away from his face, occasionally even running a hand down his back, his hand exploring Bucky's arms and torso clinically, appreciating his soldier.

That was what Bucky felt most. Appreciated. Useful.

Bucky was still nuzzling Steve's neck when Steve set him down in the bed. He immediately pulled the covers over himself, wanting to be hidden. His whimpers and snuffles and mumbles of "Василий" were still audible under the sheets.

Steve's expression crumpled a little as he tucked Bucky in and the other could no longer see his face. "I'll come straight back up after I've spoken to Gleason, okay?" he murmured, reaching out to squeeze Bucky's shoulder under the sheets. Steve ducked down and tugged the sheets back a little to kiss the top of his head.

"I love you," he told him. "Hang in there for me."

Steve rubbed at his eyes as he headed back downstairs, letting himself take a tactical sniff before he walked back into the kitchen.

"So, contraception, right? Please say it's just pills, because I can't deal with--"

"Steve, are you okay?"

"What? Yeah. I'm fine."

Gleason just raised a brow at him, very slowly.

Steve sighed. "Bucky's just... having a bad day, that's all. Readjusting to the 21st century and everything. You know."

"And how are you coping with it?"

"Me? What? I'm fine. Like I said. Besides, I caused it, so..."

"Steve," David dead-panned. "This isn't your fault."

"But I upset him. On purpose. I got angry and I fucked up. I did that. And now he's been crying all day because he found out he hurt me once or twice under HYDRA's control and--" Steve let out a huff and fisted a hand in his hair. "I can't take it away. I can't make it alright. I can't make him forgive himself. ...I never shoulda told him. He'd been through enough already."

David gestured for Steve to take a seat.
"Steven," he said, firmly. "Having two Alphas is very, very difficult, emotionally, for an omega. You're trying to juggle three people's needs: your own, Tony's, and Bucky's. We omegas are instinctually programmed to respond to our Alpha's needs, which often means making them feel validated in their protection for us. When you have two Alphas, often, they end up trying to protect your from one another. It creates a paradox, because you want to fulfill their desire to protect but also don't want to offend the other Alpha. Bucky is... very dominant. I think your loyalty toward both of them is commendable, but I also think you need to be aware of the burden you're taking on. Not only of having two Alphas, but navigating their needs with your own. And neither of them are especially well-adjusted, which makes it even trickier. By himself, Bucky would be astronomically difficult to care for. I completely understand why you want him here, but... by yourself, right now, you're not equipped to handle the both of them. Trios are difficult."

"I know it's going to be hard," Steve said, sighing as he took a seat. "It already is. You should have seen them a few days ago, they were a nightmare." He remembered them flipping a goddamn coin and wanted to roll his eyes. "But they're worth it," he murmured, the edge of his lips twitching up into a smile. "Definitely."

David smiled a little too at that.

He sipped his tea again, then asked, point-blankly, "The mark on your neck. How... intentional was your mating with him? ...you do understand that, while Tony, at his age and with his sperm count, doesn't constitute a high risk of pregnancy, with Bucky, it's actually considerable elevated? Especially in post-heat, and especially with your and his enhancements?"

It was Steve's turn to look a little sheepish. "I mean it wasn't... not planned, you know? It just sort of happened. Obviously I wanted it," he quickly added, not wanting anyone to throw around the word force -ever again. "But, yeah..." Steve sighed and ran a hand over his face. "I know. It wasn't smart."

"So," Steve straightened up. "What have you got for me? Some magic pills or something?"

Gleason smiled. "Not magic, per se. I do have pills for you, but I want to emphasize that, in pre-heat and post-heat, you can't rely on them. And really, you ought to be using a condom as well, even with the pills. You understand that they only shift the statistics in your favor... I can't guarantee their 100% success. After all, you're... well... the only one of your kind. Speaking from a physiological point of view."

He set a bag on the table; inside were two large, orange medicine bottles. "Every twelve hours," he said firmly, pushing them toward Steve. "...and I took the liberty of including some condoms in there as well," he added. There was a glint of teasing in his eye. He knew Steve's sexual history and that, as far as condom use went, Tony was notoriously awful at remembering.

"Have you gotten Bucky any outside help, yet? It must be incredibly hard to adjust to waking up in a new culture, with new technology he doesn't understand," said Gleason mildly. Steve understood he was asking as a friend and that his role as a doctor was over.

"Right. Got it," Steve breathed, dragging the pills over to inspect them. Even though he really had no idea what he was actually looking at. "Every twelve hours, got it," he breathed. And then he smiled a little in turn. Gleason's concern was sweet.

"About that. I was wondering if you had any suggestions," Steve said. "I want to find him help outside of SHIELD. Sam I trust but he already has a full time job; I can't ask that of him. Same goes for Natasha. We need someone who understands war. That's a priority, an ex-soldier or agent or... something. He attacked Sam," Steve said, lowering his voice. "Because he was paranoid, or something. We need someone who can..." He pressed his lips together in a thin line. "Handle
themselves. You know?"

Gleason's head bobbed. "That's a tall order. I'm an omegecologist, not a psychologist... but I'm happy to ask around for you."

"Thank you David," Steve hummed, a small yet grateful smile tugging at his lips. "That would mean a lot."

Gleason smiled back at Steve and reached over to pat his hand. "He's lucky to have you. ...is this the permanent arrangement, then? ...you three?"

It was clear that SHIELD had filled Gleason in on a lot. Perhaps including Steve and Tony's desire to publicly announce their trio.

Steve had a busy week ahead of him: he had the STRIKE meeting Thursday, Banksy's show Friday, Phil's funeral on Saturday, and, on Monday, a UN meeting in Germany during which Loki was going to be tried. Perhaps Gleason's concern for him was understandable in that context; Steve was on an emotional rollercoaster that was traveling far too fast.

At least Tony had casually offered to "babysit" Bucky while Steve was at his STRIKE meeting. Natasha, Clint, and Brock had been texting him periodically with ideas. Brock, as second in command, was surprisingly respectful of Steve's leadership as an omega. It was not clear how much of that was guilt over the Gideon incident.

"Erm..." Steve considered David's question. "I think so. I mean...I wasn't expecting it to work but then it just, sort of, happened?"

"They initiated it?" David asked, blinking in surprise. Steve grimaced and rubbed at the back of his neck.

"I don't know if that's the right word for it."

"Anyway, I should let you go back to... napping," David finished tactfully.

Steve nodded. "Thanks David. For, everything."

"Of course."

Steve gave Gleason a sideways hug in a goodbye. Then he moved to go back upstairs, taking one of the pills on his way up and setting an alarm for 12 hours on his phone. He knocked once on the bedroom door before stepping inside.

Steve sighed when Bucky didn't respond. He moved to slide under the covers gently.

Steve curled an arm onto Bucky's bicep and tugged himself closer. "Hey," he murmured. "Tell me how you're doing."

"I am capable of following orders," replied Bucky stiffly.

He curled into Steve, pulling him over. Bucky's body was bigger and more solid than Tony's; they two of them fit together like they'd been made for each other. Having both been enhanced, they made a striking pair.

"A man took our picture," said Bucky suddenly. "At Coney Island... didn't he? He paid us fifteen cents."
He nuzzled into Steve's neck and let out a deep sigh of satisfaction. With Steve beside him, the tension eased out of him and within a few moments Steve could hear him breathing deep and steady, asleep.

It seemed like the energy of merely remembering things and trying to take care of himself was exhausting.

"Yeah Buck. He did. I loved that photo," Steve murmured, reaching up to run a hand through his hair.

Bucky's sudden peacefulness was infectious. When he was sleeping he was quiet, calm. All the worry and panic was etched out of his features. Steve could watch him forever like this. But he soon felt sleep pulling at his bones too. Steve drifted off not long after Bucky did.

He was in a car, driving. There was a man next to him, muttering something about Thor's brother. Steve ignored him. He wasn't sure why he was driving. But he knew it was important. Wherever his destination was, he just had to get there. If he didn't get there people might get hurt. Yes. That was it. This was Steve's duty.

But then a policeman stopped their car, another officer coming around to the left. No matter. Steve would just explain that he was Captain America and that he had important Avengers business to get to. They would understand.

Steve stepped out of the car. "Sorry officer, if I might just explain--" And then he reached out and smashed the officer's head into the front of his car. He could feel brain on his fingers.

What?

No! No this couldn't be happening. This wasn't real. Why would he have done that!? Steve didn't want to--

He picked up the dead officer's gun and shot the other one. People around him were screaming.

And then Steve looked up and Donner was sat in the passenger seat of his car. He was crying and he looked terrified.

"Steve?" he whispered and yet somehow Steve could hear him. "W-what have you done?"

Steve woke up and managed to get to the toilet before he threw up. Then he slumped back on the bathroom floor, trembling. There were tears in his eyes. For about ten minutes he scrubbed at his hands but couldn't get the feeling of warm, wet brain off of them. Steve let out a shaky breath and looked up to meet his own gaze in the mirror. Fuck.

He heard Bucky stir in bed. Steve ducked his head down, washing his mouth out with water before he walked over to the bedside. He sat down on the edge of the mattress and reached out to touch Bucky's shoulder. "Sorry I woke you," he murmured. "It's okay Buck. Go back to sleep."

A lone grey eye stared up at Steve from the bed.

"The feeling isn't the worst part," said Bucky quietly, matter-of-factly. "It's the smell. That smell never comes off your hand, no matter how much you let Karpov wash it for you."

The eye closed and a few moments later he was snoozing lightly again.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!